Options Aplenty at 2016 MSHS: What’s Right for You?

By Jason Walker • SFA Communications & Membership Coordinator

The SFA Midwest Soil Health Summit is approaching on Feb. 17-18 at Arrowwood Resort in Alexandria, and this year there are more educational and networking opportunities than ever.

As registration heats up, I’d like to clearly explain the various programming to ensure you have the precise information you need to plan your schedule.

First, the main Midwest Soil Health Summit is $150 for members and $200 for nonmembers, and the first sessions begin at 2:30 p.m. on Feb. 17 with “Intro to Soil Biology” with Michael Lehman, followed by “Principles for Building Soil Health” with Kent Solberg at 4. Afterward, a social hour with hearty snacks, cash bar, exhibitors and networking will ensue, culminating in an interview of Jay Fuhrer and Allen Williams by SFA Executive Director John Mesko. You must register for the main MSHS to attend these sessions. Of course, all of the Feb. 18 sessions – Jay, Allen, Grant Breitkreutz, Todd McPeak, etc. – are included with MSHS registration.

Second, the special “Building Soil Health Experts” track will be held from 10:15 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Feb. 17 and is a separately ticketed event targeted solely to agriculture service professionals. Cost is $100; click here to register. You may register for both this and the MSHS, but those who only register for the “Experts” track may not attend the social hour or any of the Feb. 18 programming. CEU credits have been APPROVED for “Building Soil Health Experts” – contact wayne@sfa-mn.org for details.

Third, there are two completely free events that anyone is welcome to attend regardless of ticket purchase. At 1 p.m. Feb. 17, John Mesko will present “Soil Science Basics,” a very entry-level course that is intended for non-farmers, lay people and landowners. Then, at 2:30 p.m. Feb. 17, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy joins us for a special International Roundtable to discuss the launch of a new international initiative around soil carbon coming from the global climate agreement in Paris.

Click here to view the full two-day schedule.

Registration for all begins at 9 a.m. Feb. 17 at Arrowwood. To reserve a room, call the resort at 1.866.386.5263 and be sure to request the MSHS rate of $105.

The Midwest Soil Health Summit has become a real point of pride within SFA. We often hear that “it's the best conference I've ever been to," and it's attracted a diverse new crowd to our brand of agriculture. I hope to see you Feb. 17-18 in Alexandria!
Executive Director’s Note

When adopted by farmers en masse, the sustainable farming practices SFA promotes have the potential to change the way we feed the world – and make rural communities thriving, exciting places to live.

At SFA, we focus on important issues like climate change, food security, growing world population, and rural community decline, and we do it primarily through networking, demonstration, and education. But there are other ways to affect important food and farming issues.

Alongside our main tenets are public policy issues of food and farming, and within that sphere of influence there are different viable techniques to make changes. One technique centers on identifying the source of the problem – an organization, group of people, or even an idea – and then attempting to stop, block, or thwart its progress. This technique is important, needed, and is clearly central to our political system here in the U.S. It is not, however, complementary to SFA’s approach.

Another public policy technique that fits more succinctly with SFA is to seek out areas of commonality among the various “players” addressing an issue. There are often more things we have in common than what we do not. This focus on areas of agreement rather than disagreement is becoming more popular in political circles. If there is public policy advocacy which connects closely with SFA, it is the “group formation” theory of change. According to the Center for Evaluation Impact, the goal of group formation is to build coalitions of unlikely allies, and advocates may be able to align existing groups or create new groups by finding something around which individuals can identify. Conversely, advocates may tighten group identity by differentiating their group from others.

To be very clear, SFA does not directly pursue public policy advocacy or have any programs directly lobbying or organizing for a particular cause or political objective, but we may occasionally join other organizations who are better equipped to carry those issues forward. For example, SFA is a member of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, which works in Washington on a variety of sustainable ag issues. More locally, SFA is a member of the MN Environmental Partnership, a group of organizations committed to advocating for the environment in Minnesota.

We focus on our strength, and that is helping farmers through networking, demonstration and education. To learn more about the ways we are working to improve our food system, come to the SFA Annual Conference on Feb. 13 in St. Joseph, Minn., or the Midwest Soil Health Summit on Feb. 17-18 in Alexandria, Minn.

Annual Meetings Upcoming: GML, Crow River, Central

Greater Mille Lacs Chapter Annual Meeting is 5 p.m. Jan. 17 at Glen Kimberly Town Hall, 32631 Dam Lake St (just east of County 47). Agenda includes presentations by SFA Executive Director John Mesko, Aitkin County Health Educator Amy Wyant and Jane Jewett on a potential farm-to-school project, a potluck, board election, co-op update, and more. Free. Registration is not required. Information: Erik Heimark at 218.232.1303 or Jodi Olson at 218.927.1435.

Crow River Chapter Annual Meeting is 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Jan. 30 at Delano Senior Center, 234 2nd St N, Delano. Discussion includes creating mini-grant programs, supporting local processing initiatives, branding the Crow River region as a local food destination, and more. Free for Crow River members. Potluck lunch. Register online here or print this form and mail to the address shown. Info: jerry@sfa-mn.org or 1.844.922.5573 Ext. 705.

Central Chapter Annual Meeting is 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Feb. 6 at the Initiative Foundation, 405 1st St SE, Little Falls. Agenda includes marketing panel, potluck meal and board meeting, and afternoon of strategic planning led by Jan Joannides from Renewing the Countryside. Cost is $10 members and $30/nonmembers; vendors welcome for $50. Register online here.
MISA Releases New Report on Locally Raised Meats

The Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture released a report about local and direct-to-consumer meat sales in Minnesota, written by Jan Joannides, former Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems at the University of Minnesota. The report was partially funded by and in collaboration with SFA.

“Consumer Interest in Locally Raised Meats in Northern Minnesota” presents the results of detailed consumer surveys conducted in 2012. Consumers responded from 30 northern Minnesota counties, and the report describes consumers’ interest in locally raised meats, willingness to purchase, preferred method of purchase, preferred price range, and value they placed on various types of labels. Northern Minnesota farmers who direct-market meat can use these results to help plan their marketing strategies. Click here to download and read the report.

To access this and more similar reports, visit the MISA Documents Homepage.

Chapters & Groups: Make the AC Work For You

By Jerry Ford • SFA Network Coordinator

The SFA Annual Conference provides our chapters with a wonderful chance to share the events, stories, and successes of their regional work, and chapters can take advantage of these two opportunities to do so:

Opening Session Chapter Showcase

Help us kick off the event by giving a one-minute introduction of your chapter or networking group! What excites your members? What guides your chapter? Share your happenings from 2015 and what you’re planning for 2016.

Chapter Displays

Foster conversation and promote chapter/networking group engagement throughout the conference by preparing a tri-fold display to show all your group’s up to. Displays can include the following:

- Your mission and activities
- Needs for volunteers/members/activities/etc.
- Vision for how your chapter will impact sustainable agriculture to rally future activity
- Products, farming practices and history highlights, as well as landscape features that make your chapter’s region unique
- Your Chapter’s official SFA logo

SFA Communications Coordinator, Jason Walker, can provide chapters with display resources. Email him at jason@sfa-mn.org.

Take advantage of the Mini-Presentations and Chapter Showcase to inform your current members, draw in new members, and help your chapter/networking group grow in 2016!

To reserve a spot for your showcase presentation and your display, contact Sarah Lindblom, SFA Event Coordination Intern: sarah.a.lindblom@gmail.com.

Deep Winter Greenhouse Tour Series Announced

SFA is producing a series of tours at deep winter greenhouses across the region culminating in a wrap-up session at the SFA Annual Conference on Feb. 13. These free tours, presented by SFA’s Deep Winter Producers Networking Group, in collaboration with U of M Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, are occurring all across Minnesota over four weekends, with locations including:
Meeting is Jan. 20 for New East Central Chapter

A new SFA chapter is forming in the region just north and east of the Twin Cities, and an organizational meeting will be held at 7 p.m. Jan. 20, 2016 in Isanti, MN at the Community Center, 208 1/2 First Ave NW.

At the meeting, Jerry Ford, SFA’s Network Coordinator, will describe what SFA chapters do as well as how to set up the chapter leadership board.

If you’d like to attend and get in on the ground level of this new East Central chapter, or just want to be added to the East Central mailing list, please RSVP to Sharon Johnson at sharon@minnesotafreshfarm.com or call 612-735-5459.

Small Scale Sustainable Sheep Event Feb. 20 in Fosston

The second annual Small Scale Sustainable Sheep Farming Event will be Feb. 20, 2016, beginning at 10 a.m. at the Fosston Civic Center, 215 E First St, Fosston. This event is open to the public and focuses on the benefits of sheep as part of a sustainable farming system where meat and wool are viable value-added products.

Cost is $20 for adults, under 10 are free; pay at the door. Lunch and snacks provided. Please RSVP to Alethea Kenney at 218-657-2502 or sustainablesheep@sfa-mn.org. Trade show booths are also still available.

Few Spots Remain for Farm Skills 101, Deep Winter Class

A few spots remain 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.

A recent alum 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.

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

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.

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