The Beginnings of SFA's Farmer-to-Farer Network™: LSP, Filling a Void, and 'A New Dawn of Farming'

By Jason Walker • Communications Coordinator

The recent SFA Annual Conference was our 22nd, meaning the gathering got started around the time Ross Perot ran for president the first time, "Unforgiven" won the Oscar for Best Picture, and the cost of a gallon of gas was around $1.

SFA has accomplished a lot in those two-plus decades. The support we provide for those who making their living off the land—our Farmer-to-Farmer Network™ – is stronger and more vibrant than ever. Our projects and seminars are making a real difference for Minnesota farmers and eaters of all stripes. And our events, like Minnesota Garlic Festival and Harvest Festival, continue to grow, attracting thousands of folks each year. It's an exciting time to be a part of SFA.

But, as our network grows, we have to be mindful of our past. Spawned originally from the Land Stewardship Project, SFA was created to fill a void in the Minnesota sustainable ag community by creating a platform from which farmers could gather together, share ideas, and otherwise support each other. We are grateful to LSP for not only helping to launch our organization but also for firmly defining SFA's mission.

A 1998 report, "A New Dawn of Farming: The Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota's Formation & Growth," describes in great detail the reasons this platform was crucial, and it's worth revisiting because it provides the bedrock for what the organization was, is and always will be: a group of like-minded farmers.

"New Dawn" describes how, after the Land Stewardship Project was founded in 1982, the burgeoning farm crisis in America made it clear that organizing people around Minnesota was not enough - policy needed to be influenced. The document states, "As LSP began to wrestle with the policies of government programs and private corporations, the organization inevitably became controversial, making some people uneasy."

Noticing the success of its Stewardship Farming Program, which linked 25 farmers in southeast Minnesota with researchers to analyze date and host field days and workshops – and noticing the fact other farmers wanted to be a part of the theretofore exclusive program – the "New Dawn" states that, to LSP, "it became clear there was a need for forming some sort of permanent venue that would bring people together in a farmer-to-farmer information sharing type situation."

The first SFA chapter was then created in that Southeast region, but soon folks in Western,
South Central and Central regions had chapters, too, and in 1992, Cannon River. As the decade continued the CornerPost newsletter began production, chapters were added — and consolidated.

But our original mission never wavered. As "New Dawn" reflected at the time of its publication, SFA’s mission was to help "sustainable agriculture practitioners to share techniques and expertise in the field and across their kitchen tables." Member Carol Michaelis is quoted as saying, "Written documentation is great, but there’s nothing like word of mouth … That local farmer-to-farmer education can’t be beat."

I encourage you to read the "New Dawn of Farming" report, written by Audrey Arner and Brian DeVore and available for download on our website. Not only will you likely see some familiar names and hear some familiar stories, "New Dawn" really emphasizes SFA’s niche in the sustainable agriculture community: We are the Farmer-to-Farmer Network™.

Executive Director’s Note

By John Mesko

Have you had to adjust your farming business plan since you started farming in order to remain in business, or become more profitable? Many farmers have, and the ability to adjust plans in midstream is a critical skill for today’s farmers.

This is why we’ve launched the Adjust 2015 Project at SFA. Our goals for this project are as follows:

- Increase the knowledge and awareness beginning farmers have of potential difficulties they may face; and develop the skills of beginning farmers to recognize dangers looming on the horizon early enough to make adjustments before those dangers threaten the business or the farm family.
- Build into the beginning farmer educational system an emphasis on realistic, nimble and flexible business plans.
- Help aspiring farmers develop a proper exit strategy as a part of their original business plan.

Through paid surveys and interviews with beginning farmers, Adjust 2015 will summarize the stories of farms and farmers who have had less than desired success, or have had to make changes to their operations and plans in order to survive.

We are currently looking for potential survey participants. We are asking folks to send us their contact information and some basic information about their farming situation. Invited participants will then be sent a link to the Adjust 2015 Survey. Upon completion, farmers will be reimbursed $40 for their time to take the survey. If you or someone you know encountered difficulty in getting started in farming, needed to make adjustments to their original business plan, or has not succeeded in farming, and would like to help others avoid the same, click here to participate in Adjust 2015. Thanks!

Lake Superior Chapter Hosting 'Farmers Take the Stage'

SFA's Lake Superior chapter is hosting its annual "Farmers Take the Stage" event from 7 to 9 p.m. March 22 at Amazing Grace Bakery & Cafe, 394 S Lake Ave, Duluth. Support your local farmers with an evening of family friendly talent as farmers show off their talents in music, poetry, skits, song and dance. Proceeds will support the Lake Superior SFA. In addition to great music by farmers, there will be a silent auction, stories, humor and more. Food is available for purchase.

The public is welcome. Suggested donation is $15 adults, $10 students; kids under 5 are free.
Enjoy Farmer Panel, Cuisine, Film at 'Sustainable Table'

Plan to attend a unique day of farmer-to-student, farmer-to-farmer and farmer-to-foodie connections at SFA Crow River Chapter's "The Sustainable Table" on March 30th. Happening at Gale Woods Farm from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., the first session includes a farmer panel reviewing U of M student presentations on the effects of a "hotter drier climate," "widely variable weather," "high energy prices" and the "new normal economy."

Starting at 11 a.m., SFA's own food guru, Mary Jane Miller, will serve a lunch of wood-fired pizza while presenting another in her "Culinary and Its Craft" series on farm-to-table recipes, techniques and know-how.

After lunch is a showing of the film "Dirty Work: The Story of Elsie’s Farm," followed by an interactive discussion.

$10 admission includes lunch! Click here to sign up.

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:

Register by today for a Raw Milk Production Seminar from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. March 14 at Library Building Room 103, 1414 College Way, M State Fergus Falls and led by Tim Wightman, president of the Farm to Consumer Defense League. From cow, to jar, to consumer this class is the primer you need if you are contemplating raw milk production and/or consumption.

Wightman is author of The Raw Milk Handbook and From Grass to the Glass – Chore Time. Cost $20/person or $35/family. Price includes local foods lunch. Information: paradoxhomestead@gmail.com.

Natural Care for Goats, Sheep and Horses, 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m., March 23 at Library Building Room 103, 1414 College Way, at M State Fergus Falls and led by Alethea Kenney, B.S., Doctorate in Traditional Naturopathy, Herbalist and Aromatherapist and proprietor of Boreal Balance, LLC, a natural health consulting business. Cost: $15/person, includes a light lunch. This course is part of the M State Sustainable Food Production program’s Spring 2013 short course series.

Introduction to Cheesemaking, Two Sessions (April 5-6 and April 20), led by SFA members Sue Wika and Tom Prieve, owners of Paradox Farm, Ashby, Minn., and homestead cheesemakers. Both sessions are at Faith Haven Bible Camp, on Eagle Lake south of Battle Lake, Minn., and are limited to 10 people. Students can participate in the class as a demonstration, or they can bring the necessary supplies to make their own cheese. In Session 1, students will learn the basic science of milk and the essential processes, techniques and ingredients involved in cheesemaking. In this class we will make cream cheese and whole-milk ricotta. In Session 2, Students will learn the essential processes, techniques and ingredients involved in cheese-making to make a stretched curd/pasta filata and a brined cheese. We will make mozzarella and Greek-style feta. Cost: $50/session; or $90 for both. Call 218.747.2202 or email paradoxhomestead@gmail.com for more information.

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.

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: animal selection for a forage-based system; nutrition requirements; planned grazing; fencing; rotation, marketing, and farm planning.

For more information, click here.

Planning For Your Farm's Future

SFA and Renewing the Countryside are excited to present a special four-day Farm Succession and Estate Planning workshop with internationally known farm transition expert John Baker. The workshop, to be held March 4-5 and March 25-26 at Villa Maria in Frontenac, will include expert guidance and legal assistance to help ensure that you have a sound plan in place for the eventual transfer of your farm to your family or non-family successor. To register, click here.

The Farm Transitions project is in conjunction with Renewing the Countryside.

Public Policy

Are you interested in state and federal ag policy? Offer your feedback by taking our Public Policy Survey. It will take about 10 minutes, and will really help us determine the interest of our members and your thoughts about the future of SFA.
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.

Take a Photo, Win a Free SFA T-Shirt Winner: Dayle Reinke

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. 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.

January's winner: Dayle Reinke of Wadena
In-Depth Grafting Workshop Planned March 19 in Staples

Join us for an all-day, intensive apple and fruit tree grafting workshop from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. March 19 at Central Lakes College Age and Energy Center field office, main building, in Staples (on the north edge of town just off County Road 2). This first in a series of workshops on orchards for very cold climates is led by expert researchers and horticulturists yet suitable for all levels of interest and experience.

Instructor is Bob Purvis of Homedale, Idaho, who has served as secretary of North American Fruit Explorers (NAFEX) since August 2009. Wherever he has lived, he has taught grafting workshops and pruning demonstrations and helped others learn more about fruit growing. Joining NAFEX launched him eventually into a career in horticulture and agriculture and into many rewarding relationships with amateur and commercial fruit growers, nurserymen, and research scientists.

Students will graft scions (cuttings) or chip buds of cold-hardy apple, apricot, pear, or plum varieties onto dormant rootstocks to make new fruit trees to take home. After 2-3 weeks, the scions or chips should unite to the rootstocks and then grow leaves and shoots. Given good care, the grafts will grow into trees and produce their first blooms or fruits in 3-4 years. You will also receive a set of illustrated lecture notes.

The workshop cost is $80, however, for the first 12 registrants 1/2 is defrayed to $40 through a grant from the University of Minnesota Central Region Partnership. Bring a utility knife with replaceable blades or better, a right- or left-handed grafting knife. If you have a favorite fruit tree that you want to propagate, bring freshly cut branches from that tree. Also, bring lunch.

Early and advance registration is crucial. Simply email your interest in attending, including your contact information, to rscheer@charter.net. Then, follow by payment via Paypal using the same address, or by check payable to Green Island, Grafting Workshop, 850 Scheer Drive NE, Wadena, MN 56482. Questions: email Kent Scheer at rscheer@charter.net or Jim Chamberlin at jchamberlin@hugllc.com; please include your phone number.

Save the Date for U. of M. Urban Ag Expo

The University of Minnesota is hosting an Urban Agriculture Expo from 9 a.m.-1:30 p.m. April 20
at the Sabathani Community Center, 310 E 38th St, Minneapolis. Join the U. and fellow urban farmers in learning about growing techniques, business skills, and the "people aspects" of urban farming. Contact Betsy Wieland for more information at 612.596.1175 or eliza003@umn.edu.

Marketing and Economics Workshop Planned in Fairmont

Rural Advantage and University of Minnesota Extension will be hosting “Marketing and Economics of Local Foods and Third Crops” from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Knights of Columbus in Fairmont, Minn.

Speakers begin with Linda Meschke, Rural Advantage founder, who will be updating attendees on Rural Advantage’s Local Foods Initiative. Brigid Tuck with University of Minnesota Extension will address the economic contributions that grape growers and wineries have made to Minnesota’s economy and the possibilities that can still be found in that industry, then Paul Pierson with USDA Rural Development will share information on the different programs and assistance Rural Development is able to offer small business owners.

After lunch, Jerry Ford, fruit and vegetable producer and SFA Events Coordinator, will share personal experiences with marketing on his farm as well as professional experiences with marketing for the Minnesota Garlic Festival. The last speaker of the day will be Dale Nordquist with University of Minnesota, who has been working on a project that keeps track of businesses that specialize in specialty (third) crops.

The Knights of Columbus is located at 920 E 10th St in Fairmont. Registration and refreshments will begin at 9:30 a.m.; there will be an hour break for lunch on your own. The workshop is free and pre-registration is not necessary. More information: 507.238.5449 or sacke032@umn.edu.

Workshop: Producing and Selling Eggs and Poultry

Have a few extra eggs you want to sell? Interested in expanding your flock and marketing your eggs locally? Not sure what the rules, requirements and expectations are for producing and marketing eggs? Attend a workshop from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. March 16 at the University Center Rochester, 2129 Heinz Center.

This workshop, from the University of Minnesota Extension and the Minnesota Dept. of Ag, will cover the basics of egg food safety requirements, including everything from protecting your flock from unwanted diseases to a hands-on opportunity to learn candling and grading, as well as practical application of the labeling requirements.

Cost is $20/person and $10 for student or business partner; pre-registration is highly recommended as seating will be limited. Information/registration: Wayne Martin at 612.625.6224 or marti067@umn.edu.

Backyard and Small-Scale Poultry Workshops Set

The University of Minnesota Extension’s Small Farms Team is inviting those interested in backyard and small-scale poultry to attend their new educational programs packed with production and marketing information. The workshops will be held on March 7 in Slayton, March 11 in Hutchinson and March 26 in Northfield. The program will start at 6 p.m. and end at 9 p.m. at each location. The cost is $20 for adults (spouses and business partners $10.00) and $10 for students. A light meal will be provided and attendees will receive a copy of the workshop’s proceedings. Each location’s details:

- Slayton, 6 p.m. March 7, Courts Building Meeting Room, 2848 Broadway. Contact: Mike Boersma, Extension Educator, boers010@umn.edu or 507.825.6715

- Hutchinson, 6 p.m. March 11, Commercial Building Meeting Room, McLeod County Fairgrounds, 840 Century Ave SW. Contact: Nathan Winter, wint0146@umn.edu or 320.484.4334.

- Northfield, 6 p.m. March 26, Community Resource Center 1651 Jefferson Pkwy. Contact: Mike Donnelly, donne099@umn.edu or 507.332.6165.
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.

Play: Secure the Future for Stewardship Farmers

Two public performances of the drama "Look Who's Knockin'" will be presented by the Land Stewardship Project March 22-23 at St. Catherine University Recital Hall, 2004 Randolph Avenue, St. Paul. Both performances begin at 7 p.m. and will be followed by an audience discussion centered on the issues raised by the play.

The one-act play presents an ethical dilemma faced by an older farming couple, Nettie and Gerald: do they follow the trend and sell their land for top dollar, or pursue a path to help the next generation of farmers gain secure, long-term access to land? “Many landowners and farmers are in the same tough situation Nettie and Gerald are, particularly at a time of record-high farmland prices,” said LSP organizer Karen Stettler.

The cost is $10, payable at the door. For more information, contact LSP’s Amy Bacigalupo at 320.269.2105.

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.

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