Our Collective Wisdom Fuels Plan to Boost Soil Food Web

For the past ten months, as SFA President, I’ve had a front-row seat to the innovation and strength of our organization. We’ve been involved in numerous projects, from garlic and asparagus production to pasture walks, dairy apprenticeships and soil health workshops. This list doesn’t even begin to cover the depth and breadth of the education, connection and networking resources our organization is providing to growers and communities across the state.

And what an important time for us to be doing this work. Many of you have probably been touched personally by rural stress: A recent survey found 90 percent of farmers and agribusiness professionals reported agriculture-related stress, including financial (91 percent of farmers), commodity prices (87) and weather (76). Low prices, changing climate, lack of land access, lack of market accessibility and resource availability are all part of the struggle.

SFA was born out of another time of crisis – the 1980s farm crisis, when our state lost an estimated 10,000 family farms. Some of you may have been farming through that turbulent time or perhaps you owned a small business, a seed company or an implement dealership. Maybe you were a teacher or a city leader or a farm kid like me who witnessed the people around you who were anxious, angry and scared.

I also saw networks of people come together to share their support, to voice their concern and to demand change. I grew up sitting along the back wall in their community meeting rooms (it was common to sneak in extra people around you who were anxious, angry and scared.

Today, our organization is needed more than ever. There’s no looking away and there’s no sugarcoating that agriculture and the communities it supports continue to be under siege. Our – yours and mine – history, experience, knowledge and belief in sustainable farming is the hope for our future. Our courage to have the hard conversations and our willingness to pull up a seat for neighbors is exactly what our world, our communities and our livelihood need.

Over the next year, many more opportunities will become available for you to connect with SFA, engage in big ideas and share your wisdom. Now more than ever, we are called to come together to create the solutions and drive the changes we know are possible.

At the annual conference in February, Theresa will be sharing details from SFA’s newly developed strategic plan. It reflects many voices who shared what they are witnessing in their communities and how they believe SFA can build a strong future for regenerative farming. As you will see in the plan, SFA is not only

continuing our commitment to soil health but building on our knowledge by accentuating the fifth soil health principle of integrating livestock. SFA is building capacity through new staff, programming and funding that is focused on supporting and educating producers who either want to add livestock to their enterprises or want to increase their knowledge and skills. In an age of “Beyond Meat” and the “Impossible Burger” this is a courageous commitment, perhaps even audacious. But we are ahead of the curve and know livestock are critical to building the soil food web. Just like we were nearly 10 years ago when we started the Soil Health Summit, we can and will lead on this.

You’ll also note in the plan that the SFA is committed to creating a place for people who may not have traditionally had their voices heard or their

Carlson: To next page

SFA Strategic Plan

To view the SFA Strategic Plan, members may visit sfa-mn.org/portal and enter the password “sfa” when prompted.

By Connie Carlson
SFA Board President
carl114@umn.edu

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Dial 1.844.922.5573 then the appropriate extension.

The Board of Directors meets four times a year: February (usually the day before the Annual Conference, which is Feb. 8, 2020), April, July and October.

CornerPost is published yearly and is the annual report of the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit Organization. For IRS filings, recent financial reports and other organizational records, visit sfa-mn.org/sfa-documents.

Contributions to SFA are fully tax deductible under terms of section 170 of the Internal Revenue Code. SFA’s federal tax exemption number is EIN: 41-1671893.

SFA’s mailing address is 4924 Upton Ave S, Minneapolis, MN 55410.
Carlson: Strategy Will Find Solution

From previous page

experiences shared. When you look around at our meetings, you have to admit that our organization is very pale and male, a reflection of traditional Minnesota agriculture. But agriculture is shifting as more women are entering the profession and more people of color are trying to enter. Young and emerging farmers are searching for a place to contribute, to own land and be part of the Minnesota agricultural community. As new perspectives and experiences join in the work and leadership, there will be moments of discomfort. We will need to listen with generosity and be honest about history, bias and privilege. But we know how to do this. We’ve been doing this for thirty years and, to quote Albert Einstein, “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” Imagine what we will accomplish when we honor the history and experience of people who, out of necessity and survival, have always been innovators, and give them a platform from which to share, collaborate and lead.

We have great experts coming on board, many of you know Kent, Allen, Doug, Angie, Katie – but your expertise and experience is what makes our organization strong. Whether you are a farmer nearing retirement or an emerging farmer, a culinary professional, a food co-op manager, a legislator, teacher, a parent or student, we need your ideas, your energy and commitment to building the soil web, the foundation that ties us all together.

My hope is that you take time to absorb the strategic plan and think carefully about the role you can play. I hope you bring your expertise to your chapter meetings and take your ideas to the cafes, churches, schools and business where you live and work. I hope you pull up a chair for your neighbors to listen to their experiences or sneak an extra brownie at the local potluck. I hope you add your voice to the chorus of people who are working every day to build healthy soil and healthy communities. Together, we will foster agriculture that, when done well, heals.

SFA Growing to Meet Demand for Change

Have you noticed new faces at SFA?

This year, I am happy to report that SFA has expanded our team to include two new soil health consultants and a new Development Assistant role for Katie Feterl, who you may know as SFA’s Multimedia Coordinator. In addition to keeping SFA in the social media spotlight, Katie is also focusing on membership development and online giving, which has boosted SFA’s income in a short time. The Give to the Max Day drive in November was helped by a generous new donor who matched gifts up to $6,000. WeRestored that goal thanks to Katie’s efforts and those of Jason Walker, SFA’s Communications Director. Katie will continue to help SFA become more self-sufficient – watch for new fundraising programs in the new year.

SFA’s Soil Health work now has more “boots on the ground” thanks to a two-year grant from the McKnight Foundation. Doug Voss, a grazing dairy farmer from Paynesville, has been hired in a part-time role to assist Kent Solberg, SFA’s Livestock and Grazing Specialist, on farm consultations and coaching in central and southern Minnesota.

Allen Deutz a Marshall farmer, is working part-time for SFA gathering economic data from soil health practicing farmers to help us tell a better story on costs and benefits of regenerative agriculture. Allen works with the MN Office of Soil Health on this project.

And, SFA is completing another set of Soil Health Case Studies, made possible by the SW Regional Sustainable Development Partnership (SW RSDP) and with CINRAM, the Center for Integrated Natural Resources and Agriculture Management. These programs help implement SFA’s new Strategic Plan, which responds to the changing agricultural landscape and new players such as the Minnesota Soil Health Coalition. SFA is providing more focused assistance on fencing, grazing dairies and livestock integration, serving hundreds of farmers. Reflecting this vision, a new program has been launched, “Silvopasture, Managed Woodland Grazing for Regenerative Agriculture and Oak Savanna Restoration.” Details on this program, done in cooperation with Dr. Diomy Zamora, Gary Wyatt and Jeff Jackson of the University of Minnesota Extension and Great River Greening, can be found at sfa-mn.org/silvopasture-agraforestry and will be shared at the Annual Conference on Feb. 8 in St. Joseph. A silvopasture-focused educational track will be featured at the Midwest Soil Health Summit on March 5 at the Oliver Kelly Farm near Elk River. Partnerships are paramount in SFA.

We are pleased to continue our Soil Health for Fruit and Vegetable Growers, Growing and Marketing Premium Minnesota Garlic, and the Asparagus Project. These programs are designed to provide income boosts for any farmer, using a small land base, by producing early and later-season high-value crops.

To help beginning farmers, SFA is part of the Farmland Access Hub, hosted by Renewing the Countryside, which provides “navigation” services to beginning farmers seeking land. For info, attend their presentation at the Annual Conference or visit renewingthecountryside.org/farmlandaccess.

Our programs are intended to serve chapter members throughout the state: farmers facing greater barriers to start up, conventional farmers, dairy producers and beginning growers. They are also meant to shift the paradigm of production agriculture into a regenerative system that fully manifests our idea that “Agriculture Done Well Heals.”

To change the food system, our work includes folks who work in agricultural processing and mega dairies. These people are connected to agriculture and some seek a farming opportunity to lead to greater independence and success. They are the new face of agriculture. As they make their homes in Greater Minnesota, join SFA in making a space and room for them in our farmer-to-farmer network.

The Sustainable Farming Association’s Annual Conference, set for Feb. 8, 2020, in St. Joseph, offers programming that reflects the goals of our new strategic plan.
Restoring Farm Viability Through the Soil Food Web

By Kent Solberg
Livestock & Grazing Specialist
kent@sfa-mn.org

Late planting, prevent plant acres, drowned-out crops, rutted field during harvest, low test weights, low yields, high crop moisture, low commodity prices, unable to spread manure due to wet conditions – it seems like the list of problems with the 2019 crop season just won’t end. In the agricultural press we hear people questioning if this is the “new normal.” Can anything be done?

Despite the gloom of 2019 I see signs of hope. Farmers restoring the soil food web are reporting, “the drowned-out spots are smaller.” Or, “We didn’t rut our fields up during harvest while our neighbors really struggled.” And, “I could get done this year when others couldn’t.”

Farms rebuilding the soil food web are building soil aggregates, creating soils that can handle more water and equipment traffic – and well-aggregated soil can only come from healthy soil microbial populations. Healthy soil biology requires a functioning soil food web fueled by the “liquid carbon pathway,” which requires a diverse array of living plants photosynthesizing sugar (carbon), or energy. This liquid carbon is exchanged with soil microbes for water and nutrients plants cannot access on their own. The byproducts of this synergy build soil aggregation allowing air and water to make up about 50 percent of the volume of healthy soil.

How do we restore the soil food web? By implementing the principles of soil health we build the habitat for soil biology. Only through a focus on creating this habitat can we restore soil function.

For the past 70 years agriculture has been able to operate by focusing on the chemical and physical parameters of soils. Soil biology, until recently, has received little more than a wink and a nod. However, research is opening up new insights to just how powerful the role soil biology plays in agriculture - literally driving most of the chemical and physical aspects of the soil ecosystem. Without healthy soil biology, more and more inputs (expenses) are required to produce a crop. What impact does that have to the long-term financial health of the farm?

Never before has there ever been so much information available to farmers who want to see their soils function properly. SFA offers a variety of educational and technical resources to help farmers with this transition including our Dirt Rich soil health workshops, work with dairy farms through the Minnesota Dairy Initiative, the Midwest Soil Health Summit (March 5, 2020), our Annual Conference (Feb. 8, 2020), Soil Health for Fruit and Vegetable Growers programming, and our new silvopasture work. We also have online resources on our soil health portal at sfa-mn.org/soil.

In addition to Wayne Monsen and I, we have recently added staffers Doug Voss and Allen Deutz, both of whom have extensive experience applying the principles of soil health. Doug will be assisting with technical assistance and educational opportunities for farmers; Allen is working to capture the financial benefits of soil health practices.

We continue to grow our work in soil health and revitalizing farms through your support. Help us help farmers rebuild the soil food web.

Net Income Improves SFA’s Cash Position

I want to start this Treasurer’s report the same way I did the prior two years by extending a big thank you to current members and supporters! New and renewing members combined with fundraising have kept our programs vital. These funds give your organization’s board, staff and chapters maximum flexibility in offering programs that are relevant and impactful. Please keep encouraging your friends and neighbors to join or renew and please participate in our fundraising campaigns.

SFA Financial Summary:
July 1, 2018–June 30, 2019

Income Highlights: Overall, SFA raised approximately $463,690, nearly $54,000 more than the previous year. Of this, $382,000 was raised by SFA at the state level and $82,000 by chapters. The pie charts provide a summary break-out for your review.

Expense Highlights: Total statewide expenses were $433,108 which includes $82,000 of chapter expenses and $351,108 of statewide expenses. The statewide expenses can be further broken down into program expenses of $254,00 administrative expenses of $73,000 and fundraising expenses of $24,000.

The bottom line: We ended the year with $35,582 in net income compared to a loss from the prior year. This has improved our cash position and enabled us to enter the new fiscal year with a little more breathing room. If you are an SFA member, you can access our latest fiscal year financials at sfa-mn.org/sfa-documents and enter the password “sfa.” You can also access our IRS Form 990 on that site. This is our annual ‘tax’ report to the IRS.

Finally, I want to name and thank our major funding sources: Lakewinds Cooperative and our event sponsors and exhibitors plus Otto Bremer Trust, McKnight Foundation, Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship and Compeer. Major government grants include Specialty Crop Block Grants for asparagus, another for garlic from MN Department of Agriculture (MDA), MN Dairy Initiative through MDA and the North Central Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE). Without these organizations and agencies SFA would not be able to do all the things you see in this report.

It’s been a pleasure to serve as your Treasurer for a final year. If you have questions about our financials, please feel free to contact me directly or our Executive Director Theresa Keaveny. Our contact info is on our SFA website.
**From Apprentices to Veterans, DGA Has a Program**

I would like to introduce myself as DGA/SFA’s new education coordinator for Central Minnesota. I am really excited to take on this role and am passionate about the wonderful things happening in Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship. It is important that our future generations have the training they need to be successful in agriculture.

My husband, Nate, and I along with our two children own and operate a 100-cow dairy farm by Westport, Minn. We purchased our farm from Nate’s dad in 2002. Nate is the third generation here and this farm has been grazing since it started. We have all crossbred cattle. We were certified organic in 2013 and ship our milk to Organic Valley. We have been Master Graziers in the DGA program for 4 1/2 years. We had an apprentice on our farm from April 2016-April 2018.

DGA is still actively looking for new candidates to become Master Graziers and Apprentices. In Minnesota, we currently have 28 Master Graziers, four apprentices, five graduates and four journeyworkers.

DGA has recently introduced an internship program, which is a great option for people interested in trying out agriculture for a summer or semester to see if it would be a good fit. If they choose to go ahead with the internship, their hours from the internship would transfer over.

A new DGA program aims to introduce U.S. veterans to agriculture, as many coming out of service are still looking for their next career path. DGA has added benefits to veterans who participate in the DGA program and a veterans liaison that assists veterans in navigating their path.

For more info about DGA or if you are interested in joining as a Master Grazier or Apprentice, please contact me at 320.815.9293 or angie@sfa-mn.org.

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**Annual Midwest Soil Health Summit is March 5 in Elk River**

We have heard a consistent message after the first six Midwest Soil Health Summits – attendees keep saying it’s “the best conference I’ve ever been to.” Other notable experts have stated that it is “the best soils short course in the Upper Midwest.”

If you’ve attended, you know why, as the level of expert education is top-notch and attuned to issues farmers face in the Upper Midwest. And the opportunity to network and speak directly with the leading names in soil health has proven valuable to many. Plus, the 2020 MSHS will include a separate educational track focused on silvo pasture.

The MSHS will run from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. March 5 at Oliver Kelley Farm in Elk River and includes lunch and refreshments. Cost is just $50 for SFA members and $75 nonmembers. The 2019 Soil Health Summit was completely sold out – registering now guarantees your seat at the table. Watch our website and SFA Connect for announcements about speakers, farmer panels and other conference agenda items.

Don’t miss the 2020 Midwest Soil Health Summit – register online at www.sfa-mn.org/soil or by mail using the form at right.
SARE-Funded Events Drew Hundreds

SFA has recently finished the second of two consecutive grants from NCR-SARE’s Professional Development Program on “Networking for Soil Health.” This work expanded the number of agricultural support professionals who are able to conduct successful soil health programs for farmers and other staff and to build a Soil Health Network database of people interested in soil health.

Through these two grants we held numerous education events to promote soil health: four Midwest Soil Health Summits, four Dirt Rich: Building Soil Health Experts field days, and 16 Café Chats.

With funds from the grants SFA gave out 104 scholarships for agricultural support staff to attend either a Midwest Soil Health Summit or a Dirt Rich field day. These scholarships provided registration fees, lodging, mileage, and food for the recipients to attend the event. The scholarship recipients agreed to be involved with a “downstream” soil health education event in their home areas. Over the four years there have been 65 “downstream” soil health education events in which scholarship were involved. There were over 1,000 attendees at these events, enhancing our Soil Health Network database.

Our 16 Café Chats allowed farmers and agricultural support staff to meet in a friendly spot to discuss soil health. Invited farmer speakers shared experiences, both good and bad, with working towards improving soil health on their farms. There were 208 attendees at these café chats. SFA thanks NCR-SARE for their support of promoting soil health. With the help of the two grants the SFA has become a major player in the soil health movement.

Coping With Rural Stress? Call Helpline

Need help with farm stress? Know someone showing signs of mental distress or contemplating suicide? The University of Minnesota Extension’s Farm and Rural Helpline is a free, confidential, 24/7 source for advice and resources. Extension’s rural stress task force applies programming and expertise to help families and small towns respond to current economic, environmental and societal challenges that overwhelmingly affect rural Minnesota and farming communities. Calls are answered by trained staff and volunteers. If you or someone you know is struggling with stress, anxiety, depression or suicidal thoughts — call. Sometimes it’s easier to talk to someone you don’t know.

Call: 1-833-600-2670 Ext. 1

SFA Photo Project

SFA is launching a new Rural Organizing and Leadership Development Project, designed to strengthen SFA’s farmer-to-farmer network, reduce poverty in the face of a struggling farm economy and provide support to new and transitioning farmers.

The project, funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, aims to build a multicultural community chapter of farmers, agricultural workers, rural businesspeople, educators to support sustainable agriculture and a healthy local food economy. SFA is recruiting a 30-35 hr/wk organizer based in south central-western Minnesota, where SFA presently does not have chapters.

This project also provides leadership development support to SFA chapters, and will coach community participants and SFA members to serve on boards and commissions related to sustainable agriculture, local foods, conservation and rural development.

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2020 SFA Annual Conference

Feb. 8, 2020 • Gorecki Center, College of Saint Benedict • St. Joseph, Minn.

SFA Members pay just $30 through Dec. 31 | Register below or at sfa-mn.org/conference

SFA Annual Conference Member registrations ($30 through Dec. 31; $50 through Jan. 31): ______

Nonmember registrations ($50 through Dec. 31; $60 thereafter): ______

Veggie Buds children’s programming ($10 for ages 3-12): ______ TOTAL ENCLOSED: $_____

Name(s): ____________________________

Address: _____________________________ City: __________ State: ____ Zip: _________

Email(s):______________________________

☐ My check is enclosed, payable to SFA, 4924 Upton Ave S, Minneapolis, MN 55410 Charge my: ☐ VISA ☐ MC

Card number: _______ - _______ - _______ - _______ Exp. Date _____ / _____ Card code _______

LUNCH NOT INCLUDED WITH REGISTRATION • CONFERENCE RUNS 8:30 A.M.-5 P.M. • REGISTRATION NONREFUNDABLE

SFA PHOTOGRAPHS SCENES AT THIS CONFERENCE FOR PROMOTIONAL PURPOSES; YOUR REGISTRATION ACKNOWLEDGES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO BE PHOTOGRAPHED.
**Intensive Garlic Project Continues**

By Jerry Ford  
Garlic Project Co-Director  
jerry@sfa-mn.org

In its second full year, the Minnesota Premium Garlic Project has reached dozens of new and experienced garlic growers in our state with information, training and resources to help them with this valuable crop. Adding garlic to a farm’s repertoire can provide a significant income stream and enhance the resiliency of the operation.

Funded by a USDA Specialty Crops Block Grant, this project is providing intensive workshops, classes and field days for best practices, and, with the Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, we are also offering advice and training on marketing.

In addition, six growers have been conducting field trials on several garlic cultivation practices, including planting timing, mulching, fertilization and seed treatments. As these results come in, we will compile and publish them, and there will be a roundtable session with the collaborating growers at the Annual Conference on Feb. 8, 2020, in St. Joseph.

We conducted field days in 2019 in Wadena and Finland just before harvest, and another in Two Harbors at planting time. Classes and workshops were held at the MN Organic Conference, the MN Fruit and Vegetable Growers Conference, SFA Annual Conference, and at various operations in Cloquet, Ramsey and Aitkin.

We’re excited to announce that the Department of Agriculture has funded a Phase II of the MN Premium Garlic Project in which we will continue the field trials and reach more potential growers. We’re also offering a one-on-one mentoring program starting in May, 2020.

**Asparagus Project Held 14 Events Thus Far; More Planned in 2020**

By Connie Karstens

The Growing and Marketing Minnesota Asparagus Project is an SFA effort to encourage the production and marketing of Minnesota-grown asparagus that began in November 2018. During this two-year project, the mission is to increase production of asparagus in Minnesota.

One goal of this project is to work with underserved communities. Through the asparagus survey, 60.9 percent of respondents were beginner farmers with fewer than 10 years of experience. Additionally, 65.4 percent of those surveyed were female, 4.6 percent survey respondents reported being American Indian, 14.8 percent reported being Asian or Pacific Islander, 0.9 percent reported being Hispanic or Latino and 3.6 percent reported other underserved responses.

To date, there have been 14 workshops/outreach opportunities conducted across Minnesota and one recent educational webinar. Throughout these programs, it is estimated to have reached over 260 people. Plans for the second year of this project include outreach to MN Northern Growers & Marketers Conference, MN Organic Conference, SFA Annual Conference, and at various operations in Cloquet, Ramsey and Aitkin. We’re also offering a one-on-one mentoring program starting in May, 2020.

Save the Date: Chapter Annual Meetings

**East Central** – Dec. 7, Cambridge  
**Lake Agassiz** – Jan. 11, 2020, location TBA  
**Lake Superior** – Jan. 25, Peace Church, Duluth  
**Greater Mille Lacs** – Jan. 26, Hazelton Town Hall, Aitkin  
**Cannon River** – Feb. 1, 2020, Seeds Farm, Northfield  
**Central** – Feb. 22, 2020, location TBA  
**CROW River** – March 14, 2020, Senior Center, Delano  
**Driftless** – TBA  
**Western** – TBA  

Updated info on meetings at sfa-mn.org.
Sustainable Farming Association
4924 Upton Ave S
Minneapolis, MN 55410
www.sfa-mn.org

Make a tax-deductible donation 24/7/365 at sfa-mn.org

Monthly donors provide sustainable, year-round support.
Sign up at right or online – now with bank withdrawal!

SFA is a 501(c)(3) organization; your membership is fully tax deductible.
Your gift helps SFA protect our food-producing resources – air, land, water, family farms and communities – for future generations.

Clip and mail to above address

Yes! I would like to support SFA. Here’s my membership of:

- $40 Single
- $50 Household
- $75 Supporting
- $150 Patron
- $500 Steward
- $1,000 Sustaining

Or, make a recurring donation: $_______ Monthly  Quarterly  Yearly

All are welcome to join at a lower amount if it is more affordable: $_______

Designate a chapter if you like; this is not required:
- Cannon River
- Central
- Crow River
- Driftless
- East Central
- Greater Mille Lacs
- Lake Agassiz
- Lake Superior
- Western
- Statewide

Name(s): __________________________________________________________

Address: __________________________________________________________

City: __________________________ State: _____ Zip: __________ Phone: __________

Email: ____________________________________________________________

- My check is enclosed, payable to SFA
- Charge my credit card:  VISA  MC

Card number: __________ - __________ - __________ - __________

Exp. Date _____ / _____ Card code _______ Signature _____________________________