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**Section I  
General Information**

1. Project Number: ENE 96-20  
Grant Number:  
Funding Period: October 1, 1996 - September 30, 1997
2. Project Title: Holistic Resource Management: Eastern New York Pilot Project
3. Project coordinator: Tracy Frisch  
Name, affiliation, address, telephone and fax numbers, and e-mail  
Regional Farm & Food Project, 27 Elm Street, Albany, NY 12202  
(518) 426-9331, fax: (518) 465-8349
4. Type of Report: Final
5. Date of Report: October 31, 1997
6. Reporting Period: From October 1, 1996 to Sept. 30, 1997
7. Major Participants (only new information)
8. Cooperators (only new information)
9. Project Status:  
 New: received SARE Chapter 3 Professional Development Program funding for the first time.
10. Statement of Expenditures (attached)

## 2. Abstract

The Holistic Resource Management: Eastern New York Pilot Project sought to introduce agricultural agency field staff and farmers to the theory and practice of Holistic Resource Management. HRM is a system for setting goals and making decisions that takes into account profitability, natural resources and the environment, and quality of life. This value-driven management approach provides users with a new perspective and effective tools for making their farm a success on many levels.

We aimed to motivate participants to apply HRM in three ways: (1) to assist farmers in determining their profitability, natural resources, and personal/family goals and developing a whole farm management plan to meet them; (2) to support the adoption of intensive rotational grazing by larger numbers of dairy and livestock producers in the region; and (3) to foster leadership development among farmers and farmer-to-farmer support networks.

Our project brought HRM workshops to eastern New York state for the first time. We held the following training sessions:

- Nov. 19, 1996 Principles of Dynamic Management: The Key to Farm Business Success  
(close to 50 participants, including farmers) West Glenville, NY
- Dec. 2-4, 1996 Three-Day Intensive Training on Holistic Resource Management  
(about 25 participants, including farmers) West Glenville, NY
- Jan. 29, 1997 Follow-up Workshop Voorheesville, NY
- Feb. 11-13, 1997 Three-Day Intensive Training on Holistic Resource Management  
(about 25 participant, including farmers) New Lebanon, NY
- April 23-24, 1997 Wealth Generation & Financial Planning  
(about 25 participants, including farmers) Rensselaer, NY

Our courses, taught by Ed Martsof of Morrilton, Arkansas, the most experienced HRM instructor in the eastern U.S., were each fully enrolled and received outstanding evaluations from virtually all participants. Because of the first three-day course had a substantial waiting list and was a resounding success, we took advantage of the momentum to schedule an additional three-day introductory course two months later.

We modified our original plan for this project in several other ways. We expanded the target farmer audience from dairy farmers to all interested farmers, due to high level of interest expressed and the complications of dairy farmer recruitment. Also in response to demand, we consolidated the two half-day follow-up workshops proposed in our grant into a two-day advanced course in financial planning. We trained fewer agency personnel than anticipated, as a result of factors such as overloaded schedules, lack of supervisor approval, the overwhelming number of required or strongly recommended in-service trainings offered, inflexible work plans, and the fact that HRM training was not yet well-recognized in our region.

We have established two farmer support networks which generally meet monthly to help put HRM in practice. In addition to reaffirming the HRM principles learned in the courses, these on-going networks provide a sounding board for farmers as they strive to make their farms successful, fulfilling, and good for their local community and environment. Over the summer the networks held meetings called *Weak Link-a-Thons* on one another's farms. These sessions served as a non-threatening forum to share farm problems and obtain free analysis and advice from a group of peer consultants in the context of the farm host's holistic goal. In these networks, the depth of thinking, willingness to reveal problems, and concern for other farmers' challenges is demonstrably greater than in our non-HRM farmer network initiated around the same time.

We remain committed to maintaining HRM farmer networks and continue to learn about ways to increase the application of this valuable framework to New York farms. Also the two course participants from outside our region plan to organize HRM courses in Massachusetts and Quebec.

## Section II Final Report

### I. Objectives

The project will introduce field staff of the Natural Resource Conservation Service, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and Cooperative Extension, and selected farmers and other agricultural professionals to the theory and practice of Holistic Resource Management, and motivate them to begin to use it as

1. A goal-driven whole-farm planning and decision-making process to assist farmers, especially dairy producers, in determining their profitability, natural resources, and personal/family goals and developing a management plan to meet them;
2. A framework for supporting the adoption of intensive rotational grazing by larger numbers of dairy and livestock producers in the region; and
3. A tool to foster leadership development among farmers and farmer-to-farmer support networks.

### 3. Specific Project Results

#### A. Accomplishments

HRM Workshops Our project succeeded in introducing Holistic Resource Management to eastern New York state by offering a series of workshops for the first time in the region. HRM is a value-driven management system applicable to agriculture which provides tools for farmers to improve their bottom line, improve their environmental stewardship, and achieve a more satisfying quality of life, while also building community.

We held the following training sessions:

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Course participants have expressed interest in additional advanced courses during the winter of 1997-98. In addition, a University of Massachusetts Cooperative Extension specialist who attended one of our courses has requested our assistance in organizing the introductory and financial "planning for profit" courses for early 1998. A Canadian dairy farmer who participated in our first course also plans to introduce HRM to his region.

HRM Network Formation In addition to holding these workshops, we organized two farmer networks comprised of workshop participants which meet monthly to help participants put HRM in practice on their farms. In addition to reaffirming the HRM principles learned in the courses, these on-going networks provide a sounding board for farmers as they strive to make their farms successful, fulfilling, and good for their local community and environment.

Spring network meetings primarily dealt with establishing a holistic goal for one's farm and applying HRM testing guidelines to decision making. The holistic goal addresses quality of life, environmental stewardship, and profitability (economic sustainability). A farmer uses this goal in tandem with the testing guidelines to evaluate how well an array of possible options under consideration fit the holistic model.

Starting in June 1997, the networks began holding meetings called *Weak Link-a-Thons* on one another's farms. Informally facilitated by the host farmer, our Weak Link-a-Thons generally last for 3 to 4 hours and provide an opportunity to delve more deeply into the issues affecting that farm. They include a brief farm tour, and have elicited lots of constructive input for the farm family or operators. These Weak Link-a-Thons serve as a non-threatening forum to share farm problems and obtain free analysis and advice from a group of peer consultants. Participants focus on the underlying causes of these problems, attempting to identify the weakest link in the solar chain from the capture of the sun's energy to the conversion of products to dollars in the marketplace.

Examples of weak links include problems with soil compaction or drainage, inadequate labor to produce a good crop, underutilization of land resources, poor communication and conflicted goals within farm family, and lack of marketing. HRM counsels farmers to concentrate their money, time, and other resources on overcoming their weakest link, and then subsequently address the next weakest link.

To strengthen our HRM networks, as project director, I have been exploring various models for farmers networks and discussion groups. In Vermont, the Pasture Association and Cooperative Extension are training farmer facilitators and organizing such groups, borrowing from models used for many years in Australia and New Zealand. It has been interesting to contrast the dynamics and problem-solving capacity of our HRM networks with that of another farmers network we started last winter. Using the HRM framework and tools, farmers typically engage in deeper discussion and show more willingness to address and analyze sensitive matters.

## **B. Publicity for Activities and Programs**

Publicity about this project was primarily designed to recruit participants to the training events, while introducing a wider audience to the Holistic Resource Management term and concept.

In order to publicize the HRM trainings to agricultural professionals, we obtained Cornell Cooperative Extension, NRCS and SWCD staff listings for eastern New York. We worked closely with several agencies to disseminate notices of our introductory seminar and three-day courses. Materials with a cover letter or memo from the appropriate agency were sent out by the NRCS Area Conservationist, the NRCS State Conservationist, the State Committee (for SWCD) based in the NYS Department of Agriculture & Markets, and by the Pro-Dairy specialist who collaborated closely on the first two trainings. Follow up calls were made to dozens of agency field staff as well as to key supervisors to reinforce the invitation, explain HRM, and further stimulate interest in attending.

We also sent a first-class mailing to several farmer lists (within about a two-hour radius of the program sites), including those of the NYS Pasture Association, the Mohawk Valley Sustainable Agriculture Network, and our own organization, as well as additional referrals gleaned from personnel contacts. We also sent information to a variety of other businesses and organizations, such as the major large animal veterinary practices and land conservancies; in follow-up calls, we discussed the value of the course with them and asked for their help in identifying and encouraging potentially interested farmers to participate.

In addition, notices for the seminar and/or course were submitted and published in key farm media, including *American Agriculturalist* and *Country Folks*, and *Rural Futures*. They were also submitted to the approximately county extension newsletters within a two hour radius. The Ag Radio Network, based in Utica, NY, also ran a spot on our HRM offerings. One of the December course participants wrote a half page article for *Country Folks* (enclosed), and a columnist for *New York Farmer*, who attended the November seminar, planned to write a piece for that publication, but it did not appear.

#### **4. Potential Contributions and Practical Applications of the Professional Development Program**

##### **A. Trainee Adoption and Direct Impact**

The introductory HRM workshops took the students through a process designed to shift their paradigm about agriculture -- resulting in changes in attitudes and understanding. The courses also developed farm business management skills which were consistent with HRM principles. We started by identifying our core values and then moved through a history of agriculture in the decades since World War II. We contrasted biological and mechanical systems, learned about the solar chain of energy conversion into dollars, and gained familiarity with the HRM testing guidelines. Throughout the courses, practice was emphasized so that students could use the techniques after the course ended.

In addition to presenting an alternative approach to thinking and managing farming enterprises, the courses demonstrated effective teaching and group dynamics. The HRM courses showed how farmers, assisted by able facilitation and some structure, can come together to problem solve constructively. Agency personnel also were influenced by the farmers' enthusiasm for social support and learning networks evident in the workshops.

Extension staff were especially interested in using value clarification tools and the three-part goal development in their work with farmers. NRCS and Extension personnel seemed less clear about how they might use other aspects of the holistic management system in their highly structured work. Many of the farmers may be more ready to apply HRM principles and practice to their operations than agency personnel functioning under the existing paradigm.

##### **B. Potential Benefits or Impacts**

Our HRM programming promises to benefit farms by offering a more effective management approach. HRM assists farmers and agency personnel advising farmers in the setting of a farm goal that will inform all farm decisions. Using HRM testing guidelines and concepts like the solar chain provide a decision making framework that can mean the difference between bankruptcy and turning a profit, between burnout and an energized family life, between depleted soil and regenerated land.

Some of the most significant benefits of our HRM programming have been in the area of process. In addition to learning about HRM concepts and practice, course participants (both agency field staff and farmers) experienced interactive learning under the guidance of a skilled educator.

The instructor modeled a participatory, highly respectful teaching style which gained the trust of participants and set an outstanding tone for future interactions among group members. He refused to provide answers, instead helping participants work through the process to develop their own answers.

In the courses, we practiced a variety of exercises that formed a new tool kit to take back and adapt, whether for our farm enterprises, agency activities, or agricultural organizations. These new tools include what we value exercise, idea harvest (type of brainstorming), HRM testing guidelines, and goal formation.

A learning community of farmers is an important legacy of the courses. HRM workshops considerably deepen the participants' willingness to offer constructive criticism, offer support, and share personal concerns; in comparison to a non-HRM farmer network we formed ten months ago, the difference in openness, depth, and focus emerging from HRM courses is remarkable. Such farmer-to-farmer networks promise to set an example to the broader agricultural community -- both to agency personnel and farmers.

### C. Feedback from Farmers

The feedback from farmers attending the workshops was almost uniformly positive. They expressed satisfaction with the new understanding of holistic management which they gained from our courses. The interactive approach to learning, which also quickly developed a supportive, sharing community, was highly praised.

Representative feedback included on the first three-day course included "it forced me to go back to basics, reinvent my farm, stretch my mind;" "first-class presentation on a difficult subject"; "new concepts very helpful, instructor made pictures to help us work with them;" "Ed spent good quality time with individuals on their issues and didn't take up course time with these individual problems." One farmer wrote, "Ed Martsolf is an outstanding leader in that he is extremely knowledgeable, very clear in his presentations, and adept at dealing with a diverse group of strangers. I think he also tried to encourage us to use our intuitions, as well as the more concrete analytic tools he gave us, in setting goals and evaluating farming decisions."

Excerpts from anonymous course evaluations, some of which are from agency personnel:  
I value "working on [improved management skills] with a large group of peers and the way Ed [the instructor] refused to give any answers."

I got "a tremendous food for thought approach to asking the right questions."

I value "the many and various exchanges and points of view I was exposed to while here. The willingness of others, obviously very busy people, to give serious thought to the problems/opportunities of others."

I got "tons of stories, an excellent framework, people to call later, a plan (well, the beginning), communication framework with my-partner. The relaxed, informative, lively, friendly style was great."

I value "the emphasis on a well-set goal (finite and value-based) with an attitude toward investment rather than expenditure."

Lyle Purinton, dairy farmer, and Cara Alexander, herdsman, wrote: . . . "We have been operating our dairy farm since the late 1970s and have been the way of the "bigger is better" and "technology has all the answers" route. In the last few years, we have begun to feel that we're being led down the proverbial "primrose path" by some of the experts and organizations from whom we garnered advice and ideas. On our farm, we have made some radical changes, moving unknowingly toward a more holistic program without the benefit of any kind of guidance or definite plan."

"The HRM course has given us a better understanding of what we have been trying to do, and has us believing that maybe we are not crazy after all. The ideas of goal setting and the problem solving or testing plan being written down in black and white and being right there in front of us help to make management and alternative ideas easier to develop and their impact more thoroughly explored before implementation.

"We feel the HRM course has merit for anyone wanting to develop a better relationship between themselves and their operation, family, and community."

Vegetable grower William Denner: ". . . HRM calls into question many things that I would call the slippery slope of farming -- looking for solutions to problems from outside, taking on more debt from machinery, labor that goes unpaid, costs not identified as costs -- things that help farmers, little by little, to be driven off the farms. HRM asked me to think about why I want to farm, what I want from farming, what I want from life. It also helped me to see the way my decisions about my farm will shape my life and offered a way to test my decisions before I make them. . . ."

Hay and livestock farmer Mike Scannell summed it up like this, "The main inspiration I got from the course was that you have to stay away from expensive technological fixes and look for low-cost biological solutions, like intensive grazing.

"The HRM courses have brought a community of alternative-thinking, sustainable farmers together, and created a kind of local think tank. Before we were separated geographically and by our different types of operations."

**5. Individuals Involved:**

Number of extension and/or NRCS personnel in attendance at:

- 14 Workshops
- Conferences
- Short courses
- Other events (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**6. Future Recommendations & Areas Needing Additional Professional Development**

I would suggest that for future HRM training projects the coordinator and a core of advisors (including several influential agency personnel) become more intimately familiar with HRM before organizing trainings for others. Each of these individuals should be encouraged to take at least one three-day HRM course prior to developing a plan of action. Unfortunately, this can be costly and inconvenient, given the paucity of HRM educators in the Northeast.

Futhermore, in concert with the HRM course, I would suggest integrating leadership training, a workshop in farmer networks/farmer discussion groups, and a 4 - 6 month practicum in facilitating an HRM farmer network for interested agency personnel. A major obstacle however, particularly in New York, where Cornell offers a large number of in-service workshops and where farmer-centered programming is not the rule, will be recruitment of USDA personnel.

7. Slides are not available.

## Appendix Accounts from two Weak Link-a-Thons (farmer network meetings) held this summer:

**A Vegetable Farm** At our first July Weak Link-a-Thon, farmers were led on a tour of the 12 acres of vegetable fields of the host farm, shown various production problems and asked for their insights and advice. The group then returned to identify the weakest link in the vegetable operation, asking many questions and offering the farmer their full attention to his situation's challenges. In this case, the group eventually concluded that the vegetable enterprise was overextended. They estimated that at most only one-half of the land was actually producing a marketable crop.

Often farmers put the blame for their crop failures on weather. Though we had an unusually cold spring and it is a drought year, this farm has irrigation and the other farmers were growing much more successfully this year. Instead, fertility and good soil management were felt to be limiting factors in this operation. The farm, despite a long history in organic production, does little cover-cropping. It is driven by production and sales goals to meet many years of past debt. This short-sighted pressure has made it impossible to concentrate on building the soil and practicing timely soil preparation. These efforts, in a few years' time, would increase yields tremendously while also reducing weed pressure. The group empathized with the stress and anxiety to which this vicious cycle subjects the farmer.

One of the accomplished farmers present reported a \$75,000 gross on 4 cultivated acres of vegetables. This farm was aiming for a similar gross on 12 acres, but would definitely be unable to meet this goal. It remains for the farmer to avail himself of the considerable expertise in this group to get very specific recommendations on soil building practices, such as cover crop planting.

**A Dairy Farm** A dairy farm which has pioneered intensive rotational grazing in its county hosted our second Weak Link-a-Thon in June. Perhaps because of this farmer's early adoption of this practice and his disinterest in expanding his 70-cow herd or pushing his cows to produce ever more milk, the farmer has felt isolated from Cooperative Extension and other farm groups. At our meeting, the farmer and his wife and partner shared their anguish over their debt of hundreds of thousands of dollars. Their debt payments are \$4,500 monthly. The wife's off-farm income is essential, but not sufficient, to prevent the farm from being foreclosed. As the last working dairy on its rural road, residential development is encroaching.

As a result of the HRM course, the farm's herdsman developed a unique plan to buy 40 cows as cheaply as possible in early spring, feed them only on pasture (with no grain or total mixed ration supplement to boost production), and milk them as a separate herd. These cows will be resold when grazing ends in mid-fall. This plan uses an underutilized resource on the farm (grass) and requires no outside inputs. Following a central HRM principle, the farm operators assumed the plan wouldn't work and solicited feedback on its problems from a number of experts in dairy-related fields. After they had addressed all the holes in the plan to everyone's satisfaction, they pursued and received financing (in the name of the herdsman) by an intrigued lender. The farm is now seasonally milking a temporary herd of 34 cows in addition to its established herd. (Postscript: The Jersey herd has now been sold and numbers are being calculated.)

Some of the key components of the farm's holistic goal are paying off debts more quickly, making the farm self-supporting, planning rather than reacting to crisis, and becoming more self-sufficient in feed on the land they own. As a means to maximize on-farm resources, the network discussed how this farm could improve forage quality. Solutions to the problem of obtaining capable and reliable labor were felt to be crucial, so that harvesting could be done in a more timely fashion. The farm has hosted foreign exchange interns for over 20 years, but cannot always count on getting a motivated or timely placement.

While the group brainstormed many suggestions, it had no single answer. Network members showed a lot of respect for the farm family's ingenuity and creativity. The farm is fairly diversified, and has explored its other marketable resources. Everyone also gained important insights into the values, experiences, and likes/dislikes of the farm members, a good foundation for the network's future "consulting" with this farm.



Country Folks Dec. 23, 1996

# Holistic Management: Profit & Ecology Hand In Hand

by Jackie Conklin

Holistic Resource Management (HRM) is a philosophy of goal setting and decision making that combines managing natural resources to improve soil fertility and vegetation with managing for profit and production. The "Whole" in holistic includes people, water, soil, and financial resources. Simply put it encourages evaluating and managing the whole and considering how all the parts of the puzzle fit together. "Holism is an understanding that every decision we make affects every part of the whole," says Walt Davis, President of Holistic Resource Management of Oklahoma.

HRM also differs from conventional agriculture management by emphasizing long term solutions to management rather than the "quick fix" solution. Holistic management emphasizes treating the cause of the problem, not just the symptom. Decisions are based on how the "whole" will be affected by any single change to one of its parts. Its success is credited to the fact that responsibility for making decisions is placed on all the people who will be affected by the decisions.

## Define the "Whole"

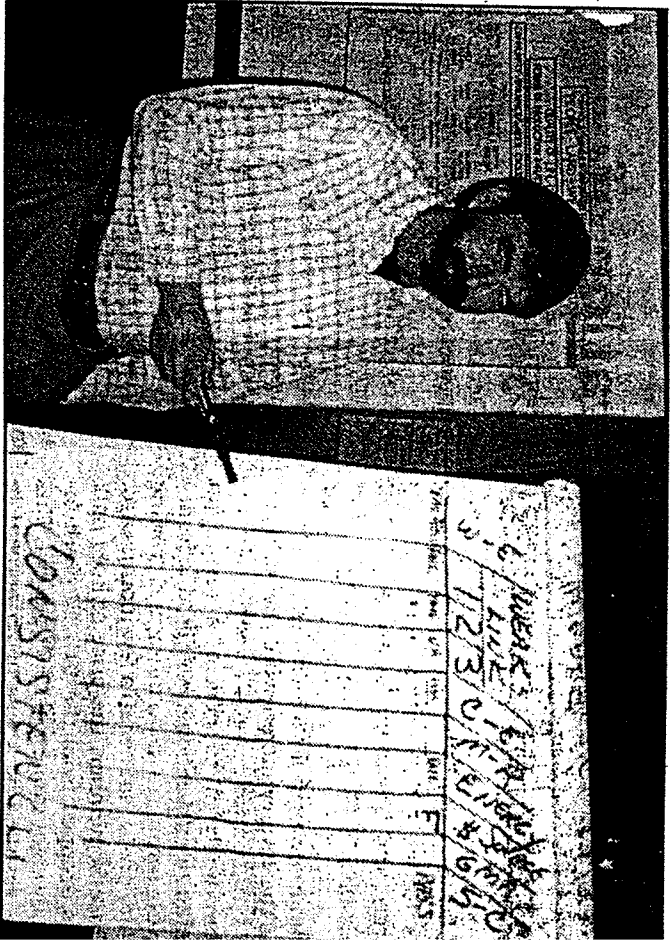
Once the "whole" - people, land, money - are defined, the first step in Holistic Management is setting a goal. This goal includes defining the future quality of life desired by the people involved; secondly - the forms of production to be achieved to support that quality of life; and third - a vision of what the land must look like to support production and future generations. Having set the goal, the HRM model provides a framework in which to test each action considered.

Testing guidelines used under the

management model are 1) identifying the weak link - is there a logjam created by people, finances, or land? 2) What is the cause of the problem and will our proposed action directly treat the cause or the symptom and have we treated this problem before? 3) If we spend time and money on the proposed action will it give us the biggest return for our investment? 4) Will the proposed tool require use of a finite energy product or require the spending of money and 5) How will the proposed action affect the culture and society that we live in?

Approximately 30 dairy and other production farmers from across New York State and Canada participated in a HRM Training Workshop in Schenectady County recently. Ed Martsof, Certified HRM Instructor from Morrilton, Arkansas, moderated an intense three day interactive workshop which taught the principles of management essential for success in the fast changing future. "By managing the 'whole' spectrum of resources available to each farmer, you benefit from having more profit and less stress," stated Martsof. "You need to be clear on what you need and want using technology and information that is right for you without being exclusive of your choices."

Brainstorming was a resource encouraged to identify areas of their operations which could be changed to improve forms of production. "Once ideas are gathered you can evaluate all day - but you can't evaluate ideas you don't have," stressed Martsof. A question posed to the group to help develop goals for quality of life and forms of production was, "If I want profit five years down the road I will need \_\_\_ as



"By managing the "Whole" spectrum of resources available to each farmer, you benefit from having more profit & less stress," says Ed Martsof. Photo: Jack Conklin

a future resource base for a better quality of life. Developing a mission statement, building goals that were value-based, and developing a Quality of Life statement provided the framework for participants to complete the workshop.

## Manage for Profit: Let Production Follow

"We are conditioned to manage for production and hope for profit," stated Martsof. "I challenge you to manage for profit and let production follow." Participants were encouraged to plan for profit by being proactive in their planning, not reactive. "Whenever an industry has fewer and fewer players, it creates larger and larger niches - don't be intimidated by bigger is better - it's not the only game in town!"

Some of the sustainable methods in

farming which were discussed at the workshop included 1) thinking about what will be good for the land in 50 or 100 years, not what will pay the most return today at a cost to the land in the future 2) buying tools and equipment that you can pay cash for from the farm income 3) mulching and composting 4) preparing the land well with limited chemicals and planting intensely 5) diversification, and most importantly, 6) making community

What are the benefits of getting back to basics? According to HRM practitioners holistic management increases biodiversity and productivity on the land, reduces chemical inputs and expenses, ends long-standing conflicts over resource use, provides stronger families and communities, and most importantly provides the knowledge that the land will be able to sustain future generations.

# A Free Introductory Seminar on Holistic Resource Management

## *Who should NOT attend this HRM course:*

- If you are satisfied with the level of your farm profits.
- If you are pleased with the way things are going in your community.
- If you are happy with your workload, your stress level, and the amount of free time you have.
- If you believe what you are doing now is attractive enough that your children would want to do it for their future.

## **Principles of Dynamic Management: The Key to Farm Business Success**

Tuesday, November 19, 10am to 3pm  
(Catered luncheon included)

Grange Hall, West Glensville (Western Schenectady Co.) \*

\* **From the west**, take Rt. 5 east from Montgomery Co. At Hoffmans sign on left, turn left onto Wolf Hollow Rd. At first crossroads, turn right on W. Glensville Rd. Grange Hall is 3/4 mi. on right. **From the east**, on Rt. 5, turn right onto Wolf Hollow Rd. Proceed as above. **From I-90**, get off at exit 26. Go west on Rt. 5S through Rotterdam Junction. Turn right on Rt. 103 (Lock 9), and then left onto Rt. 5. Go about 2 miles to Hoffmans and turn right onto Wolf Hollow Rd. See above.

Instructor: **Ed Martsof** of Morrilton, Arkansas has been a farm educator and manager for over twenty years. Originally from Western Pennsylvania, Ed has practiced Holistic Resource Management on his farm since 1986, instituted HRM on a high-profile livestock development ranch in Arkansas, and provides management consultancy to an array of farm-based enterprises.

### Agenda

- Introduction--How HRM can help you
- Panel Discussion--Farmers practicing HRM
- Luncheon
- New ideas, skills, habits and practices
- Practical on-farm applications of HRM concepts and skills

This introductory seminar will be followed by a three-day, intensive course on HRM on December 2, 3, and 4, 1996 (see back of flyer for more information).

A USDA Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research & Extension grant is subsidizing this program to introduce HRM concepts to the Eastern NYS farm community.

**For more information and to reserve your seat, call Tracy Frisch, 518-426-9331**  
**Please RSVP by November 12 for luncheon. Regional Farm & Food Project**