Going Back To Our Roots: 2014 Annual Conference
Registration Now Open; Cost as Little as $35

By Jason Walker • SFA Communications Coordinator

Bet you didn't see this one coming. Not this early, anyway.

But here it is: Registration is now open (click here) for the 2014 SFA Annual Conference, to be held Feb. 8 at the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, Minn.

- **The theme:** "Back to our Roots."
- **The cost:** as low as $35.
- **The sessions:** Selected and led by you, members of our Farmer-to-Farmer Network.

Winter is a busy season, and many of you have likely experienced "conference fatigue," January and February are a blur of convention centers, classrooms and vendor booths. In the middle of all that we've decided to, well, get back to our roots and make ours a farmer family gathering as we build and strengthen our Farmer-to-Farmer Network™.

A founding concept of SFA is that there is wisdom in the community, so you'll help to determine and lead the sessions – which will include casual but focused networking conversations on topics that you choose. Using an online voting system, SFA members can choose session topics; we'll analyze the data and create the schedule around your wishes. We want your input; you can even add your own ideas. Bookmark this link and vote often as more ideas are added.

The venue at St. Ben's will be a familiar, centrally located one that's easily accessible. Lunch is not included with your registration; instead, attendees will enjoy a lengthy break where they can eat at St. Ben's, walk to one of the restaurants in St. Joseph, or bring a sack lunch. The idea is to give our members the freedom to network at their own pace, however and wherever they like, and to take advantage of the quaint surroundings.

Family programming is returning, so that the ENTIRE farm family can come enjoy and learn from our Farmer-to-Farmer showcase. Admission for children ages 3-12 is just $10, while kids under 3 are free.

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The $35 discounted price is valid through Aug. 31 for SFA members only. Current SFA members should have received an email with a discount code for registration. Non-members may register for $45 or, for the best value, simply join SFA today and we’ll email your discount code. Starting Sept. 1, registration goes up to $45 for members and $55 for non-members.

Also, do you remember the gray Farmer-to-Farmer T-shirts from the 2013 Annual Conference, shown at right on handsome SFA spokesmodel Kent Solberg? They’re specially priced at just $15 when you register online for the 2104 Annual Conference.

Want the T-shirt for free? Volunteer at the 2014 Annual Conference – it’s not too early to sign up. Contact Volunteer Coordinator Karen Couné at karen.coune@gmail.com or 612.202.7201.

Take advantage of the discount. Click here to register today.

**Executive Director's Note**

*By John Mesko*

Can you feel the excitement already? I have to tell you that our staff is excited about next year’s SFA Annual Conference, and I hope you will be too. You will have a chance to help decide the topics we cover and the content itself, and that's only the beginning. Why are we doing this? Well, at the heart of this motivation is to take our Farmer-to-Farmer Network to its full expression. What better way to do that than to involve our network in the development of our programming!


Speaking of networking, are you, or is someone you know a network builder? SFA is looking for someone to help us continue to grow our Farmer-to-Farmer Network™.

If you are a farmer, or are into sustainable agriculture, and you are interested in SFAs approach to enhancing the movement through Farmer-to-Farmer Networking, read on.

Consistent with our efforts to lead the sustainable agriculture movement, we are making unprecedented investments in our Network. We are currently accepting applications for someone to lead SFAs Farmer to Farmer Network Development Program - A 2 year project of the Sustainable Farming Association designed to strengthen, unify and enhance our Farmer to Farmer Network by investing in the continued development of our regional chapters, as well as developing a network infrastructure to support SFAs continued growth. This could be a half-time, or a full-time position.

Other considerations:

- Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture or related field preferred
- Farming experience helpful
- Proficiency with Microsoft Office software.
- Working familiarity with online publishing and productivity tools such as Google Docs, Google Sites, Dropbox, Wordpress, etc.
- Ability to communicate clearly in writing
- Ability to speak and make presentations in front of an audience of any size
- Familiarity with SFA and SFA Chapters may be helpful
- Successful candidate should be able to demonstrate a history of teamwork, professional communications, energy and self-accountability
Should be confident and comfortable working in a “virtual” organization, where most of the communication with co-workers is via email and phone, supported by occasional face-to-face meetings.

If you want to be a part of a very exciting time in the history of SFA, send me an email with your resume. Tell me what you’d like to see in a Farmer-to-Farmer Network, and how you think you can contribute.

Chapter Update: South Central

By Sherry Jansen • Chapter Coordinator

The South Central Chapter of the Sustainable Farming Association held its Annual Meeting on March 16 at the Clarks Grove Baptist Church. This year’s annual meeting topic was Soil Health for Increased Crop Productivity.

The morning session included an expert panel featuring Josh Reinitz, owner of East Henderson Farm in Henderson and SFA state board treasurer; Peter Hartman, NRCS Soil Scientist; and Carmen Fernholz, Madison, Minn.

Following a lunch provided by local growers, attendees heard a presentation by keynote speaker Gary Zimmer, from Midwestern BioAg, Madison, Wis. Mr. Zimmer is a farmer, agri-businessman, author and educator and has evaluated farming practices as a consultant, on his family’s southwestern Wisconsin farm and as president of Midwestern BioAg, a biological farming consulting and products company. The Zimmer family’s organic farms utilize the ideas Gary has gleaned over a lifetime spent studying agriculture. Otter Creek Organic Farms include an organic dairy, pastured beef and a variety of crops on 1,000 acres.

Future activities the South Central Chapter of SFA will be engaging in include:

- A Book n A Brew club in Alden which meets at 7 p.m. on the fourth Tuesday of the month November through March
- The Festival of Farms Tour near Alden will be a diversified adventure of sustainable crop, dairy, beef operations, and multiple cropping rotations
- Possibly a signature event of a hog roast with a band
- And be sure to see our booth at the Freeborn County Fair July 30-Aug. 4.

For more information and to be added to announcements for the SFA South Central Chapter, please contact Linda Meschke at linda@ruraladvantage.org or find us on Facebook.

Chapter Update: Lake Superior

By Jean Sramek • Chapter Coordinator

Editor’s Note: Because of a computer error, the Lake Superior chapter update scheduled for the April 22 SFA Connect was not received in time for publication. It is included here.

With the support and guidance of the Institute for a Sustainable Future, Lake Superior Sustainable Farming Association has developed a CSA Wellness Initiative (click here to read more). It’s similar to health insurance incentive programs that offer a discount for healthy lifestyle choices such as visiting a fitness center or gym. Through this initiative, participating
health insurance and health coverage program providers offer rebates or wellness benefits to members subscribed to participating CSA farms. Each of the participating CSA farms meets criteria established by the LS-SFA, and applications by interested CSA farms are reviewed annually.

The first participant is HealthShare, is a local, community-based coverage program created to provide health coverage to uninsured employees of small businesses in northeastern Minnesota. To qualify for the program, businesses must meet certain eligibility requirements. HealthShare focuses on preventive care, health education, and using health care services at the right time and in the right place. Other insurance providers or health plans may join this program in the future. Increasingly, health insurance providers and health coverage plans have begun to recognize the life-long benefits of healthy eating to support and improve good health. A variety of studies demonstrate that CSA membership increases the variety and consumption of vegetables. Maine Health, Physicians Plus (WI) and Health Tradition (MN, WI and IA) are examples of health plans providing CSA rebates or including CSA’s as part of their wellness initiative coverage.

The Institute for a Sustainable Future has developed this online form as an informal survey of interest by Northeastern Minnesota and Northwestern Wisconsin residents. If you’d like your health care provider to join the CSA Wellness Initiative, please take the survey and pass it along to your friends and family.

Budding Farmers Support Network Fires Up at Recent Event

By Bailey Webster • SFA-BFSN Coordinator

The Budding Farmers Support Network is a new organization started by several University of Minnesota students. Frustrated by a lack of hands-on education practical for future farmers at the University, we decided to create an organization that would provide education, mentorship, and a sense of community to beginning farmers.

We met for the first time in October for a potluck and brainstorming about what we wanted to be. One of our ideas was to become a chapter through SFA, so we contacted Executive Director John Mesko to explore that possibility. John was really excited about our ideas, and through his enthusiasm a partnership between the Budding Farmers Support Network (BFSN) and SFA was born.

On April 19, we hosted a kickoff event on the U of M St. Paul campus. John Mesko was the featured speaker, and Lakewinds Natural Foods donated sandwiches and desserts. About 25 people were there, and several people became SFA members at the event. People stayed for a long time after John’s talk to chat with other beginning farmers.

BFSN is planning programming through the summer, including visits to SFA member farms, workdays, and a table at Garlic Festival in August. For more information or to join our email list, email me at webst176@umn.edu or buddingfarmers.sfa@gmail.com.

Job Posting: SFA Central Chapter Seeks Coordinator

The Central Chapter of the Sustainable Farming Association (SFA-CM) is currently seeking applications for a Chapter Coordinator. Successful applicants must have knowledge of sustainable farming practices and strong public relations skills. This is a part-time contract position with variable hours (approximately 20 hours per month).

Submit cover letter and one page resume to SFA-CM Personnel Committee: Arlene Jones (stmathiasfarm@gmail.com), Bryan Simon (bryandsimon@gmail.com), and Vickie Kettlewell (vickie@sunupranch.com) before May 17, 2013. The committee will interview selected applicants. The position will begin after June 11, 2013.

SFA GrazeFest Series Pasture Walk Event Set for Aug. 10
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
Nearly 100 Participate in SFA Stress Survey

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; a quick survey on the new topic of SFA members’ use of mobile technology and how it pertains to SFA is now available at this link, so please take a few minutes to respond.

In the Stress Survey, Question One asked, “On a scale of 1-10, how much does stress affect farm productivity?” A rating of “1” meant stress did not affect farm productivity at all, and a rating of “10” meant that stress affected productivity more than anything else. The average score participants gave to stress was 6.56; most people gave responses of 5 and above. Some key findings:

- Nearly 10 percent of respondents indicated that stress impacts farm productivity more than anything else.
- Over one-third of respondents ranked stress at 8 or more.
- Only 11 respondents ranked stress below 5 on the scale, indicating stress is clearly a factor for most farmers taking the survey.

Question Two asked if respondents would attend a stress management workshop if available, and over 60 percent of respondents indicated they would attend such a workshop.

Thanks to everyone who participated in the survey. We awarded an SFA T-shirt to one random survey taker, and the lucky winner was Kelly Smith of Esko. Thanks, Kelly!

And again, please click here to help SFA by taking another VERY brief survey.

Holistic Management of Goats Workshop Planned in Ashby

An upcoming event in the Fergus Falls area includes SFA members and will be relevant to many. The event:

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; 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.

HECUA Seeking 80-Hour Farm Volunteer

The Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA) is seeking an 80-hour farm volunteer position for a period of three weeks sometime between mid-June and mid-August 2013. Undergraduate students interested in exploring sustainable agricultural practices and business models would work for three weeks in exchange for lodging at the farm and some training and context for the hands on day-to-day work. HECUA will provide the learning and reflection tools for the student and will evaluate their contributions. If interested, please email HECUA's Manager of Internships and Community Partnerships at eseru@hecua.org.

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.
Dairy Industry Asks FDA: Approve Aspartame as Additive

According to the Farm-to-Consumer Legal Defense Fund, the dairy industry has petitioned the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to approve aspartame as a hidden additive in milk, yogurt, eggnog and cream.

The International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA) and the National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF) are asking FDA to alter the definition of “milk” to include chemical sweeteners such as aspartame and sucralose without listing these additives on the front panel. While aimed principally at replacing sugar in flavored milks served to school children, the petition also asks for the right to put hidden artificial sweeteners in a host of dairy products including nonfat dried milk (always added to reduced-fat milks), yogurt, cream, half-and-half, sour cream, eggnog and whipping cream. Truly, no conventional dairy product will be safe if the petitioners get their way.

According to the Farm-to-Consumer Legal Defense Fund, thousands of adverse reactions to aspartame have been reported to the FDA, mostly concerned with abnormal brain function, brain tumors, epilepsy and Parkinson's.

Click here to read the aspartame request and comment by May 21, 2013.

MDA Requests Specialty Crops Grant Proposals

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture is accepting grant proposals for specialty crop research under the USDA's Specialty Crop Block Grant Program. The goal of the program is to fund projects that will increase the competitiveness of specialty crops. The MDA anticipates a federal allocation of $671,000.

The USDA defines specialty crops as fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, and nursery crops (including floriculture). Nonprofits, government agencies, universities and other organizations involved in Minnesota agriculture are encouraged to apply. Individuals, for-profit businesses, or commercial entities may only apply if their project demonstrates a significant benefit to a specialty crop segment. This program will not fund projects focused on individual businesses, physical improvements/equipment or operating capital.

MDA will accept applications from eligible entities submitted by 4 p.m. May 29, 2013. For a complete list of crops that qualify for research, click here. For a copy of the Minnesota Specialty Crop Block Grant RFP/Grant Manual, grant application guidance and a fillable application form, click here.

MDA: Sign Up for Driftwatch Registry This Spring

Before spring fieldwork starts in earnest, growers of organic and other sensitive crops should consider signing up for the Driftwatch™ registry offered by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA). By registering with Driftwatch™, farmers identify the locations of their sensitive crops and pastures using the point and click features of Google Maps®. Commercial fertilizer and pesticide applicators can then check the database and take special care to avoid organic land and other sensitive crops/forages when they are applying chemicals in the vicinity of these crops.

Driftwatch™ is offered by MDA through a partnership with Purdue University. For more information or to register land, go to www.driftwatch.org.

State Wetland Restoration Funds Set Up to Help Farmers

The MN Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) has approx. $5 million allocated for restoring drained and partially drained marginal fields (click here for more information). These grants are based on the following regional locations: west central, up to and including Norman and Mahnomen counties; central, up to southern Crow Wing and Aitkin; southwest,
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.