

## **Minnesota Organic Network Conference Call Notes from December 7, 2006**

### **Call Participants (in order of appearance)**

Glenn Schafer (scribe), Helene Murray, Noreen Thomas, Jim Riddle, Bill Wilcke, Pauline Nickel, Carmen Fernholz, , Harriet Behar, Gigi DiGiacomo & last, but exercising ultimate power and control over the group, Meg Moynihan (host).

### **General Small Talk**

On this day it was said that all the degrees had fled from the thermometer, leaving it at zero as we rose to face the day.

### **Rounding the Robin on a Cold Day in December**

- **Glenn Schafer, FSA:** The Minnesota Farm Service Agency (FSA) is planning on having a booth, once again, at the upcoming Minnesota Organic Conference. The current federal farm bill is set to expire at the end of 2007, precipitating forthcoming discussions and debates on the next farm bill. Congressman Collin Peterson of Minnesota is slated to be the new Chairperson of the House Ag Committee and has indicated that writing a new farm bill will be one of his top priorities. All things considered, groups interested in organic agriculture will have renewed opportunity to voice their concerns and desires for the farm bill process. The new State Executive Director for Minnesota FSA is expected to be named in the near future.
- **Helene Murray, U of M:** There's a great new book out by Gary Holthaus entitled "From the Farm to the Table; What All Americans Need to Know about Agriculture" that contains stories about organic agriculture, including some folks from good'ol Minnesota (U of Kentucky Press). U of M will be partnering with the Green Capital Tropical Study Center of Jamaica on creating research and education opportunities related to organic and sustainable agriculture. Helene has been participating in discussion on how the partnership will work, but there may be opportunities for members of the organic community in our region to participate; more details will be known in February or March of 2007. Helene conveyed Paul Porter's apology for not being on the call; the group agreed to come up with the appropriate punishment for him later in the call.
- **Noreen Thomas, Organic Producer:** Last summer's garden project field day was a great success, with an estimated 600 children visiting their farm (exceeding their expectation of 50 kids). The field day included a variety of classes pertaining to sustainable agriculture and soil conservation. Noreen has specifics on the outcome if anyone is interested. On June 9, 2007, an event called "Going Green on the Farm" is being planned that will include several hands-on workshops on multiple topics presented by Master Gardeners and, perhaps, any one of you organic networkers who have something groovy and green to present (contact Noreen if you're interested). Our very own Meg Moynihan participated last year and gives the event two green-thumbs up. In news from the field, the epic soybean aphid battle of the summer of 2006 generated some interesting

results in terms of organic methods of control. Seeding soybeans into rye proved to be an effective means of aphid control by creating a plant canopy that invited "the beneficials" (sounds like an adventure movie) into the field prior to the advancement of the infamous aphid troops; lying in wait with the tactical advantage, the beneficials were poised to significantly reduce the population of aphids to an acceptable level. Those fields without rye to protect the soybeans were severely affected by aphid infestation. Duly impressed, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has been moved to write on the practice. However, the practice of double-cropping rye and soybeans is still considered an uninsurable practice by RMA, leaving it without a risk management option (other than by the protection of the beneficials). Meg and Paul Porter met with officials at the Risk Management Agency (RMA) recently to discuss the matter, providing data and information to support insuring the practice; folks in WDC are also looking at the issue, but no resolution is expected soon.

- **Jim Riddle, U of M/Organic Certifier:** USDA has announced four new appointments to the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), including a consumer rep., environmental rep., processor rep. and scientist rep.; details on the individuals appointed can be reviewed at - <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/Newsroom/NOSB%20Nominations%202007%20Press%20Release.pdf>. The Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF) received \$3 million budget increase for organic research in the House appropriation bill. The Senate version does not contain the proposal; however, the issue will be held over for the new congress, where fresh eyes can view the proposal. Otherwise, Jim has been working on two grant applications. One proposal is to OFRF and involves transitioning 25 acres of conventional land to organic at the Lamberton Experiment Station to provide baseline levels of data for future research in organics; the other application is for a larger grant in conjunction with Oregon State University and CREES, in which Jim will head a team certification experts to contribute to the proposal. Work continues on an RMA-funded project, led by U of MN Agronomist Craig Sheaffer, to develop a organic risk management tool and three winter "schools" to expound on the details of the tool. March 22, 2007, in Le Center is the first meeting and will be facilitated by Ryan Miller, Extension Educator; the two subsequent meeting dates have not yet been set. Carmen and Jim may be contacting one or more of y'all to participate in an organic outreach working group; stay tuned.
- **Bill Wilcke, U of M:** Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) is in the process of organizing the recently received grant proposals for review.
- **Pauline Nickel, U of M:** The U of M's Southwest Research and Outreach Center at Lamberton is in the process of transitioning 25 more acres to organic, to add to their 120 acres currently certified organic. Pauline is very please with the exceptionally positive attitude the staff at the Center has with regard to the conversion of additional acres to organic production and organic agriculture in general.
- **Carmen Fernholz, U of M/Organic Producer:** Carmen will be working on the RMA grant reference by Jim pertaining to organic risk management tool by organizing summer workshops that correspond to the forthcoming winter schools

regarding the RM tool. The RMA staff is interested in an organic field day. Carmen recently attended Organic Iowa Conference and noted that Iowa has organized a statewide association; perhaps it's something Minnesota should consider. He will be also attending a meeting with the Executive Board of O-Farm on January 11/12, 2007, at the Holiday Inn in Des Moines, IA, to discuss better organization of organic livestock marketing; contact Carmen if you know of organic livestock producers who may want to have input at that meeting. Interstate marketing will also be addressed at the meeting. The Web site for the Minnesota Organic Farmers' Information Exchange (MOFIE) is being updated and Carmen seeks to expand participation in MOFIE. As Jim mentioned, Carmen also seeks to form an organic research working group.

- **Harriet Behar, MOSES:** Harriet is new to the 'O-Net' call and glad to participate. MOSES is busily preparing the goods for the Upper Midwest Organic Conference in La Crosse, WI, on February 22-24, 2007; check it out at - <http://www.mosesorganic.org/umofc/intro07.htm>. Farm bill discussions and education will be a hot topic at the conference, particularly in three areas: 1) Organic research, 2) Organic transitioning, and 3) Expansion and funding of the Conservation Security Program (CSP). Harriet will be putting on an organic certification training session in Cresco, IA, on January 11, 2007. She is also working with the Minnesota Food Association to hold two, full-day meetings regarding food marketing. The first meeting is for food service people, including restaurants, on January 22, 2007, in St. Paul, MN; the second meeting is for producers, focusing on what buyers want on the market, on February 21, 2007, in La Crosse, WI. MFA is now hiring a "Food Broker" position to work with the aforementioned groups on a long-term basis.
- **Gigi DiGiacomo, U of M:** Gigi is also new to the 'O-Net' call and glad to participate, as well. She currently serves as the U of M's 2007 School of Agriculture Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems. She is in the process of developing sample surveys, one for producers and another for buyers, aimed at gathering organic marketing data in Minnesota. DiGiacomo is a consultant specializing in farm business management, marketing and planning. She is also working with Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) to gather data on organic pricing in the upper Midwest, first for grains and eventually for livestock, as well.
- **Meg Moynihan, MDA:** MDA's call for sustainable agriculture demonstration grants is open until December 15, 2006; come one, come all, as the project proposals can be of many sorts. A question has arisen from the review of 2003 through 2005 Economic Research Service (ERS) data for organic agriculture; the data reveals a significant drop in 2004 grain acres and the experts wonder why. As an alternative to hiring a private detective, if anyone wants to opine on the matter, contact Meg. Phil Brooks, an organic produce distributor, will be at the Minnesota Organic Conference and is interested in marketing locally and organically grown produce. As a note of interest, "Agrability," a USDA-funded non profit organization, provides a broad variety of direct assistance to disabled farmers. MDA is currently working on its organic legislative initiative; hopefully good news will follow. A grant from SARE will be funding six workshops for Ag. Professionals that work with organic dairies (4 in MN and 2 in WI); more

details are forthcoming. Finally, the Minnesota Organic Conference is coming together like "nobody's business," which means it's going to be bigger and better than ever! However, session hosts are needed; if you're interested, contact Meg. In his absence, Paul Porter was nominated.

### **Next 'O-Net' Call**

**When?** Thursday, January 4, 2007, at 8:30 AM

**Where?** Near your favorite phone, in your favorite chair.

**Host?** Paul Porter (who else?)

**Scribe?** Gigi DiGiacomo

**Number?** 1-800-909-6472 or 612-625-2003