A Comprehensive Event on a Vital Topic: Farm Transitions

By Jason Walker • SFA Communications Coordinator

As our ongoing Farm Transitions work has progressed, we’ve seen how valuable this education and support is to farmers who have taken part. Developing a farm succession plan not only is the wise thing to do, it gives farmers peace of mind to know that the land they’ve worked so hard to build and nurture will remain in sustainable hands.

Each workshop has been well-received, but we had never done anything like the four-day extravaganza held in March at the Villa Maria in Frontenac. There, internationally known farm succession planning expert John Baker led the multi-day session of hands-on help where attendees dove right in to develop their succession plans.

Jan Joannides, executive director of project co-sponsor Renewing the Countryside, said the workshop, attended by about 50 farmers, was meant to be intense because the estate-planning process is just that.

"This workshop provided an opportunity for people to really dig deep into the questions and decisions they need to make," she said. "And with a wealth of expertise at hand, from both the presenters and participants, they learned about pitfalls they can avoid and strategies for dealing with complex issues."

Baker is the "go-to" guy on farm transitions, and those who attended seemed to understand the valuable information they were getting. Kent Solberg, SFA’s Livestock and Grazing Coordinator who is a lead on the Farm Transitions project, said he appreciated Baker's advice on separating family from the farm business side.

"It was extremely valuable to understand that farm and family are linked but have different dynamics and goals," he said. "Differentiating these can assist farm families who may be stuck or confused in deciding a path for the future of their farm."

And going back to the peace of mind factor, the Baker workshop also encouraged attendees to create a vision, or intended destination, for their farm. As Solberg said, we don’t just hop behind the wheel without a destination in mind, and similarly we need an intended destination for our families, farms and farm businesses.

"There may be detours and potholes along the way, but when you have a plan you can adjust for the unforeseeable things that pop up," Solberg said. "The process can be difficult, and requires serious time and thought to work through all the factors affecting farm family decisions,
but considering the potential consequences of not planning, the effort is worth it.”

Our next Farm Transitions workshop has not been determined; keep reading SFA Connect for details when they are known. Also, check our our Farm Transitions homepage where you can find archived newsletters and information about our workshops.

SFA and Renewing the Countryside’s Farm Transitions project is thanks to the generous support of USDA-Risk Management Agency.

Executive Director's Note

By John Mesko

With spring ready to break loose (it has to eventually, right), I'm very much aware that many of you will be busy for the next few months. Your time available to read this newsletter, and no doubt the countless others that you probably get will be limited. We understand, and we want you to know that whenever you've missed anything in SFA Connect, you can get it on our SFA Connect archive page. If you haven't been there yet, you should really check it out.

If you are like me, you are eager for warm weather, eager to get out in the field or in the garden. I'd personally like to see some green grass coming up soon! Delayed spring weather, and the stress it can cause for farmers can tempt us to take shortcuts. In those situations it's easy to forget about farm safety. As you all know, farming is one of the most dangerous jobs in America from a health and safety perspective. I recently found a good webpage that makes a great reminder for us on how to be safe every spring, but especially this spring, where it looks like everything will be compressed.

I look back over the last 3 spring messages I’ve sent out to you through this newsletter, I’m aware of how important each one of you is to SFA, our Farmer-to-Farmer Network, and all of agriculture. Thank you for what you do, and for the incredibly busy, but very important growing season you are about to embark on. Be safe!

SFA Board Welcomes New Members, Interim Chair

By Jason Walker • SFA Communications Coordinator

The SFA Board of Directors welcomed four new board members and an interim president and said goodbye to its outgoing president at a meeting April 13 at the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph.

Joining the board were four new chapter representatives: Eric Ament of Duluth (Lake Superior), Dayna Burtness of Northfield (Cannon River), Marie Petry of Wolverton (Lake Agassiz), and Wes Tennis of Hayward (South Central). Also, Vice Chair Jim Chamberlin (right, from Central Chapter) has stepped in as interim Chair upon the departure of John Ostgarden, who resigned his position and stepped down from the board.

John Mesko, SFA Executive Director, said he was confident the board would proceed
"John Ostgarden has been an unwavering advocate for sustainable ag and SFA," Mesko said. "However, Jim Chamberlin is a veteran board member and will be an effective Board Chair. I'm excited to work with him as well as get to know the new board members."

Chamberlin and his wife, Audra, own a diversified farm near Deerwood and raise livestock, fruits, vegetables and maple syrup as well as operate a managed timber lot. He said he is eager to keep SFA’s Farmer-to-Farmer Network moving in a positive direction.

"I want to see a board and organization that is cohesive and effective, with direct, honest, and respectful dialogue," he said. "Understanding your strengths and those of others can help us achieve that."

For more information, or to contact your SFA board member, [click here](https://sfa-mn.org).

**Nearly 100 Participate in SFA Stress Survey**

Thanks to all who participated in the recent SFA Stress Survey, a simple, two-question survey. We will use this data to assess the need for stress-related programming at future SFA Farmer-to-Farmer Network events: a quick survey on the new topic of SFA members’ use of mobile technology and how it pertains to SFA is now available at this link, so please take a few minutes to respond.

In the Stress Survey, Question One asked, “On a scale of 1-10, how much does stress affect farm productivity?” A rating of “1” meant stress did not affect farm productivity at all, and a rating of “10” meant that stress affected productivity more than anything else. The average score participants gave to stress was 6.56; most people gave responses of 5 and above. Some key findings:

- Nearly 10 percent of respondents indicated that stress impacts farm productivity more than anything else.
- Over one-third of respondents ranked stress at 8 or more.
- Only 11 respondents ranked stress below 5 on the scale, indicating stress is clearly a factor for most farmers taking the survey.

Question Two asked if respondents would attend a stress management workshop if available, and over 60 percent of respondents indicated they would attend such a workshop.

Thanks to everyone who participated in the survey. We awarded an SFA T-shirt to one random survey taker, and the lucky winner was Kelly Smith of Esko. Thanks, Kelly!

And again, [please click here](https://sfa-mn.org) to help SFA by taking another VERY brief survey.

**SFA-Related Events Planned in Central Minnesota**

Several upcoming events in the Fergus Falls and Wadena areas include SFA members and will be relevant to many. The events:

A “Pork on Pasture” Workshop will be held from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. April 27 at 18618 Co. Rd. 23, Verndale. As part of the M-State Sustainable Food Production program’s short course series, SFA members Kent and Linda Solberg will be sharing information on how they successfully raise pork on pasture. Presentation will include how hogs fit into their pasture rotation, fencing, feeding strategies, farrowing on pasture, marketing, castration, and managing sows and pigs overwinter. Cost: $50/person or $75/family; bring a sack lunch. Beverages provided. For more information, call 218.445.7580 or email [sevenpinesfarmandfence@gmail.com](mailto:sevenpinesfarmandfence@gmail.com).

Holistic Management of Goats Workshop is 10 a.m.-4 p.m. June 15. As part of the M State Sustainable Food Production program’s short course series, this day features a hands-on opportunity to learn about incorporating meat and milk goats into a farming operation. Topics:

- New Crops Project
- Minnesota Dairy Initiative
- Planning For Your Farm’s Future
- Public Policy

For information about MDI and its ongoing projects, contact Kent Solberg at mdi@sfa-mn.org.

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animal selection for a forage-based system; nutrition requirements; planned grazing; fencing; shelters, animal handling. Instructors are Sue Wika and Tom Prieve of Paradox Farm, a forage-based, permaculture farm featuring integrated livestock systems located at 11643 State Highway 78, Ashby, Minn. Cost: $50/person; $75/family. Bring a sack lunch. More information: paradoxhomestead@gmail.com or 218.747.2202.

Annual Conference Photo Feature

Photographer Crystal Liepa documented our SFA Annual Conference again in 2013 at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. Watch for a new photo each issue of SFA Connect and learn more about Crystal at her website.

SFA Photo Contest Winners: Dan Fabian, Emmy Tolbert

Who doesn't want to win a free T-shirt, let alone a cool SFA one? Here's your chance. Send communications coordinator Jason Walker your photos, and the best each month, chosen by a panel of distinguished judges, gets an SFA T-shirt. What kind of photos are we seeking? Simply anything from your farm, family, garden or kitchen – anything that's related somehow to sustainable agriculture that you'd like to share with SFA members.

Send your photos to jason@sfa-mn.org, and we'll include the winner in SFA Connect. Check out our Facebook page for all the photo submissions.

February’s winner: Dan Fabian
Dairy Industry Asks FDA to Approve Aspartame as Additive

According to the Farm-to-Consumer Legal Defense Fund, the dairy industry has petitioned the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to approve aspartame as a hidden additive in milk, yogurt, eggnog and cream.

The International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA) and the National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF) are asking FDA to alter the definition of “milk” to include chemical sweeteners such as aspartame and sucralose without listing these additives on the front panel. While aimed principally at replacing sugar in flavored milks served to school children, the petition also asks for the right to put hidden artificial sweeteners in a host of dairy products including nonfat dried milk (always added to reduced-fat milks), yogurt, cream, half-and-half, sour cream, eggnog and whipping cream. Truly, no conventional dairy product will be safe if the petitioners get their way.
According to the Farm-to-Consumer Legal Defense Fund, thousands of adverse reactions to aspartame have been reported to the FDA, mostly concerned with abnormal brain function, brain tumors, epilepsy and Parkinson's. 

[Click here](#) to read the aspartame request and comment by May 21, 2013.

### MDA Requests Specialty Crops Grant Proposals

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture is accepting grant proposals for specialty crop research under the USDA's Specialty Crop Block Grant Program. The goal of the program is to fund projects that will increase the competitiveness of specialty crops. The MDA anticipates a federal allocation of $671,000.

The USDA defines specialty crops as fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, and nursery crops (including floriculture). Nonprofits, government agencies, universities and other organizations involved in Minnesota agriculture are encouraged to apply. Individuals, for-profit businesses, or commercial entities may only apply if their project demonstrates a significant benefit to a specialty crop segment. This program will not fund projects focused on individual businesses, physical improvements/equipment or operating capital.

MDA will accept applications from eligible entities submitted by 4 p.m. May 29, 2013. For a complete list of crops that qualify for research, [click here](#). For a copy of the Minnesota Specialty Crop Block Grant RFP/Grant Manual, grant application guidance and a fillable application form, [click here](#).

### MDA: Sign Up for Driftwatch Registry This Spring

Before spring fieldwork starts in earnest, growers of organic and other sensitive crops should consider signing up for the Driftwatch™ registry offered by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA). By registering with Driftwatch™, farmers identify the locations of their sensitive crops and pastures using the point and click features of Google Maps®. Commercial fertilizer and pesticide applicators can then check the database and take special care to avoid organic land and other sensitive crops/forages when they are applying chemicals in the vicinity of these crops.

“Driftwatch™ is a free and voluntary program,” said Meg Moynihan, administrator of MDA’s organic and diversification programs. “We offer it to help landowners and pesticide applicators communicate better – and to prevent problems before they happen.”

In Minnesota, growers may register grapes and other fruits, vegetables, Christmas trees, and certified organic crops and pasture. The program is not intended for homeowners; participants must have at least 1/2 acre of a certified organic or other qualifying crop in commercial production.

Driftwatch™ is offered by MDA through a partnership with Purdue University. For more information or to register land, go to [www.driftwatch.org](http://www.driftwatch.org).

### State Wetland Restoration Funds Set Up to Help Farmers

The MN Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) has approx. $5 million allocated for restoring drained and partially drained marginal fields ([click here for more information](#)). These grants are based on the following regional locations: west central, up to and including Norman and Mahnomen counties; central, up to southern Crow Wing and Aitkin; southwest, including parts of Le Sueur, Waseca, and Freeborn counties; and all of the metro counties.

If you prefer speaking directly to a person (instead of navigating the State agency website) call Beth Markhart at 651.203.6019 for a simple, straightforward explanation of what this program means for you and your land. Beth has over 20 years of experience with restoring wetlands and other natural resources in Minnesota. As BWSR has prioritized the restoration of "less-wet" wet prairies and meadows, Beth can discuss with you the feasibility of restoring these specific areas on your land for payment and also using them for mob grazing or other activities. Most
WEI Hosting Spring Edibles & Medicinals Workshop

The Women's Environmental Institute is hosting a workshop, Spring Edibles & Medicinals, April 27 at the WEI Farm Campus, North Branch & Wild River State Park from 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Eat your yard! In this first of the 2013 Prairie School Series, Retired Naturalist Dave Crawford will take students out to the prairies of Wild River State Park. You will learn about area native plants that are tasty, healthful, and healing and learn about early spring flora and fauna active on our local prairies. Cost is $25. To RSVP, visit www.w-e-i.org; For more information, contact Anika Walz at anika@w-e-i.org.

USDA Audit Prompts Organic Crop Insurance Program Shifts

On Feb. 22, 2013, USDA’s Office of Inspector General issued an audit of the USDA Risk Management Agency (RMA) Federal crop insurance program for organic farming practices. The audit found that Transitional yields* (T-Yield), offered to organic growers generally exceeded what they had produced using organic farming practices for the crop years of 2008-2010. In response to this audit, RMA plans to make several changes to their Federal crop insurance program for organic farming practices - including eliminating the 5 percent organic surcharge and changes to the T-Yields offered to organic producers beginning with crop year 2014. RMA is also working toward having organic prices in crop year 2014 or 2015 for almonds, apples, barley, blueberries, oats, pears, additional stonefruits, table grapes and wheat.

A transitional yield, in this instance, does not refer to the yields during the transition to certified organic production. For crop insurance purposes, a T-yield is an average yield for a county, determined by RMA in the collection of producer data, which may be used to substitute for low yields in a producer's yield history ('yield substitutions') or to ensure an overall minimum level of insurance coverage. The purpose of the T-Yield is to minimize the downward impact on insurance coverage that can occur after an unusually bad year, or series of years.

USDA Risk Management Agency has posted two documents concerning its response to the audit of organic crop insurance performance:

- 2103 Organic Crop Insurance Fact Sheet
- Organic Crop Insurance Audit and Next Steps Questions and Answers

These documents can be found on the RMA "Current Issues/Organics" page. There is also a link from the RMA main page. Organic Producers should contact their approved insurance provider/Agent should they have any questions about the changes to Transitional yields and guarantees.