

The Sustainable Farming Association:

Making a Difference for Farmers in Minnesota

A Report of the Sustainable Farming Association

2001 Survey

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Executive Summary

The Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota (SFA), a non-profit, farmer-to-farmer information-sharing network, conducted a survey of its membership during the spring of 2001. The purposes of the survey were to determine beneficial relationships among members to gain insight on where to focus energies and resources, and to create a database of members to promote networking. The survey was sent to 498 individuals in April 2001. Responses were received throughout the spring, results compiled and analyzed through the summer, and this final report was written and ready for printing by mid-September. The response rate was 38% and included both farmers and non-farmers. Ninety percent of respondents were members of the organization, with an average length of membership of six years. The primary reason for joining the SFA was to support sustainable farming practices (91%), followed by meeting people with similar interests (79%), and using SFA programs to improve practices (51%). Thirty percent of members reported that their expectations of the SFA were met, 42% said expectations were generally met, and for 18% expectations were partly met. Seventy-two percent have suggested the SFA to a friend. Fifty percent have experienced life improvements on their farm as a result of SFA membership. Thirty-three percent attend programs twice per year, and 81% have attended field days. Ninety percent of field day attendees reported that field days are effective in communicating information to farmers, reasons being farmer to farmer communication (87%) and seeing and comparing practices first hand (78%). To improve field days, 49% would like more farmers to share experiences with practices, and 35% would like cost analyses of practices. Seventy-nine percent of farmers have changed practices in the past three to five years to make their production more sustainable, and continue to use those practices. The number one reason to adopt sustainable practices was to farm in a way that is better for the environment (89%), and the greatest barrier to adopting sustainable practices was the greater time requirements (83%). Seventy-six percent of farmers direct market, with neighbors making up the top customers (48%). Sixty percent of dairy farmer respondents have participated in the Dairy Diagnostic Team program, and the top area of improvement on farms resulting

from the program was physical dairy facility improvement (17%). Seventy-three percent of grazers practice Management Intensive Grazing, of which 24% participate in a grazing group. Recommendations include extending field day topics to cover new areas of interest proposed by respondents (page 13), providing help to direct marketers with processing, and creating active dialogue between farmers interested in adopting new practices with those using those practices, possibly through a column in the Cornerpost newsletter, or through web-based media.

Introduction

The Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota (SFA) was founded in 1988 by farmers interested in creating a network for sharing information about sustainable practices (<http://www.sfa-mn.org/>). The organization's founders believed that "farmers, better than anyone, can inform each other what is needed to sustain our farms and communities." Today, the organization has over five hundred members in twelve chapters throughout the state. The mission of the SFA is stated as follows: "The SFA recognizes the wisdom within ourselves and our communities to find ways of farming that are economically viable and ecologically sound. In the spirit of cooperation we offer mutual support and fellowship to strengthen our families and communities. Our diversity enhances the sharing of resources, new ideas and approaches to farming." The aims and purposes of the organization are:

- To develop a support group for family farmers to acquire knowledge and understanding of economically and environmentally sound practices of production farming.
- To support this group through newsletter, farm tours, seminars, on-farm meetings and research opportunities.
- To serve as a vehicle for information sharing about farming methods, without endorsing commercial products.
- To support and encourage Extension and University research programs that promote sustainable agriculture.
- To promote farming as a positive way of life.

During the winter of 2001, the SFA sought to systematically collect information about its membership in order to assess the progress and success of the organization's current programs. The information gained will be used to 1) determine what practices are currently being used by members, 2) what interests and needs members have, and 3) to develop a database of current members with the purpose of creating beneficial relationships between members (e.g. farmers producing organic grain and those needing organic grain to feed livestock).

Survey Results:

Basic Information *This information provides us with a demographic look at the members of the Sustainable Farming Association.*

Of the 498 surveys sent out, we achieved a 38% response rate (190 returned surveys). Of these respondents, 80% are farmers and 20% are non-farmers. Relationships of non-farmer respondents ranged from retired farmers and future farmers, to members of the general public interested in supporting sustainable agriculture. The majority of SFA farmers are full owners of the land they farm (Table 1). This result is similar to the result found by the 1997 USDA Census of Agriculture for the state of Minnesota (www.nass.usda.gov/census/; all MN state figures were taken from this source), though the SFA reports only a third the percentage of tenant farmers as the state of Minnesota. The USDA survey reported 73,367 farmers in Minnesota in 1997. Table 2 depicts the average acreage owned and rented by SFA farmers, and includes a comparison of the size distribution of SFA farms and MN farms. Results show that the SFA has a slightly higher percentage of farmers (81%) working 50-999 acres of land as compared to the 1997 MN state figure(75%), and a slightly lower percentage working 1000 or more acres.

Table 1. Farmland	SFA	MN
Full owners (own all land worked)	62%	55%
Part owner	35%	35%
Tenant farmers	3%	10%

Table 2. Ownership	Mean	Low	High
Acreage owned (SFA)	188 acres	0.33 acres	1200 acres
Acreage rented	170 acres	5 acres	780 acres
% farmers working:	1-49 acres	50-999 acres	1000+ acres
SFA	17%	81%	2%
MN	18%	75%	7%

The majority (80%) of SFA farmers have been in business for 10 or more years, which is very similar to the MN state results (Table 3). Of interest is the difference in age of members of the SFA compared to MN farmers in general: the percent of farmers in particular age categories is similar except in the 40 and older categories. It appears that the SFA retains the greatest percentage of members in the 40-59 year old groups, and has fewer farmers in the 60 and older group.

Table 3. The number of years SFA members have been farming as compared to 1997 figures of farmers in the state of MN, along with the age of those farmers (age groups were recorded differently in the two surveys and therefore appear differently here).

Years farming	SFA	MN
<= 2	3%	4%
3-4	5%	6%
5-9	12%	14%
10+	80%	76%
Average	21.5	21.6
Age (years)	SFA	MN
<25	na	2%
20-29	2%	na
25-34	na	9%
30-39	9%	na
35-44	na	25%
40-49	40%	na
45-49	na	13%
50-59	29%	22%
60+	20%	29%

There is a slightly lower percentage of farmers in the SFA who are sole proprietors of their farming business than in the state of MN overall, and a slightly higher percentage reporting partnerships (Table 4). Forty-five percent of SFA farmers record farming records manually, with the majority of farmers finding their record keeping system to be organized and useful (Table 5).

Table 4. Business type	SFA	MN
Sole proprietorship	84%	87.8%
Partnership	12%	8.4%
Corporation	3%	3.3%
No response/other	1%	.4%

Table 5. Record system	
Manual	45%
Computer-based	20%
Manual & Computer	33%
Other (none)	1%
No response	1%

	Yes	No	No response
Organized records	70%	19%	11%
Useful records	75%	9%	16%

Farms with whole farm plan

Forty-two percent of SFA farmers report having a whole farm plan (WFP), and 69% of farmers without a WFP are interested in creating one. The percentage of farmers with/without a WFP who attended SFA workshops focusing on WFP are reported in Table 6.

Table 6. SFA farmers with or without a Whole Farm Plan attending SFA workshops specific to this tool.

Workshop	Attendance of farmers with WFP	Attendance of farmers without WFP
3 day Holistic Workshop	37%	14%
Field day covering elements of WFP	14%	20%
WFP Workshop Series	7%	5%
Decision Case Study Workshop	4%	5%

Practices

Forty percent of SFA members report their practices as being organic (Table 7), followed by sustainable, transitional and conventional. Of those who are organic, 64% are certified.

Table 7. SFA farmer practices	
Conventional	9%
Transitional	14%
Sustainable	34%
Other*	3%
Organic	40%
Non-certified	36%
Certified	64%
Certifying agency:	39%
OGBA	
OCIA	26%
MOSA	13%
FVO	11%
Oregon Tilth	8%
Demeter Association	3%

* permaculture, biodynamic, appropriate technology, or ecological

Products

SFA farmers report producing a wide variety of products (Table 8). Of particular interest is the result that the percentages of SFA farmers producing hogs, sheep, goats and poultry is much higher than the percentage of farmers in the state of MN producing the same products. Also, there is a much higher percentage of SFA farmers producing vegetables and fruits and nuts than farmers in general in the state of MN, and a much lower percentage of SFA farmers producing hay.

Table 8. Products produced by SFA members and farmers in MN. Reported as percentage of the total number of farmers responding to the survey (153 SFA; 73,367 MN state census 1997).

Products	SFA	MN
Livestock		
beef	48%	28%
dairy	20%	11%
swine	12%	5%
sheep	12%	1%
goats	5%	0.1%
poultry	29%	1%
Crops		
grain	48%	58%
hay	8%	21%
vegetables	28%	4%
fruit and nuts	20%	1%

Of the 190 SFA survey respondents, 80% are farmers, and 20% were non-farmers. Of those farmers, 90% are current members of the SFA, along with 84% of non-farmers (Table 9). Respondents were from 11 SFA chapters across the state of MN (Table 10). Central chapter, which is one of the largest SFA chapters, was sent the highest percentage of surveys (24%). Twenty seven percent of Central chapter members who received surveys responded.

Table 9. SFA Membership	Farmers	Non-farmers
Member	90%	84%
Non-member	9%	14%
No response	1%	2%

Table 10. Chapter response (% total respondents shows the percent of the total 190 people who returned their survey; % surveys sent shows the percentage of the total 498 surveys that were sent to each Chapter).

Chapter	% total respondents	% surveys sent
Central	24%	29%
Northeast	23%	30%
Southeast	9%	3%
Western	9%	9%
Cannon River	7%	7%
South Central	6%	8%
Coteau Ridge	5%	3%
Princeton	5%	5%
Crow River	4%	3%
Lake Agassiz	2%	1%
Hiawatha	2%	2%
Other	1%	na
No response	3%	na

Ninety one percent of SFA members reported joining the SFA to support sustainable practices, followed by meeting people with similar interests, and using SFA information to improve practices (Table 11). The average length of membership in the SFA is 6 years (Table 12), and over a third of members have been field day hosts. Ninety percent of members have had their expectations of the SFA met in some way (Table 13). Seventy two percent have suggested a friend to join the organization, and 50% have experienced a life improvement on their farm as a result of involvement with the SFA (Table 14).

Table 11. Reasons for joining SFA (reported as percent of 169 SFA member respondents).

Support sustainable farming practices	91%
Meet people with similar interests	79%
Use SFA programs to improve my practices	51%
Direct contact with farmers as food source	18%
Other*	12%

*SFA philosophy, to gain a mentor

Table 12. Participation in SFA (reported as percent of 169 SFA member respondents).

Average length of membership	6 years
Low	1 year
High	13 years
Field day host	37%
Board member	31%
Chapter officer	22%
Event sponsor	12%
Other*	26%

*Speaker, Coordinator, Grazing circle member, Harvest festival, Exhibitor, Consumer, Consultant, Read newsletter, Volunteer, Advisor

Table 13. Fulfillment of expectations

Yes , expectations met	30%
Expectations generally met	42%
Expectations partly met	18%
Expectations not really met	7%
Expectations not met at all	1%
No response	2%

Table 14. Getting the word out	Yes	No	No response
Suggested a friend to join	72%	24%	4%
Life improvement on farm resulting from membership	50%	16%	34%
Farm diversification resulting from SFA information	46%	54%	0%
Attended field days	81%	17%	2%

One third of SFA members attend programs twice per year (Table 15). The preferred time and day for field day events is Saturday afternoons (Table 16). Table 17 shows the ranking of perceived usefulness of observed field day topics. Ninety percent of participants report field days to be effective in commuting information to farmers, with one third reporting that they have changed practices as a result of field days, and another 26% considering change (Table 18).

Table 15. Attendance at SFA programs

Twice per year	33%
Once per year	30%
Other*	14%
Six per year	11%
Once per month	7%
More than once per month	5%

* Four per year, Three per year, Seldom, Never

Field Day Events

Table 16. Preferred time and day for field day events

<i>Time of day</i>	
Afternoon	72%
Evening	31%
Morning	29%
<i>Day of week</i>	
Saturday	58%
Thursday	40%
Tuesday	38%
Friday	37%
Wednesday	35%
Monday	32%
Sunday	29%

Table 17. Practices observed at field days and their perceived usefulness
(reported as percent of 143 field day participants; usefulness reported as average on a scale of 1-very useful, to 5-not useful)

Practice	Perceived usefulness	Percent of total participants
Other alternative weed control	1.5	8%
Intensive grazing management	1.8	67%
No herbicide application	1.9	48%
Alternative weed control	1.9	34%
Cover crops	1.9	45%
Alternative crops	2.0	48%
Alternative pasture forage	2.0	49%
Flame weeding	2.1	29%
Alternative tillage	2.2	32%
Reduced herbicide application	2.3	36%
Other	1.9	8%

Table 18. Effectiveness of SFA field days (reported as percent of 143 field day participants)

<i>Field day influence on practices</i>	
Farmers who changed practices	33%
Farmers considering change	26%
Farmers who did not change	17%
No response	24%
<i>Effectiveness of SFA field days</i>	
Effective	90%
Not effective	1%
No response	9%
<i>Reasons for effectiveness</i>	
See and compare practices first hand	78%
Farmer to farmer communication	87%
Information is good and well presented	57%
Other (presenters are encouraging and supportive)	9%
<i>Suggested improvements</i>	
Increase discussion time/more time at each location	16%
Provide yield results/observations sent after harvest	24%
Provide cost analysis	35%
Need more farmers to share experiences with practice	49%
Display and describe farm equipment	18%
Provide information on <i>why</i> to try alternative practices	25%
<i>Farmer expectations of field days</i>	
Field day exceeded expectations	16%
Met expectations	71%
Fell short of expectations	4%
No response	9%

A list of field day topics that were recommended to continue was created from the survey (below), along with a list of new field day topic ideas (page 13).

Continue SFA topics:

Diversity of farm types/cropping systems

Rotational grazing

Scientific comparison of sustainable concepts

Watering systems for grazing

Alternative cropping

Poultry health/processing

Crop rotation

Sustainable hog production

Tillage and rotation effects on pests/disease technology

Alternative energy/ appropriate

Weed control/alternative weed control

Pasture walk

Insect control

Greenhouses/season extenders

Mulch residues

Direct marketing

Cover crops

New Technology Use

Organics

Flame weeding

Organic transition

Hoop houses

Organic fertilizers

New crops

Zoning and land-use planning

Drainage

Tax incentives

Research agenda and partnerships

Non-GMO corn

Sustainable pasture management

Value added practices/marketing

Herbicide reduction

Pasturing poultry

Alternative livestock

Alternative forage in pastures

Composting manure

Gardening

Using equipment variables

New SFA field day topic suggestions:

Passing on farms to next generation

Weed biology

Youth in agriculture

Organic control of fruit tree pests

Agritainment as income source
wasps

Biocontrol of leaf hoppers with

Political action

Diversify species for better ecology

How to leave farming without high costs	Beneficial insect habitat
Cost analysis comparisons (ex. Grazing vs. confined)	Farm fertility
Marketing	Soil compaction
Local processing plants (small, regional)	Soil as a carbon sink
Crop field as pasture in rotation	Soil building practices
Grazing groups crops	Balancing soil
Rotational grazing of beef on corn ground	Plant in bed system with cover
More on livestock crop?	Crop rotation/cover crops what compliments next
Alternative turkey production growers	Organic gardening/vegetable/fruit
Draft animals	Flower production
Worms	Raspberries
Woodlot management	Raising greens in greenhouse
Agroforestry	Seed saving techniques
Grape production	Alternative energy
Increasing meaningful profits	Humane treatment of animals
Integrated pest management cattle/calves	Small corrals for handling
Decreasing prejudice against organic production grazing	Improving prairie plantings with
Potato insect control	Goat production
Whole farm system management systems	Animal behavior in sustainable

Grass-fed beef	Soil biology testing
Tree nursery production	Hemp
Growing Nitrogen fixers for soy/corn	Diversified farm layout plans
New equipment ideas	No-till soy in rye
Programs for women and children fertilizers on soil	Effects of cover crops and
Support for people trying to return to farming	Human nutrition for marketers
Profitable shelterbelts	Sustainable fencing/hedgerows
Organic certification	Multi-species grazing integration
Northern fruit and berry production	Practical farming skills
Value added practices	Energy conservation in agriculture
Permaculture	Collaborative marketing

Sustainable Practices *This information will help us understand how SFA programs can be directed to alleviate barriers to sustainable practices.*

Seventy nine percent of farmers report having made changes which they continue to use that make their practices more sustainable (Table 19). The practices farmers have changed are reported in Table 20. The reasons farmers have changed practices include farming in a way that is better for the environment, producing a higher quality product, passing on productive land to future generations, contributing to changes in the direction of agriculture in the United States, and reducing input costs (Table 21). Barriers to adopting sustainable practices include time requirements, availability of markets, greater management complexity, and a lack of necessary knowledge (Table 21). Field days, workshops and the Cornerpost newsletter were all reported as effective means of eliminating these barriers (Table 21).

Table 19. Farmers who made changes in last 3 to 5 years to make farm operations more sustainable.

No changes	6%
Tried change, but abandoned	4%
Changed and continue to use	79%
No response	11%

Table 20. Practices changed in last 3 to 5 years to make farm operations more sustainable.

Practice	Some change	Major change	Tried but dropped	No change	No response
Decision making approach	39%	12%	0%	10%	39%
Weed/insect management	36%	18%	1%	11%	34%
Tillage	34%	13%	1%	14%	38%
Fertility management	30%	19%	0%	10%	41%
Alternative marketing methods	30%	22%	2%	10%	36%
Manure management	29%	14%	0%	11%	46%
Types/mix of crops/livestock	29%	13%	1%	12%	45%
Livestock health/facilities	28%	12%	1%	10%	49%
Marketing	28%	19%	1%	14%	38%
Grazing management	26%	19%	1%	6%	48%
Agroforestry	11%	6%	0%	19%	64%
Other*	1%	2%	0%	2%	95%

*:Season extending, permaculture system, overwintering cattle without buildings, composting poultry

Table 21. Adoption of sustainable practices (reported as percent of 173 respondents to this section; importance level reported as average on a scale of 1-very important/no barrier, to 5-no importance/strong barrier)

Reason	Importance Rank	Response rate
<i>Reasons to adopt sustainable practices</i>		
To farm in a way that is better for the environment	1	89%
To produce a higher quality product	2	88%
To pass on productive land to future generations	3	87%
To contribute to changes in the direction of agriculture in this country	3	87%
To reduce input costs	3	87%
To consume less energy	4	89%
Other ¹	4	9%
To achieve a higher net income	5	86%
To improve my family life	5	83%
To improve the health of my livestock	6	78%
To be less dependent on outside suppliers	6	86%
To improve the viability of my community	7	83%
To have fewer insects and/or weeds	8	84%
To decrease dependence on outside income	8	80%
To be less dependent on government subsidies	9	81%
<i>Barriers to adopting sustainable practices</i>		
Other ²	1	11%
Greater time requirements	2	83%
Availability of market outlets	2	83%
Greater management complexity	3	83%
Lack of necessary knowledge/skills/information	3	86%
Concerns about weed pressure	4	82%
Possibility of lower profit	5	82%
Fear of lower yields	6	81%
Government program (eg. Crop insurance requirement)	7	81%
Requirement of credit institutions	8	82%
Peer pressure	9	83%
Pressure from agribusiness	9	84%
<i>Value of SFA programs in alleviating barriers</i>		

Field days	1	87%
Workshops	1	73%
Cornerpost newsletter	2	88%

¹Personal health, Satisfaction of endeavor, Build work ethic in children, Revert to an older way of doing things

² MN Department of Agriculture, Weather, Lack of equipment, Lack of price stability, Personal physical barriers, Labor shortage, Cost (no government payments), Lack of support from family/friends, Density of producers for co-op development

Fifty five percent of respondents are in favor of cosponsoring projects with University of Minnesota Research and Outreach, followed by UMN Extension, and the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (Table 22).

Table 22. Project cosponsor support (reported as percent of 173 respondents of this section)

Organization	Percent respondents supporting co-sponsorship
UMN Research and Outreach	55%
UMN Extension	54%
MISA	51%
ESAP	50%
Soil/Water District	48%
NRCS	36%
Grazing Land Initiative	34%
Ag Lenders	28%
MN DNR	26%
FSA	18%
Corn Growers	14%
Soybean Growers	14%
MN Pork Producers	13%
Other*	18%

*Land Stewardship Project, Political parties, Environmental groups, MN Fruit and Vegetable Growers, Dairy Marketing, Churches, South Dakota State University, Local schools, Youth Groups, Michael Fields Inst., FFA students, Local tribes, Health conferences, MPCA, Chambers of Commerce, Blandin & McKnight Foundations, Milk plants, H.H.Humphrey Institute, Seed dealers, NFFI, Marketing associations, Farmers Union, Sustainable development partnerships, Chemical dealers-educate staff

Marketing *This information will help increase our knowledge of marketing techniques of SFA farmers, and the success of those techniques.*

Seventy six percent of respondents direct market their products, while 37% cooperatively market, and 63% of these people receive premium prices (Table 23), while only 48% report having adequate processing infrastructure (Table 24). The top customers of direct marketers are neighbors, and the most commonly used form of advertising is word of mouth.

Table 23.	Yes	No	No response
Direct marketing	76%	23%	1%
Cooperative marketing	37%	42%	21%
Retail outlet marketing	27%	50%	23%
Receive premium prices	63%	23%	14%

Table 24. Direct marketing customers	
Neighbors	48%
Other ¹	35%
Farmers Market	28%
Community Supported Agriculture	3%
Processing infrastructure rating	
Adequate	48%
Inadequate	39%
No response	13%
Direct marketing advertisement	
Word of mouth	88%
Mail	29%
Flyers	29%
Signs	26%
Other ²	23%
Internet	18%

¹Advanced orders, Whole Farm Co-op, Wholesale, Restaurants, Harvest Fest, Passersby, Growers, Relatives, Friends, Co-workers, World-wide customers, Tourists, Auction, PTO

²Customer visits, Newspapers, Brochure, School tours, Calendars, Memberships, MN Grown, Salesman, Co-op, Family, Television, Industry magazines

Top products direct marketed: Beef, Chicken, Vegetables, Eggs, Pork, Lamb

Dairy *This information will be used to help improve SFA programs for dairy farmers.*

The total number of SFA farmers responding to this section was 30, of the total 31 reporting “dairy” as product. The 1997 Census of Agriculture reported 9,603 dairy farms in MN.

Table 25. Milking herd size	SFA	MN
1-9 cows	4%	5%
10-19	0%	6%
20-49	31%	43%
50-99	26%	35%
100-199	22%	8%
200-499	17%	2%
500+	0%	1%

Table 26. Dairy characteristics	Mean	Low	High	Response rate
SFA dairy herd size	100 head	5	270	77%
Number of youngstock	49 head	0	160	73%
Available pasture acreage	94 acres	2	200	70%
Available intensive grazing acreage	99 acres	0	328	67%
Annual production (lbs/cow)	18,957	7,300	29,200	77%
Price received per 100 weight	\$13.35	\$11	\$20	47%
Table 27. Milking system (67% response)				
Pipeline	27%			
Parlor	20%			
New Zealand parlor	7%			
Stall barn	7%			
By hand (goats)	3%			
Stanchion barn	3%			
Processor (58% response)				
AMPI	7%			
CROPP	7%			
FDA	7%			
Kraft	7%			
DFA	3%			
LeSueur cheese	3%			
LOL	3%			
NFO	3%			
Osaki's creamery	3%			
Perham co-op creamery	3%			
Plainview co-op	3%			
Pro-Ag	3%			
Stacyville co-op	3%			
Sunrise Ag, Buckman	3%			

Sixty percent of SFA dairy farmers have participated in the Dairy Diagnostic Team (DDT) program (Table 28), with half of those participants reporting that the program was effective on their farms, and a third reporting that they would recommend the program to other dairy farmers. Twenty eight percent of DDT participants have been in the program for less than one year, which may explain why the areas of improvement on farms due to DDT had a high number of people responding that no improvements have been seen yet (Table 29).

Table 28.

<i>Dairy Diagnostic Team Program</i>	Yes	No	No response
Dairy Diagnostic Team participant	60%	37%	3%
Recommend DDT to other farmers	33%	1%	66%
Found DDT effective	50%	6%	44%
<i>Years of participation in DDT</i>	0-1	1-2	2+
(50% response rate)	28%	11%	11%

Table 29.

<i>Areas of improvement on farm because of DDT</i>	
Other*	17%
Improvements in physical dairy facility	17%
Herd health improvements	6%
Implementation of accounting programs	6%
Attitude toward dairy business and industry	6%
Environmental issues addressed and corrected	6%
Increased milk production	0%
Increased milk quality	0%
Nutrition changes	0%
Feed cost savings	0%
More personal time	0%

*No improvements yet

Grazing *This information will be used to help improve SFA programs for livestock graziers.*

Thirty three percent of respondents started management Intensive Grazing (MIG) as a result of SFA programs, while 72% were already practicing MIG, but SFA programs helped improve their system (Table 30). Twenty four percent of farmers belong to grazing groups (Table 30). Of those who do not belong to a grazing group, 55% are interested in information on joining.

Table 30. Management Intensive Grazing		Yes	No	No response
Participate in MIG		73%	20%	7%
Belong to grazing group		24%	56%	20%
	Mean	High	Low	Response rate
Acreage in MIG	107 acres	775	6	56%
Number of animals	113 head	915	5	56%
Number of months	6.5 months	12	4	56%
Number of years in MIG	8.7 years	29	2	56%

Table 31. Types of livestock on pasture

Youngstock	79%
Other*	70%
Steer	52%
Dairy cows	38%
Dry cows	38%

* Beef cow/calf, Sheep, Poultry, Hogs, Horses, Goats, Geese

Crop Production *This information will be used to help improve SFA programs for crop producers.*

Sixty four percent of SFA farmers use cover crops, as compared to 10% of MN farmers from the 1997 Census of Agriculture (Table 32). Twenty eight percent of SFA farmers participate in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) as compared to 20% of MN farmers surveyed in 1997.

Table 32. Crop production		SFA	MN
Farmers using cover crops (SFA 85% response) ¹		64%	10%
Farmers participating in CRP* (SFA 90% response)		28%	20%
Farmers using drainage techniques (78% response) ²		49%	na
	Mean	High	Low
Number of years in crop rotation	4 years	12	1

*MN figure also includes farmers participating in Wetlands Reserve Program

¹**Reasons SFA farmers do not use cover crops:**

- | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Pasture is used as cover crop | Return on investment |
| Not needed on grass management | Time |
| Too late if harvest in September | Cool soil temperatures |
| Wet spring ground | Short growing season |
| Knowledge | Machinery |
| None work in my rotation | Cost |

²**Technique used:**

Tile 36%, Ditches 22%, Other 7% (Raised beds, Trenches, Mulch, Contouring, Subsoiler, Alfalfa)

Weeds This information may provide help in research proposals related to the AURI program.

When asked about weeds, 60% of farmers reported that they tolerate a few weeds in their fields (Figure 1). Fifty percent of farmers noticed a change in the weed species found in their fields after changing their crop rotation (Figure 2), followed by changing cover crop use, switching to organic practices, and changing their tillage practices. The most troublesome weeds reported by farmers were Canada thistle (35%), Foxtail species (22%), and Quackgrass (11%; Figure 3). Over 70% of SFA farmers use cultivation to control weeds (Figure 4).

Figure 1. Farmer opinions of weeds

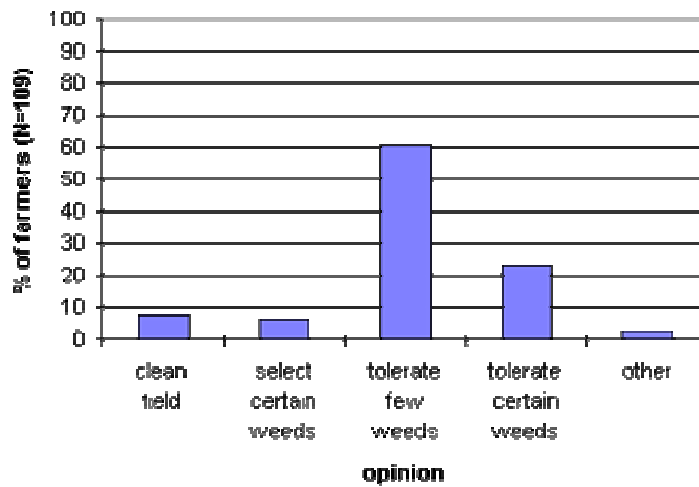


Figure 2. Percent farmers who noticed a change in weeds after changing practices

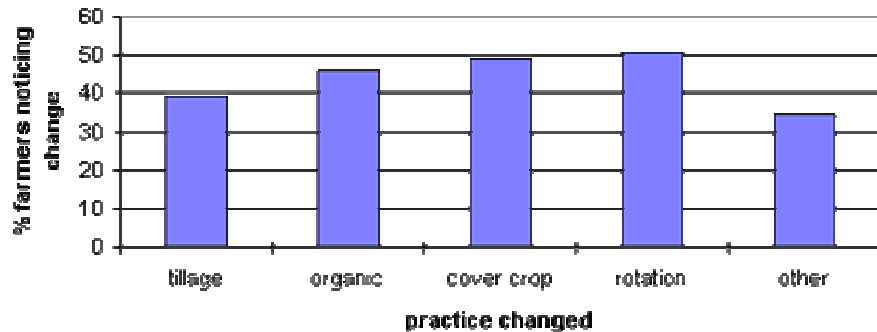


Figure 3. Most troublesome weeds

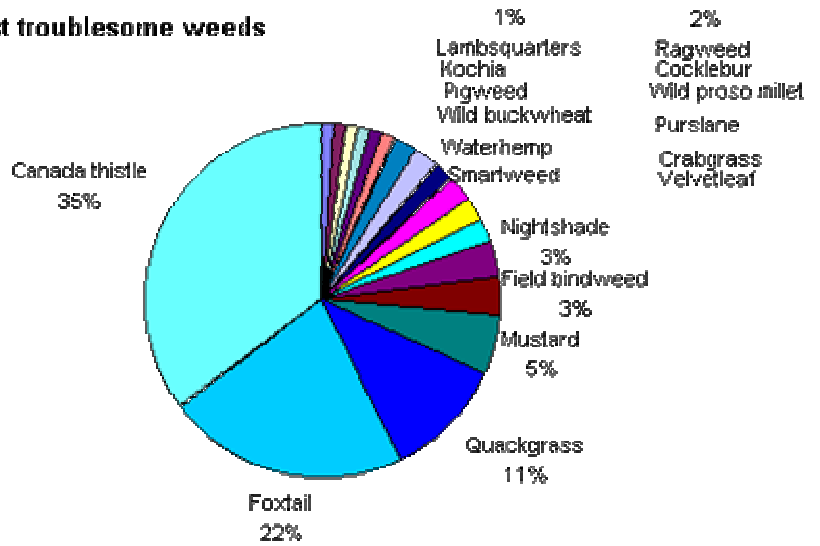
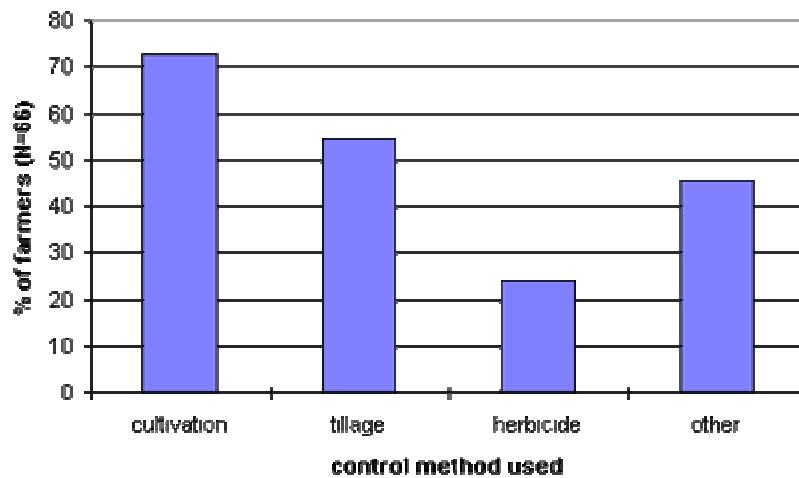


Figure 4. Practices used by farmers to target weeds



Closing

In the closing of the survey, we asked several questions that will help us to further promote networking between and among SFA farmers and the general public. Fifty six percent of farmers wish to be included in an SFA Marketing Directory (Table 33), 55% are interested in other marketing opportunities, 68% wish to have their name passed along to “buyers” who are interested in purchasing the farmers’ products, and 54% would like their name to be passed along to “sellers” who have products for sale that may be useful to the farmers’ sustainable practices. Thirty nine percent are interested in the possibility of being included in future research proposals. This information has been incorporated into the SFA Members and Associates Database and will be used to promote

networking and the continuation and support of sustainable farming practices in Minnesota.

Table 33. Question	Yes	No	No response
Member of LSP	40%	41%	19%
Include in SFA Marketing Directory	56%	24%	21%
Include in other marketing opportunities	55%	21%	24%
Pass name along to buyer	68%	14%	18%
Pass name along to seller	54%	20%	26%
Interested in being included in research proposals	39%	33%	28%
Contact by phone at a later date	80%	9%	11%
Contact in person at a later date	73%	13%	14%

Survey Comments

The following comments were written by various respondents:

Farmer communication:

“Can/does the SFA receive questions like ‘how do hoop houses hold up in Minnesota’, and then create an active dialog among members for learning?”

Research ideas:

“...alternative energy, horse farming, cover cropping and tillage with low horsepower.”

Focus of SFA programs:

“I am a small market gardener, less than 1 acre. Most [programs] and field days focus on large production. There needs to be some emphasis on small farmers.”

“LSP has changed its focus from sustainable farming to sustainable food production, should SFA consider this? Field days for consumers?”

“During the last twenty years, the biggest obstacle to small organic family farms is big government bureaucracy that favors agri-business, and punishes the small operator. The SFA’s main mission should be to influence farm policy to level the playing field.”

“To improve SFA, add chapters. I've had a hard time finding a chapter in my area.”

“SFA and LSP need to reach out to more traditional farmers. SFA needs to work more closely with LSP, rather than compete with them...”

“Education is the key to point out the problem that’s happened the past 40 years, most farmers don't see a problem. We should show them how to fix it and get a better profit in the process.”

The direction of agriculture:

“I think the University of Minnesota has done more harm to farming than help. Where do they get their funding? Why did the University push bigger and bigger farms? Who has it helped, small farmers, small towns, animals, or big business?”

“SFA can do more than any other entity in promoting sustainable agriculture. It accepts farmers large and small, organic, and chemical users. Members often do their own research and pass it on farmer to farmer. Often University and agri-business research stress production, not the environment.”

SFA leadership:

“SFA involvement often consumes too much time, energy, and expense in simply dealing with organizing events and tending to business and publicity to leave much leadership energy for discussing worthwhile research ideas.”

“Each chapter should have multiple applications annually.”

“ Need staff person assigned to work with each local chapter.”

Field days:

“The SFA should provide written handouts with facts and figures of cost analysis, etc.”

“To improve field days, package them and the discussions [that arise] for those who can't attend.”

“Field days are ineffective because conventional farmers don't attend.”

Recommendations

The results of this survey show the interest that SFA members have in the beneficial effects of the organization. Over a third of those who received the survey chose to have their opinions included by responding, which I believe demonstrates the interest that members have in making the SFA successful. Looking through the results, we see that the average number of years that people have been farming is 22, with 89% of farmers being 40 years of age or older. This reflects the ideas of some that we need to make farming more viable so that future generations will have the opportunity to make a living through farming. There are many facets to this idea, all which are complex and will take time. By using the information this survey has gathered, we will be able to make a positive start toward reaching that goal.

Farmer to farmer communication is one of the most important tools used by the SFA, and 87% of field day attendees reported it as the number one reason why field days are effective. The SFA mission itself shows how important communication is in creating a “spirit of cooperation” to offer mutual support, share resources, ideas and approaches to farming, in order to strengthen our families and communities. Therefore, most recommendations focus on ways to increase and enhance communication between SFA members.

Field days:

I believe the results show that field days have been very successful at providing farmers with useful information. Eighty-one percent of respondents have attended field days, and 37% have been field day hosts. Thirty-three percent of attendees have changed their practices as a result of information learned at field days, and another 26% are considering change. Ninety percent of attendees reported that field days are effective, with ways to

improve reported as getting more farmers to share experiences with practices (49%) and provide cost analyses (35%). Therefore, I recommend:

1. Enhance existing field days by a) providing cost analyses of the use of alternative practices, b) “package” field day topics in handouts for people who are interested but unable to attend field days, c) encourage more farmers to share their experiences, and d) provide outreach to conventional farmers.
2. Extend field day topics to cover new areas of interest proposed by respondents (page 13), and include topics for smaller-scale producers.
3. Hold field days on Saturday afternoons, the preferred day and time of the majority of respondents.

Adoption of sustainable practices:

The top five reported reasons for adopting sustainable practices were: to farm in a way that is better for the environment, produce a higher quality product, pass on productive land to future generations, contribute to changes in the direction of agriculture in the U.S., and to reduce input costs. The five greatest barriers to adopting sustainable practices were: greater time requirements, availability of market outlets, greater management complexity, lack of necessary skills, and concerns about weed pressure.

Again, I believe that communication is necessary to help promote these incentives and alleviate these barriers. By working together and learning from one another’s experiences, we can find ways to promote environmental quality, create schedules to reduce time requirements and make managing production less complicated. Therefore, I recommend:

1. Create an active dialogue between farmers interested in adopting new practices with those using those practices, possibly through a column in the Cornerpost newsletter, or through web-based media.

2. Promote research on alternative practices by co-sponsoring projects with groups who are knowledgeable about specific topics (page 16).

Marketing:

Again, availability of market outlets was one of the top five reported barriers to adopting sustainable practices. Also, 76% of farmers are direct marketing products, 63% of which are receiving premium prices. Only 48% of direct marketers reported having adequate processing infrastructure. Therefore, I recommend:

1. Increasing marketing opportunities available to SFA members.
2. Providing information about marketing methods, and sharing marketing experiences through SFA programs.
3. Providing help to direct marketers with their processing infrastructure.

SFA Leadership:

Based on comments (page 23) and response rates from individual chapters (page 9), it appears that some chapters are more active than others. A comment that organizing events can take the vast majority of available time, energy and resources implies that to make the SFA sustainable itself, there needs to be either a larger staff, or some way to reduce these pressures. Therefore, I recommend:

1. Encouraging involvement in chapter coordination and event planning from multiple SFA members.
2. Increasing the number of SFA staff members so that individual chapters can have greater support from a central body.

I hope these recommendations will prove useful to the organization. I realize that these final ideas will be the most difficult to accomplish because of budgetary restrictions and variable interest levels between chapters, but I feel that such changes would make the SFA more effective. Overall, I believe the survey results show that current programs (field days, workshops, and the Cornerpost) are well received by members, and that they

provide useful information and networking opportunities. Again, I believe that any increase in communication between members will be very beneficial for helping move agriculture in a more sustainable direction in the United States.

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