Good Times Abundant at Annual Conference

By Jason Walker

Another Annual Conference has come and gone. Or has it? When I left St. Ben's last night, there was still quite a crowd enjoying the beer and cheese reception.

Yep, it was a fun day of conversation, classes, cooking and camaraderie at this year's event. For those who couldn't make it, a recap:

- Our first-ever Organic Valley Leaders Breakfast was a hit. The food was good, Executive Director John Mesko gave an intimate chat about the inner workings of SFA, and everybody left full and refreshed to start the day.

- The esteemed Dr. Val Farmer spoke about the importance of family. What's the most important crop you can grow? The next generation. Aren't we glad we got Dr. Farmer before he retires this spring? For a leader in his field, he sure was a genuine, practical guy.

- How about Mary Jane Miller's culinary sessions? Each one sounded terrific, and I definitely overheard raves about the Minnesota mushrooms session with Kevin Doyle. And is there any better sight than a cheesemaker – Alemar's Keith Adams – showing up at the registration desk with a cooler full of cheese and a sack of baguettes?

- All the breakout sessions were well-attended. What was your favorite? I heard good things about several, and it seems like the new technology session – Social Media, Blogging, the iPhone and YouTube in Your Farm Business – was especially well-received.

- The SFA Conference is known for its extensive networking opportunities. "Hallway chat" is always a key component of our gatherings.

So, what was your favorite moment from this year's conference? Email me (Jason Walker) at jason@sfa-mn.org, and I'll compile the responses in a future SFA Connect. I'll go ahead and tell you my favorite: lunch, when I was eating in the St. Ben's cafeteria with...
Sarah Wolbert of Renewing the Countryside (and fiddle player in The Field of Medicine). Out of the blue, here came the good Dr. Farmer himself, who ate and chatted with us. What a friendly guy.

In summary, thanks to everybody. Thanks to all the members and attendees who came, to the exhibitors who gave us a dynamic trade show, and to all the volunteers without whom the conference couldn’t succeed.

And a special thanks to volunteer coordinator Karen Couné, events coordinator Jerry Ford and culinary coordinator Mary Jane Miller. Also, let’s not forget the long hours worked by special assistants Emilyrose Pfaltzgraff and Ellie and Sarah Mesko.

Executive Director’s Note

Thanks to everyone on registered, volunteered, exhibited, spoke at, or attended the 2012 SFA Conference over the weekend. Great conference, great crowd, great time.

We had originally invited Sen. Amy Klobuchar to address the group as a member of the Senate Ag Committee. While she was unable to attend the conference, she did send a link to a video that we had intended to play on Saturday. Unfortunately, technical difficulties prevented us from showing the video at the conference.

If you’d like to watch the video, you can here.

We also awarded the SFA Distinguished Service Award to both Mary Ellen Frame and DeEtta Bilek. The Farmer Emeritus Award went to Kent and Linda Solberg. Thanks to everyone who submitted nominations, and congratulations to the winners!

All this week, I’ll be sharing more of my reflections from the conference on my blog. Check it out!

Chapter Update: Central

By Amanda Whittemore

The Central Chapter held its Annual Meeting on Jan. 7 in Browerville. Attendees spent the crisp winter day listening to a variety of speakers and topics including Nolan Lenzen and the Beginning Farmer Programs; SFA Executive Director John Mesko, who provided an update on current projects, endeavors, and legislation; and Ken Gust of Self-Sustaining Rural Communities. We spent time actively engaged in group discussion on topics such as the 2012 Farm Bill. We were able to gain an important sense of direction from our members in regards to their needs and how we can best serve them as we move into another year.

Our chapter is currently researching and applying for grants that would allow us to expand our annual Festival of Farms event held in July. With much success in 2011, we feel this event serves as a great opportunity to connect our farms to the communities they serve. The collective experience of the farm tours, demonstrations, vendors, food, animals, and music lends itself an opportunity for important relationship building between farmers, businesses, neighbors, and the community as a whole. The Festival of Farms event celebrates the diversity of farms and the local economy therein. The connections, relationships, and resources that are created and maintained at this event are immeasurably important to the continued presence of our local farms. Additionally,
providing the people of our communities with this experience further encourages their support and participation in the movement toward sustaining their local economy.

The Central Chapter would like to acknowledge the selfless and dutiful service of Sister Ruth Lentner as she recently fulfilled her term on our chapter's board. Sister Ruth has been actively involved in the Sustainable Farming Association for many decades and we are immeasurably grateful for her efforts. Sister Ruth was a recipient of the 2011 Earth Citizen Award given to those dedicated to the work toward a sustainable global society. We wish her all the best.

Free Energy Efficiency Webinar Slated Feb. 22

Over the past couple of years, farm energy efficiency rebate programs have become more prevalent throughout Minnesota. Rural electric cooperatives have been working hard to help their customers make cost effective energy efficiency upgrades to their operations.

However, some confusion still exists regarding how these programs work. A one-hour webinar at 12:30 p.m. Feb. 22 will answer each of these questions and provide additional information regarding farm energy efficiency rebate programs in Minnesota and how electric cooperatives, farmers, and related business owners can work together to everyone's benefit.

Jake Fischer, from The Minnesota Project, will provide insight on the background of the state policy that has pushed rebate programs to the forefront and will also provide information regarding this year's just-announced USDA-REAP and EQIP energy efficiency programs. Dave Gruenes, Stearns Electric Association's District Manager, will then give the electric cooperative perspective on the value of these programs and how farmers and other interested stakeholders can work to best take advantage of the program's offerings.

This webinar will be a good opportunity to answer any questions you may have had about energy efficiency, but didn't know who to ask. Registration is free at https://cc.readytalk.com/r/hat7kg95csqw.

Hazelnut Conference Coming Up in Decorah, Iowa

Only two weeks remain until the Upper Midwest Hazelnut Growers Conference, where growers from throughout the Midwest will convene in Decorah, Iowa, to network with researchers & scientists, learn the latest on growing, processing, and marketing nuts, and enjoy the fellowship of other growers.

The conference kicks off March 2 with a Hazelnuts 101 course that will guide new growers or those thinking about getting started, through selecting plants, planning and planting your orchard, maintenance, harvesting, and processing your nuts. Registration for Friday only is $25. March 3 is a full day of presentations in the morning, a processing panel after lunch, and a hazelnut processing demonstration in the afternoon. Registration for Saturday only is $40.

A brochure with a full agenda and registration form can be found at www.iowanutgrowers.com. A full conference registration (both days) is $50. Attendees are encouraged to bring their favorite hazelnut treat to share with others. Individuals, businesses, or organizations wishing to host a booth can do so by contacting info@iowanutgrowers.com.

Mill City Farmers Market Looking for Assistant Manager

The Mill City Farmers Market, a nonprofit organization based in Minneapolis, is seeking an Assistant Manager. The position, along with the Market Manager, oversees the day-to-day activities and logistics, year round, in planning and running the market. The Assistant Manager attends most Saturday markets along with weekly office hours to plan the market logistics, marketing and events.
This is a salaried, 30 hour-per-week position (hours vary seasonally), salary to commensurate with experience. Must be available to work most Saturdays May-October (5 a.m.-3 p.m.). Applications due by March 1. Training begins in late March, and the market opens May 12. Cover letter, resume and three references should be emailed to: Martha Archer, Executive Director, at Martha@millcityfarmersmarket.org.

New Permaculture/Organic Farm Seeks Community Leader

Resilient Northern Habitats is a “for-benefit” enterprise based out of Little Falls, Wis., that creates design, models and instruction of whole natural systems which stimulate human health and creativity while multiplying ecosystem vitality. The goal is to create a permaculture-based organic farm collaborative, from which will grow a local farm community and economy. The project currently consists of 270 acres, spread between three farmsteads of mixed fields, forests and waterways and additional wooded acreage.

We seek a Community Outreach Farm Leader to help with our efforts. The ideal candidate will be an advocate for ecological farming and ecological revitalization, a good communicator and natural community builder, among other attributes. The full-time position pays $25-30,000, and housing options are available.

To apply, email a letter of interest and resume to phenry@hungryturtle.net by March 1.

Local Food Happy Hour to Discuss the Business of Farming

Join us from 5:30-7 p.m. on Tues., Feb. 21 to discuss the Business of Farming: Models, Marketing & Distribution Dynamics, hosted by Twin Cities Local Food Happy Hour and Land Stewardship Project. When farmers choose a business strategy, they develop a model that works for their operation and their customers. From direct market to CSA’s, to selling to restaurants, farmers markets or other distribution centers, each model comes with its own set of risks, challenges, and benefits.

Our panel of producers and buyers will discuss the dynamics of sustainable farm business models. Our panelists are: Lori Brinkman, Elmbrink Farms (Producer, direct marketing model); Aaron Reser, Mill City Farmer’s Market (Buyer); Karla Pankow, Bossy Acres Farm (Producer, CSA Model).

Join us at the Chatterbox Pub, 800 Cleveland Ave S, St. Paul, for drinks and/or dinner and get better acquainted with your community’s movement toward a more sustainable food system. Send questions to: Anna Cioffi, Land Stewardship Project, at annac@landstewardshipproject.org.

Local Foods and 3rd Crops Meeting in Fairmont

Join University of Minnesota Extension and Rural Advantage for a 3rd Crop Producer Meeting on “Local Foods and 3rd Crops” on Feb. 27 at the Knights of Columbus (920 East 10th St) in Fairmont. Registration begins at 9:30 a.m.; the morning session will be from 10:00 a.m. to noon and the afternoon session will be from 1 to 4 p.m.

For a full agenda, check out the UMN Extension – Conservation Agronomy Facebook page or find event details here. For more information, contact Jill Sackett, UMN Extension/Rural Advantage, at 507-238-5449 or sacke032@umn.edu.

Midwest Poultry Convention Coming to St. Paul

The 41st Annual Midwest Poultry Federation Convention is set for March 14-15 at the Saint Paul RiverCentre. The MPF Convention is the largest regional poultry show in the
U.S. In 2011, the convention drew more than 1,900 participants from 36 states as well as Washington D.C., four Canadian provinces and several other international countries.

For 2012, the event will expand its Exhibit Hall to accommodate additional exhibitors and will welcome participants from all segments of the poultry industry – egg layer, broiler, turkey and organic/specialty poultry production. The convention will also feature an exceptional Education Program and trade show, along with pre-show events.

For more information or to register, visit midwestpoultry.com.

U of M Extension Offers Workshop for Small-Farm and Acreage Owners

Do you dream of owning acreage in the country? Do you have an existing acreage that is need of a plan and strategies for the best possible results? The Living on the Land Workshop Series, offered by University of Minnesota Extension, will equip you with the education and resources to be successful. The eight-week course is designed to arm landowners with agricultural information to enable them to be good stewards of their land.

The series will be taught by Extension educators and natural resource professionals at two locations – from 6 to 9 p.m. Thursday evenings from March 8-April 26 in Hutchinson at the McLeod County Fairgrounds 4-H Café and in Mankato at the Historic Courthouse in the Conference Room. Early registration is $175 until Friday, March 2 and all registrations received afterwards will be $200.

Contact Nathan Winter for a hard copy of the brochure and other questions regarding the Hutchinson Location at 320-484-4303 or by e-mail at wint0146@umn.edu. Contact Diane DeWitte at 507-304-4325 or by e-mail at stouf002@umn.edu for more information on the Mankato location and registration questions.

Specialty Crop Growers: Apply for Business-Boosting Grants

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture has received $700,000 in federal funding to help promote and enhance the specialty crop industry. Fruit, vegetable and other specialty crop farmers can apply for Specialty Crop Block Grants to help them compete in today’s marketplace. Grant projects may include outreach to increase consumers’ nutritional knowledge about specialty crops, assistance in the development of good agricultural practices, investment into specialty crop research, development of new and improved seed varieties, and pest and disease control.

MDA Marketing and Development Director Mary Hanks says growers of fruits, vegetables, culinary herbs and spices, medicinal plants, tree nuts, flowers, and nursery plants are eligible to apply. MDA will accept grant applications through April 20, 2012. A list of eligible and ineligible commodities can be found at www.ams.usda.gov/scbgp. A grant manual is available on the MDA website at www.mda.state.mn.us/grants/grants/specialty.aspx.

Questions regarding the grant program or the application process can be directed to David Weinand at 651-201-6646 or email David.Weinand@state.mn.us.

Advanced Orchard Health for Sustainable Fruit Seminar

Join orchard health expert Michael Phillips for a day of in-depth orchard care geared towards fruit producers looking for sustainable and nature-based production techniques. The seminar is from 9:15 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Thurs., Feb. 23 at the Radisson Hotel in La Crosse, Wis. Cost: $150 per person, which includes lunch, snacks and an information packet. There is a $30 discount toward registration for OTFA members and a $20 late registration fee will apply after Feb. 3.
For more information and to register: contact OTFA at 507-643-6329 or email jackie@hochorchard.com. This event is sponsored by the Organic Tree Fruit Association (OTFA) with support from MOSES.

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SFA Connect is your bi-weekly link to the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota

The Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota 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.

Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota (SFA)
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