

**Notes from MN Organic Network Conference Call
June 5, 2008**

Present: Meg Moynihan (host), Bill Wilcke (scribe), Noreen Thomas, Bud Markhart, Paul Porter, Pauline Nickel, Carmen Fernholz, John Beckwith, Harriet Behar, Dennis Johnson (guest speaker)

Round-Robin: Each conference call participant gave a brief update from their perspective. Several conference call participants gave their updates before Dennis Johnson's remarks and several followed Dennis, but they are all presented together here.

Noreen Thomas (Farmer, Moorhead MN)

- It is very wet where she is located, but it is drier further north in MN.
- There is lots of interest in organics among consumers in their geographic area.
- There is a fair amount of farmer's market activity in her area.
- There will be an event to help educate young people about sustainable agriculture on the Thomas farm on June 14.

Carmen Fernholz (Farmer, Madison MN, and UMN Organic Research Coordinator at SWROC near Lamberton)

- It is pretty wet at his farm and to the south of his farm; there is some concern about being able to harvest the first cutting of alfalfa due to the wet weather.
- There will be a field day at Carmen's farm on August 20.
- Carmen helped construct a high tunnel for raspberries at the University of Minnesota-Morris. A high tunnel has been started at Lamberton, but wet weather has slowed construction.
- Cover crops were planted at Lamberton last fall with the intent of demonstrating techniques for suppressing the cover crop prior to planting this season, but cover crops in the Lamberton area experienced a lot of winter kill, so the demonstration might not be as dramatic as planned.

John Beckwith (NRCS)

- Debates about the Farm Bill and federal budgets have had a large impact on the agency budget.
- There are a number of organic programs included in the new Farm Bill. One such program is a nationwide organic transition program similar to what MN has had the last few years, but John won't have much information about that program until rule-making is completed.
- A person can have some influence on how NRCS programs are implemented in the state by getting on state Technical Committees. Locally, involvement in Soil and Water Districts might be a way to influence program implementation.

Bud Markhart (UMN Hort Dept, St Paul)

- Bud just returned from China to review some educational programs and he can report amazing progress on their educational programs since his last review trip.
- Bud is not sure whether the chickens at the student organic garden on the UMN St Paul Campus will be affected by various city attempts to regulate production of poultry. The chickens are not certified organic because they were not raised on organic feed since their second day of life.
- Noreen has been hearing a lot about a “no child left indoors” effort, but so far, this has not affected the student garden on the St Paul Campus.

Paul Porter (UMN Agronomy & Plant Genetics Dept, St Paul)

- His project’s oilseed press is currently at the elevator in Clearbrook MN. The elevator has purchased its own oilseed press and will be demonstrating it locally.
- In response to a question, Paul said that he was not familiar with any in-state organic crop variety trials. Carmen said that Walter Goldschmidt from Michael Fields Agricultural Institute had some corn tests going on at SWROC and Senyu Chen from SROC in Waseca was testing some soybean varieties at SWROC for nematode resistance.

Harriet Behar (MOSES)

- MOSES is planning an organic dairy field day near Melrose MN, in central MN, 1 to 4 pm on June 25.
- MOSES is planning another organic field day, mostly about forages, near Goodhue MN, in southeast MN, on July 22.
- There will be another organic field day about vegetables near Wrenshall MN, in northeast MN, on Sept 20.
- Harriet mentioned that the University of New Hampshire has an organic dairy that just received a large research grant from NE-SARE.

Pauline Nickel (Head of the SWROC near Lamberton MN)

- Has been working on an NCR-SARE Research & Education preproposal which is due June 10. The project would involve training of K-12 science instructors and would involve farmers and a recently retired UMN College of Education faculty member.

Bill Wilcke (UMN Bioproducts and Biosystems Engineering Dept, St Paul and Regional Coordinator of the NCR-SARE Program)

- NCR-SARE has a deadline for preproposals for its Research & Education program on Tuesday, June 10, 2008. A number of people on this call are working on preproposals.
- Greg Cuomo, former head of the WCROC at Morris and of the experiment station in Rosemount has been named the new Associate Dean for Extension in CFANS. Greg started as a pasture management researcher at Morris and after he became head at WCROC, worked a lot on renewable energy programs. Greg should be a good ally for organic agriculture.
- A meeting of the MN Sustainable Ag Advisory Committee has been scheduled for June 19. That group advises Beth Nelson, MN SARE Coordinator, on sustainable ag professional development activities for ag educators in MN.

- Bill attended the signing of the Organic MOU at the MN Dept of Ag last week. It was a nice event. The Commissioner of MDA was very complimentary of MN organic efforts and particularly of the work of Meg Moynihan. The MOU was signed by a number of heads, or their representatives, of Federal and state agencies that are working on organic agriculture. John Beckwith signed on behalf of NRCS. Al Levine signed for UMN CFANS and Michael Schmitt signed for UMN Extension.

Guest – Dennis Johnson (Dairy Researcher at WCROC, Morris)

- Dennis gave a little history of dairy research at Morris up to the recent decision to transition about half of the herd to certified organic.
- The dairy herd at Morris is about 100 years old and was originally started as a breeding herd. Eventually, the dairy herd was used to provide milk for students at the School of Agriculture in Morris. The first dairy researcher was hired in about 1965. The herd was involved in pasture management research when Greg Cuomo was a forage agronomist at WCROC and more recently the herd has been used in a cross-breeding program. With the public demand for more organic dairy products, the decision was made, with legislative support, to transition about half of the herd (about 70 cows) to organic production.
- Key goals/activities of the organic dairy program will be to:
 - Focus on herd health, particularly reproduction and incidence of mastitis.
 - Develop a seven-person advisory committee.
 - Search for someone to direct the organic dairy program. (Dennis is nearing retirement, but he will probably come back part time after retirement to help with the transition.)
 - Pick an agency to certify the dairy operation.
- They are working on an NCR-SARE preproposal, but that is a little bit tricky because the transition to the new person would probably take place during the life of the project.
- They hope to work with organic producers on record keeping systems.
- Dennis has been working with some farms in northern MN that have DHIA records that have shown a reduction in mastitis during their transition to organic production.
- Noreen mentioned that Jim Stordahl, a local Extension Educator who works with a number of organic farmers has seen large reductions in vet bills for organic dairy farms. Dennis has seen similar reductions and he believes part of this is due to lower pharmaceutical costs.
- Productivity is greater in conventional dairies so it's hard to say whether the reductions in vet bills lead to greater economic return for organic dairies.
- BST is categorized separately from vet bills in record systems for conventional dairy farms. There is a savings in BST cost on organic farms. BST use is down even on conventional dairies due, in part, to concern over longevity of cows. It would be useful to study differences in culling criteria used on organic and conventional dairy farms.

Next Call: 8:30 am, Th, Aug 7. Bud Markhart volunteered to host the call and John Beckwith volunteered to scribe.