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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Editor’s note: This article originally appeared in the March 12, 2013, edition of SFA Connect.*