

## Organic Network Call Notes

**NOTE: No meeting on June 7!! Next meeting is June 28!!! Please put on your calendars NOW!!!**

If you know anyone who wants to join the informal MN Organic Network Group, email [meg.moynihan@state.mn.us](mailto:meg.moynihan@state.mn.us)

Thursday, May 03, 2007

Present: Jim Riddle (U of MN Southwest Research and Outreach Ctr), Meg Moynihan (Minn. Dept of Ag.), Bill Wilcke (U of MN and SARE), Noreen Thomas (farmer, community leader, and airline travel expediter), Hans Kandel (U of MN Extension), Pauline Nickel U of MN Southwest Research and Outreach Ctr), John Beckwith (USDA NRCS), Helene Murray (U of MN-MISA), Bud Markhart (U of MN)

Host: Jim Riddle      Scribe: Meg Moynihan

1. Round Robin    2. Discussion: strategies to get organic into Master Gardener Program and University offerings

### 1. RR

**Hans:** Weather really nice for planting so fieldwork in full swing. With Paul Porter, is working on research papers – How farmers evaluate crops b/4 harvest – can they reliably predict yield performance.. A number of farmers want to be involved in breeding projects. Project has helped farmers understand complexity of factors that contribute to yield

Just receive draft from Pat Carr re organic research projects he's undertaking at Dickenson. Some interest at NDSU to have Dickinson as a center for organic research. Possible for projects to be replicated in MN and elsewhere in the region.

**Bill:** Jim Stordahl gave seminar recently on use of goats for weed control. Is working w/ others at Itasca state park. Are finding goats prefer some weeds over grass. Goats possible weed biological control and growing mkt for their meat, too!

Recently got a question from the new beef extension person at Hutchinson, who was looking for info on direct marketing beef – Bill commented that more and more extension staff seem to be looking folks looking for info on sustainable agriculture. Seems like a positive thing.

Is spending most time on SARE activities these days. Have final lists of grant recipients. Beth Nelson should have that info. Helene asked for info about Minnesota recipients.

PDP and R&E calls for **preproposals** are currently open. PDP this year's focus is bio-energy (defined broadly). PDP closes May 25. R&E closes June 19.

**Meg:** The House/Senate ag committee doubled the appropriation for organic certification cost share from \$50K/yr to \$100K per year. Growers and handlers are eligible for 2/3 of certification costs up to \$350/yr and may participate for no more than 5 years. They do not qualify for state payments in years when federal payments are available. The MDA may use \$15K each year for organic program administration. If there are excess funds in any year, the Commissioner may appropriate them for other organic activities.

The Sustainable Ag Demonstration Grant funding also doubles from \$80/yr to \$160/yr and \$20K of it may be used each year for dissemination (Greenbook).

Survey returns for MDA Organic Producer Survey hit about 40%. Service learning student from UMN Natural Resources class did a great job getting all data entered and we have begun analyzing. Meg hopes to have data summary available by end of May and noted that ON members could use information for proposals, reports, etc.

The survey included a number of marketing-focused questions created by Gigi DiGiacomo for her organic marketing project. Gigi has already begun to work w/ that data.

MDA web page has been redone and will be a mess for awhile as page addresses and locations of information change. Apologies to all who use or link to the MDA site.

**Noreen:** busy planting in her area. Have had meetings of producers and buyers to look at Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign. Applied to NW Regional Development Partnership for local food project funding and area waiting to hear decision.

Ag Opportunities on the Air – wonderful program available at MDA web site. Niche that has formed out of that – a lot of kids in college thinking about summer jobs...producing poultry, goats, what have you. They like listening to it.

<http://www.mda.state.mn.us/news/radioopps.htm>

Continues work on her MDA Sustainable Ag. grant and will be planting sweet alyssum to attract beneficial bugs.

**Pauline:** Helping a project at New Ulm -- “Putting Green” group -- in a demonstration “pizza garden” The project employs people w/ mental and physical disabilities. Pauline and her staff are helping w/ designing the area w/ attention to energy etc. as well as getting garden certified (Jim). Pauline and Carmen have been helping w/ design and business plan. Will keep group up to date. “Putting Green” is project’s name. Owned by city. Have a golf putting green – self supporting and affordable for local families.

All work going great guns in plots at Lambertson. Have been kind of wet, but are going great guns now. Lambertson is also involved in another garden project in cooperation w/ U of WI.

**John Beckwith:** Three Rivers RC&D office in SE has worked w/ Putting Green project/group as well. Had v. successful Earth Day celebration at Whitewater Park. Featured local and organic food. Rural Development has funds available for producer value added grants. RFP is open until May 16. Announcement is at <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/coops/vadg.htm>

Conversion to organic production is specifically mentioned as a fundable activity!!

**Helene:** In mid-April, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* author Michael Pollan spoke at Arboretum. Attendance 400+. Very good event. *Marketing Local Foods* book has come out – aimed toward producers and helping them figure out how to market local foods. Available online at MISA website or contact Helene for hard copy.

**Bud:** Student Organic Farm – finishing class today. Have great group of students really active for summer. Largest group and possibly most energetic we've had. Major addition – chickens! Two students doing a poultry project. Getting hens from 4-Hers. Also have intern from France coming. Mon Dieu!! His 5-yr program requires international internship.

Student Organic Farm will be selling food again at Mpls campus farmers market and making office deliveries on St Paul campus. Also, some small research projects on the farm. One in cooperation w/ Milt. Also variety trials in cooperation w/ Erin Silva, an organic researcher from UW.

Horticulture director of graduate studies (DGS) met w/ Master of Ag degree students, many of whom said they are interested in sustainable and organic and were persuasive about the need for more training and education in organic at U of MN including things like seed saving, production, marketing, greenhouse. The DGS said students articulated their needs very well. If Organic Network members has opportunity to convey to U the need for additional courses, this is a good time and a good platform to build them.

**Jim Riddle:** Vegetable variety trials Bud mentioned are also doing at Lamberton -- replicated trials beets, carrots, melons. Also plans to check in on Putting Green project. Two RMA winter schools on organic practices were held recently – daylong events at Caledonia and Litchfield. Each one attended by +/- 40 people, mostly producers. The extension agents who organized them plan to do again next winter.

SE Minn. business community seems interested in building more organic infrastructure. Jim to speak to La Crescent Rotary Club. American Society of Ag and Biological Engineers conference at Mpls convention center will have half day workshop on organic practices. Organic farmers needs for equipment and engineering. Carmen and Jim both speaking.

National Coop Grocers Assn having annual meeting in Mpls in July. Jim speaking. Lamberton Organic Field Day will be July 11. Jim has been working on speaker lineup. Jeff Moyer from Rodale Institute to speak about NT organic systems research and use of

roller crimper in front of planter. Craig Sheaffer will speak on minimizing risk. Erin Silva will be at veg trials talking about choices for organic veg. production and sharing info about UW organic research projects.

Last week, Jim spoke to the new WI Organic Advisory Council. There was a suggestion for some kind of Upper Midwest organic network. They are aware of New Ag Network in MI, IL, IN (scribe's note: Check w/ Carmen about this, as he has taken on participation in the New Ag Network on behalf of MN). There was a suggestion to have quarterly regional organic meetings. Also to pursue cross pollination for research and econ dev opportunities between WI and MN. Jim shared Status of Organic Agriculture in Minnesota report w/ them.

Jim noted NOP has just posted reversal on policy position regarding grower group certification. E.g., coop of very small producers, typically in developing regions (coffee, vanilla, spices) who certify as one cooperative. Several months ago, NOP declared each individual farm had to be certified. Big outcry. Now NOP has reversed position and agreed coop groups can be certified as long as a 2002 policy is followed. Jim will post more information about that to the network.

Jim asked about status of University research initiative – organic and alternative livestock. Helene said last she heard livestock still in at \$150K per yr. and organic resch still alive but no info on \$ figures. Alt energy work designated for MISA has changed to one-time funding of \$350 going through Dept of Agriculture as pass-through to MISA.

Noreen: noted there is broad concern about Master Gardener training and that it's too focused on conventional. And not enough on organic/sustainable.

## 2. Organic Courses for U and MG

Bud talked to MG program training recently. Well attended – people are learning to learn. One of places to pressure there is Mary Meyer – state coordinator. She is the one who could make something like that happen. In principle, Mary is interested. She has competing demands on time and attention. Also, is interested in handing over coordination of the project to someone else and may be hesitant to take on new project with change coming. She needs to hear from a lot of people that this is important. Higher up in Extension needs to hear the need also so they support this kind of change. Noreen suggested doing a needs assessment at upcoming MG conference, in order to document interest from Master Gardener members. Also suggested maybe getting some help for her – funding, a helper, to Gets strong feeling that part of the leadership a little uncomfortable w/ organic. Meg said wouldn't this make for a great SARE PDP project, but then remembered the current call's focus is bio-energy, and so deflated. Sigh.

Pauline suggested identifying selective topics w/in Master Gardener program for which to build organic components on – a piecemeal, yet strategic, approach. Identify key topics and help them figure out how to approach. Bud commented that Emily Hoover already interested in doing fruits piece.

The core MG course message right now is: “Here is the alt to chemicals. It may or may not work.” NOT “here is how to create a successful organic system” Paradigm is teaching people how to fix problems, rather than how to create a healthy system organically. Do other states have organic MG program components? Nobody seemed to know but Bud said lots of other states come to MN for advice/direction. Noreen thinks VT and one of the Carolinas MG programs are on board w/ organic.

Jim noted that there is a new American Dietetic Assn white paper r/t organic talking points – Mary JO led this effort. Noreen said local chapters of ADA have local foods interest. Pretty staid organization, so for them to do that is huge!

We decided to take June and August off and to move the July meeting to **June 28!**

**Host: Pauline**

**Scribe: Bill W.**