2016 ANNUAL REPORT

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ABOUT
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Walmart Has Gone Organic: Where Does SFA Fit In?

Changing tactics while sticking to core mission is vital in changing world

"Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his tomorrow; Nought may endure but Mutability." — Percy Bysshe Shelley

The great poets tell us that one thing we can always count on is change, and this is certainly true for the Sustainable Farming Association. Not only are we going through internal changes – leadership, technology, financial, structural – but the whole milieu of sustainable agriculture is changing as well. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, and I firmly believe that it will all turn for the better. But change is rarely easy.

SFA is at a crossroads: decisions that we make now will have a great impact on whether we will continue to be effective in the coming years. However, if we hold to our core mission and values while changing our tactics, practices and strategies, I’m confident we will continue to be relevant and thrive.

The Past
Six years ago, SFA was at a crossroads when we hired John Mesko as our second Executive Director. Under the direction of our first E.D., Mary Jo Forbord, we put some great programs in place, our structure had improved, and we were an effective influence in the state’s sustainable ag movement. But the grant money that helped to implement these changes was ending, with no new sources in site, and Mary Jo was moving on to a new position.

So, one of the primary directives to the incoming E.D. was to find new funding, and John did this in spades. He lined up a series of foundation and government grants – Adjust 2015, Pasture Project, Beginning Farmer Rancher Programs, S.A.R.E grants, McKnight Foundation – that funded some very relevant projects and increased our ability to serve our chapters and members through technology, services and staff.

In short order, the board of Directors worked with John to develop a new Strategic Plan. One of the core ideas of this plan was finding our “sweet spot”: where do we fit in the world of sustainable agriculture? What is it that sets us apart from all the other nonprofits, agencies and players in this area? And what are the strengths and resources that we can use most effectively without duplicating what others are already doing? Out of this came a refined identity as we trademarked the phrase Farmer-to-Farmer Network®, which encapsulated our core values as a grassroots, bottom-up organization that focuses on the “wisdom of the community” and works primarily at the local level.

This has served us well, and these core principles are still as relevant today.

John and the board also approved policies that enhanced our chapters – a critical component of our grassroots structure and the farmer network – one of which was that all income generated by a chapter would stay in that chapter, including all membership dues designated to a chapter. The Association also invested in significant infrastructure improvements such as a powerful combined database, unified accounting and finances, website upgrades, and new branding and logo – all of which strengthened our chapter structure at a time when it needed help.

We also created Networking Groups as a way for people of particular interests to network together regardless of what region they live in. At that time, in keeping with the policy that all chapter funds stay in the chapter accounts, it was decided that there would be no cost-share for the networking groups that were forming.

The idea was that we would get a lot more names on our mailing list (we did), and those people would be more likely to join, donate or attend an event. But the thing that really made this possible was that the grants we were working under had funds allocated to “operational costs.” But that’s another one of the changes we’re seeing: those kinds of grants are all but gone.

The Present
So, where are we now?
First off, we are in good shape. The bills are being paid, the projects are surpassing expectations, and changes in our infrastructure are proving to be a great benefit (see Jason Walker’s report). In the past three years, we’ve added three new chapters and five networking groups. Our events are successful, we have grown, and we are highly regarded.

Yes, our Executive Director has moved on, but the board has moved quickly and decisively to put an Interim E.D. in place (me) and form a Search Committee to identify a new director. As Interim Executive Director (I do not intend to seek the permanent position), my job would normally be to see to it that the day-to-day business of the organization continues uninterrupted, and to keep SFA on course until the new E.D. takes over.

But, as I’ve said, there is more going on than just a change in leadership: the entire sustainable farming/nonprofit/local foods world is changing. We’ve grown up. No longer the fair-haired child that everyone tries to help, we’re now an adult that’s being subtly told to get out of the house and get a job. I could cite several examples in the sustag/local foods community, from “peak CSA/farmers markets/food co-ops” to the changes in people’s behavior: yes, they will still shop at the co-op, but will they take another crucial step and come to a crop mob? Will they see organizations like SFA as worthy of their ongoing support?

The fashion has changed. Sustainable is more quotidian: something we just do as a lifestyle choice, not a charity that we’re going to support financially. The thinking could be described as, “Hey, I shop at the farmer’s market, and local foods seem to be in every restaurant and grocery store, so you must be doing OK.” We used to say things like, “What if even Walmart had an organic section?” Now, guess what? It does.

And the place where this sea change is most evident, at least to a nonprofit organization, is among the big funders, who started moving in a different direction – they feel like they’ve got us on our feet and we should be supporting ourselves. Government grants to nonprofits are generally a few years behind the trend, but they are starting to phase out or are going to larger organizations.

In the big picture, that’s a good thing – we’ve accomplished a lot of the mission. But how do nonprofits, which generally rely heavily on foundation and government grants, support themselves now?

So, in addition to my assumed duties as Interim director, I must also kick-start the process of moving SFA in a new direction. This was paramount on the Board of Directors’ agenda at the last meeting, along with criteria for hiring a new E.D.

The Future
As we move forward into this new sustainability landscape, what are our resources and risks?

The first risk is that we’ll run out of money. The majority of our funding comes from grants, and we have no new grants in the pipeline. As I pointed out above, the entire milieu is changing, and if we are to continue as an organization we must also change.

So, if we’re still relevant – and I believe we are and will be for a long time to come – how do we continue to be financially sustainable? We
must stay true to our core values while changing our practices and strategies to adapt to this changing world. Stated simply, we should develop "earned income" – money that we make from our own enterprises – and rely less on grant funding.

And this brings up a second risk: inaction. We must start right away: If we don’t develop more income streams, we’re could run out of cash in 12-14 months. Yes, we will continue to seek grant funding, but we should be very focused and particular about it. And, at the same time, we need to get creative about other sources of revenue.

SFA has a bevy of assets and resources available to us:

• A great board of directors
• Chapters and Networking Groups
• Dedicated members
• Successful events
• Programs that could be modified to be "profitable"
• Solid infrastructure

Plus, we are a nimble, adaptable organization: When we see an opportunity, we can quickly act on it.

If SFA’s earned income paid for at least our basic operating costs – if such income streams became more than half of our revenue – then any grant funding would be extra. I know this is possible because at least one of our sister organizations is doing it.

At the October board meeting, I gave a homework assignment to the board members: come up with an idea for SFA to generate earned income. I’m now also asking for such ideas from you, our members. Personally, I believe that we can make our events more profitable. I also think that we can redouble our efforts with individual fundraising. What is it worth to each of us to help ensure that SFA continues and thrives? Are there philanthropists who would support our cause?

Finally, I believe it’s time to reinstate the practice that Chapters (and, now, Networking Groups) share in the cost of services provided to them by the association: database, insurance, staff time, website, promotion, and so on. At the October board meeting, I submitted the core of a proposal for a cost-sharing plan, and you’ll be hearing more about this in the next few months from your Chapter Delegates and other board members.

I’m looking forward to hearing your ideas and reactions to all this. And I’m looking forward to working with our new Executive Director in the exciting and challenging times ahead.

Grassroots Growth Key to Success

Chapters need to step up and build revenue streams

SFA has long pushed the envelope on farmer-driven solutions that promote producer independence, protect soil and water quality, and build community. But have we worked ourselves out of prominence? We now find ourselves in the position where soil health and cover crops are all the buzz, everyone speaks to sustainability, and grant funding for grassroots organizations like ours seems harder to find. Seems that our success could be our downfall.

So where do we go from here? I say back to our origins: farmer to farmer networking and local grassroots collaboration. Chapters need to step up and become more effective. We need to follow the lead of successful chapters to develop revenue streams that are sustainable. An organization driven from the bottom up makes for effective change and empowering chapters to guide and lead the state level activities would be emboldening.

Strategic collaboration and partnerships with other organizations can leverage resources and foster effective change. Organizations like the Farmers Union have jumped on the soil health bandwagon, and agencies such as Natural Resources Conservation Service and local Soil and Water Conservation Districts have resolutions and programs promoting soil health. We have worked with these and other organizations and expanding these partnerships makes sense.

Choosing why and who we work with will be imperative, but deliberate collaboration on specific issues could accelerate the change we seek.

I believe we have just scratched the surface of ecological based agriculture. The agriculture world is starting to get it, but there is still much work to do. Let us be as resourceful an organization as we are with our farms, because we know it all starts with health, whether that’s soil or the balance sheet.

By Jim Chamberlin
SFA Board Chair
jchamberlin@hugllc.com

SFA Board Meeting Schedule

The Board of Directors meets four times a year: February (usually the day before the Annual Conference), April, July and October.

Be like these awesome ladies – volunteer at the SFA Annual Conference on Feb. 11, 2017! All volunteers receive a T-shirt. Sign up to volunteer at sfa-mn.org/conference.
Though he grew up in the suburbs, agriculture piqued Kent Solberg’s interest at a young age. As a freshman in a high school that served both urban and farm kids, Solberg spotted an “Introduction to Agriculture” class, and excitedly signed up.

“After the first week in class the instructor took me aside and said, ‘You’re not from the farm, are you?’ Well, the answer was no, and I was promptly kicked out of class … foolish me.”

More like foolish teacher.

Three degrees in natural resource management later, Solberg has yet to look back. He even bought his own farm: Since 2003, Solberg and his wife, Linda, have raised dairy and beef cattle, hogs, and chickens on their homestead in Wing River Township, Wadena County.

Solberg has spent his entire career doing what he loves: working with and caring for the land. That passion has taken many forms: farming; restoring native prairies; managing wildlife damage, weeds, and brush; assessing and developing habitat management plans; running his agricultural fence business of 18 years; instructing college courses; and serving as SFA Livestock & Grazing Specialist.

In his other roles as SFA’s Minnesota Dairy Initiative Coordinator and a Deep Roots Instructor, Solberg cultivates and shares knowledge supporting the sustainable practices he’s focused on throughout his career with new and seasoned farmers alike: grass-based livestock systems, pasture and grazing management, soil health, cover crops, and livestock integration. And he certainly isn’t all talk – he and his wife utilize high-density grazing, silvopasture, and multi-species cover cropping for soil health and livestock forage on their own farm.

Solberg has a down-to-earth, solutions-based approach to his work that does not go unnoticed by his colleagues. SFA Board President Jim Chamberlin notes, “He’s very pragmatic and not afraid to say that he doesn’t have the answer to every question or a solution to every problem. He also has taught me to put the focus on the goal of building soil health and not on the tools that are used to achieve it. The tools a producer uses can vary, but the effectiveness of the tool in achieving the goal of soil health should be the main consideration in decision making.”

This approach seems to be working. “A lot of the livestock producers I work with are starting to adopt the principles of soil health, such as cover crops, because they can see an immediate benefit by expanding their forage/ grazing opportunities,” said Jeff Duchene of NRCS, who has collaborated with Solberg for many years. Together, they have assisted the Crow Wing River Forage Basin Council in putting on field days and workshops to explore issues relevant to that region. “Kent has really helped with educating local producers … on the principles and utility of soil health for their operations. There definitely seems to be more and more interest among livestock producers, and I fully anticipate this momentum to keep building.”

**SFA Cornerpost | 2016-17**

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A PASSION FOR PROGRESS

‘Town Kid’ Turned Expert Farmer Kent Solberg Focuses on Solutions, Mentoring

By Katie Feterl
SFA Multimedia Intern

Solberg: To Next Page
Solberg’s genuine ability to connect with a variety of farmers and discuss sustainability has arguably made him one of the most trusted and recognizable farm leaders in the Upper Midwest. “In large part due to Kent’s work,” Chamberlin said, “SFA has made inroads into moving the needle of conventional agriculture to a more sustainable model.”

In fact, Solberg’s work is part of a quickly growing conversation in agriculture that is garnering interest from more conventional audiences. Despite his dense farm and travel schedule, Solberg took the time to share his thoughts on the work that has become both his lifestyle and an incredible asset to SFA.

Feterl: Why are sustainable farming practices so important to you?
Solberg: In high school, I began noticing not only the environmental issues associated with commodity agriculture but also the decline of rural communities. The push in the 1970s was “Get big or get out,” and smaller farms started to go away. Communities were literally closing their doors, and it became clear to me that the model was broken. I began to ask, “Is this the only way? Can we feed people and protect or enhance our natural resources? Can there be opportunities for new producers?” I began searching for other models. They had to be financially viable, productive, and protect or preferably enhance the environment. Sustainable, or maybe better described as regenerative, farming can and does accomplish all of the above.

What major steps in sustainable agriculture have you seen in your lifetime?
Managed grazing was (and still is) a biggie from the 90s. The recent focus is on soil health, although it is in danger of being watered down through co-opting of the term. Soil health is the biggest opportunity of the past 40 years to move agriculture in a more environmentally and fiscally sustainable direction – all in one package! Often the fiscal and environmental aspects of agriculture on the surface have appeared in conflict with each other. With a soil health focus, it has been clearly demonstrated that we can have both. The principles of soil health have been around for decades; however, we now have the attention of the ag press, the land grant universities, NRCS, SWCD and Extension all at the same time – a rare event. You can hardly open an ag publication in the past five years and not see at least one article on soil health, cover crops, no-till or grazing. We couldn’t pay the mainstream ag press to include articles on sustainable farming 25 years ago. This is HUGE.

What progress would you like to see? What do you think is possible?
I would like to see a truly comprehensive focus on soil health as the dominant agricultural production model. Getting the majority of producers to adopt the principles of soil health as core to their operation would resolve most of the environmental issues we in agriculture have been struggling with for the past 80 years. While there is room for advancement and fine-tuning, the science is sufficient to move this forward. The single greatest obstacle is not lack of information or that adopting soil health is hindered by finances, but the mindset and attitudes of producers. If we can move the majority to rethink their operation, it is possible to see substantial changes on the landscape. Old habits die hard, but low commodity prices and the fiscal struggles of many producers could be one of the greatest motivations for change. I would also like to see the environmental and conservation community jump on the soil health bandwagon. Some conservation organizations have (Audubon, National Wildlife Federation, Trout Unlimited), but many more have been slow in joining us.

Is there an area of agriculture that you think needs the most attention right now?
As alluded to above, the mindset of producers. Soil health means they need to think more on their own, and many are afraid to do this. They have been handed a “recipe” by agronomists for 30 years and that way of farming is all they know. Many haven’t been around livestock since they were children. Some have only been row crop producers, and now we’re asking them to include small grains, cover crops and livestock. Change is uncomfortable to most of us, so we need to have the resources available to help the early adopters of soil health principles make a successful transition. If producers would adopt the principles of soil health as quickly as they embraced precision agriculture or Roundup Ready technology, we could make huge strides in the next five years.

Kent Solberg teaches fencing skills to Deep Roots student Yvonne Baller during a hands-on Farm Skills 101 course.
Volunteer at the SFA Annual Conference on Feb. 11, 2017 – All volunteers will get a T-shirt. Sign up to volunteer at sfa-mn.org/conference.
Fundraising, Transacting Online are Ongoing Priorities

By Jason Walker
SFA Communications
Director
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The past 12 months have marked a monumental shift in SFA communications. A good portion of my past year was spent making a renewed focus on fundraising as well as finding a more efficient database system that would greatly streamline our recordkeeping. In short, a nimble, grassroots organization like SFA has to take advantage of all technology at its disposal to move toward achieving financial sustainability.

While there is no perfect system, I am confident that the changes we have implemented in 2016 will greatly benefit all aspects of our organization. And I can’t stress enough how important transacting online is to our organization – it’s like making an additional donation to SFA, and our goal should be to process no more checks under $50.

But more on that in a minute. First, let’s address the most crucial aspect to any nonprofit’s sustainability: cash donations from supporters.

Fundraising

SFA is not a government organization, and memberships and conference registrations cover a minuscule portion of our operating budget. We rely on our network of supporters to advance our mission and couldn’t exist without tax-deductible donations from people like YOU.

Please give generously to SFA, and also consider making your support of SFA public. If your friends value sustainable agriculture but also issues like clean water, humane treatment of animals, carbon sequestration, and boosting rural economies, share with them why SFA’s work is worth their financial support. Make it a goal in the next few weeks to share with just two people – either by email or Facebook – that you support SFA and why they should, too.

Anyone, at any time, can make a one-time or recurring tax-deductible donation to SFA on our homepage, www.sfa-mn.org. This method ensures the largest portion of your dollars will flow directly into SFA programming.

Why is Transacting Online important?

Transacting online is like making an additional donation to SFA. Our infrastructure allows for automation regarding nearly all SFA-related transactions, removing the potential for human error as well as onerous overhead costs. In short, writing a check costs staff time to process, record and deposit, as well as costing your time and stamp. Transacting online only costs a minimal (~3 percent) fee. Transact online and maximize your impact!

Create an Account

Ever wonder whether your SFA membership is current? Forget what upcoming SFA events for which you registered? Our website has a new login feature that can provide answers to these questions as well as many other benefits.

Create an account by clicking the login link at the upper right on our homepage. Then, once logged in, you can view your SFA membership, easily register for upcoming events, make a sustaining donation, share your support of SFA on Facebook, and much more.

Need help? Watch how-to videos at youtube.com/sfafarmer.

Membership is Now Automated

In the past, SFA used April 1 as the date around which memberships revolved. This was arbitrarily based on a tradition of memberships coming in via chapter annual meetings as well as the SFA Annual Conference; subsequently, it was not a true reflection of modern membership. Now, thanks to our savvy new database, memberships are precisely configured based on signup date. If you join SFA on Aug. 23, you are a member through Aug. 22 of the following year. Moreover, the automation removes the potential for human error as well as the aforementioned overhead costs. It’s a win-win for the entire SFA network and a milestone well worth celebrating!

Renewing With a Chapter

If you are logged in when renewing, you will notice there is not a menu choice to join a chapter. Don’t panic. Renewing members do not need to re-enter this designation; the system knows your chapter affiliation and the membership will be duly assigned and credited. If you are concerned that your chapter affiliation is not logged properly, or you wish to switch chapters, please email me at jason@sfa-mn.org.

Transact Online, On-site

At your Chapter Annual Meetings, you no longer need to take checks and try to create a handwritten list of new and renewing members (this takes a ton of staff time to process and, as one chapter recently experienced, checks can be completely lost in the mail!).

Set up a computer station at your meeting with a browser on the SFA website, and have folks join or renew online. Or, have a demonstration on how to join/renew using your smartphone.

SFA-branded templates as soon as possible, usually within two business days.

The Constituent Input page is a quick way to get new people in the database. When you host an annual meeting or event, place a signup sheet at the door with room for names and, most crucially, email addresses. Afterward, enter each attendee in this form, and they will be automatically placed on your mailing list.

All these forms can be found at the Chapter Resource Portal and Networking Group Resource Portal under “Resources” on the SFA homepage.

Whew! Yes, the last year has included a renewed focus on streamlining our operations. It seems like a lot to process, but functioning sustainably is the only way we as an organization can survive in a competitive nonprofit climate.

I want to see SFA thrive and know you do, too. Please help us take advantage of all these resources for the betterment of the organization, from the ground up.
How Farm Skills 101 Spurred Our Farm

When my partner Andy and I started SFA’s Deep Roots Farm Skills 101 in April 2015, we had 20 laying hens and 40 chicks housed in an old milking parlor. We also had three piglets on order to raise over the summer. We had no prior experience raising chickens or pigs and very little knowledge of fencing options beyond metal hog panels for pigs and old-fashioned barb wire fences for cattle.

At Farm Skills 101 we not only learned about different electric and portable fencing options, but we had hands-on experience of installing a permanent electric perimeter fence. This experience was invaluable for our farm. Today we raise pigs on pasture using two strands of polywire fencing charged by a solar energizer. We also use electric netting to protect our chickens and goats from predators.

As we had already started to raise chickens, we knew that it was important to know how to process our own chickens on the farm. Fortunately, homestead chicken processing was part of the Farm Skills curriculum. While not necessarily a pleasant experience, it is a good skill to have when laying hens or roosters need to be culled. Understanding how to butcher our own poultry has provided us some independence from having to depend 100 percent on the limited processing facilities for poultry, most of which only process chickens during a designated time of year.

After attending Farm Skills 101, we had a clearer idea of the type of farming that we wanted to do. We wanted to raise our animals on pasture with daily access to the outdoors and create a multi-species grazing system that will eventually incorporate the pasture and woodlands on our farm. The instructors of Farm Skills 101 provided us with practical knowledge of proper animal husbandry for selecting and raising healthy animals that thrive on pasture; fencing options to protect animals from predators and also to maintain animals in specified paddocks to adequately work and fertilize the land; and multi-species grazing systems in which different species work in sequence to work the land. For example, goats eat grass and other plants; pigs root up the soil; and chickens scratch the earth and eat insects. This was a very different farming method from the one that I experienced growing up on a conventional dairy farm.

What many people don’t know is that SFA’s Farm Skills 101 had such an influence on us that our farm name, GRAISE Farm, was created during this experience and derived from the lessons learned and that we now strive to achieve on our small, diverse farm. GRAISE stands for Grassfed, Raised humanely, Animals In a Sustainable Environment. Thank you, SFA, for providing this practical farming program that helped us kick start our farm!

By Tiffany Tripp
SFA Board of Directors

Pasture-raised pigs at GRAISE Farm using two strands polywire fencing and a solar energizer.

CHAPTERS & NETWORKING GROUPS: Promote yourselves at the SFA Annual Conference

1. Sign up for free table space in the main meeting room!
2. Reserve a spot to do a 30-second “infomercial” about your group in the opening session!

Email Valerie McGoldrick at mcgoldrickv@uwplatt.edu by Jan. 30, 2017.
All Signs Point To Growth in Soil Health Adoption

It’s been another year of working to move agriculture in Minnesota and the Midwest toward a more resilient and sustainable path. Much of the work boils down to working with one farmer on one particular field or issue at a time. While workshops, field days and conferences play a role in educating producers and helping shape the big picture, questions on how to apply what is learned at these events to specific situations can impede adoption. The need for one-on-one coaching and mentoring, even for experienced producers, is often critical to helping move forward with new concepts and ideas such as soil health and cover crops.

Farming with a focus on soil health is a paradigm shift for most producers (If you are new to the concepts of soil health, I encourage you to check out our website at sfa-mn.org/soil). Paradigm shifts take time; in agriculture, it takes about 20-40 years – basically a generation. In 1900, it was believed that rubber tires on farm equipment poisoned the ground. By the 1930s, much of the equipment had rubber tires. Although tractors had been around for almost 50 years, the International Harvester equipment catalog for 1949 still had horse-drawn equipment. Hybrid seed and glyphosate-resistant crops existed for a couple decades before they were fully embraced by the majority of farmers.

Educational events bring in the numbers that impress funders, but it’s often the one-on-one work that moves farmers ahead. One-on-one work with farmers at first glance seems expensive and time consuming. However, for every producer we can move ahead on adopting the practices and principles of soil health, more tend to follow. Many producers decide what they will do based on what other farmers are doing. The more champions for a specific set of practices that we can “plant” on the landscape, the more likely others in that area will adopt those practices. It’s a bit like being a Johnny Appleseed. However, in addition to planting the seed (think workshops, conferences and field days) we need to care for the seedlings to ensure they get a good start. When they are thriving, others tend to follow. Time spent one-on-one with farmers is often time well-spent.

My work as SFA Livestock and Grazing Specialist alternates between helping develop events and participating in those events, and the follow-up with individual farms seeking to move in a direction presented to them at the event. In the past year, I have been involved in the development of and/or gave presentations at 18 different events across the state including the Midwest Soil Health Summit, SFA Annual Conference and Minnesota Organic Conference. We have provided direct technical assistance to 35+ dairy farms, beef operations, crop farmers and pasture raised hogs and poultry producers. I have provided information on fence design, livestock handling facilities, forages, cover crops, pasture management, low cost milking parlors, out wintering, grass-fed beef production, animal nutrition, soil health, crop rotations, grazing season extension and basic animal husbandry. We held another sold out Deep Roots Farm Skills 101 class – where students learn by hearing, seeing and doing. Funding for much of my work comes from The Pasture Project, Minnesota Dairy Initiative, and a Beginning Farmer Rancher Development Grant.

Two SFA groups that I work closely with include the Crow Wing River Basin Forage Council and the Ecological Service Livestock Networking Group. The Forage Council continues to create educational opportunities for livestock producers to improve their operation in a manner that benefits water quality with a winter meeting in Staples, Minn., and a summer tour in central Minnesota. The Ecological Service Livestock Network works to address invasive plant issues and loss of

Healthy soil from the Grant Breitkreutz farm was on display at SFA’s summer 2016 “Dirt Rich” events in Redwood Falls. Photo courtesy Karl Hakanson.

By Kent Solberg
SFA Livestock & Grazing Specialist
kent@sfa-mn.org
Solberg on Soil: Stop Bandaging a Broken Model

By Kent Solberg

There is a theme in commodity agriculture that farmers are both unwilling and can ill afford to change practices without a substantial subsidy. This way of thinking permeates modern agriculture: bribe producers to bandage a broken production model to achieve results that benefit society. Typically, this pattern has been connected to practices such as terraces, grassed waterways or CRP where a farmer is paid to take land “out of production.” Now, public discussion has suggested subsidies are essential to adoption of some soil health practices, such as cover crop integration, into the commodity corn and soybean model.

If cover crops are considered the key tool to make the corn and soybean model more environmentally friendly, some may view their integration as something producers cannot “afford” without financial assistance – and to maintain the current model we must bribe farmers to change. But the corn and soybean production model in itself has not been “affordable” over the past three years due to low commodity prices, and there is no guarantee that prices will improve. Some have noted there will never be enough money to affect large-scale change. Plus, many in commodity agriculture incorrectly view the addition of cover crops to the corn and soybean model as the endgame for soil health.

However, when cover crops are used as tool in concert with minimizing tillage, diversifying the crop rotation and integrating livestock through managed grazing to move toward soil health, there are NUMEROUS examples of producers demonstrating profitability – most without subsidies. Implementing practices such as cover crops are not only affordable, but profitable, if placed in the context of soil health. Across the country we are seeing well-managed integrated crop and livestock operations that are consistently profitable; SFA has highlighted some of these producers since 2014 at the Midwest Soil Health Summit and will do it again Feb. 15-16, 2017, in Fergus Falls.

Many producers are reluctant to change. Sixty plus years of conservation subsidies have not addressed most of the negative issues associated with commodity grain production in it’s current form. Some have suggested that instead of propping up a broken model with more bandages, maybe it’s time the taxpayers and Congress let the risk of financial failure foster incentive for change. Because the current corn and soybean model has to adjust to remain profitable, and a true commitment to soil health can be key to its future success.

Soil Health: From Previous Page

herbivory that threaten ecological viability using livestock. Currently, they are working closely with contractors using goats to address invasive buckthorn and garlic mustard.

As I travel across the state, I see evidence of our work with soil health taking root. Despite the recent wet weather, I saw fields going into the fall green with cover crops. As encouraging as this is, there are also many miles between good examples of farmers caring for the soil. The landscape is still dominated by corn and soybeans with little other crop diversity. During seven recent hours of windshield time I did not see a single managed grazing operation once I left my driveway.

While we are making progress, there is more work to do. Will you join us in this work? Even if you are not a farmer, you can be part of this change. Will you consider a donation above and beyond your basic membership? We are in the early years of a potential revolution in agriculture – a farming system that focuses on good soil function. Unfortunately, it will not change overnight. We have traction. Let's keep soil health moving forward.

If you would like to learn more, I encourage you to attend our Annual Conference on Feb. 11, 2017, where we are planning a beginner’s session on soil health and restoration; and the Midwest Soil Health Summit, two days of advanced soil health training, set for Feb. 15-16, 2017, in Fergus Falls.

Midwest Soil Health Summit is Feb. 15-16

We have heard a consistent message after the first two Midwest Soil Health Summits – attendees keep saying it’s "the best conference I’ve ever been to.” If you’ve attended, you know why, as the level of soil health expert education is top-notch and attuned to issues farmers face in the Upper Midwest. This is ADVANCED soil health training.

Register today at www.sfa-mn.org/soil.
Soil Health at Breitkreutz Farm: Seeing is Believing

Farmer: SFA, Midwest Soil Health Summit critical to attaining sustainable goals

Grant Breitkreutz discusses the cover cropping methods his farm employs during SFA’s “Dirt Rich: Building Soil Health Experts” event Aug. 15 at his farm in Redwood Falls, Minn.

Recent recipient of the Environmental Stewardship Award from the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, Beef Magazine’s Trailblazer of 2016, Outstanding Conservationist Honoree, and Cattlemans of the Year: With credentials like these, one could assume that Grant Breitkreutz’s only reason for attending and presenting at this year’s Midwest Soil Health Summit is to show off his well-deserved medallions. Quite the contrary, Breitkreutz said the most valuable aspect of the MSHS is the space it provides for sharing ideas, learning from other farmers, and finding interesting approaches to mimic on his Stoney Creek Farm near Redwood Falls, Minn.

At Stoney Creek Farm, Grant and his wife, Dawn, practice no-till row cropping and intensive rotational grazing as well as diversified cover cropping. By late summer, their cover cropped acres are waist high and provide nutrient-dense forage for their cow/calf operation. Despite his successes, Breitkreutz still appreciates attending the MSHS to hear about the experiments tried and conclusions drawn by like-minded producers. He said it is very reassuring to hear success stories from other farmers who are trying similar cover cropping, no-till, and intensive rotational grazing systems, and he values the ongoing education that has continually nudged him in the direction of conservation.

Breitkreutz relies on SFA to obtain and chronicle on-farm monitoring data regarding water infiltration, plant nutrient density, and more. SFA has provided the Breitkreutz farm with a wealth of knowledge and guidance, which has empowered Breitkreutz and his family toward their inspiring stewardship. Because of this diligent conservation work, Stoney Creek Farm has welcomed the return of wildlife, celebrated consistent yields with lowered input costs, and raised healthier livestock.

Above and beyond all of this, Breitkreutz said the number one thing he is excited to talk about at this year’s Midwest Soil Health Summit are the amazing changes he is seeing in soil structure and the resulting improvements in water infiltration – this past summer was one of the wettest on record in western Minnesota. Entering Redwood County, it was astounding to see the deeply flooded fields, washed-out roads, and submerged crops. Surprisingly, Stoney Creek Farm’s corn stood mightily in perfectly spongy earth where water infiltration was taking place at a rate high enough for the land to drink up such massive quantities of rain.

“Seeing is believing,” Breitkreutz said, and he is anxious to show pictures from his farm where this year’s exceptional rains left far fewer pools and less muddy mess to trap his equipment than in neighboring fields where tillage has not been reduced.

So many solutions these days require more: more work, more time, more money, what have you. Importantly, Grant’s solutions toward a sustainable farming model are mostly asking for less: less tillage and fewer inputs for a more in-tune with nature approach. What’s more, this approach is very clearly working! Corn fields are not supposed to be marshes (or dry dust bowls in other climates) and, as Breitkreutz’s fields illustrate, they don’t have to be. The added root mass and organic matter produced from cover cropping encourages the return of important soil microbes, which benefit plant and animal health while also increasing the soil’s water holding capacity. Reducing tillage helps keep this microbial life alive, especially the more delicate fungal species crucial to a healthy soil food web. By putting these basic concepts into practice, Breitkreutz has significantly improved the well-being of his entire farm.

Breitkreutz said it usually takes at least three times repeating before people start catching on to new concepts or new ways of doing things. His evolution into a more sustainable farming methodology followed this general truth and he agrees that the presentations, conversations, and mentorship provided by SFA and through the Midwest Soil Health Summit could not have been more valuable in solidifying his confidence.

Additionally, through SFA, Breitkreutz has connected with The Pasture Project, which has led him into conversations and research opportunities with Dr. Allen Williams and Warren King. Overall, it is this community of like-minded people and the visible results from Grant’s own experimentation that will keep this trailblazing environmental steward motivated to further his conservation efforts.

To learn more about the great work being done by Grant and his family at Stoney Creek Farm, join them at the 2017 Midwest Soil Health Summit, where Grant will be presenting some of his conclusions from the growing season. Also, keep your eye out for a video by the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association documenting and celebrating the Breitkreutz farm for its inspiring environmental stewardship.
Networking for Soil Health in SFA Wheelhouse

As SFA Special Projects Coordinator, I am involved with two projects: The Pasture Project and The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Professional Development Project (SARE PDP). Below are updates on each of these projects and what we accomplished in 2016.

The Pasture Project
SFA is a cooperator with The Pasture Project, which received a Conservation Innovation Grant to focus on incorporating cover crops and grazing into cropping systems that continues through June 2017. The Pasture Project is progressing well, and we are working with four farmer cooperators who are incorporating cover crops:

- Grant and Dawn Breitkreutz, Redwood Falls
- Dan Tiffany, Redwood Falls
- Allen Deutz, Marshall
- Scott Haase, Blue Earth

We are measuring changes in the nutrient and biological activity in the soil with cover crops and livestock grazing as compared to farming without cover crops. The farmer cooperators are very pleased with the project and the results. In fact, one cooperator would now like to put cover crops on all his acres, and we have to encourage him to stay with the project and keep a test plot without cover crops so we all can learn more from the comparison.

Dr. Allen Williams is the lead scientist on The Pasture Project study. He has great knowledge in soil health, including integrating cover crops and livestock into farming systems, and has the ability to lead thought-provoking discussions, whether in the field or lecture settings. Dr. Williams has presented at the previous two Midwest Soil Health Summits and is scheduled again for the MSHS in Fergus Falls on Feb. 15-16, 2017.

SARE Professional Development Project
The SARE Professional Development Project, “Networking for Soil Health,” is designed to expand the number of agricultural support professionals – NRCS, SWCD, Extension, Crop Consultants, industry personnel – who are able to conduct successful soil health events for farmers. This project runs through October 2017.

The SARE-PDP project objectives are:

- Conduct a series of Train-the-Trainer events
- Promote soil health
- Create a Soil Health Events Calendar
- Maintain a Soil Health Network database
- Assemble and publish a checklist to help agricultural service professionals conduct soil health education events.

In August, we hosted two field days combined with The Pasture Project and SARE PDP, with morning sessions in restaurants and afternoons on farmer cooperators’ farms. On Aug. 16, we were in Redwood Falls with Grant and Dawn Breitkreutz; on Aug. 17, we were in Marshall at the Allen Deutz farm. At both, Dr. Williams led discussions that focused mostly on healthy soils, high nutrient value forage in cover crops, farming practices that work to promote cover crops, and market opportunities. People stayed late at both field days – a good sign that they are interested in soil health and the economic opportunities that come with it.

To encourage agriculture service professionals to attend Train-the-Trainer events, we offer scholarships with funds from the SARE-PDP that cover expenses for agriculture service professionals attending the Midwest Soil Health Summit and field days in conjunction with the Pasture Project.

We provided 29 scholarships to the 2016 Midwest Soil Health Summit, 11 scholarships to the field days in August 2016, and we already have 15 signed up for scholarships for the 2017 Summit. Recipients agree to host at least one soil health training event within the year.

SFA also hosts live Soil Health education webinars for both Train-the-Trainer events and farmers. These webinars are recorded and posted on the Soil Health Portal on the SFA website.

SFA is combining the objectives of Soil Health Promotion, Soil Health Events Calendar, and Maintain a Soil Health Network database into a series of activities. Jason Walker, our Communications Director, has created a Soil Health Portal on the SFA website where members of the Soil Health Network can register their education events the calendar. SFA then takes pre-registration fees, publicizes the event, sends the registration list to the host just prior to the event, after the event a post-evaluation survey is sent to registrants, and the summary of the evaluation is shared with the host.

Through this website the Soil Health Network grows as the participants are entered into the database, which totals over 900 people so far.

As these projects continue, SFA will host more soil health webinars, promote and evaluate soil health education events, build the Soil Health Network database, and continue to be the “go-to place” for soil health information.
Finances Solid, But More Sustainable Revenue Needed

As your volunteer Board Treasurer, I am pleased to report for a second year in a row that our organization continues to operate on a strong financial footing. The fiscal year ended June 30, 2016 and our net income for the prior twelve months was a little over $21,000. This is revenue in excess of expenses. Some of this net income was simply timing; the dollars came in before the expenses.

Revenue for the fiscal year was approximately $433,000, up slightly at three percent over the prior year. This is an important number since we planned for a decrease thinking the prior year was abnormally large. To maintain and even slightly grow our revenue is a great result. Our largest revenue source at 70 percent of total revenue includes $7,659 in membership dues which is less than 2 percent of our total revenue. Expenses for the fiscal year were $411 thousand, which are actually down about $5 thousand from the prior year. Our single largest expense item at 59 percent continues to be the total for employee salaries and contractor fees. After total personnel expenses, our second highest expense category at 18 percent continues to be direct conference and event expenses for things such as rent and food. Personnel expenses for running conferences and events are found in the various personnel lines. The remaining 23 percent of the expenses are typical operating expenses including a variety of items such as printing, mileage reimbursements and insurance.

Our Balance sheet as of June 30, 2016, showed assets of $142,000, almost all of which was dollars in the bank either waiting to be spent as we performed against our grants or dollars for various Chapters and Networking Groups. Crow River chapter had the highest balance again at $37,000 and the next two highest again are Central and Western chapters, with $8,000 and $9,000 respectively. Each Chapter and Networking Group receives an email monthly with their financial transactions and total balance.

We did change accountants earlier this calendar year. And we moved to have all our checks processed by Bill.com, which provides more accurate and speedier bill processing. We also changed our member database. During all these changes, there were several months this summer and fall where checking account balances were not available on a timely basis. All the details were correct, but it required manual work to calculate totals. This has been corrected as of October 2016 and chapters and networking groups should be getting complete reports again.

As a reminder, 100 percent of your dues goes to your chapter. If you don’t specify a chapter, the Association at the state level receives it. These numbers include all Chapter and Association level revenue and expenses combined. Lake Superior chapter is excluded because they are legally a separate nonprofit organization.

Please, please consider a donation to our Association. To be a truly sustainable organization we need to see more of our income coming from individuals and organizations that support our mission and benefit from our work.

Finally, financials for fiscal year 2016 (July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016) are available at sfa-mn.org/sfa-documents under “Recent Financial Reports.” Please feel free to contact me if you have questions or want to understand more about our organization’s financials.


Overview
Sessions (Site Visits/Hits): 59,989
Users (Unique Visitors): 41,496
Average Pages Viewed/Session: 3.89
New Visitors: 67.8%
Returning Visitors: 32.2%

How Visitors Are Viewing Site
Desktop: 60.1%
Mobile: 32.1%
Tablet: 7.8%

Most Visited Pages (not including homepage)
Garlic Festival: 16.2%
Harvest Festival: 7.4%
Annual Conference: 2.6%
Midwest Soil Health Summit: 2.5%
Deep Winter Greenhouse Tour: 2.4%
Deep Roots: 1.7%
Garlic Growers: 1.4%

Visits to Chapter Homepages
Central: 1,839
Lake Superior: 1,664
Crow River: 1,091
Lake Agassiz: 847
Southeast: 682
Cannon River: 681
Greater Mille Lacs: 540
Western: 520
East Central: 465

Visits to Group Homepages
Upper Midwest Garlic Growers: 2,940
Sustainable Sheep: 1,225
Deep Winter Producers Group: 848
Forage Council: 447
Ecological Service Livestock: 286

Geographic Breakdown of Users (Top 5 by Category)
By Metro Area
Minneapolis/St. Paul/Suburbs: 55.6%
Duluth: 9.8%
Chicago: 7.3%
Fargo, N.D.: 3.2%
Rochester: 1.7%

By State
Minnesota: 69.3%
Illinois: 7.6%
Wisconsin: 5%
California: 1.9%
Texas: 1.3%

By Metro Area
Minneapolis/St. Paul/Suburbs: 55.6%
Duluth: 9.8%
Chicago: 7.3%
Fargo, N.D.: 3.2%
Rochester: 1.7%

By State
Minnesota: 69.3%
Illinois: 7.6%
Wisconsin: 5%
California: 1.9%
Texas: 1.3%
The SFA Conference is tailored to Minnesota’s sustainable farming community. Most sessions will be “discussion format,” focusing on the wisdom and needs of the community.

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CHAPTER UPDATES

Cannon River

By Tiffany Tripp

Building our Farmer-to-Farmer Network

Getting to know each other and support one another through informal gatherings was the general focus of the 2017 Cannon River SFA Annual Chapter Meeting in March. Several new farmers have joined the Cannon River Chapter in the last couple of years; two of them hosted farm tours and potlucks this summer inviting not only to chapter members, but to new farmers wanting to learn more about beginning to farm.

In June, Graise Farm, co-operated by Tiffany Tripp and Andy Olson, hosted the first farmer-to-farmer network event of the year. During a tour of their farm, they explained how they’ve repurposed the Tripp family’s dairy farm into a diverse livestock farm. They shared how they built and incorporated chicken tractors for pasture-raising chickens and explained how they pasture-raise pigs using electric fencing to move pigs to new paddocks weekly, a skill that they learned from the SFA Farm Skills 101 Class that they attended in 2015. Fifteen people attended the event that ended included a potluck dinner.

Sogn Valley Farm owners, Dana and Karyn Jokela, hosted a farmer-to-farmer event in August. A tour of their farm showed how they’re repurposing Dana’s family farm and how they’re using cover crops to improve the soil to produce vegetables that are sold through their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares and at the St. Paul Farmers’ Market. Karyn shared her passion for native pollinator plants and explained how she has collected seed from the farm’s existing plants to re-seed native plants throughout the gardens to improve the habitat for bees and other insects.

Creating a Community One Chair at a Time

The Cannon River SFA Chapter has purchased a set of tables, chairs, and tablecloths that will be available for use among chapter SFA members for hosting events on their farms and engaging with the wider community. Details on how to check out the equipment will be communicated soon via email to chapter members and at the 2017 Cannon River SFA chapter meeting.

Cannon River SFA Communications

Cannon River SFA announce events through several forms of communication; SFA email distribution; Cannon River SFA Facebook page; Cannon River SFA Google Group. To assure you’re receiving the announcements, be sure to check Cannon River SFA as your preferred chapter when you renew your SFA membership and like our Facebook page: www.facebook.com/CannonRiverSFA.

Central

By Lisa Baker

At the Central Chapter annual meeting, we hosted a strategic planning session with Jan Joannides from Renewing the Countryside. Supported by the Initiative Foundation, we brainstormed ways the chapter can support and lead local food marketing efforts within our region and best serve our members. Ideas included farmer mentorships, hosting a farmer-buyer event, educating consumers, securing a booth at county fairs in our region, possible collaborations, and much more. The first phase of this project recently concluded and next the chapter aims to develop actionable steps we can take over the next 1-5 years. One initiative the chapter has been considering is to develop a marketing piece to advertise all of the sustainable producers who are members in our chapter. If you are interested in being part of this project, please contact the Central Chapter Coordinator at central@sfa-mn.org.

The Central Chapter members met at several farms in our region throughout the year to network with each other and learn what we are doing to farm responsibly and sustainably. The potluck meetings were hosted at Island Lake Farm in Deerwood, the Franciscan Sister of Little Falls, the Initiative Foundation in Little Falls and Stonebridge Beef in Browerville. These gatherings are an easy way to learn from one another and keep tabs through the ebbs and flows of farming seasons. In 2017, we’ll continue to meet on farms, and we’d love to find more members who would invite a group of 10-20 people over for potluck! Contact a board member or email our chapter inbox at central@sfa-mn.org if you’d like to host a meeting.

Two member farms installed keyline water management systems as a demonstration project funded by the Central Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships. Island Lake Farm in Deerwood and Bakers’ Acres in Avon showcased how berms and swales on contour...
From Previous Page

can help move water from saturated areas to drier hillsides to improve soil health and water conservation efforts. Over 100 attendees learned about the permaculture practice and implementation. The project will extend into 2017 for further development and learning opportunities.

We also sponsored the High Tunnel Conference in Verndale, a Farm-to-Institution networking event in St. Joseph, Back-to-Basics conference in Pine River, the Harvest Dinner at Sunup Ranch in Braham, a high tunnel tour of the Farm on St. Mathias in Brainerd and Foothills Orchard in Little Falls, and a field day at Redfern Gardens in Sebeka for a MN Dept. of Agriculture Sustainable Agriculture Demonstration Grant project.

Our board gained two new members this year who are active in our local food and farming community: Joe Luetmer of Local Harvest Market and Beth Berlin from U. of Minnesota Extension. We are sad to see Katie Spoden leave as she moves to Chicago. We will miss her ideas, passion and astute relationship building skills within our local food system.

We hope to see you at our annual all-member meeting in January. Watch our website and chapter newsletters for details on when and where.

Crow River

By Jerry Ford

Another Stinker

For the past 11 years, Minnesota Garlic Festival has been the flagship event for the Crow River Chapter, and one of the best yet was Aug. 12, 2016. Despite having to work around flooding at the McLeod County Fairgrounds, our team of 25 coordinators and 80+ volunteers pulled off a great day of food, fun and education.

Over 3,300 festival-goers were treated to some of the finest in locally grown foods as a host of area chefs and restaurants joined forces to produce The Great Scape Cafe, our popular pop-up restaurant. This was the last year for Cafe, our popular pop-up

program, in collaboration with Lakewinds Food Co-op’s Organic Field Fund, to help revitalize and rebuild local food processing systems which align with sustainable methods and practices, with the goal of growing the market for local farm products, while protecting the environment, strengthening our Crow River Area community, and supporting local economic health.

The Crow River Sustainable Development Grant will be launched early in 2017. Watch for announcements in the SFA Connect and on our chapter webpage, as well as on the Lakewinds Co-op website.

Another Annual Meeting

We held our Chapter Annual Meeting in Delano on the last Saturday in January, 2015. With a theme of “Recreating the Local Food System – Together” we continued this conversation from previous annual meetings.

Crow River Chapter board members outlined a plan to recreate the local food system, and we invited participants to take part in group discussions on the following topics:

- Creating mini-grant programs
- Branding the Crow River region as a local food destination
- Cultivating a newspaper/TV/media presence

Our next Annual Meeting will build on this work, and will once again be the last Saturday in January, 2017. Watch the SFA Connect and our chapter webpage for details: sfa-mn.org/crow-river.

Contact us at crowriver@sfa-mn.org, 1.844.922.5573 Ext. 705.

Sustainable Sheep

By Alethea Kenney

The Sustainable Sheep Networking group has been part of three events in 2016 in support of sustainable farming education and the new Sustainable Sheep and Fiber Community of Northern Minnesota (SSFC). In February, producers got together at the Small Scale Sustainable Sheep Farming event to learn about how animal fiber can be used to create art and fashion, more sustainable pasture management and other timely topics.

The 4H of Polk Co. partnered with SSFC to offer a 4H Fiber Fun Day for any 4H member and family and the Fosston Fiber Festival and Fashion Show in early October wrapped up the year for the SSFC and Sustainable Sheep Networking Group. Next year, in addition to those annual events, the SSFC intends to add a Beginning Shepherding workshop for early summer. Info: sustainablesheep@sfa-mn.org or fa-fm.org/sustainable-sheep/

Garlic Growers

The Garlic Growers, an SFA networking group, host summer farm tours and roundtable sessions at the SFA Annual Conference. Visit our homepage at sfa-mn.org/garlic-growers to learn more and how to find us on Facebook. Info: garlicgrowers@sfa-mn.org.
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Would you like to have solar energy lower your utility bills with sustainable energy?
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