SFA Member Focus: Matthew Willenbring's Big Idea

By Jason Walker

Editor’s note – SFA is beginning an occasional series of member profiles. If you know someone who merits consideration for a profile, please contact SFA communications coordinator Jason Walker at jason@sfa-mn.org.

SFA member and egg producer Matthew Willenbring of Cold Spring wants to build a chicken-processing facility on his family’s farm. He has the desire and determination to see it through.

The devil, however, is in the details. Before he can begin, Matthew, 28, needs to know his idea is financially viable.

Looking to diversify while building his flock of layers, he alit upon the business philosophy that sustainably minded chicken processing should not be so hard to find in central Minnesota. But Matthew needs to know there’s enough demand to support his facility – before he builds it.

That got Matthew thinking that problems like these can be solved when the SFA community works together. While envisioning his chicken-processing house, Matthew had another idea: create a clearinghouse to offer SFA members easy collaboration on anything from augmenting their CSA shares to gauging market interest in a product.

This way, a young farmer like Matthew could survey members to learn whether there was enough demand for his chicken-processing facility to make economic sense. Similarly, a vegetable CSA farmer could connect with a chicken producer to offer meat to its members, or vice-versa – all while using the clearinghouse to find a suitable meat processing facility.

“SFA members could better meet the demands of the market they serve,” Matthew said. “They can be more profitable, and provide new generations who are eager to live the lifestyle of a sustainable farmer with more assurance that, five and 10 years from their starting, they are going to be continuing to do what they love, not just on the side, but full-time.”

Matthew’s clearinghouse would work via an individual who would travel the state and meet with interested SFA members. The person would approach people who have established markets or CSAs to see how they can enhance their offerings with products they don’t currently offer, connect them with a source, then follow up to make sure the member pairings are working out.
The traveling person would have to meet with the SFA board or a member committee, providing concise reports on his/her progress.

“It could revolutionize what we have going right now as an organization,” Matthew said. “I would love to be connected with a CSA grower who is producing product but doesn’t currently have eggs available to customers. It would take me 3-5 years to get a customer base that’s substantial enough to make me secure that I have a market for all the eggs that I’m producing. Why not take that crucial first three-year period for someone who’s trying to get into this market, get their customer base established and turn over a net profit that’s going to keep them producing eggs for the long haul?”

As Matthew sees it, under his model established farmers can expand their offerings to please consumers, young farmers have financial stability and better ways of getting started, and processors are given a reliable stream of business.

“You want everyone to be happy and benefit,” Matthew said. “I understand how hard people have worked in establishing customer bases. We can partner together so that we’re not fighting each other as members. We can meet the consumer demands. A lot of consumers out there would like more variety of products that they can buy local. Let’s get together as an organization to meet those needs.”

Interested in Matthew’s idea, or want to hear more? He’d love to chat with you. Email him at mwill_csmn@hotmail.com or call 320-250-1624.

Executive Director's Note

SFA supports...

We’ve been running the SFA Public Policy Survey for a while now and the initial responses are interesting.

- Most of you are interested, familiar and active in learning about sustainable ag-related policies.
- Over 70% of you want SFA to be more involved, particularly in providing information and comment on relevant issues.
- Half of you want to see SFA hold a “Day at the Capitol” event.
- Over half of you would like to see SFA hire a person specifically focused on public policy issues.
- Over half of you would like to see SFA expand beyond Minnesota.

Do these initial responses reflect your views? Many thanks to all who have already taken this survey, but frankly, we really need to hear from many more of you. If you agree with the initial direction and responses of the rest of your fellow members, take the survey now and let us know. If you think this survey is headed the wrong direction, let us know!

We are far from making any decisions or taking any actions at this point. We are asking you, our members for some direction here. If you value SFA as an organization that can make a difference in sustainable agriculture, then tell us if you think involvement in public policy development and information is one way we should be doing that, or not.

As your Executive Director, I have no opinion on this, I’m waiting to hear from you. Personally, I’ve taken the survey as a member of SFA, I hope you will too.

SFA is already working in the public policy arena in a limited way. Did you know that? That’s right, our Public Policy Webpage is just one way we are looking to serve our members in helping them to get the information they need on issues related to agriculture and the public policies at the state, local and national level.

Almost weekly now, I get an email, or a phone call from someone outside of Minnesota who would like to join SFA and begin working on behalf of their local sustainable farmers in way similar to what we are doing. And daily, I’m asked to represent SFA’s “position” on public policy issues related to agriculture and the environment. Now I’m asking you. This survey is important to SFA and as someone who is interested in SFA, I hope you’ll find the survey important to you.

Where do you see SFA in the future on these issues? Please go to the survey and take it now.
Thanks so much!

Next Farm Transitions Workshop Slated for March 23 in Browerville

Renewing the Countryside and SFA were happy to see so many farmers from central Minnesota exploring options for succession planning for their farm at the Feb. 17 Clearwater Farm Transitions workshop. Over 40 people attended the day-long workshop, led by Gary Hachfeld and David Bau of the UMN Extension who introduced participants to the many aspects that must be considered when planning for the future of a family's farmland. Subjects reviewed were trusts, wills, insurance and best strategies to transfer land, assets and wealth while avoiding probate and minimizing exposure to estate or capital gains taxes.

If that sounds like a lot to learn in one day - it is!

This is why Renewing the Countryside and SFA, with support from the USDA Risk Management Agency, will be providing personalized assistance to those who would like help with this process. Some of the decisions that farm families need to make are not simple or easy, and there are many people, including family members, who have an interest in the planning process and eventual outcomes. That's where Renewing the Countryside can help.

The next introductory workshop will be March 23 in Browerville. For more details or to register, visit our online registration at bit.ly/BrowervilleFT or contact Jason Walker at jason@sfa-mn.org or 612.605.9269.

RTC Farmer/Buyer Networking Events Scheduled

Renewing the Countryside has been facilitating a series of farmer/buyer networking events for more than five years. From farm to school programs sourcing large amounts of fruits and vegetables to linking caterers with niche gourmet growers, we have helped hundreds of successful relationships develop. This approach to connecting regional buyers and farmers also provides information on new opportunities that are helping to scale up the implementation of local foods.

This year, workshops will be held in Moorhead [March 26], St. Charles [March 28], and Duluth [t.b.d.]. For more information, please contact Sarah: sarah@RTCinfo.org or 612.741.6074.

New Annual Conference Photo Feature

Thanks to Heavy Table photographer Crystal Liepa, we have a stockpile of awesome photos from our 2012 Annual Conference, held Feb 18 at the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph. Look for a new photo in each SFA Connect, and read Heavy Table writer Tricia Cornell's story about the conference here. This issue's photo is of SFA member Dallas Flynn:

Scholarships for Transitioning and Recently Certified Organic Farmers

While transitioning to organic farming can present financial uncertainty for farmers, there's a special program in Minnesota to help them accomplish their goals. The “Tools for Transition” program, led by the University of Minnesota (UMN), Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) and other partners, provides farm business management scholarships of up to 90 percent to qualifying farmers.

“Tools for Transition” is aimed at helping clarify the cost and process of transitioning to organic. Minnesota field crop or dairy farmers who have any acres in transition or who have been certified on Feb. 17. Up next: March 23 at the Browerville Community Center. For more information or to register, visit bit.ly/BrowervilleFT.

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.
fewer than three years are eligible to apply, and project leaders are eager to expand the program to more farmers this year.

Farmers in "Tools" work directly with a farm business management instructor on a personally designed program to help them understand and better manage their own cost of production, profitability, and other financial measures. UMN agricultural economists analyze the data to look for patterns and trends, while carefully protecting the privacy of all participants' financial information.

Program participants get the chance to participate in special workshops and to receive a discount
MCIA Seeks to Hire Manager for Organic Services

The Minnesota Crop Improvement Association (MCIA) is seeking qualified candidates for the position of Manager, Organic Services. The Manager, Organic Services will be responsible for the overall management, performance and growth of the MCIA Organic Certification Program. This position requires knowledge of the organic industry and the ability to lead an innovative, professional team to deliver industry leading organic certification service. A successful applicant will be self-motivated with excellent communication and decision making skills. A four-year degree in a food science or agriculture related field is preferred with proficiency in Word, Excel and database management software required.

A job description is available at [www.mncia.org](http://www.mncia.org). This is a full-time position in St. Paul offering a competitive salary and a full benefits and personal leave package. Applicants are asked to submit a letter of application and resume by March 16, 2012 to: Ben Lang, Minnesota Crop Improvement Association (MCIA), 1900 Hendon Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108. Email inquiries to mncia@mncia.org.

Extending the Growing Season Workshop in Lamberton

Are you interested in learning about low-input methods of growing produce earlier in the spring and later in the fall? Attend the Extending the Growing Season workshop from 9 a.m. to 4:45 pm. April 4 at the University of Minnesota Southwest Research and Outreach Center in Lamberton. The session will highlight topics related to earlier- and later-season vegetable production techniques and include a tour of the SWROC's high tunnels. It will also feature a screening of the new documentary film, "Farm to School: Growing Our Future.

For more information, visit [swroc.cfans.umn.edu](http://swroc.cfans.umn.edu).

MISA Study Profiles Clover Valley Farms

The Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) has released the second case study in an online series that provides beginning and transitioning farmers with a unique virtual resource. The new study in the “Profiles in Sustainable Agriculture” series features Cindy Hale and Jeff Hall of Clover Valley Farms in Duluth. They raise pastured poultry and hogs, produce herbs in a passive solar greenhouse, and use integrated pest management to grow heritage varieties of apples in new and restored orchards.

The "Profiles in Sustainable Agriculture" project uses graphics and narratives to integrate personal stories of profiled farmers with detailed information on their practices. The case studies also include technical assistance via extensive tips and links to finance, production, and marketing resources. The first case study featured Laura Frerichs and Adam Cullip of Loon Organics in Hutchinson.

The case studies are located at [http://sustagprofiles.info](http://sustagprofiles.info).

Funding Restored, ATTRA Project Moves Forward

A project of the National Center for Appropriate Technology, the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service's ATTRA project is a leading national provider of technical assistance in the sustainable agriculture and farm-energy arenas. Federal funding for ATTRA was restored in the fall after being cut earlier in the year. Now, ATTRA is gearing up its publications, toll-free information hotline, and other services.

Since 1987, the ATTRA project has been the a resource for information on sustainable agriculture, covering a wide range of topics, including reducing pesticide use on cropland, promoting food safety in sustainable production systems, reducing farm energy use and costs, enriching soils with the use of cover crops, and providing technical assistance in the growing areas of local farmers.
Free Online Farm-to-Table Jobs Service Launched

A new website aims to unite people looking for work in agriculture and food industries and prospective employers: FarmandFoodJobs.wordpress.com. Organizers hope that this website will help unite workers with farms, organizations and companies across the United States.

The service is free, and the website does not require you to sign up, log in or provide any personal information. According to Megan Willis, website co-founder, the site is designed for farmers by farmers to support the farm-to-table notion by publicizing jobs with an emphasis on (but not limited to) agriculture.

To post a job, email the job description to farmandfoodjobs@gmail.com. To view current job postings, visit www.farmandfoodjobs.wordpress.com.

Tech Company Seeks Feedback for New Sustainable Ag Gadget

Can we help more growers transition to and stay in sustainable agriculture? The Hunt Utilities Group of Pine River thinks we might have a piece of the answer. But we know technology. You know farming, and we need your input. We are developing an electronic device that will help farmers move to and remain in sustainable agriculture.

As you well know, some of the current barriers for farmers include: information about sustainable ag is inaccessible or disparately located; tools are designed for single, specific crops; and sustainable ag can be more time-consuming in planning, tending, planting, and harvesting. This tool will help address those issues and more, all the way through the growing season from planning through planting, tending and harvesting.

Follow this link to insert your two cents. Thank you for your input!

FESSA Hosting First Annual Conference in Stillwater

Farm Enterprises in Small-scale Sustainable Agriculture, a self-described "group of eclectic, enterprising small-scale farmers," is hosting its first annual conference March 31 from 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Stillwater Public Library in Stillwater. The conference is geared for new and aspiring farmers, farmers looking to diversify, and any creative people interested in sustainable agriculture. FESSA hopes attendees will gain inspiration and resources, confidence to begin a new enterprise, and an introduction to a network of like-minded people.

Preregistration is required and capped at 100 attendees. A freewill donation of $10 is requested. To register or for more information, email mail@fessa.org.

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.

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)
Box 192, Princeton, MN 55371
763-260-0209 • info@sfa-mn.org

Unsubscribe | Privacy Policy