Soaked Spring Amplifies Importance of Soil Health

As I spent another day dodging rain last week, it was hard to believe the middle of June has passed and July is just around the corner. It's like the past two years have been Mother Nature's fiendish test on our willpower as farmers, producers, gardeners and seasonal eaters here in Minnesota. We shall overcome.

But it's almost July, and at SFA that means Festival of Farms time – the Saturday each summer where our network of farmers gather to celebrate our farms, our land and our sustainable food systems. This year's event is set for July 13, and at least four SFA chapters have special events planned; read a complete preview of those chapters Festival of Farms events in the next edition of SFA Connect.

I have Festival of Farms updates from the Central, Crow River, Lake Agassiz and South Central chapters. If your chapter is not listed here but you're having Festival of Farms events you wish to promote, email them to me at jason@sfa-mn.org so we can list them in the next SFA Connect and on your chapter homepage.

Also, all this rain has got me thinking about the importance of soil health. It's becoming more and more obvious that, on a local, national and even international level, soil health is emerging as the bedrock of sustainable agriculture. A couple weeks ago, on a trip to southern Minnesota, John Mesko and I drove past acres and acres of conventional farmers' fields that were waterlogged and unplanted, and we couldn't help but discuss what those fields would look like if they were put into even a basic cover crop rotation. Imagine how much difference it would make if conventional corn and soybean farmers just threw in an alfalfa rotation once in awhile?

Experiences like that make me even more convinced that SFA's GrazeFest series of promoting pastured livestock production, cover cropping and soil health is crucial to improving farming in Minnesota.

With the Farm Bill once again in the news, let's hope there's at least minimal strides made toward rewarding – or at least not punishing – those who are good stewards of the soil. And plan to attend a Festival of Farms event in your area to see more folks who are making sustainable ag work in Minnesota.

Executive Director's Note
By John Mesko

Pork Still Getting Squeezed

I grew up raising hogs. It was my job to care for sows and feeder pigs starting at around 9 years old. We always had about 15-20 sows when I was a kid, each in its own pen. We had these pens spread out in about 4 different buildings, sheds and lean-tos. By the time I was 11-12, I had 4 of my own sows and was in the hog business.

So, naturally, when we started our farm back in 2006, raising sows and feeder pigs was a part of our plan. We bought a bred sow, kept the gilts, raised them up for breeding, and with in a year, we farrowed 6 sows and sold 40 feeder pigs the second spring we were on the farm. I enjoyed the work, we broke even on the feeder pigs, and we had our own feeder pigs to raise up to sell pork to our customers. Then came the fall farrowing. We had pigs born in September and October, and they were ready to sell in November and early December. We had about 25 to sell, and despite lowering our price from the spring, we couldn’t sell them, at least not all of them.

We kept feeding them, of course; and they grew and grew. We kept advertising on Craigslist, great pictures, the whole works, but no one wanted to raise pigs through the winter. We actually gave four 75# feeder pigs away that year. The rest we raised through the winter, a very cold winter in which they consumed a tremendous amount of feed. By spring, we had some pigs ready for market, but not enough meat customers to sell the meat quickly. We butchered the pigs and still sold pork all through the summer by fall, we still had meat in the locker, and we ended up giving pork away to friends as gifts for Christmas. When all was said and done, despite pork prices that bordered on “elitist,” we took a financial bath on the pigs. All the while, we were trying to maintain sows and a boar with adequate feeding in between farrowings.

Needless to say, we quickly changed our pork model to a “buy pigs in the spring, feed them through the summer, and sell pork in the fall only” model. This is difficult for me, having had many years perfecting the raising of feeder pigs as a youngster, I’m very selective about the breeds and quality of feeder pigs I will accept. Finding a dedicated hog producer is getting very, very difficult for the reasons I experienced early on in our farming operation.

We recently received our small shipment of feeder pigs for this summer. The farmer we bought from was lamenting his experiences with trying to sell fall feeder pigs, and it sounded familiar. As we contemplated other options, such as selling to larger pastured pork operations like Niman Ranch, it became clear there is no easy answer to the sustainability of small-scale, diversified pork production. With the rising cost of grain, as well as the general inflation of living expenses, selling feeder pigs is a breakeven proposition for most folks. Plus, it really doesn’t lend itself well to a farmer with a full time off farm job. Raising quality feeders requires attentiveness at odd hours. Have you got a suggestion? You might consider checking out SFAs 2014 Conference Idea Generator. You will be presented with a choice between 2 topics to be covered at the SFA Annual Conference in Feb. 2014. Pick your favorite, and then you’ll get another choice. Keep Voting! The more votes we get, the more accurate the results will be. Next time, I’ll let you know what the leading ideas are.

Chapter Update: Cannon River

By Mary Ellen Frame
We're trying a new thing in our chapter, which is to have topic-centered meetings that are focused on sharing information and experiences among the participants. The first such meeting, held in March, was about the possibility of doing bulk buying, the idea being that when more than one farm needed something that would be cheaper in a large quantity, two or more farms could go in together and save that way – things like seeds, composted manure, packaging, and other supplies. It was suggested that as a class project, St Olaf College students could research the logistics of such a plan and also other small businesses doing a similar thing.

The second meeting was titled "Failing Forward," where participants told about farming mistakes they'd made and what they'd learned from those mistakes. Several of the beginning farmers found it reassuring to hear these stories from those who've been in farming longer, and have recovered from their mistakes. One thing that was talked about was that, especially when you're renting land, it's important to keep in mind that your business and the land are separate things.

In both these meetings, discussion ranged well beyond the designated topics, which was also good; everyone enjoyed and learned from all of it. We find this is a very satisfying format, and we plan to have more such meetings after the growing season is over. We try to schedule them on evenings when people are free. It seems a good way to fulfill the purpose of SFA, having real farmer-to-farmer exchanges, learning from each other. We all have something to learn, and something to teach.

For Festival of Farms, there will be tours of two farms in the Webster area; Waxwing Farm, a vegetable CSA with pastured pork and eggs, and Sweet Land farm, an orchard.

New Produce in a Pinch Blog Post Now Online

By Jason Walker • SFA Communications Coordinator

My wife, Leita, and I recently launched a new blog about our urban garden, Produce in a Pinch, to describe how we work to maximize and beautify food production on our small – tiny, really – Minneapolis city lot.

I wrote the first post, about boulevard gardening, but a new post today is by Leita and talks about our new beehive, complaints of smelly compost, and the way our kids trample practically everything. And Leita has a great perspective, too, given that she typically works in the garden until dark or later ... I joke that she's a CSA farmer at heart because all she ever wants to do is weed and plant, weed and plant.

Read the new post as well as the initial one here. And tell me what you think of the new blog or share topic ideas by emailing me at jason@sfa-mn.org.

SFA, Living Song Farm Awarded Lakewinds Grants

Lakewinds Natural Foods, with stores open in Minnetonka and Chanhassen and plans for a third location in Richfield, recently announced the recipients of its 2013 Lakewinds Organic Field Fund. The three groups will receive $22,000 collectively for a variety of projects including establishing organic grazing pastures for chicken and cattle, educating local farmers about in-demand crops like quinoa and spelt, and immigrant farmer training.

The Lakewinds Organic Field Fund was created by the grocery cooperative in 2011 as a means to reinvest profits into the co-op’s core mission: supporting local, organic food producers by
enhancing the development and sustainability of organics through research, training, organic certification, transitioning farms from conventional to organic, creating new farms and land trusts for organic farms.

The three groups receiving awards are:

- **Living Song Farm (Howard Lake).** Project: Establish additional organic pasture for rotational grazing of cattle and chickens.

- **Minnesota Food Association (Marine on St. Croix).** Project: Continue the development of its immigrant farmer training program through Big River – a certified organic farm.

- **Sustainable Farming Association (Princeton).** Project: Continue previous work on the New Crops Project to develop educational materials for local farmers about the demand for and requirements for growing crops like quinoa and spelt.

These awards recognize the work each group is doing towards a collective goal of producing locally grown, organic and sustainable foods, a key value for Lakewinds. “Our purpose for this grant program was to strengthen our support of the local farming industry. Supporting the local food system is an integral part of who we are as a natural foods co-op,” said Dale Woodbeck, General Manager of Lakewinds and an SFA Lifetime Member.

For more information, please visit our [website](#) or email dalew@lakewinds.coop.

**Community and Local Food Resource Website Launched**

A new, tri-state collaboration has resulted in a website to assist rural community food system development. Designed to support rural communities beginning to build local food systems, as well as those with more developed ones, the [website](#) brings together the following organizations:

- Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships (UMN Extension)
- North Dakota State University Extension Service
- Buy Fresh Buy Local South Dakota
- FARRMS, a non-profit based in Medina, N.D.

“The release of this website coincides with the kickoff of a new season of farmers markets, CSAs and farm-to-institution programs,” said Greg Schweser, community food systems planner for the University of Minnesota Extension’s Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships and an SFA member.

The project was funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program’s North Central division. Researchers worked with rural Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota communities to identify needs and meet them through the website’s tools and resources for farmers, community groups, Extension educators and others interested in local food systems. It will be useful to those working in local foods seeking production assistance, expanded marketing opportunities, developing stronger businesses, creating new sourcing options, educating citizens and crafting more beneficial public policies.

[Click here](#) to visit the site.

**FARRMS Soil Day Fundraiser is Tomorrow in Fargo**

FARRMS, a sustainable organization that focuses on helping small-scale sustainable farmers, is holding a fundraising event called Symphony of the Soil tomorrow in Fargo, N.D.

The event will include a day of learning about soils. The day begins at 9 a.m. at North Dakota
State at a soils discussion with Fred Kirschenmann from Iowa State’s Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. Later, the event moves to Probstfield Farm in Moorhead for a soil tour, followed by a gala reception with Kirschenmann and filmmaker Deborah Garcia. After the reception there will be a screening of Garcia's film, "Symphony of the Soil," at the Fargo Theatre.

Learn more and purchase tickets here.

Cover Crop Fact Sheet Now Available for Download

With our unpredictable weather, soil health is more important than ever for sustainable farmers. At SFA, we are ramping up our commitment to soil health education – it’s the bedrock of not only sustainable food production but also environmental stewardship.

Alongside our ongoing GrazeFest series of pasture-based events, SFA's Livestock and Grazing Coordinator Kent Solberg has prepared a Cover Crop Fact Sheet, a one-page guide to the basic tenets of cover cropping, the four main groups of cover crop varieties, and additional resources graziers and farmers should utilize.

The downloadable fact sheet is available on our GrazeFest page. Please feel free to spread the Fact Sheet with friends and neighbors.

New Issue of Farm Transitions Newsletter Now Online

Our Farm Transitions program with Renewing the Countryside has its own e-newsletter, covering various topics on farm transition, wills and trusts, and estate planning.

Click here to read the latest edition that includes several timely articles about long-term care, including the importance of long-term care insurance.

Also, watch for upcoming expanded Farm Transitions content including podcasts, a print newsletter, a collaborative Farm Transitions online portal, and more.

To view the latest newsletter and the newsletter archive, visit our Farm Transitions homepage at sfa-mn.org/farm-transitions/.

SFA GrazeFest Series Pasture Walk Event Set for Aug. 10

By Kent Solberg • SFA Livestock and Grazing Coordinator

Attention dairy and beef producers: A pasture walk and farm tour will be held at 9:30 a.m. Sat., Aug. 10, 2013, at the Gans farm north of Aitkin. We will be looking at Joe's energized fence and watering systems, grazing management, and soil health in relation to pasture management. Watch SFA Connect for more information on the event and registration as the date approaches.

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 Winner: Andrew Wirtz of Melrose

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.

April's winner: Andrew Wirtz of Melrose sent this photo of their son, Jayden, checking out their hogs.

Take Part in Quick Survey for SFA; T-shirt Up for Grabs

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.

We're collecting data with another super-quick survey on the new topic of SFA members' use of mobile technology and how it pertains to SFA. The survey is now available at this link, so please take a few minutes to respond. A random survey-taker will receive an SFA T-shirt. Thanks!

Apply for USDA's Farm Service Agency Microloans
The Farm Service Agency (FSA) developed the Microloan (ML) program to better serve the unique financial operating needs of beginning, niche and the smallest of family farm operations by modifying its Operating Loan (OL) application, eligibility and security requirements. The program will offer more flexible access to credit and will serve as an attractive loan alternative for smaller farming operations like specialty crop producers and operators of community supported agriculture (CSA). These smaller farms, including non-traditional farm operations, often face limited financing options. For more information, click here.

Sustainable Farming Association (SFA)
Box 192, Princeton, MN 55371
763-260-0209 • info@sfa-mn.org