

# The Land Stewardship



SARE Project LNC94-75

SARE Project LNC94-20

Keeping the Land and People Together

# Letter

Vol. 14, No. 5

OCT/NOV 1996

## Reflecting on What the Land Has to Teach

Farmers are showing what happens when they get off the tractor and walk the fields with open eyes and an open mind.

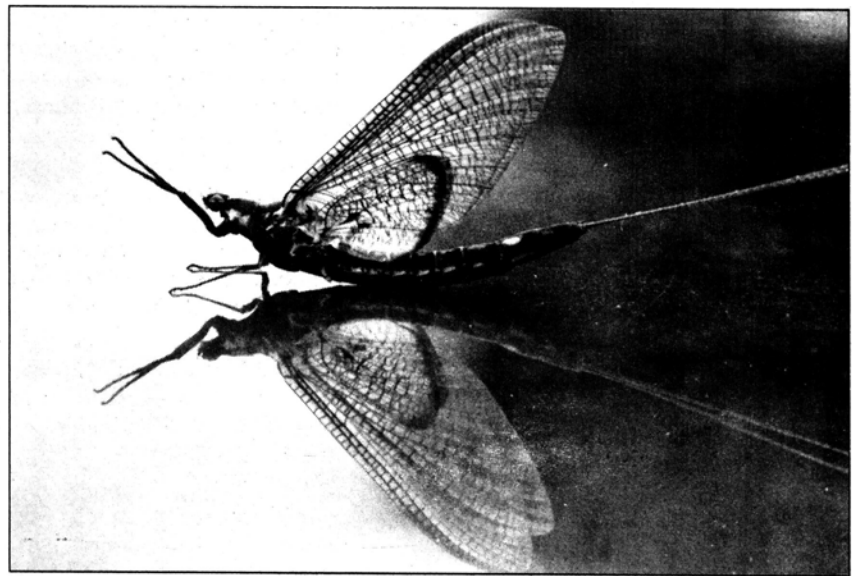
By Brian DeVore

**T**he Canada thistles on David Podoll's farm aren't looking so good these days. You see, these prickly weeds are being wracked by one disease that leaves a "rust" on the plant and another that attacks the roots. To top it off, the painted lady butterfly likes to lay its eggs in the thistle's flowering head. When the larvae hatch, they munch their way out, pretty much shredding what's left of the already ravaged host.

The result is a natural weed control system that no amount of spraying or mowing could accomplish. So what does the Fullerton, N. Dak., farmer do when he sees some Canada thistle plants in the grassy margins next to his 480 acres of small grains?

He leaves them.

Podoll explains that his thistle control program relies on a natural repository of disease and weeds. One grand, expensive, environmentally harmful weed eradication campaign might eliminate all the Canada thistles temporarily, but it would also destroy a natural source of future control. Thistle rust and the painted lady butterfly need places to overwinter. Destroying their host would be like throwing a storage container for weed killer onto the scrap heap. That's why Podoll purposely protects and encourages the establishment of ecological "edge" areas next to his fields — stands of trees, soggy sloughs, natural grass areas — that



*Sustainable farmers are learning that taking a close look at everything from how insects like this mayfly are faring to the way Holsteins munch grass can produce environmental, financial and social rewards.*

are not disturbed and thus provide a place for the Canada thistle, and its enemies, to spend the snowy months. The added benefit of this strategy is a greater diversity of wildlife, insects and plants on the farm: things that are important to the farmer.

How did Podoll ever figure out this balance between weed control and ecological protection?

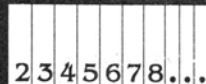
He has a simple answer: "You just watch."

### Homegrown tools

Podoll and other farmers attempting to raise food and fiber in a more environmentally and economically sustainable manner are learning that often the most

Observation, see page 9...

## Inside



A different view of profits.....	2
Jungle fever.....	4
Store drops PSF pork products...	5
Holistic gathering a success.....	6
Write USDA by Nov. 25.....	8
A real farmer is a real poet.....	12
Don't coddle farmers.....	13
Teaching kids about food.....	15

# Commentary !?!?!?

## A farmer's-eye view of profits

By Richard A. Levins

**I** was present recently when seven sustainable farmers gathered to talk about profits on their farm. Each of the farmers was grazing dairy or beef cattle in southern Minnesota. We talked about what they mean by "profits," how they measure profitability, and what planning methods have been most useful to them.

These farmers seemed as interested as any other group of farmers in making sure their operations were profitable. But as we talked, a picture of profits that went beyond dollar signs came into focus.

### What do we mean by 'profit?'

Return on assets is a common guide to financial performance, but not for these farmers. One of them said, "If money was the key to my operation, I would have sold out long ago and invested money in something else." Sure, selling out might be more profitable in the way some use the word, but there is much more to the picture for these farmers.

Each of them agreed that farm income should be enough to cover debt payments and make some progress toward getting out of debt altogether. Bills should be paid, off-farm income should be minimized, and a farmer should not be relying on inventory sales or depreciation to get by.

Maximizing income took a back seat, however, to a delicate balancing act that includes quality of life, the environment and long term goals for land and community. In this balancing act, making "enough" money was a better guide than making "as much as possible."

All of the farmers had set out specific quality of life goals. Their way of farming generally was one that should leave time for family and community. They also valued the aesthetics of farm life — country living, trees, recreation — and were willing to count these blessings as part of their "profit" from farming. One farmer said he was considering buying a neighbor's farm. Why? Not to make

money by expansion, but to protect his family's quality of life against pressure from developers.

All of the farmers had specific goals for taking care of the land they farmed. Improving soil quality, not just maintaining it, was as important as making extra money. The farmers took pride in the quality of the food they were producing and often sold it directly to customers who appreciated the difference.

And last but not least, the farmers each took a very long view of what they considered as profits. By improving soil quality and farming practices, the economic outlook for them and those who came after them would be brighter, said the farmers.

If profits are not only money, but family, environment and long-term outlook as well, how do you measure your progress? One farmer joked that his solution to this complex question was very simple. He checked his pulse once a year. If he was still alive, he must be doing something right.

On a more serious note, the farmers agreed that keeping track of certain expenses was an essential part of tracking profits. Accurate, honest figures were essential. Veterinary costs, feed costs, and custom hire costs came up often in our discussions. One of the farmers was using the computer program Quicken to track his expenses and, after one year, found the method to be not only useful but fun.

The bigger questions of measuring profit, however, were most often addressed in a more general way. Was our family able to do what it wanted to do? Was there enough money and time? Did the debt level increase? Were the bills being paid? How about inventories — were they up, or down?

If the answers to these questions were favorable, the farmers were inclined to consider the last year a profitable one. A farmer who was profitable would likely have a "gut feeling" that things were going in the right direction and that progress was being made. Some of this



*The Land Stewardship Letter* is a bimonthly publication of the Land Stewardship Project, a private, nonprofit organization. The mission of the Land Stewardship Project is to foster an ethic of stewardship for farmland, to promote sustainable agriculture and to develop sustainable communities. Members of the Land Stewardship Project receive this newsletter as a benefit. Annual membership dues are \$30.

Membership inquiries should be addressed to: Rebecca Kilde, LSP, 2200 4th St., White Bear Lake, MN 55110; tel. — (612) 653-0618; fax — 0589. All inquiries pertaining to the editorial content of the *Land Stewardship Letter* should be addressed to the editor, Brian DeVore, at the same address.

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Dale Anderson, David Andow, Robert Duban, Jim Erkel, Dan French, Dale Hennen, Paul Homme, Cheryl Miller, Ruth Murphy, Larry Olson, Charis Stenberg

### STAFF

#### Twin Cities Area Office

2200 4th St., White Bear Lake, MN 55110  
tel. — (612) 653-0618; fax — 0589

George Boody, executive director; Dana Jackson, associate director; Jennifer Potter-Andreu, Brian DeVore, Scott Elkins, Rebecca Schon Kilde, Faye Larson, Lee Ronning, Gina Scanlon, Mary Schulte, Mark Schultz,

#### Southeastern Minnesota Office

180 E. Main St., P.O. Box 130, Lewiston, MN 55952; tel. — (507) 523-3366; fax — 2729  
Fran Bockenbauer, Jodi Dansingburg, Doug Nopar

#### Western Minnesota Office

103 W. Nichols, Montevideo, MN 56265,  
tel. — (320) 269-2105; fax — 2190  
Audrey Arner, Amy Bacigalupo, Lynn Koenen, Patrick Moore, Paul Sobocinski, Paul Wymar

The LSL thanks LSP member Susan Maas, this issue's guest copy editor.



Printed on 50% recycled - 20% post consumer waste paper

Profits, see page 3...

### ...Profits, from page 2

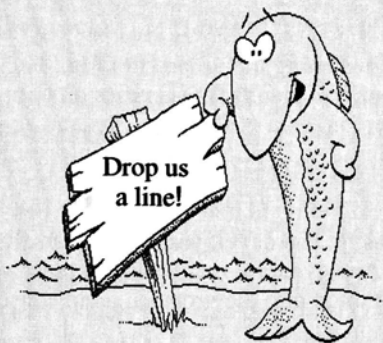
satisfaction might come from the bottom line of a conventional accounting statement, but some of it might not, too.

I came away from our talks thinking that for these farmers, what made for a profitable year was only partly dependent on any numbers I might gather. The rest depended on the individual farmers and what they were trying to make of their lives.

### Planning for profits

When it came to looking toward the future, conventional accounting tools weren't doing the job for these farmers. Some had decent sets of accounts but didn't use them in management. One farmer said his old accounting system was good for working with bankers but left him in a rut with no clues on how to keep abreast of changes in his life and in agriculture.

Looking ahead, especially with more goals than conventional profits in mind, was a challenge for all the farmers. Most had taken workshops in Holistic Management and liked the methods they learned. In Holistic Management, the farmers learned how to do "gross margin analysis" to investigate new enterprises on the basis of their potential cash flow. They



Got an opinion on land stewardship, the environment, or rural society in general? We welcome letters to the editor or commentaries. All material must be signed and include a return address and phone number. We reserve the right to edit for length and clarity.

**Contact:** Brian DeVore, Editor, *Land Stewardship Letter*, 2200 4th St., White Bear Lake, MN 55110; tele. — (612) 653-0618; fax — (612) 653-0589; Email — devo0009@gold.tc.umn.edu

also learned to think more broadly about the powerful effect cost-cutting can have on profits.

Their planning didn't stop there, however. Holistic Management also gives farmers a set of seven "testing guidelines" they can use to check the viability of new enterprises against their goals. How will family living fare under a new plan being investigated? How about land quality? Some otherwise profitable activities were eliminated on the basis of these tests. A farmer gave the renting out of some of his land as an example.

One farmer put it this way: "I am moving away from being driven by the bottom line and moving toward being driven by broader goals." Another said that "with seven testing guidelines and only one of them profit, I guess the financial bottom line is only one-seventh of my planning process." No matter how you put it, this is a group of farmers always thinking beyond the dollar bill, always looking for new ways to meet the challenges of farming, raising a family and living in a solid rural community.

### What I learned

We have to be careful when we say that "sustainable agriculture must be profitable." For economists such as myself, that might mean one thing, and for sustainable farmers that might mean something else. Conventional economics and sustainable agriculture use different languages to talk about profits.

I am reminded of something I have learned by raising a deaf child. For many years, American Sign Language was thought of by hearing people as a primitive collection of gestures. Later, when a few linguists took it seriously enough to study it, they found sign language to be rich, with a full grammar of its own. Its expressive powers were equal to, and in some ways better than, English. Hearing people know this now, but only because they accepted the possibility that their first impression of the language was wrong.

I think there might be something similar going on with profits. As long as we continue to think that accountants and university economists have everything figured out, the sustainable farmers and their attitudes about profits will never seem quite right. Rather than say "these farmers don't understand profits," most of us, myself included, might be better off saying "we don't understand profits as well as we thought we did." □

## The Meadowlark in the Morning

I.  
Not the blood in my fingers,  
not the cry in my throat,  
not all the children of Eden,  
not all the devils in Hell  
sang as loud or as long or as  
well as the yellow meadowlark  
in the morning.

II.  
Crazy wind  
come over me.  
Crazy light  
in the dew.  
Crazy farm  
at dawning,  
what will  
I do with you?

III.  
Bright feathers  
on a blue tractor.  
Silver puddle  
by the barn.  
I never know  
what I'm doing.  
I never know  
the harm.

Still  
I open, like you,  
every morning,  
without a thought,  
without a plan,  
catching as catch can,  
hearing music  
in this land  
we are made of.

*From Nishnabotna, by Michael Carey. Reprinted by permission of Mid-Prairie Books, Parkersburg, Iowa (see review on page 12).*

*Richard Levins is an extension economist at the University of Minnesota and the author of the Land Stewardship Project publication, Monitoring Sustainable Agriculture with Conventional Financial Data. For information on ordering this publication, see page 14.*

## News Briefs



### Udder failure

Posilac, the first genetically engineered bovine growth hormone to be approved for sale to dairy farmers, isn't exactly burning up Wall Street.

After two years on the market, the milk production enhancer is being used on 10 percent of the nation's 9.4 million dairy cows, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, when chemical giant Monsanto Co. started selling Posilac, some securities analysts predicted that eventually up to 70 percent of U.S. milk would come from cows injected with genetically engineered bovine growth hormone, also known as transgenic bovine somatotropin.

However, government officials say the amount of milk being produced with the help of the hormone appears to be dropping. Farmers complain that Posilac adds to their feed costs and interferes with traditional breeding routines, according to the newspaper. □

### Follow the soil south

"They aren't making any more of it" goes the old saw about the need to conserve soil in this country. Maybe not, but farmers with money, wanderlust and a short ecological memory can sure find some "new" soil to plow once they've worn out the turf back home. Farm magazines are entertaining their readers with tales of American farmers who are striking out to break sod in the agricultural frontier of South America's jungles.

Dawn, Mo., farmer Art Hughes recently visited Bolivia, and is ecstatic over the possibilities it offers for producing cheap crops and livestock for "global trade." In a *Successful Farming* article, he pointed out that the first step to farming in a place like Bolivia is to round up some bulldozers: "Land clearing companies have fleets of Cats, and clear land for a flat rate of \$200-\$300 per hectare (2.47 acres). The cost is determined by the size of the timber. ... Clearing will consist of two Cat D-8s dragging an anchor chain between them that takes a 50-foot swath while dragging down the brush. D-6s windrow the brush to be burned." □

### Maybe consumers know enough

A nationwide public relations campaign aimed at putting a polish on the image of agribusiness has been canceled.

The Agriculture Council of America had plans to kick off an advertising campaign this fall that would attempt to "educate" consumers about food quality and safety (see Sept. 1996 LSL). Surveys have shown that consumers view agribusiness in a negative light, especially when it comes to its environmental track record, but have a generally positive view of food producers. Officials with the Agriculture Council, which represents the agribusiness community, felt that a campaign that presented farmers as "partners" with agri-industrial firms would make for good public relations.

The campaign was under development for more than three years, and half of the \$1 million needed for test marketing had been raised when its cancellation was abruptly announced. The Agriculture Council's board of directors voted to nix the effort out of concern that there was not enough "industry support" available, according to *Feedstuffs* magazine. □

### Diversified cropping rakes in the cash

Diversified systems which rely on few inputs were more profitable than a high-input continuous corn system being tested in a Wisconsin study. The Wisconsin Integrated Cropping Systems Trial study involved a four-year economic analysis of three cash grain cropping systems: continuous corn, corn-soybeans, and corn soybeans-wheat/red clover, according to *Sustainable Agriculture*, a newsletter published by the Minnesota Extension Service.

For continuous corn, the gross profit margin was \$151 per acre between 1991 and 1995. The gross margin was \$204 for corn-soybeans and \$195 for corn-soybeans-wheat/red clover.

In the corn-soybean system, the corn

was no-till planted every year with a starter fertilizer. Pests were controlled with standard agricultural chemicals.

The corn-soybean-wheat/red clover system used no commercial fertilizer, no insecticides and only spot spraying of Canada thistle and one emergency rescue treatment of herbicides in the soybeans. Corn and soybeans were rotary hoed and cultivated under that system. □

### A sprawl checker?

A new proposal for allowing Minnesota's Twin Cities to grow into the next century in a sustainable manner is packed full of ambitious goals and strong language about balancing development with conservation. But it lacks specific tools for reaching those noble ends.

This fall, the Metropolitan Council unveiled a plan that would open nearly 200,000 acres to suburban development between now and 2040. The Regional Growth Management Strategy would make land available for development by extending sewer service in stages, thus producing gradual growth in the area. It's hoped this would slow growth down enough to allow communities to deal with the effects of new development.

Projections show that 650,000 people will be added to the region's population within the next 25 years. The Metropolitan Council proposes accommodating that growth through such measures as building houses closer together and redeveloping the urban core. But the Council's plan lacks specifics on how to overcome the obstacles — tax and zoning policy, the Council's lack of enforcement power and negative perceptions about urban living, to name a few — to denser housing and development of urban areas.

And even if concrete action plans were instituted into the proposal, land conservation advocates point out that the Metropolitan Council only has jurisdiction over seven counties. People are commuting from 70 miles or more away, making the true metro sprawl area at least 13 counties large (including counties in Wisconsin). Without a statewide land-use framework, a large part of southeast Minnesota will remain threatened by Twin Cities sprawl, say land use experts.

Public comment will be taken on the plan until the Metropolitan Council votes on it Dec. 30 (see calendar on page 16 for dates and locations of public hearings). The Minnesota Legislature would then vote on funding for implementation of the plan during the 1997 session. □



## Grocery chain drops Premium Standard

Citing concerns about the environmental and social damage resulting from the production of Premium Standard Farms' pork products, a Midwestern supermarket chain has dropped the line from its 18 stores in Wisconsin and Minnesota. The decision took effect Oct. 6.

Hudson, Wis.-based Erickson's Diversified Corporation stopped carrying Premium Standard's products after farmers and consumers representing the Land Stewardship Project (LSP) and the Missouri Rural Crisis Center talked to store officials about the mega-hog operation's record as a corporate citizen in Missouri. Both LSP and Missouri Rural Crisis are member organizations of the Campaign for Family Farms and the Environment, a national effort to stop the spread of factory hog production.

During the past two years, documented manure spills originating from Premium Standard facilities have polluted more than 12 miles of Missouri's waterways and killed 180,000 fish. In addition, Premium Standard sued Lincoln Township, Mo., when officials there tried to enforce local zoning rules pertaining to the 100,000 hogs the corporation raises in the township. Premium Standard's original lawsuit called for the township of a few hundred people to pay \$7.9 million in damages on the basis that the Princeton, Mo.-based hog giant's property rights would be illegally taken by the zoning rules. The monetary portion of the lawsuit has been dropped. Premium Standard, the nation's fifth largest pork producer, filed for Chapter 11 financial reorganization in July despite huge infusions of Wall Street cash.

In announcing the dropping of Premium Standard's product line, store officials reiterated that they were willing to work with family farmers who were raising pork in an environmentally sound, humane manner. Erickson's Diversified Corporation's holdings include stores under the names Erickson's, More 4, Econofoods and Food Bonanza. □



*Clean Up our River Environment (CURE) members (l to r) Tom Chervenky and Terry VanDerPol, along with LSP intern Amy Bacigalupo, work on a cedar strip canoe. CURE is selling raffle tickets for the canoe until April. For information, contact LSP's western Minnesota office at (320) 269-2105. (photo by Patrick J. Moore)*

## Farmland protection receives a big boost

An innovative proposal for permanently protecting farms and open land in the Twin Cities region is one step closer to reality. The Land Stewardship Project has received initial approval for a \$500,000 grant to develop a pilot land preservation project that would serve as a model for the rest of the state.

The grant would go toward developing a green corridor of undeveloped land through Washington and Chisago counties, two areas threatened by sprawling development. Approximately 10,000 acres of land would be protected through the use of such tools as voluntary

conservation easements, purchase and transfer of development rights, and land acquisition.

LSP's 1000 Friends of Minnesota program will lead the collaborative effort to set up the corridor. Working with LSP on the proposed project is Washington County, Minnesota Farmers Union, the Minnesota Land Trust, the Trust for Public Land and the Committee to Preserve Chisago County's Rural Values.

The dispersal of the \$500,000 grant is contingent upon the state Legislature and Gov. Arne Carlson approving a larger Legislative Commission on Minnesota

Resources (LCMR) package in 1997. For more information on how to support the passage of this package, call LSP's Lee Ronning at (612) 653-0618. □



*Joann Burt stands outside the chicken processing facility being built on her family's farm near Utica, Minn. LSP members and other local farmers are hoping to use the facility to gain access to grocery stores and other retail markets. For information on the Southeast Minnesota Alternative Markets Group, call LSP at (507) 523-3366.*

## LSP hosts Holistic Mgt. gathering

By Audrey Arner

For two days in August, the Land Stewardship Project hosted the Center for Holistic Management's Annual Gathering. Sharing the wealth of their knowledge, experience and inspiration, 140 holistic managers from across this continent (plus an Australian) came together in and around Rochester, Minn.

A day of workshops included an introduction to Holistic Management decision making, methods for using the testing guidelines, grazing planning and monitoring. These workshops featured veteran Holistic Management educators such as Ed Martsof of Arkansas, Don Nelson and Jeff Goebel of Washington, Miles Keogh from Colorado and, finally, Holistic Management founder Allan Savory.

On the second day, participants were taken on a tour by members of the Monitoring Team, which is organized and administered by LSP in association with the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture and Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota.

"Earth Be Glad," the hilly farm home of Mike, Jennifer and Johanna Rupprecht of Lewiston provided a backdrop for



Soil scientist Jay Dorsey demonstrates a simple tool for monitoring sustainability during a field trip at the Holistic Management Annual Gathering. (photo by Jodi Dansingburg)

discussing goal-setting. Their holistic goal included an expression of their desired quality of life, an identification of their forms of production and a description of their future landscape.

Sharing their goal aloud was a prelude to discussions about ecological problems in southeastern Minnesota, using birds as indicators of the land's health, and farmer-friendly means of monitoring changes in soil quality.

Fellow Minnesota farmers Muriel and Dan French also shared their goals during a tour of their operation. They then joined other Monitoring Team members in

conveying their experience with the monitoring methods for quality of life, stream bank management and profitability.

Charis and Mark Stenberg's family and friends prepared for months in advance to design an end-of-the-trail celebration at their farm home near Pine Island. □

Audrey Arner directs LSP's Holistic Management education program. For information on winter courses, call her at (320) 269-2105.

## New LSP staff

**Scott Elkins** has joined the Land Stewardship Project's 1000 Friends of Minnesota program as an organizer. Elkins has worked with the Minnesota Public Interest Research Group and the Fund for Public Interest Research. He has a psychology degree from Trinity University and a master's degree in social psychology from the University of Minnesota.

Elkins is based in White Bear Lake.



Scott Elkins

**Jennifer Potter-Andreu** is a new intern with the 1000 Friends program. She is pursuing a bachelor of arts degree in geography and anthropology at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn. She has conducted research on the environmental impact of a 1996 zoning ordinance in Isanti County, Minn., and recently served an internship with the Minnesota Land Trust. Potter-Andreu also taught English and did health work in Brazil.



Jennifer Potter-Andreu

**Amy Bacigalupo** and **Paul Wymar** are the new interns in LSP's western Minnesota office. Both are completing work on master's degrees in forestry at the University of Minnesota. They have worked extensively on ecological forestry issues and hold biology degrees. They will be working with LSP's Chippewa River Basin Interdisciplinary Team, based in Montevideo.



Paul Wymar & Amy Bacigalupo



Update

West

## Western Minnesota at its best

By Patrick J. Moore

Of all the seasons in the year, fall is the best time to experience western Minnesota. There is nothing quite like the clear blue sky of the prairie to serve as a backdrop for the yellow and brown fields, the gray geese and the brilliant colors of cottonwoods and maples that line the river valleys.

Recently, the Land Stewardship Project's Montevideo office has organized several events designed to take advantage of this beautiful autumn weather. In early September, Clean Up our River Environment (CURE) sponsored a field trip to the Calcareous Fens of the Minnesota River Valley. Guiding us on this unusual and enlightening tour was Wayne Ostlie, science director of the Nature Conservancy's Midwest office. On this trip we learned that the upper portion of the Minnesota River valley from Watson to Ortonville is considered to be one the largest intact eco-regions in

the entire United States. According to Ostlie, this area provides a wildlife corridor where deer, waterfowl and other wildlife can roam uninterrupted for more than 50 miles — a landscape feature that's becoming increasingly rare in this overdeveloped world of ours.

Later in the month, CURE co-sponsored a field day on board member Dennis Gibson's farm, where we learned of his experiment to establish "blind field tile intakes" designed to minimize the amount of sediment entering the Minnesota River. Dennis is working with University of Minnesota researchers and extension agents to document the efficacy of this approach to maximizing agricultural production while minimizing environmental impacts.

Looking for this middle ground between agricultural productivity and environmental integrity is also the charge of the newly formed Chippewa River Basin Interdisciplinary Team ("I Team" for short).

October was the month of the annual Minnesota River Revival. For the fifth year in a row, CURE and LSP sponsored this celebration of the river's beauty and heritage with music, food, story telling, artwork and canoe rides. More than 250 people gathered on a chilly Sunday to take in the sights and to get their first taste of "Screaming Walleye" beer, which has just been released by Schell's Brewing Company of New Ulm, Minn., to benefit the river clean up movement.

Cub Scout Packs 142 and 292 from Montevideo have also joined in the movement by tackling trash on the Chippewa River. During one October outing, more than 30 scouts and their parents hauled three pickup loads of trash from an old dump site on the river.

In their spare time, CURE members are building a cedar strip canoe in board member John White's garage to raffle off as a fund-raiser in the spring of 1997 (see photo, page 5).

As you can see, when the air gets chilly, we get busy out here. As the CURE motto goes: "The river may be dirty now, but it's getting cleaner every day." And we're having a whole lot of fun building community every day. □

*Although he may sound like it at times, LSP organizer Patrick J. Moore is not on the payroll of western Minnesota's tourism industry.*

Update

We the People...

Policy

## Opportunity knocks, LSP answers

By Brad DeVries

The 1996 Farm Bill, with its shrinking safety net and expansion of planting flexibility, offers sustainable agriculture advocates both daunting challenges and exciting opportunities.

We have complained long and loud that commodity programs discouraged economically and environmentally beneficial diversity in farming operations, and we were right. Now that those restrictions are supposedly disappearing, we have the intimidating, but exhilarating, opportunity to demonstrate to farmers and others the economic and environmental benefits sustainable practices can have when the distorting effects of commodity price supports

aren't present.

A grant from the Joyce Foundation will enable the Land Stewardship Project to take on this challenge over the next two years through the new "Flexibility Outreach Project." At its core, the Outreach Project is about enhancing communication, in particular reaching audiences that haven't yet considered the advantages of sustainable agriculture. It's about making certain that farmers are aware of the innovative production practices and management strategies their neighbors are using, and passing on timely information about changes and opportunities in conservation programs. The project will send information the other direction as well, keeping policy makers and U.S. Department of Agricul-

ture field personnel up to date on what on-farm conservation methods are working; and which aren't. This project will network with nonprofit organizations and citizens throughout the Midwest and Great Lakes region.

We will design a guide to sustainable practices and conservation programs to help farmers make decisions that enhance their stewardship of the land and protect the viability of their farms in an era of shrinking federal farm supports. We also will work with the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation on networking with groups and active individuals throughout the region to share ideas for building a sustainable agriculture movement in the era of "Freedom to Farm."

Feel free to call me at (202) 547-5754 if you have any questions or ideas about this exciting initiative. □

*Despite his many years of working in our nation's capital, LSP staffer Brad DeVries is not a bitter and cynical person.*

# It keeps going & going ...

## Conservation in the new Farm Bill is still being modified

By Brad DeVries

It's a pity that most people seem to think the fun was over when President Clinton signed the 1996 Farm Bill into law back in April. In reality, there are still plenty of twists and turns and dark intrigues in store as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) writes the final regulations to implement the law that Congress passed.

Some of the most interesting machinations have occurred around environmental programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

### EQIP

The issue of herd size limits for EQIP cost-share assistance has enough plot surprises to make a John Grisham novel look tepid and predictable.

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition won a partial victory on the issue back when Congressional conference committees were hammering out the details of the Farm Bill. The program forbids cost-share funds for the establishment of manure management systems from going to "large confined livestock operations." However, the term "large confined livestock operations" is maddeningly undefined. The House version had no herd size limits, while the Senate adopted an amendment by Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa that limited cost-share assistance to operations that are below the Clean Water Act thresholds. Those figures — 1,000 beef cattle, 2,500 hogs, 700 dairy cows, 100,000 chickens — are still in the stratosphere, but they are, at least, limits. The final Farm Bill was sans the Senate caps, but settled on language that made it very clear the USDA was to develop regulations that set limits based on the Clean Water Act and other factors.

Under strong pressure from several of the national livestock commodity groups and key members of Congress, USDA staff looked at the tough choices they faced, and hurriedly hoisted a white flag of surrender. When the draft rule came out on October 11, the Department decreed that, instead of a single national standard, every state will be required to

come up with its definition of what constitutes a "large confined livestock operation."

If the regulation goes through like this, it's safe to assume that states that have huge factory farms already, or states where they are planned, will end up with essentially meaningless herd size limits, and your tax dollars will be hard at work installing mega-manure lagoons (the favored "manure management system" for livestock factories) as fast as the USDA can cut the checks. This legislation, through its offer of an open-ended subsidy to large livestock factories, will accelerate the manure lagoon chasing states are engaged in under the auspices of "economic development."

Senators Harkin, Tom Daschle, Patrick Leahy, Paul Wellstone, Herb Kohl and Russ Feingold sent a strongly-worded

### Let's fix EQIP!

Public comment will be taken on the new EQIP rule until Nov. 25. Contact the USDA and tell it that it is imperative that strict, nationwide limits be placed on the size of livestock operations that can receive cost share funds for manure management facilities. Send all comments on EQIP to: Lloyd Wright, Natural Resources Conservation Service, PO Box 2890, Washington, D.C. 20013-2890.

letter to USDA Secretary Dan Glickman, intended to stiffen his resolve and remind the agency just what was in the actual Farm Bill. The National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture and the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition issued a press release critical of Glickman's failure to mandate concrete EQIP guidelines. LSP and the Campaign for Family Farms and the Environment confronted the Secretary on the issue at the Farm Aid Agriculture Town Meeting in Columbia, S.C., in October. These and other efforts are shining a very public light on EQIP's shortcomings. Hopefully, this scrutiny will bring about meaningful herd size limits.

### Conservation Reserve Program

Much to our surprise, CRP moved off the back burner in early September after the USDA indicated the long-term rule for the program would not emerge until late this year or early in 1997. The popular CRP program pays landowners to keep land in permanent vegetative cover for 10 years at a stretch. It's been a powerful tool for cutting erosion, protecting water and providing habitat for wildlife. In late August, the Department published its draft "Interim Rule" on CRP, which mainly dealt with the stipulations of getting out of the setaside contracts early. Fortunately, the USDA made it clear "early-out" would not be available for CRP land in filter strips, grass waterways, riparian areas, field windbreaks, shelter belts, shallow water areas, land prone to extreme erosion, and other areas of high environmental value as determined by the Secretary.

These criteria popped up again just two weeks later in a USDA announcement that certain high-priority land would be eligible for enrollment at any time, without waiting for a formal sign-up period.

This program, which the USDA can implement on its own without a formal comment or rule-making process, is long overdue, but has a few glaring omissions. Contour grass strips failed to make the continuous sign-up list, despite the tremendous erosion-stopping benefits these structures can have in row-crop fields.

An important priority for the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition this fall has been to urge the USDA to promote the use of contour grass strips on CRP land. The Coalition is also exploring options that would allow limited, planned haying and grazing under rules that protect conservation values, in exchange for lower CRP payments. □

*Brad DeVries is a LSP staff member based in Washington, D.C., where he works as the media and public information coordinator for the Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Working Group. He also works with the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, and the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture.*





**...Observation, from page 1**

valuable help is not available through extension agents, how-to manuals, input suppliers or any of the other conventional sources of agricultural production information. Instead, they are increasingly relying on their own senses to gather the data needed to make sustainable farming decisions. Physically, these farmers may not be any more eagle-eyed than their neighbors. In a sense, it may be what these sustainable farmers *lack* that sets them apart. One top rate sustainable farmer and self-described land watcher says the key behind good observation is to look at something without allowing preconceived notions to interfere. It's not just looking at the land in a different light, it's looking at it in a *clear* light unadulterated by the past, feelings of inevitability and quick-fix silver bullets. What many of these farmers are discovering is that the next step after observation is accepting that natural processes work best when undisturbed. The result can be farms that are ecological treasures, as well as generators of a good standard of living.

Here are the stories of a handful of farmers from around the country who have made personal observation an invaluable field implement.

**Bug patrol**

When one considers the myriad of insects buzzing around any typical farm, it can be overwhelming. But taking a closer look at just a few of these flying and creeping creatures can reveal an intricate system of checks and balances.

For example, several years ago Frank Morton was taking some "pretty garden photos" when he snapped a bald faced hornet dangling from a plant by its hind legs, chewing on the head of a fly. That prompted Morton, who raises commercial salad greens with his wife Karen near Philomath, Ore., to note the toll hornets and yellow jackets were taking on the bane of gardeners: aphids, flies and caterpillars. Through further observation, he realized that for every, say, seven insects he'd see on a plant, four of them were there simply to feed on the three pest species. This fits in well with the Mortons' farming philosophy, which is based on a Japanese wild gardening concept that works with natural processes as much as possible. Frank estimates that there are 200 species of plants in the garden at any one time — the Mortons

planted perhaps half of those themselves.

"Now our attitude is, if you don't know what it is, you don't kill it, you watch it," says Frank. "Any gardening book is going to tell you if you have a plant covered by aphids, yank it out and put it in the compost pile. That's not what I do. I look for what's attracted to the aphids."

What the Mortons have discovered on the highly productive two acres they farm is that in a balanced system, beneficial insects will keep the pests in check. But such a balance is not easy to obtain. It requires plantings that attract beneficial insects, leaving naturally occurring beneficial insect habitat alone. And perhaps most importantly, it means realizing that no pests at all may be bad news for long term control of their populations as the beneficial insects run out of food and experience a population crash.

"You must have the pest to have the predator," says Frank. "I get nervous if I don't see any pests."

**Texas toads tell a tale**

For the Mortons, the mere presence of great varieties of insects tell them they are managing for economic and environmental sustainability. When Paula Anderson sees even one horned lizard on her Levelland, Tex., cotton operation, that's a sign the chemical-free operation is on the right track. Horned lizards, also called horned toads, are becoming rare in Texas; so rare that a TV commercial featuring people holding the half-foot long reptiles was canceled out of fear it would encourage lizard grabbing. Scientists believe chemical poisoning may be one reason these spiny-skinned ant eaters are so threatened with extinction. Cotton is one of the heaviest users of agricultural chemicals around. The infamous boll weevil lays eggs in the cotton plant's boll and makes quick work of it. There are pesticides available that can, in turn, put the boll weevil in a world of hurt. However, Anderson, who farms with her husband Ronnie, says the weevil seals itself inside the boll, making it difficult for the spray to infiltrate. As a result, it takes several passes of the airplane to do the job.

"Last year boll weevil eradication amounted to spraying as often as every 10 days," she recalls, noting that the cotton-growing season in her part of the country is almost five months long.

Anderson, who also works as an

extension agent, says there are cotton fields so saturated with chemicals that she won't step in them during the growing/spraying season. But when she does, she sees few horned toads or beneficial insects such as ladybugs, praying mantises, lacewings or certain types of spiders.

By the end of the growing season, a new chemical makes an appearance: a defoliate that removes the cotton plants' leaves, making harvest possible. Anderson says she's noticed that as soon as one field is defoliated, all the insect pests high-tail it to fields that are still green with foliage, making them prime targets for infestations.

What farmers are finding in her area is that often the secondary pest infestations, caused by the destruction of beneficial, predatory insects through spraying, cause more damage than the pest the farmer originally sprayed for.

As a result, the Andersons do what they can to encourage the presence of beneficial insects. They use crop rotations to produce a more diverse habitat and when necessary import beneficial predators such as certain types of wasps that only feed on specific pest species. They also wait until the first freeze of the fall has killed the cotton foliage, thus eliminating the need for a chemical defoliate.

Anderson says their 177 acres of certified organic cotton now has at its base a natural pest defense system. It's also home to an ugly but popular Texas resident.

"There's such a huge population of horned toads on our farm that we almost step on them."

**Wiping the weeds out**

Sometimes, says Ed Sills, what one observes just doesn't make sense. For example, on Sills' organic operation north of Sacramento, Calif., deep water is used as a natural weed control measure in the rice beds.

"But some weeds, you observe them and they just thrive on that deep water," says Sills with a hint of frustration in his voice.

One of these water-loving weeds is rice field bulrush, which can take a crop's yields "down to nothing," says Sills. There is a herbicide for the bulrush, but the plant is developing a tolerance to the chemical.

**Observation, see page 10...**

### ...Observation, from page 9

So Sills, who farms with his wife Wynette, his father, Thomas, and his mother, Anna May, has been experimenting with a reverse rice production strategy. He draws the water down in the beds and keeps them dry for around 20 days — basically to the point where the rice plants feel stressed. The bulrush fares even worse: It dies.

Sills, who also raises organic wheat, dry beans, popcorn and almonds, says chemicals are proving to be no substitute for good old-fashioned observation.

"I got tired of chemical applications that were marginally effective. We might as well deal with the problem head-on."

### The history of a fencerow

Part of good observation is having an historical perspective, being able to track the succession of land use over a period of years, and noting its effect. For example, Dick and Sharon Thompson noticed the more they cleaned the horseweeds out of the fencerows on their diversified crop and livestock farm near Boone, Iowa, the more they became infested with other, more harmful species such as foxtail.

They came to the conclusion that plowing up the horseweeds opened up ground that was formerly in the shade during the growing season. This started a succession of other weeds — weeds that eventually have a heavier impact on the entire farm's crop yields than the original horseweeds. They took it further and found grass eradication programs started a succession of more harmful weeds like velvet leaf.

The Thompsons' conclusion?

"Early weeds control later weeds," says Sharon. "This is the best-kept secret in sustainable agriculture."

### Hard facts

Nancy Vogelsberg-Busch comes from solid land observation stock. When her family's Kansas crop and livestock operation considered entering the chemical age back in the 1940s, Vogelsberg-Busch's late father, John, recalled something he had seen while serving in the military during World War II. Anhydrous ammonia, a popular fertilizer, had been used to turn the ground hard enough so that airplanes could land.

"He figured if it did that to the soil, he

didn't want it on the farm," she says.

Now Vogelsberg-Busch, who raises corn, oats, wheat, soybeans, red clover and alfalfa on 160 rolling acres near the town of Home, is carrying on that tradition of relying on personal observations before jumping onto the latest agricultural techno-bandwagon.

She has created an intricate seven-year rotation that reduces the need for erosive tillage and naturally breaks up pest cycles. She uses soil quality as her sustainable touchstone. At the core of her soil building is alfalfa, which helps naturally increase fertility while building up organic matter and reducing the hardness that can make rain an erosive force, rather than a crop-saver. She has noticed that the longer a field is not planted to alfalfa, the more slabby and less crumbly the soil becomes during cultivation. But when the soil is healthy, one can tell from the tractor seat.

"It literally flows like water off the shovels of the cultivator," she says with a sense of wonder in her voice.

### It's only a test

There are times when a farmer must overcome years of deep-rooted beliefs to truly see what's going on. When Don and Nelson Weaver noticed that the well water on their Lancaster, Pa., farm was contaminated with nitrogen fertilizer to such an extent that it posed a threat to their dairy herd, they began replacing applications of commercial nutrients with crop rotations and manure management. It took them almost five years, but now they are completely off of the commercial fertilizer habit. As a result, their latest water tests showed nitrate levels at four to 5 parts per million, significantly lower than the 40 to 50 parts per million of a few years ago.

But the brothers are convinced they could have kicked the fertilizer habit more quickly if they hadn't been influenced by the belief that nutrients had to be added each year to raise a crop, no matter what the soil tests showed. In fact, the brothers have learned that soil tests provide only a small part of the total soil health picture. These scientific samples show levels of specific nutrients, but not the inherent organic content, or the ability of the soil to be worked up.

Says Don: "You have to walk across the soil and look at it and take a spade and look at the mellowness, and how it smells and how it breaks apart and note number of earthworm pores."

### When the going gets tough...

Necessity may be the mother of invention, but in the case of South Carolina dairy farmer Tom Trantham, desperation is at least a first cousin. After 20 years of pushing his Holstein dairy herd to produce award-winning amounts of milk, the soft-spoken Trantham found he simply was not making money, no matter how hard he worked. The final blow came eight years ago when a production loan from the bank didn't come in on time.

"I was up against the wall. I didn't really know what would happen," recalls the farmer. "I thought I was going to lose my farm."

He scrambled for ways of reducing his cost of production. One thing the farmer realized as he examined his operation was that April was his most profitable month. That's when the one forage rye species he had planted came in nice and lush, making for good grazing and reducing his reliance on corn and other expensive feeds. But as summer wore on, the rye lost its nutritional value fast.

Trantham became convinced he had to replicate April every month of the year. Instead of relying on one variety of rye for grazing, he now plants more than 20 varieties of grazing plants, including millet, grazing alfalfa, grazing corn, and several varieties of rye. He bases plantings on what the cows need, not what extension agents say is the best single overall forage variety for that part of the country.

"Under the conventional system, we chose these few plants for grazing, and said 'this is what it's meant to be,'" says Trantham. "But by watching my cows and joining nature rather than fighting it, I learned they need a variety of grazing choices."

The result is different grazing plants coming into their own at different times, always giving the cows something to eat. Now the cows harvest their own feed, with some purchased corn silage rounding out their diet. Trantham has sold his corn harvesting equipment and a silo he used to store corn silage. He's also cut the number of acres he farms from more than 200 to the 59 acres of pasture the cows graze under a timed, rotational system.

Clemson University researchers estimate the farmer has cut production costs on his 90-cow herd by 25 percent.

"I'm making twice the money I ever made," he says. "I'm enjoying my dairy farm again." □

## A team approach to observation

It's one of those fall days in southeast Minnesota when lead-colored clouds are sweeping the last remnants of summer off the tree-covered hills. But the group of farmers, researchers and sustainable agriculturalists gathered in front of a barn within hollering distance of the Mississippi River are too intent on the discussion at hand to lament the passing of the season.

They've got other topics on their minds: How can one gauge the effect a certain grazing method is having on a stream's invertebrates? Will bobolinks nest near cattle? Are nightcrawlers a good indicator of soil health?

And, of course, there's the topic that's high on everyone's list as they consider an end-of-the-day field trip to the top of a nearby bluff: What's the best brand of hiking boots?

Invertebrates? Bobolinks? Nightcrawlers? *Hiking boots*? These aren't just disparate topics popping up in far-ranging conversation. These are observation tools used by the Monitoring Project, a team of 23 individuals who have come together to develop and test indicators to monitor the ecological and financial health — as well as quality of life — on six farms making the transition to management-intensive grazing.

The Monitoring Team is a joint effort of the Land Stewardship Project, the Minnesota Institute of Sustainable Agriculture and the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota.

The team, which includes farmers, biologists, soil scientists, an economist, a rural sociologist and government agency staff, has been meeting for three years. During those meetings, which usually occur on one of the six team farms, team members discuss methods for monitoring the land's transition toward sustainability. The team has recently started the development of a "tool kit" which other farmers will eventually use to measure sustainable progress on their own operations.

Coming up with a set of sustainability indicators means discussing topics that many conventional agriculturalists would at best find foreign to them.

"These are some of the richest ecological discussions I've heard anywhere," says team member Larry Gates, a watershed coordinator for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

### Sustainable sightings

The Monitoring Project publishes *Monitoring Hotwire*, a regular newsletter in which members share observations, tips and humorous anecdotes. Some of the on-farm observations serve to gauge environmental or economic sustainability, while others are obviously great contributors to an often overlooked gauge of success: quality of life. Here's a few on-farm observations from the newsletter:

☛ Jean has noticed more monarch butterflies this year, and more varieties of monarchs.

☛ Dave has seen young, half-grown pheasants in his extended rest pad.

☛ The wild turkeys on Joe's farm really have a time with the cowpies in the pastures. Every cowpie that is visible on the surface has been scratched and moved around, as the turkeys look for corn and other tasty tidbits!



*Monitoring Team members take a look at a "goat prairie" during a recent meeting in southeast Minnesota.*

☛ Geri and Ralph have had the pleasure of watching a wide variety of migratory waterfowl on their pond near the house. An early arrival on 2/05 was a canvasback, followed by a goldeneye on 2/06. Numerous Canada geese stopped by during March, and they've also enjoyed seeing ringnecks, buffleheads, mergansers (hooded and common), and more goldeneye and canvasbacks. Many of the ducks stay a few days and then move on. A flock of robins (100 or more) arrived on 3/24 and then sought shelter in the coulee during the nasty storm of 3/25.

☛ Joe observes that sidehill seeps are running longer. He thinks it's due to better water infiltration on pastures.

☛ Ralph noticed that after a recent 1-inch rain, the water ran clean through his pasture waterways.

☛ Art found a vesper sparrow nest with eggs still intact on a pad after being grazed. Art's list of bird species he's identified on his farm now totals 90!

☛ Joe heard frogs (leopard frogs?) at Easter, and then again on 5/16. The cool weather in-between does not lend itself to frog and toad activity. Joe and his daughter Aimee go out on their own some evenings to observe and listen to frogs and toads.

☛ Earthworm numbers and activities seemed to vary according to the time of day, soil moisture, soil texture (in one of Dan's plots by the stream where the soil contained more sand particles, very few worms were found — is sand abrasive to them?), and type of vegetation (we found very small worms among the roots of dense sod).

☛ On March 12, Joe videotaped runoff occurring on pastures, a winter [cattle holding] area, and waterway sections downstream from both pasture and cropped fields. The water clarity and color varied, with the most sediment and darker color appearing in the water draining from the cropped field and animal impacted areas.

☛ Art observed cow hoofprints acting as many small reservoirs holding melt water. Art commented that his pastures felt soft in comparison to cropped fields he visited at about the same time (early March). The cropped fields felt "hard."

☛ Mike saw a hummingbird on clover in his extended rest pad. Mike suggests each farmer photograph their "rest areas" and notice the smell intensified by flowering plants. ☐

# Reviews



## Nishnabotna

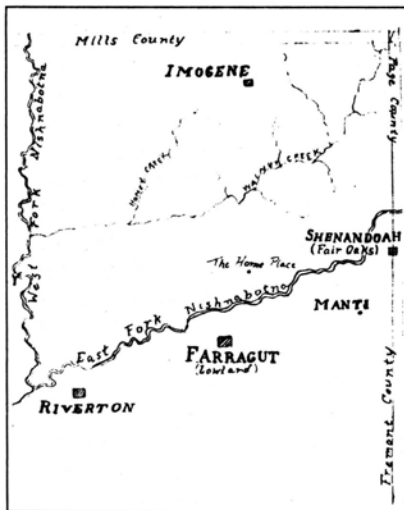
Poems, Prose, and Dramatic  
Scenes from the Natural and  
Oral History of Southwest Iowa

By Michael Carey  
Mid-Prairie Books  
Parkersburg, Iowa  
1995

124 pages  
\$12.95

Reviewed by Dana Jackson

Michael Carey is a real poet and a real farmer. His writing is not cowboy doggerel passing for poetry, and his farming is not hobby farming. He and his wife Kelly and four children farm corn and soybeans on 400 acres of Iowa land owned by Kelly's family. They manage an additional 400 acres. When the crops don't need him, Carey teaches creative writing and poetry at public schools and colleges, gives lectures, and, fortunately for lovers of agrarian verse, writes poetry.



Michael Carey dedicates this book of poems, prose, and dramatic scenes from the natural and oral history of southwest Iowa to all his neighbors, especially those in the Farragut and Shenandoah area located near the East Fork of the Nishnabotna River. In the best tradition of *Spoon River Anthology*, Carey writes as a

man who has listened well, listened to stories his in-laws and neighbors have told him about their relatives living in the Nishnabotna River area before them. "Grandma said that her grandma said that. . ." is the way he begins one poem called "The Crazy Quilt of Spoons."

When a poem is written for someone, I assume that person passed the story on to him. "Aunt Fanny" for Ellen West Longman is an example that begins: "So she told them/ to live in the hog house/ and they did."

The book is divided into two parts: chapter one, "The Past;" and chapter two, "The Present." In addition to recounting the area's oral history in verse, Carey interprets the events and the place from his own research into the history of the area. The first poem in the book, "The Loess Hills" describes the ancient natural history of these unique soil-based structures and explains that:

The mountains that  
you see before you  
are not mountains at all.  
They are what is left of  
the great wind.

In "The Letter from New York," he recounts the oldest story he could find about the first European settlers in the area. "Early Crime in Fremont County" is gleaned and paraphrased from *Southwest Iowa's Heritage: A History of Page and Fremont Counties*. "The Past" also includes two plays, one about the Mormon settlement at Manti and one about a Polish immigrant who was passionate about aviation.

Chapter two makes it clear Carey is listening to the land and its people as he lives and farms in southwestern Iowa. Carey is not a native; he's an urban New Jersey transplant who came to Iowa to study writing at the University of Iowa's famous Writer's Workshop. He moved to the Nishnabotna River area with his wife Kelly to help her cousin on the farm after he had a heart attack. When the cousin died, Michael and Kelly decided to continue farming on the family's land. This poet learned to farm and has become especially adept at marketing and using the futures market.

Michael Carey writes about the Nishnabotna area in a way that a native probably could not. His senses are uncensored. He finds common objects in the natural world uncommon and introduces the wonder of them to his readers, who may be his neighbors seeing

their place in an entirely new light. As an outsider, he has an ear for old stories that local people may take for granted, and he introduces an audience far beyond the Nishnabotna to the humorous, the tragic, and the noble characters out of the region's past and present.

I like the vignettes of people and events in Carey's poems, but the poems about farming and Carey's response to the natural world appeal to me the most. "Drought" and "Breakdown" are poems that describe everyday common farm experiences in a memorable way. "Standing by a Field of Virgin Prairie," "A Certain Slant of Light," and "The Wind" are internal, emotional expressions of a farmer paying attention, listening to non-human stories and messages. The brief and profound poem, "What the Trees Said," is an example:

No man  
owns the sun  
although it is  
inside him.  
Light breaks  
into every  
room, no  
matter how  
thick the  
shutters. All  
walls crack  
eventually.  
Let your body  
stay put and  
your spirit  
rise. Ask  
the earth  
where you live  
to take you.  
Then quiet  
yourself.  
Raise your arms  
and let it.

Sentences, broken into short phrases and shaped into verse form, make the poems easy reading. But even if written in full sentences — "The blue light of the winter moon spreads its bony fingers across the frozen crust of Iowa," and "The earth sings its deep song in the rush of newly released water" — this is poetry.

The farm poems of Robert Frost and Wendell Berry speak of New England and Kentucky, respectively. Now the "farmingest" state of them all, Iowa, has a poet spokesman. □

LSP Associate Director Dana Jackson is a native of the Smoky Hill River watershed in Kansas.

## Reviews



## Fields Without Dreams

### Defending the Agrarian Idea

By Victor Davis Hanson

Published by The New Press

New York

1996

289 pages

\$23.00

Reviewed by Pat Deninger

Exactly two-thirds of the way into Victor Davis Hanson's *Fields Without Dreams*: *Defending the Agrarian Idea* is a description of his rural neighbors that lays bare why this California grape farmer and classics professor is at times thoughtful, at times enraged, yet always passionate about the death of family farming:

"Without any interest in your own feelings, the adjacent farmers boast straight out to you where you are wrong, when you lapsed, how you failed, why you will go broke. Because they are not family, much less sensitive friends, you are not coddled. You can learn as you hurt . . . if you can stomach their bitterness and pride, you can learn."

Hanson is one of these "bothersome, queer oddballs" who chooses to farm. But he doesn't care if your town's farmer's market is a smash success. He doesn't want to tour your countryside and comment on the handsome farmyards. He isn't interested in looking at your pictures from last year's Farm Aid concert.

He is a farmer describing his own inevitable extinction, and you're going to get it straight.

Hanson's family has raised grapes, plums and other fruits in the San Joaquin Valley since 1878. As suburban Fresno fast approaches, they try to hold on to their farm, despite yearly losses from fruit that cannot be produced for a profit, no matter what they attempt.

In 1983, raisin prices plummeted from \$1,350 to \$450 a ton and never rebounded. Farmers dropped like infantrymen. Meanwhile, packers and brokers continued their cutthroat practices of mysteriously "losing" pallets of fruit, announcing that produce arrived damaged or rotted, or tacking on fees that siphoned

whatever scant money remained.

Hanson, his brothers and a cousin tapped every family resource to keep farming, and even risked planting new exotic strains of grapes and plum trees. The family's nutrient-rich fields proved too much for the grapes; they exploded on the vine. And the trees had a genetic defect that allowed them to blossom, but produce no fruit. The new varieties were bulldozed by decade's end.

Although their barrage of natural and economic hardships are particular to West Coast farming, the pressures they felt (and continue to feel) mirror Midwestern farmers' struggles. So the question remains: Why continue?

Simply put, there is no better life to lead, despite the hardships and cadre of agribusinessmen who seek to ruin you, Hanson writes. But more importantly, farmers — he calls them "agrarians" — are our society's foundation, the most-direct link to ancient Greece's city-state.

For all the people in the vibrant cities, there must be "a culture of small, independent yeoman on the land, who make their own laws, fight their own battles, and create a community of tough like-minded individuals." More and more people jam into urban and suburban locales, and they find all the glitter and energy a city provides, but no happiness.

Family farmers aren't more noble or intrinsically better than anyone else, but their role is clear. Indeed, Hanson suggests family farmers don't even need to be as abundant as they were in the past, "but they do need to be present in large enough numbers to be heard, to offer a shake of the head, when asked, that sends a tremble and quiver to the majority."

Hanson is capable of brilliant insight into the lives of all farmers. Here he describes the self-loathing a farmer feels when he knows he's not going to make it, and that he's dragging his loved ones down with him:

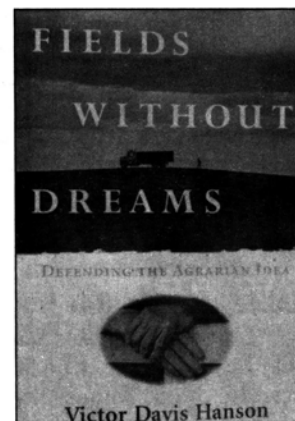
"When this realization arrives that the yeoman is a leech, a barnacle, a self-absorbed mollusk, it is like a divine bolt to the cerebellum, the voltage convulsing the body. . . From that point on, the agrarian, if he survives the shock, can never really farm again, for his noble break-even struggle has now turned traitor, become an ignoble mechanism to rob everyone he holds dear."

On the other hand, Hanson is guilty, simply, of whining some times, or ranting excessively. The book occasionally bogs down because he lapses into stiff,

academic prose peppered with Greek italicized words. And, periodically, he unloads on his changing cast of multi-ethnic neighbors and vineyard workers in a tone that borders on racism.

The trick is to read *Fields Without Dreams* and not be paralyzed by it. He offers several solutions to "preserve indefinitely" those farmers still left, but he's skeptical they could be introduced and be made to work.

He suggests eliminating the entire U.S. Department of Agriculture because its regulations "are now designed for and written to foster corporate agriculture." Replace it with a free market-driven system: "The result to family farms could not be worse than the events of the last half century."



He believes commodity brokers — food buyers and sellers — should be tightly regulated and should be forbidden to own farmland. And Hanson thinks landowners should live and work on that land. Stiffly tax those who don't.

*Fields Without Dreams* is no easy read; there were days when I let it lay because I hadn't the stomach to be buffeted by its ideas. Other days I tramped forward into his blizzard of anger. When I finished and closed the back cover, I was tired and spent, but unable to quit thinking about it.

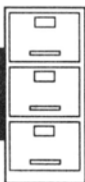
There is not a more important book for Land Stewardship Project members to read this year. It may depress you, it may anger you, it may galvanize you to action. But if you read it thoughtfully and carefully, it will move you.

I cannot recommend it more highly. Seek it out. □

LSP member Pat Deninger lives and works near Trempealeau, Wis.

# Opportunities

# Resources



## Sustainable monitoring guide

*Monitoring Sustainable Agriculture with Conventional Financial Data*, by Dick Levins, is the first in a series based on the work of the Monitoring Team (see story, page 11).

In this 30-page publication, Levins presents four financial indicators to evaluate the sustainability of farming operations. Using farm records or tax reports, farmers can transfer numbers to work sheets provided in the book, and thus evaluate their sustainability.

To order a copy of *Monitoring Sustainable Agriculture with Conventional Financial Data*, send \$7 (that price includes postage; Minn. residents add 6.5 percent sales tax) to: LSP, 2200 4th St., White Bear Lake, MN 55110. There is a 10 percent discount for LSP members and bulk orders of 20 or more copies. For more information on bulk orders, call (612) 653-0618.

• • •

## Profitable, sustainable hogs

*An Agriculture That Makes Sense: Making Money on Hogs* focuses on the 50-sow hog enterprise of one Minnesota crop and livestock operation. The case study compares the farm's production records to the averages of the top performing hog operations as reported in a regional Minnesota Farm Business Management Program annual report.

The case-study farm minimizes expenses through such production practices as outdoor farrowing and low-cost housing.

For a copy of the eight-page *Making Money on Hogs*, send \$4 (that price includes postage; Minnesota residents add 6.5 percent sales tax) to: LSP, 2200 4th St., White Bear Lake, MN 55110. There is a 10 percent discount for LSP members or bulk orders of 20 or more. Call LSP at (612) 653-0618 for more information on bulk orders.

• • •

## LSL now on-line

The contents of *The Land Stewardship Letter* are now on the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture's (MISA) World Wide Web site. The site, which is still being developed, also offers individualized responses to questions about sustainable agriculture, current research being conducted

and sources of more information.

The site's address is:  
<http://www.centers.agri.umn.edu/misa/>  
 For more information, contact Debra Elias, MISA, 411 Borlaug Hall, St. Paul, MN 55108; tel. — (612) 625-8217; Email — elias005@maroon.tc.umn.edu

• • •

## MEF offers way to support LSP

Seventeen environmental organizations, including the Land Stewardship Project, are funded by the Minnesota Environmental Fund (MEF), a charitable federation that raises money through payroll deduction campaigns. It's a convenient and easy way for people to make donations to organizations like LSP.

If you're interested in the MEF as an option in your workplace, talk to your employer's human resources department. If you'd like more information, please give us a call at (612) 653-0618.

• • •

## CSA references

*Community Supported Agriculture (CSA): An Annotated Bibliography and Resource Guide* (Agri-Topics: AT 93-02) offers 10 pages of references to articles, books, reports and organizations related to CSA farming.

For a free copy, contact: USDA, National Agricultural Library, Alternative Farming Systems Information Center, 10301 Baltimore Blvd., Beltsville, MD 20705-2351; tele. — (301) 504-6559.

• • •

## Cutting out the middleman

*Making it on the Farm: Increasing Sustainability Through Value-added Processing and Marketing* is a 34-page booklet on bringing the money spent on processing, packaging, labeling and marketing back to the farm. Compiled from interviews with southern farmers and ranchers who are adding value to their products, it describes some of their practices, discusses 10 keys to success and includes a list of resources.

To order a copy, send a check for \$12 made payable to the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (SAWG) to: Keith Richards, Southern SAWG, PO Box 324, Elkins, AR 72727 0324; tele. — (501) 292-3714.

## A teacher's treasure trove

Minnesota's environmental educators have a wealth of materials available, thanks to the Office of Environmental Assistance Education Clearinghouse. "Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle Activities for All Grades," and "Ecogames for Kids Activity Guide" are just two of the many education packets available. Most of these materials are free to Minnesota residents.

For more information, contact: OEA, 520 Lafayette Rd. N., 2nd Floor, St. Paul, MN 55155-4100; tele. — 1-800-657-3843.

• • •

## Tractor seat economics

What is the financial cost on a per-acre basis to operate a combine or chisel plow? The University of Minnesota Extension Service offers the answers to that and other questions in *Minnesota Farm Machinery Economic Cost Estimates for 1996*.

For a free copy, contact your local Minnesota Extension office or call 1-800-876-8636; (612) 624-4900 in the Twin Cities.

• • •

## Update your calendar

To receive a free schedule of sustainable agriculture events occurring throughout the nation and the world, contact: Alternative Farming Systems Information Center, ATTN: SAN Calendar, Rm. 304, National Agricultural Library, 10301 Baltimore Ave., Beltsville, MD 20705-2351; fax — (301) 504-6409; Email — san@nal.usda.gov

• • •

## Watershed conference in Feb.

The 1997 Farmer-Led Watershed Initiatives Conference will be held Feb. 6-7 at Good Counsel Academy in Mankato, Minn. The workshop will include examples of successful watershed initiatives as well as tools for creating and strengthening watershed organizations.

For more information, contact: Jim Kleinschmit or Emily Green, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 1313 5th St., SE, Suite 303, Minneapolis, MN 55414; tele. — (612) 379-5980; Email — water@mtn.org

• • •

## Community garden handbook

*Growing Together: Community Gardening and Food Security* is a 35-page guide to establishing a community garden.

For a free copy, contact: Sustainable Food Center, attn. Garden Guide, 434 Bastrop Hwy., Austin, TX 78741; tele. — 1-800-882-5592.

## LSP Membership Update

By Rebecca Kilde

Land Stewardship Project member Uli Koester has new ideas about food education. I'm not talking about charts of the food pyramid, lectures about cholesterol and exhortations to eat "five-a-day." Koester is teaching elementary school students about growing, harvesting, preparing and eating good food.

Koester is the program director of the Midwest Food Connection. The program was started by the Wedge Food Co-op and the Mississippi Market. Education is a basic principle of the cooperative movement, and these two Twin Cities co-ops saw a need for basic education about food. As a result, they targeted elementary school-aged children throughout the Twin Cities.

"Lots of corporations are teaching about food education, but they're

peddling their wares," says Koester. "I guess I'm doing that a little bit, too. But my focus is on giving kids choices, introducing them to the whole: the whole plant and the whole system, from production to processing to marketing.

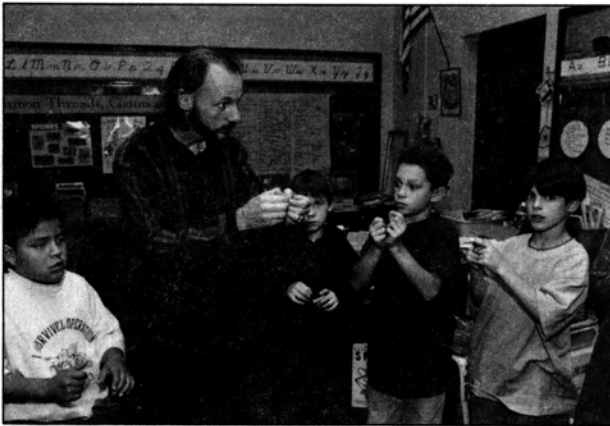
"I've seen food curriculums that are really trashy. Not very scientific, not aimed at giving healthy alternatives. And it's hokey. I think our children deserve more than hokey. Many people think teaching about food is making little cars out of carrots. That might be fun, but it's not food."

Good food should be interesting and fun, not a tasteless chore. With lessons like "Amazing Grains" and "Purple Vegetables," Uli provides opportunities to touch plants, prepare foods and taste them. And he encourages students to talk about their own experiences with growing food. One child may talk about her family's garden, while another will insist that yes, indeed, *there is* a banana tree in the backyard of his home in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Koester's lessons are seasonal, with an emphasis on harvest in the fall, and soil and seed in the spring.

"Most kids know that a plant comes from a seed, but they're not so clear about the harvest end, especially grains," says Koester. "Most grains we use are processed, and it's hard to make a connection between the food they're eating and whole, unprocessed foods."

Because Koester has spent time teaching elementary



Uli Koester combines information with entertainment to teach Twin Cities primary students about food.

### Join the Land Stewardship Project Today!

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, State & Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Mail this to: Land Stewardship Project, 2200 Fourth St., White Bear Lake, MN 55110; or the LSP office nearest you. All memberships and donations are tax-deductible as allowed by law.

### LSP Member Profile

- ✓ **Who:** Uli Koester
- ✓ **Home:** Minneapolis, Minn.
- ✓ **Family:** He's married to Beth Kautz
- ✓ **Miscellaneous:** Koester taught grades 1-3 for two years, and substitute taught for two years before that. A native of Lexington, Mass., Koester has a BS in education from the University of Minnesota and classics degrees from Carleton College and Princeton University.
- ✓ **He became involved with LSP in 1985:** "I was just interested in local farming and rural issues and became an avid reader of the newsletter. Through that, I learned a lot about sustainable agriculture."

school himself, he understands that teachers are busy, and doesn't want to make more work for them. He does all he can to make this a fun, educational service — rather than a disruptive intrusion — for the kids *and* the teachers. He's apparently successful at doing just that — the quietly energetic Koester has been to 50 different schools during the past three years. He teaches about 12 lessons a week, and has a waiting list.

The focus now is on the Twin Cities, and Koester makes a point of reaching communities of diverse economic levels and social backgrounds.

Although teaching about whole foods is pretty straightforward, Koester has had a harder time communicating the complex issues of sustainable farming to students.

"I like showing them that corn is in their Coke, for instance. But it bothers me that we grow so much corn, and the effect that has on the environment."

As a way to teach about agriculture, Koester is beginning to sponsor visits to area farms. He wants to build relationships with local farmers, and to get kids out to working farms.

"I like bringing kids and farmers together."

You can contact Koester at (612) 331-3327 about his food education program, or to schedule lessons for your school. □

Rebecca Kilde is LSP's membership coordinator.

## STEWARDSHIP CALENDAR

**NOV. 15-16** — Pathways to the Future: Exploring Planning Approaches, Design Tools and Growth Management Techniques to Enhance and Sustain the Resources and Quality of Life in the Blufflands Region, Best Western Riverport Inn, Winona, Minn.; **Contact:** (507) 643-6765

**NOV. 15** — LSP's Mark Schultz will speak about effective grassroots organizing to confront factory farming at the 25th Annual Gathering of the Northern Plains Resource Council, Billings, Mont.; **Contact:** (406) 248-1154

**NOV. 19** — Public hearing on the Twin Cities Metropolitan Council's proposed Regional Growth Management Strategy for the seven-county region (*see story, page 4*), Mears Park Center, St. Paul, Minn.; **Contact:** Scott Elkins, LSP (612) 653-0618

**NOV. 20** — Simultaneous public hearings (*see above item*), Burnsville, Oakdale & New Hope city halls; **Contact:** Scott Elkins, LSP (612) 653-0618

**NOV. 22-23** — Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Working Group fall meeting, Platte River State Park, Neb.; **Contact:** Mark Schultz, LSP (612) 823-5221

**NOV. 25** — Last day to give the USDA comments on the Environmental Quality Incentives Program rule in the 1996 Farm Bill (*see page 8*)

**DEC. 6-7** — Holistic Management event featuring Allan Savory, Little Falls, Minn.; **Contact:** DeEtta Bilek, Central Minn. SFA (218) 445-5475

**DEC. 6-8** — 1st annual National Organic Farmer Marketing Association meeting, Kansas City, Mo; **Contact:** Bill Welsh, PO Box 159, La Farge, WI 54639; tele. — (319) 535-7318

**DEC. 30** — Twin Cities Metropolitan Council votes on the Regional Growth Management Strategy; **Contact:** LSP (612) 653-0618

**JAN. 4** — Practical Farmers of Iowa annual meeting, featuring Laura Freeman of Laura's Lean Beef, Ames, Iowa; **Contact:** Gary Huber or Rick Exner (515) 294-1923

**JAN. 7** — Minnesota Legislature begins new session; **Contact:** LSP's Lee Ronning or Mark Schultz at (612) 653-0618 about legislation pertaining to stewardship issues

**JAN. 16** — LSP's 1000 Friends of Minnesota follow-up meeting to "Growing Smart in Minnesota: The Need for a State Land Use Framework," 7 p.m.-9 p.m., Courtroom 317, Landmark Center, 75 W. 5th St, St. Paul; **Contact:** Lee Ronning or Scott Elkins, LSP (612) 653-0618

**JAN. 16-19** — Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group Annual Conference & Trade Show, Gainesville, Fla.; **Contact:** Jean Mills (205) 333-8504

**JAN. 22-24** — Introductory Holistic Management course, taught by LSP's

Audrey Arner, Mankato, Minn.; **Contact:** Tim King, Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota (320) 732-6203

**JAN. 28-FEB. 2** — North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Conference, Albuquerque, NM; **Contact:** Vance Corum (360) 693-5555

**FEB. 7** — CURE annual meeting, 7 p.m., Granite Falls, Minn.; **Contact:** LSP (320) 269-2105

**FEB. 7-9** — First annual gathering of the Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (*location to be announced*); **Contact:** Mark Schultz, LSP (612) 823-5221

**FEB. 20** — 2nd follow-up meeting to "Growing Smart in Minnesota" (*see Jan. 16 item*)

**MARCH 20** — 3rd follow-up meeting to "Growing Smart in Minnesota" (*see Jan. 16 item*)

**MAY 17-19** — 8th annual Minnesota Environmental Education Conference; **Contact:** Denise Stromme, Minnesota Office of Environmental Assistance, 520 Lafayette Rd. N., 2nd Floor, St. Paul, MN 55155-4100; tele. — 1-800-657-3843

**JULY 30-31** — The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture's 10th Anniversary Conference, Ames, Iowa; **Contact:** Rich Pirog, 209 Curtis Hall, ISU, Ames, Iowa 50011; tele. — (515) 294-3711; Email — [rspirog@iastate.edu](mailto:rspirog@iastate.edu)

**Land Stewardship Project**  
2200 4th St.  
White Bear Lake, MN  
55110

Forwarding & Return  
Postage Guaranteed  
Address Correction Requested



**Nonprofit Organization**  
**U.S. Postage**  
**PAID**  
**Saint Paul, MN**  
**Permit No. 1803**