Special Event in Conjunction with Midwest Soil Health Summit: 'Building Soil Health Experts' Training

SFA has added a special event for agriculture service professionals to complement the 2016 Midwest Soil Health Summit.

"Building Soil Health Experts: Advanced Training for Professionals" will provide expert soil health education for NRCS and SWCD soil specialists, Extension staff, crop consultants, agronomists, grazing and livestock specialists, and advisers who work directly with farmers and other ag advisers.

Training will encompass soil biology and measuring soil biology, integration of cover crops and livestock into cropping systems, and seeding methods for establishing cover crops.

Click here to register for "Building Soil Health Experts."

Continuing Education Units for Certified Crop Advisers applied for soil and water management and crop management.

Sessions will include:

- Dr. Michael Lehman, "Managing Cropping Systems to Promote Soil Microbe Populations"
- Dr. Rick Haney, "Measuring Soil Microbial Activity"
- Dr. Scott Wells, “Cover Crop Establishment Strategies"
- Dr. Allen Williams (above), "Integrating Cover Crops and Livestock Into Cropping Systems"

This special event costs $100, is geared solely for ag service professionals and is separate from the Midwest Soil Health Summit. **Registration for “Building Soil Health Experts” does not include MSHS registration.** If you wish to attend the general Midwest Soil Health Summit as well you must register for that separately here.

Preregistration is required for “Building Soil Health Experts” and must be completed by noon Feb. 12. Limited scholarships may be available.
Cover Crops a Tool With Potential – When Used Properly

By Kent Solberg • SFA Livestock & Grazing Specialist

It’s encouraging that the Star Tribune, Minnesota’s largest news outlet, is plastering cover crops across the front page of the business section like in this recent article. Cover crops are a tremendous tool to move agriculture toward healthy soils. However, cover crops are simply that – a tool. They are not a silver bullet.

Cover crops work best in concert with the Five Principles of Soil Health: keep the soil covered, minimize soil disturbance, increase crop diversity, keep a living root in the soil year around, and integrate livestock. This has been the underlying message at our Midwest Soil Health Summit for the past two years and will continue in 2016.

Research and on-farm experience in Minnesota has demonstrated that it is often difficult with our short growing season and potential for an extended dry spell in late summer or fall to incorporate cover crops into the conventional corn and soybean model. While these techniques have show great promise in the southern and eastern Corn Belt, our climate makes this more risky.

The huge danger here, and has been, that many farmers may try using covers in corn and soybeans in a similar manner and may not achieve the desired results – arriving at the conclusion that cover crops don’t work in Minnesota and thus condemning an extremely valuable soil health tool. And, in general, they will be right – but only for that particular application.

If the goal is soil health, corn and soybean producers will likely need to rethink their production model. No-till is a soil conservation tool that came on the scene about 25 years ago. Many producers tried it in their corn and soybean production model and found it “doesn’t work here.” However, like cover crops, when farmers no-till in combination with other soil health tools it works just fine. Like cover crops, no-till is a soil health tool and not the silver bullet.

And when used in the context of the Five Principles, they have the potential to be a transformative force in agriculture and on the health of our land.

Executive Director’s Note

Recent emphasis at SARE, NRCS and other sustainable agriculture outlets regarding soil health has raised interest in pasture management and grazing. Frequently, at grazing conferences and workshops, winter bale grazing is touted as a great way to add nutrients to the soil through spent hay litter left behind after the cattle are done grazing. I’ve heard many farmer-presenters make comments to the effect, “With what bale grazing can do for your soils, you can afford hay at almost any price.” In the north country, making hay is an essential component of producing cattle on grass, often limiting the amount of grazing land available on a particular operation in a particular year, as some land needs to be reserved for hay production.

At the aforementioned events, I often ask if anyone has any data which can reinforce the claims of the value of spent hay litter after bale grazing. None has been produced.

The cost of winter feed is generally considered the largest expense for most graziers, and the need to make that feed on the farm often limits the size of the grazing herd. If hay could be...
affordably outsourced, then grassfed herds could grow larger as most or all of a farm’s land could be grazed. In an attempt to know the true cost and benefit of purchased hay in a bale-grazing scenario, we must somehow measure the benefit of that hay litter on the pasture in subsequent years.

The Lakeland Agricultural Research Association has a great project documenting the amount of “waste” in a bale grazing system. They note in their report that subsequent year forage production is increased after bale grazing, but they do not determine how much that forage production increased.

Progressive Cattlemen’s magazine reviewed several research projects regarding bale grazing. Again, these projects focus on important aspects of bale grazing, like the labor savings, and the boost in subsequent productivity, but there is not a measure of that boost in productivity.

Has anyone out there in SFA done this? If so, I’d like to hear from you. Most cattle producers are looking to drive the cost of hay down, of course, but what if it were worth more than we think? Let me know at john@sfa-mn.org. Thanks.

Interns Named for SFA Winter Conference Season

SFA has filled its slate of interns for the 2015-16 winter conference season. All who applied were deserving, and we appreciate the effort that went into all the applications we received. This year’s interns are:

Sarah Lindblom (top right), a beginning farmer producing chemical-free vegetables for her CSA members and farmers markets on rented land near Buffalo, Minn. Sarah learned these skills working on small scale vegetable operations in Chattahoochee Hills, Ga., and Mandan, N.D. This past season, Sarah donated hundreds of pounds of produce to the local food shelf, grew her first cover crop, managed 1-2 acres of diverse vegetables using primarily hand cultivation and organic methods, learned how to preserve food, and started a successful farm business that will continue as a CSA for the 2016 season. She will work primarily with Jerry Ford on Event Coordination.

Justine Spokely (bottom right) is a senior at the University of Minnesota studying Food Systems. She grew up on a farm in the Red River Valley, and in her spare time she enjoys biking and cooking ethnic food. She will work primarily with Jason Walker on Communications.

Alongside Sarah and Justine, current SFA Multimedia Intern Molly Flerlage will also provide communications expertise and help for the winter conferences.

Please introduce yourselves to Sarah, Justine and Molly at our conferences and help them network within the SFA community!

Conference Schedules Available; Submit Your WOC Talk
Registration is now open for SFA’s 2016 winter conferences – get the following dates on your calendar and register NOW for the best prices.

Click here to register for the SFA Annual Conference, set for Feb. 13, 2016, at the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, Minn. Until Jan. 1, registration is just $45 for SFA members and $55 for nonmembers. You may also register children 3-12 for the Budding Farmers program ($10) and for the SFA Leaders Breakfast ($15).

Also, the day's session and events schedule is filling up nicely! Check out the in-progress schedule here and start thinking about what sessions to attend.

We are also still accepting applications for WOC Talks (Wisdom of the Community), where SFA members and supporters will submit talks on subjects relating to sustainable farming and food systems, and the organization will select some of them for presentation at the SFA Annual Conference. For more information and the complete rules, please visit our WOC Talks homepage.

Click here to register for the SFA Midwest Soil Health Summit, set for Feb. 17-18, 2016, at Arrowwood Resort in Alexandria, Minn. The MSHS features soil health experts and farm leaders for two days of education and farmer networking – all geared at improving the health of your soil. Pricing is $150 for SFA members and $200 for nonmembers.

The MSHS schedule is nearly complete and will soon be available on the Summit homepage.

Sponsor & Exhibitor registration is open for both conferences on their respective homepage linked above. And remember that SFA Business/Organization members earn significant discounts on sponsorships and exhibitor space at our conferences. To learn more about SFA Business/Organization memberships, click here.

Farm Skills 101 Registration Now Open for Spring 2016

Registration is now open for the Spring 2016 semester of our Deep Roots Farmer Development Program’s Farm Skills 101, which consists of around 50 hours of on-farm education in three weekends of fun and fulfilling learning. This hands-on training consists of days in the field, not field days – participants will need pants, closed-toe shoes, gloves and safety glasses.

Spring 2016 classes will be held on April 15-16, 22-23 and 29-30 at farms near Alexandria, Minn. Friday classes run from 10 a.m.-9 p.m.; Saturdays 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Pack sack lunches and breakfasts; Friday local-foods suppers are included. Tuition also includes housing at nearby Viking Valley Hunt Club.

Deep Roots programs include small class sizes and individualized attention. Every student engages in the activities. This is real-world, real-time education.

Fall 2015 student Holly Pearson said of her experience, “I knew this was gonna be cool but have been blown away by the amount and caliber of material we’ve learned, the patience and awesomeness of the people involved and the simple elegance of sustainable farming methods. I think this class has made me a better human.”

Another student said FS 101 was a “jawdroppingly fabulous program in Minnesota where we learned all sorts of things that we didn’t know we didn’t know.”

Don't wait too long – this class will sell out. Click here to register. To read more, including Fall 2015 student Cassi Dutcher's Farm Skills diary, visit our Deep Roots homepage.

Deep Winter Greenhouse Course Added for Feb. 21
Registration is now open for our Feb. 21 Deep Roots short course, “Deep Winter Production of Greens and Livestock Fodder Utilizing Passive Solar Energy.” Click here to register.

At our Deep Winter short course, Paradox Farm owners Sue Wika and Tom Prieve provide detailed overview of the construction and operation of their deep-winter greenhouse, which utilizes passive solar energy with underground heat storage. The greenhouse provides greens for local consumers. In addition, the structure is utilized to produce fodder for the farm livestock.

To learn more about this short course, click here.

Check This Out

- From Gear Patrol magazine: “The average age of farmers in the US has risen to 58.3 years, according to an alarming Department of Agriculture census released in 2014. Spencer MacDonald’s short documentary, Age of the Farmer, offers a voice for the newest generation of farmers in North America who, in small numbers, believe in the importance and revitalization of working the land.”

Annual Conference Photo Feature

Photographer extraordinaire Crystal Liepa once again documented our 2015 Annual Conference, held Feb. 14, 2015, at the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, Minn. To learn more about Crystal, visit her website.

Conservation Tillage Conference is Dec. 15-16 in Willmar

UMN Extension and North Dakota State will be hosting the 11th Conservation Tillage Conference on Dec. 15-16 at the Best Western Plus in Willmar, Minn.

Sessions will offer a full range of topics that will be presented by some of the top rated specialists in the Corn Belt region as well as an experienced line-up of producers for the Farmer’s Panel.

Information: DIGtheCTC.com.
The Sustainable Farming Association is a chapter-based, statewide non-profit organization that supports the development and enhancement of sustainable farming systems through innovation, demonstration, education, and farmer-to-farmer networking. If you, your farm or organization has any upcoming events that you would like posted on the SFA Community Calendar, email info@sfa-mn.org.