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Abstract
These are reports from 10 Iowans who attended the 2008 20th Anniversary conference of the USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program, and what they learned at the three-day gathering in Kansas City, Missouri. All received scholarships from the Leopold Center to attend the conference. The scholarships were made possible from a gift to the Leopold Center from Chipotle Mexican Grill.

Disciplines
Agriculture
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Eric Menzel of Solon: Innovation and inspiration

The most important concept I learned at the conference was that farming cannot be done alone. I knew this going in, but I was reassured of the notion and offered many examples and possibilities for opportunities to work with others at my farming venture. Some examples of this idea came in the form of the niche meat-processing forum I attended at the pre-conference session. It is clear that meat processing is inadequate for the small-scale meat producer and it is up to those producers and innovators to take the reigns by jumping through the hoops of state and federal regulation and to make our purpose transparent in order to develop trust and respect. I am enthusiastic about the possibility of acquiring funding for my own on-farm mobile poultry-processing unit that I will be able to rent out to interested community members and otherwise provide a service for poultry growers in my area.

Another reinvigorating part of the conference was the idea of setting your own agenda. Again, I understood and agreed with this concept before attending the conference, but listening to real life examples was a positive experience. Farmers need to set their own price and gain control over the stream of production to an extent that allows them to both connect with the consumer and to reap the benefit of that exposure with more adequate price structures for their goods. CSA is a good example of this; infinite possible models for membership dues and membership involvement were discussed at one of the conference sessions. But this is just the beginning; farmers need to use their cache of being stewards of the land to bring the concept of wholesome food to people at a price they can make a decent living at.

Above these examples, the idea of innovation and practical technology were paramount at the SARE conference. I saw various examples at talks and poster sessions and hope to use some of these skills and techniques. Two concrete projects are a mobile chicken processing unit and a solar-heated greenhouse. The SARE conference given me the confidence and the information to know where to look for resources, advice, expertise, and to find the people I will need to talk to in order to get the job done.

ABOUT: He just moved to Iowa from Illinois. In addition to a new pasture poultry operation, he's also working with an established Iowa farm family.

Linda Huss of Waterloo: Marketing and organic techniques

I was pleased to be selected as one of the recipients of a farmer scholarship and I appreciate the generosity of Chipotle Mexican Grill. I learned a lot, met many interesting people, and made some good contacts. I gained information on how to market crops and other products, visiting with people who sell fresh vegetables, a dairyman who makes CowPots and generates electricity from dairy cattle manure, a couple who market both their own beef and clothing items made from their sheep, and others. I also attended lectures given by people who were either doing niche marketing themselves or were involved in the area of marketing or research. Now I know whom to contact both in
Iowa and other states if I have questions about market planning, government regulations, or other aspects of niche marketing. At all the lectures, it was good to see the issue from both a producer’s and a researcher’s point of view. Although the various producers had a variety of products, I learned about common marketing challenges and how to address them. I particularly enjoyed meeting two women who were cheesemakers, as I have long been interested in this area and am considering taking a cheesemaking course.

The other main area where I gained valuable information was organic farming techniques. Again, lectures focused on information from both researchers and producers. I found the lectures on farmscaping and building soil the organic way especially helpful. My family and I are already seeing other positive effects from my attending the conference. Before the conference, I began telling friends I would be going to the SARE Conference, which has started a dialogue about sustainable agriculture. As a result, my children and I have been asked to start a CSA, which we will try this summer with three families. Although we will not be certified organic, we will use organic practices, including those learned at the SARE Conference. My kids also will practice the niche marketing skills that I learned at the SARE conference, and experience love of the land and how agriculture can and should be sustainable. Thank you for this opportunity to learn more about sustainable agriculture. ABOUT: She lives on an 80-acre farm with corn, soybeans and hay, and hopes to start a vegetable market garden this summer.

Thank you, Leopold Center, Chipolte and the ISU Extension Sustainable Agriculture Program for funding these scholarships! I looked at this conference as the opportunity of a lifetime and a life-changing experience. We attended two of the pre conference sessions. These are my comments on the sessions. "Briefing on the UN Commission on Sustainable Development". We only stayed for the first hour, during that time I found it interesting that the USA and other countries are trying to build a dialogue of sustainable agriculture. Niche Meat Processing was the other session. My wife and I have both talked about pasture poultry and either grass fed, low grain fed or small farm raised beef. Some type of term we'd like to use for beef should we venture into that market. I think we are a year or more from that yet.

We attended the session, "Energy Efficiency and Conservation on the Farm." Since both my wife and I are conservation-minded people and with the rising costs of our inputs, we chose seminars that addressed these topics. It's hard to understand why more people aren't adopting no-till. We learned that 21 farmers in eastern Washington saved 26,000 gallons of diesel fuel on 16,000 acres. Dairy farmers also joined efforts to build a methane digester, saving $2,000 a day in electricity.

My personal highlight was the session, "Success with Renewable Energy." The two farmers using solar energy to heat their high tunnels in New Mexico and brew their own alcohol in Missouri was just great. I brought home as much as I could remember and passed it on to a vegetable grower and his son in my hometown. And I will tell everyone who will listen about the farmers who makes two-gallon batches of alcohol for his apple orchard machinery.
"Brew Your Own Biofuel" could change my life yet someday. My goal is for a group of neighbors to pool financial resources and mechanical talents and have ourselves a small efficient biodiesel plant. The speaker was a former dairy farmer from Vermont, who started in his old dairy barn then built separate facilities to make biodiesel from soybeans, canola and sunflowers. We also enjoyed the tours, exchanging ideas, seeing other farms and gathering our thoughts from this fantastic conference while riding through the Kansas countryside. **ABOUT:** They have a small, diversified operation in Grundy County. They are members of Practical Farmers of Iowa and new cooperators for the Iowa Learning Farm.

**Cindy and Vaughan Pittz of Missouri Valley:** A wonderful learning experience

**Attending the Kansas City SARE conference** was a wonderful learning experience for us. The sessions we attended covered a wide range of topics and there were sessions we wish we could have attended that had conflicting time slots. However, we had the opportunity to meet with several presenters of the sessions that we could not attend due to scheduling conflicts and that proved very profitable for us. As scholarship recipients we gratefully took advantage of the opportunity to meet with others involved in organic farming and the agri-tourism industry. The poster session was informative and we used that time to visit with people from all over the country about growing organic, sustainable agriculture practices, farm-to-farm networking and value-added farm products. We also enjoyed meeting and talking with others from Iowa about their passions and interests in sustainable agriculture. It was great to meet with them and make a connection. We have made plans to meet with several of these new friends later this summer. That was certainly a nice bonus. **ABOUT:** They operate Sawmill Hollow Organic Farms in western Iowa. They raise aronia berries, and sell the fruit as well as plant stock.

**Diane Rasmussen of Des Moines and Tom Sibbernsen of Runnells:** New to agriculture

**Our goal is to live as sustainably** and efficiently on our 60 acres as possible -- providing food for ourselves, sharing our abundance with others through the sale of produce, niche meat, and value added products, and opening our operation and home for both agritourism and ecotourism.

Agritourism and Adding Value: These were Diane's favorite seminars and she came away very excited about the possibilities and opportunities for applying them to our farm and community. She learned the importance of good signage, selecting the right farms for tourism, clustering customers for different types of tours, and marketing techniques such as using farmers markets as front-door advertising. She also gained valuable information about the resources that are available to help, such as looking into community innovation grants, SARE, Iowa Department of Commerce & Ag, and business planning classes. She plans to use the information to start an agritourism/ecotourism business for our community, and to expand our farm operation to include more varieties and larger quantities of organic vegetables and value-added products such pasta sauce & pesto in the future.
Meat Marketing/Soil Management/Energy Efficiency: Tom learned what customers consider important when buying direct from a producer (such as knowing that the animals are treated humanely), key words that customers look for in marketing, and how to reflect these in his future beef production and marketing practices. He will also be sure to showcase these values on our farm for tourists. He also learned a lot about how to apply and use cover crops in the Soil Management seminar and plans to plant rye this fall and winter graze cattle on the land.

Although the seminars and key speakers were wonderful, we truly the most value we gained from attendance was the opportunity to network and the people we met. We found everyone to be so open to sharing their own experiences and resources, and very encouraging to us to take steps to grow our future on the farm. The many talented people we met provided us with not only a wealth of new knowledge, but confidence in knowing that we are on the right track, and encouragement to grow our operations. The conference exceeded our expectations and was invaluable in our development and growth as beginning sustainable farmers. About: Tom owns approximately 60 acres near Des Moines. He is a local coffee roaster and would like to start a grassfed beef operation. Diane currently works off-farm at a non-profit organization and is planning for a future eco/agritourism operation; she aspires to sell her own pasta sauce and pesto.

Chuck Albright of Mt. Pleasant: Cover crops and no-till

Thank you for the scholarship to the 2008 SARE conference. The facility and speakers were superb. I particularly enjoyed the sessions on cover crops and no-till. I have wanted to experiment in this area for some time, and just could not seem to find the right combination of cover crop and management that appeared to have promise. After having been through the sessions, I think that hairy vetch followed by corn (both nitrogen and organic matter), and rye followed by soybeans (nitrogen scavenger and nitrogen fixer) appear to have the most promise. Now, it is just a matter of fine-tuning my management to make them work. The work that we do in this area will benefit my students at Southeastern Community College, who will have an opportunity to experiment with these methods with little personal risk. The poster sessions were very beneficial; both from an information standpoint and the opportunity to visit with the people involved and share ideas about related areas. Attending sessions that were of interest only, and not related to areas in which I teach, allowed to me an opportunity to visit with and share thoughts with presenters on sheep and goat parasites, alternative crops, CSA’s, and entrepreneurship. About: He coordinates agriculture programs at Southeastern Community College in Burlington and farms.

Phil Forbes of Kalona: Clarifying issues, getting support

The SARE conference showed me the groundswell of support to help and provide assistance to farmers. The organizations, web sites and pertinent timely research is amazing, given the lack of it 15 years ago. Much of the conference was so pertinent to what we are doing, and we plan to disseminate the information on the web and at producer meetings and mini-conferences.

Three very helpful sessions were "Niche Meat Processing," "Taking Your CSA to the Next Generation," and "Management Intensive Grazing." I work for Farmer's Creamery in Wellman and we process organic milk from almost all Amish and Mennonite dairy farmers. We are adding value to their cull dairy cows by processing them into organic hamburger. Meat processing is
critical, especially organic meat processors here in Iowa. Whereas problems that we face were not solved at this conference, it was helpful to hear the issues clarified and ways forward explored. I came away with a lot of ideas as to how to proceed. Personally, niche meat processing is one of the key ingredients to allow local, small farm operations to grow.

Grazing also is very important to these farmers, as it is mandated by organic regulations but it also helps to lower costs. The ability to manage grasses and forages is a science but also an art form. Understanding managed grazing is key, but also being able to communicate these techniques to farmers is critical. Much of what the class was based on I feel I can use in our situation. **ABOUT:** Since 1998, he has operated Moorgate Farms, which includes 60 acres devoted to organic pasture, chickens, sheep, bees and a market vegetable garden.

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**Kate Brammeier of Wilton: Marketing and cover crops**

Thank you for the scholarship to the 20th anniversary conference. In my application I indicated that I was interested in learning new marketing ideas, as well as new ideas for weed control. Both of those areas were covered in the conference and I will look forward to putting the ideas I learned about into action. I think that the most important thing I learned was the latest thinking on cover crops. **ABOUT:** She attended the conference with her husband and daughter. They have 300 acres of row crops and grassfed beef.

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**Clint Brown of Merrill: Growing vegetables in high school**

Wow! The conference was really good. I did not get too many new ideas but now I have many more places to find information that I need for my high tunnel vegetable operation. This will be my third year growing a variety of vegetables for the Sioux City and LeMars farmers markets. After my first crop of green beans three years ago, I knew I wanted to continue growing something that would have a good market. In addition to the produce, I also sell tomato and pepper plants. **ABOUT:** He is a student at LeMars Community High School. He lives with his family on a 200-acre traditional corn-soybean farm.
Brian and Julie Donaghy of Truro: The next generation

We have purchased 160 acres and we are new to farming. We want to leave the land healthy and viable for our children and their children and hope to gain an understanding of how to treat the land with not only our best interest in mind, but the best interest of future generations.

Doug and Tanya Webster of Sigourney: Learning the unexpected

The great thing about SARE is that you never know what you might learn. Just like the Practical Farmers of Iowa meetings that we have attended, you see what other folks are doing and it inspires you to change even more than you realized. SARE offers us all a lot of help with a little ingenuity and a desire to make things even better. We have a diversified farm; we raise poultry, eggs, lamb and have a CSA, market and restaurant garden, also orchard and berry fruit, grazing and wildlife habitat, all on 10 acres. We would like to become more energy and resource sufficient in our operations and want to learn more about proper stewardship of the God-given resources that we have. A trip like this is a dream, but certainly not in our farm’s budget.

ABOUT: They have a 20-member CSA and sell at the Fairfield farmers market. They are active in the Southeast Iowa Local Food System project (funded by the Leopold Center), from which they received a producer grant for several projects this. One grant goes to their son, 13, who is planting a strawberry patch; a second grant goes to their other son, 11, who is planting hazelnut, chestnut, pawpaw and persimmon trees.

Kerri Rush of Carlisle: A different kind of grower

I grow wheatgrass, something I began 11 years ago when I ordered plants and grew it on my kitchen counter. Now I have two small indoor greenhouses and sell it as juice at my Fresh Market and Café in West Des Moines. Wheatgrass is a plant that is grown from the Red Wheatberry, a special strain of wheat that produces high concentrations of chlorophyll, active enzymes, vitamins and other nutrients. Chlorophyll which makes up over 70 percent of the solid content of wheatgrass juice is the basis of all plant life, sometimes referred to as “the blood of plant life.” I have sold some of my juices at the Des Moines farmers market - it's been very popular but I just want people to know about it.

Nick and Craig Griffieon of Ankeny: Making the transition
We are trying to transition a six-generation family farm on the edge of a sprawling suburb to four siblings and would to know what the options are of making 800 acres work in this situation. Nick is 21 years old who will be finished with college in the next 18 months. My sister and her husband already live on the farm and I have two younger siblings. We already direct-market meat. I want to learn about energy savings on the farm and how organics could possibly fit. I already make biodiesel from fry oil. We are going to build a shop and would like to learn about passive solar and ways to cut energy expenses.

Donna Prizgintas of Ames: Food as art