Summary of Chapter Activities

December 2nd, 2017 - Annual Meeting. We had a small but productive meeting at Itasca State Park, and discussed ideas like hosting farm tours and doing online promotion of our members’ farms. The meeting also included a potluck lunch, election of board members and open discussion on defining goals and direction of our Lake Agassiz Chapter of the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota.

February 3rd, 2018 - Hydroponics 101. We organized a workshop featuring Barry Thoele, a leading expert and grower specializing in hydroponic and aquaponic production systems. Approximately 30 people attended the workshop, many of whom are hoping to implement their own hydroponic growing system. We co-sponsored this event with PartnerSHIP 4 Health and Lakes Country Service Cooperative hosted us. This was the only event that we charged non-members to attend ($10 per farm).

April 6th, 2018 - Low Tunnel Strawberry Workshop – We co-sponsored this event with the NW Regional Sustainable Development Partnership and the White Earth Food Sovereignty Initiative. Steve Poppe shared the latest research and best practices for day-neutral strawberry season extension. The event included a panel featuring Reed Olson (owner and chef from Wild Hare Bistro Bemidji), Dave Birky (owner of Ag Resource Inc in Detroit Lakes) and Tony Carter from Carter’s Red Wagon Farm in Park Rapids. This event was attended by about a dozen area growers (including growers from White Earth, Red Lake and Leech Lake Nations) and individuals representing culinary / food service professionals or other organizations. Attendees also had the chance to visit the White Earth tribal farm and food truck.

April 28th, 2018 – Perspectives of Sustainable Farming – Our chapter hosted a low key “farm talk” in at the Pelican Rapids Library, highlighting a mix of local, global, and historical perspectives on agriculture. Ryan Pesch presented about composting and soil health strategies used on his farm. Zachary Paige shared seed saving tips and stories. Abdulahi Hashi highlighted differences between sustainable farming in the midwestern US and Somalia. The event was attended by a half dozen local gardeners.

May 26th, 2018 – Plant and Seed Swap – We hosted a table at the Manna Food Co-op in Detroit Lakes to promote our chapter and facilitate the exchange of seeds and seedlings.
June 1st, 2018 – Special Edition of First Fridays at B – Our chapter sponsored an event in Moorhead in partnership with Cass Clay Food Partners and Ugly Food of the North. The purpose of the event was to gather public input about the Metropolitan Food Systems Plan (which covers the Fargo-Moorhead area and surrounding communities) as it is being revised and updated. This was a great opportunity to promote our chapter among the 60 attendees, including a mix of farmers, gardeners, and community organizers.

July 14, 2018 - Lake Agassiz Festival of Farms Nielsville & Halstad – This event featured a tour of three farms, including Happy Hogs, Happy Chicks, Happy Life (owned by chapter board member Karla Chandler), Gorgeous Goats, and Hugh’s Gardens in Halstad. The event was poorly attended due in part to insufficient planning and outreach, lack of support from the chapter board and coordinator, and bad timing.

Aug. 9, 2018 - Cover Crops & Mulching for Fertility Field Day White Earth Food Sovereignty Initiative, Mahnomen – Speakers included SFA Livestock & Grazing Specialist Kent Solberg on cover crop basics, David Manuel of Red Lake Local Food Initiative on how to care for the soil, and Vivian Wauters from the U of M, who showed research from her study of summer cover crops. Event was well attended with over 25 in attendance. Lots of engagement from the participants, though equitable engagement between the presenters was lacking. Overall a very successful event with lively conversation after the event. Many people drove up to 2 hours to attend. Some new people attended who work with soil conservation in our region.

Oct 17th, 2018 – In Defense of Land and Food Sovereignty – Fermina, an indigenous Mixteca farmer from Oaxaca, Mexico came to MState Fergus Falls Campus to speak about being part of the technical team of CEDICAM for over 14 years, promoting her experiences of soil conservation, reforestation of native trees, rainwater collection, conservation of native seeds and food production. More than five SFA members were present, as well as Sue Wika’s MState class and Fergus Falls community members. Well attended, and very good engagement. Fermina was well prepared with her presentation and it was an informative event about how indigenous people are continuing to farm with their community with no government support.

Other Activities: In addition to these events, we also held about half a dozen conference calls with board members that were organized and facilitated by Noelle Harden, chapter chair. We also distributed an e-newsletter about four times, which was put together by Noelle Harden and Kelsey Wulf (chapter treasurer). We also have begun compiling farm profiles from our board and members, three of which are currently on our chapter website. We continued to maintain our chapter website and Facebook page.

Chapter Website: https://www.sfa-mn.org/lake-agassiz/
Chapter Facebook Page: https://www.facebook.com/lakeagassizsfa/

Results from Chapter Survey

One of our major endeavors as a board this year was a survey to help our chapter understand and better address the needs and ideas of our members, and as a way to build awareness of our chapter. We asked the Lake Agassiz board, current and past chapter members, and non-member sustainable farmers in our region a list of questions to find out information about our area’s farmers. We received 25 responses. Answers, analysis, and recommendations made below.

Keep having topics presented but please have video or site sources. Many of the younger gen are at full time work and cannot make meetings during day so making it easy to access. It is such a big area to cover.

- Chapter Survey Respondent
Question: Why does sustainable agriculture matter to you?

There were many consistent themes in the responses to this open-ended question. Most hovered around a good understanding of the three legs of sustainability (Ecological, Economic, and Social). There were a significant amount of responses that were concerned particularly with the ecological aspect of sustainability, climate change, being a good role model in our current farming system and working towards a paradigm shift in how we treat our natural resources. Here are some of the quoted responses:

It’s a way to continue to learn and live according to our belief system.

I don’t like the use of chemical on the animals, crops and land.

Quality!! I don’t think you can purchase better food than you can raise yourself.

The planet’s going to die unless we figure it out. It’s an opportunity for more families to be building wealth locally and working the landscape instead of bigger equipment and robots. A technical dystopia not too far in the future.

Being a good steward of the land is of value to me. Supporting fruit and vegetable producers is good for the local economy. Local food can be higher in nutritional value.

I want to feed my family more healthy foods and teach them how to garden so they can grow their own foods.

The current system is not sustainable for long term health of the environment and nutrition health. It’s nice to be the farmer and producer and educate people about sustainable systems.

We like having locally and sustainably grown food available... for our own consumption [and] the community.

Question: Why are you interested in sustainable agriculture?

Chapter members have a variety of interests related to sustainable agriculture. Respondents to this question tended to select three or more answers to this question, since they were able to “select all that apply.”
**Tell us about your farm operation!**

We asked each respondent to describe their farming/gardening operation in a few sentences. There was a good amount of diversity of answers amongst farming operations. Most revealed that they were small scale operations, a few certified organic, a few interested in becoming more energy efficient, a good amount of farmers raising livestock (and diversity among the livestock being raised), and good amount of orchards, fruit and perennials. Two respondents work with high tunnels, a few farmers spoke about renting land or working with other people’s land. There were a few people that were gardeners, and not farming on any significant scale. One person mentioned they were interested in learning how a person can make a living with a sustainable farm without another job. Sample responses include:

*We’re a certified organic vegetable operation. We hope to continue to increase efficiency, improve soil organic matter (really a top priority the next couple of years), and improve member engagement.*

*I have an heirloom seedling-to-transplant growing operation (mostly wholesale). I keep working in more L.E.D. lights into the seedling growing. Would love to be doing some winter-greenhouse stuff.*

![I have a 1.5 commercial fruit and vegetable operation with one 30’ x 60’ high tunnel.](image)

*Diversified farm growing grass fed highland beef, market vegetables, honey and eggs. Biggest hope in the next five years is to find a partner that wants to join and eventually take over farming here.*

*We have a large garden, apple and plum trees, chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys. We want to incorporate strawberries into a portion of our land.*

*We are an environmentally friendly farm, dedicated to the raising of high quality food utilizing chemical free and naturally sustainable practices. In our retirement careers we have recovered a 40 acre feral abandoned property that we fenced, cross fenced, built all the infrastructure/building and are now raising goats, llamas and feeder pigs, along with a massive garden and of course chickens.*

*We raise sheep for their lambs and their wool. We sell the lambs off the farm to local Bosnian immigrants who butcher the lambs on the farm and take them home for weddings, birthday parties, feasts. We raise wool for hand spinners, knitters, felters, weavers and crocheters. We use herbicides only when necessary and then spot spray. We have a cover crop on our tillable land every winter. Our sheep eat our pasture grasses and our own hay. We only feed purchased feed out of our control during lambing. We try to keep our flock at about 35 ewes.*

**How have you engaged with us?**

Result: The majority of respondents have engaged with our chapter in person.

Other responses include:

- **U of M Classes**
- **Just found out about it**
- **Working with them on a panel discussion late in April**
- **None of the above**
- **Never**

![Chart showing engagement methods](image)
Have you attended other SFA events?

Result: Many people in our chapter are attending smaller-size regionally based SFA events. Nine people also attended the annual conference. Things listed in the “other” category included: ‘Farm tour, Sponsored trainings (hydroponics/strawberries), Tours, Red Lake Food Summit, Chapter Meetings.’

What do you value the most in sustainable farming related events?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Networking with farmers</th>
<th>Listening to speakers with expertise</th>
<th>Acquiring new farming skills and techniques</th>
<th>Farm tours</th>
<th>Hands-on activities</th>
<th>Opportunities to sell or purchase farm products</th>
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Which topics are you most interested in learning about?

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<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Soil health</th>
<th>Growing produce</th>
<th>Accessing markets</th>
<th>Seed saving</th>
<th>Raising livestock</th>
<th>Farm tours</th>
<th>Farm programs and policy</th>
<th>Food preservation</th>
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Significant Results: These last two are very important surveys showing what is valued most within events as well as potential topics that farmers are interested in. Most people are interested in in-person events and hearing from farmers with experience.

Upcoming workshops can be based off this result. The first four topics were significantly higher in ranking than topics 5 to 8. These would be potential topics for events in our region in the future.
What other chapter activities are you interested in?

![Chart showing interests](chart.png)

Result: People in our chapter are interested in having a stronger online presence and sharing experience as well as hosting a workshop or tour on their farm. Other category: - *Shared resources - books/tapes/videos*

How far are you willing to travel to chapter events?

![Travel preferences](travel_preferences.png)

67% of respondents are willing to travel two hours (or more) to a chapter event.

What other questions or ideas do you have for our chapter?

*Offer free membership for the first year.*

*Increase policy work helping increase a living wage for sustainable farmers.*

*Offer more promotional material for SFA events, farmer’s markets, and Co-ops.*

So I just found out about your organization recently, but more resources on grants for equipment & capacity building would be helpful.

*Offer more online videos*  
*We could do a farm financial virtual workgroup. A working group which meets quarterly or something to talk about our farm goals and get assistance on measuring our progress toward goals. Just an idea*

We're sort of at the edge of several chapters of the SFA and usually all of the activities are not convenient to attend. We're interested but very busy with our own farm. Douglas County is sort of stuck in the dark ages of corporate farming as far as I can figure out.
Key Takeaways

- Over 75% of people who answered the survey define themselves as gardeners. The vast majority (over 82%) already have an understanding of farming.
- Members have an interest in sharing information online. A significant amount of people have been using the SFA website and CONNECT.
- Top preference for our members to connect is in-person at local events traveling up to two hours or less.
- Top topics of interest include soil health, growing produce, accessing markets and seed saving.
- A few people, 12% of respondents, wrote that they do not feel like they are a good fit with SFA for various reasons, but mostly because they don’t feel like they are being heard and partly because they are suggesting ideas that might not be priority for SFA to take on.

Recommendations for 2019

- **Improve our online presence for sharing expertise in farming.** As a board, we all want to participate in having farmer profiles and share our stories through the internet. This was echoed through the results of the members in this survey on having a “stronger online presence.”

- **Continue to host in-person events** as this was the number one-way people said that they are engaged with SFA. The number two most valued is to listen to speakers with expertise, therefore having some experienced speakers at these events will be priority.

- **Set high priority to put on events** within 2 hours of our members with a focus on recommended topics from the member survey (soil health, growing produce, assessing markets and seed saving)

Other Reflections from the Board

Aside from the member survey, board members shared reflections about the chapter in preparation for the statewide SFA strategic planning that occurred in October. Here is a summary of their comments:

- Board members value the chapter for its resiliency, the people involved, networking, having friends in the chapter, and being a formal organization that puts on events.
- Challenges identified include low membership and event attendance, the large geography of the chapter and distance between members (3 hours or more in some cases)
- Board members cited climate change, small farms, local and healthy food access as key ag trends
- Monthly check-ins and co-sponsoring events are working well for our chapter
- Our chapter should start doing more focused recruitment and outreach, more communication with one another and with members, more casual get togethers at one another’s farms
- Board members pointed to advantages and challenges related to electronic communication
- Fundraising ideas included
  - Work with some of the grassroots funding campaigns in the Fargo-Moorhead area (our biggest population center in the region)
  - Round-up donations at stores. Prairie Roots does this, how about Manna?
  - Fundraising meals, either on farm or in restaurants featuring local food from members
- Board members shared ideas about connecting with the Master Gardener program for garlic production education and to learn about their models for “train-the-trainer” workshops. They also expressed support for development of a financial planning cohort and networking meeting between SFA chapter boards.