

**Beginning Farmers and Sustainable Agriculture
a Sustainable Future for the Great Plains**

An Abstract for the Symposium
*Planning for a Sustainable Future:
The Case of the North American Great Plains*

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The Beginning Farmer Sustainable Agriculture Project has worked since 1991 to increase the ability of beginning farmers to enter farming using environmentally sustainable practices. Mutual-help discussion groups, farmer-designed education programs, and other support for learning about and experimenting with whole-farm sustainable agricultural systems have improved the success of a study group of farmers in northeast Nebraska. These farmers have tried, implemented, and, in turn, taught sustainable agriculture practices to others during the project period.

Sustainable farming practices that conserve natural resources and minimize use of nonrenewable resources are a good fit with beginning farmers. Beginning farmers are receptive to these practices because they have not yet committed to a particular type of farming. Such practices fit their resources of management ability, labor availability, and creativity. These farmers are the strategically critical population to achieve a sustainable agriculture because of agricultural demographics. The average age of US farmers is 50 years and over half of US farmland is controlled by farmers likely to retire in the next decade. Young farmers who succeed these senior farmers will control the farmland resource base for the next generation, offering a significant opportunity to improve the environmental stewardship and sustainability of US agriculture.

The Project has found special needs of beginning farmers to succeed in their attempts to enter farming. They need information geared to limited resource farmers because they cannot afford the capital-intensive technology of conventional agriculture. They need information geared to beginners and to fit their existing resources, typically use of crops, facilities and other resources indigenous to the farm, rather than purchased off-farm. They need social outlets and peer support, since alternative approaches are often denigrated locally and since they may be isolated socio-culturally. They need thriving rural economies, since most need off-farm jobs to support the farm while it develops enough to support both growth and family living expenses.

Contrary to a recent report that global warming would have little overall effect on US agriculture and an increase in irrigation would suffice to offset changes, we believe a more complex and environmentally sound response to climate change will be required. In an era of environmental and economic instability, sustainable agriculture approaches that increase farm biological diversity, environmental stability, and flexibility in management will ensure the survival of both farmers and our food supply system. We have begun to equip beginning farmers with the managerial tools to make such a transition in their agriculture. Several have already taken steps to address social, economic and environmental sustainability on their farms.

An additional project begun in 1994, the Nebraska Ag IMPACT Project, extends group activities to established farmers and non-farm community members across Nebraska. These groups are learning about, researching and demonstrating environmentally sound farming practices that benefit their farms and communities. Local projects include controlled grazing in riparian areas, farm marketing and management for women, maintaining grass cover on CRP land, computer linkages for farm information exchange, and organic certification of farm crops. These groups have actively engaged farmers and ranchers, Extension personnel, researchers, technical assistance providers, and community members.