FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Date: 08/11/09

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Farm Restoration Yields Soil Restoration in Wimbledon, ND

A group of farmers in Wimbledon, ND are working to turn a conventional chemically dependent farm into a fertile, sustainable, organic, farming unit. What started as a farm restoration project for the sake of their beef market ended by using all of the livestock to restore the soil.

Dick and Linda Grotberg, Dick Lovestrand, Rilla Miller, and Virginia Grotberg, live and work together as a Christian community in the Bethany Prairie Farm Fellowship. The farm consists of 440 acres, 400 of which are tillable. The livestock consists of 70 Scottish Highland cows, 12 to 15 head of Highland beef, 53 yearlings and calves, and 3 herd bulls, 10 Welsh mares, and an American Baskin Curly stallion, one milk cow, a dozen Saanen milking goats, 300 broilers and 150 laying hens.

Bethany Prairie Farm has been Dick Grotberg's home since the 1940's. It has been farmed conventionally since the 1950's. In 2004, the group went out of confinement hogs and began purchasing Scottish Highland cattle. Since 2004, they have practiced and begun to practice sustainable management practices with the cattle. In 2005, they began the task of restoring the 440-acre conventional farm to a sustainable organic integrated crop/livestock farming unit.

In 2006, they submitted a proposal for their restoration project, and were awarded $18,000 from the North Central Region Sustainable Research and Education Program's (NCR-SARE) Farmer Rancher Grant Program. Their goals were to make an integrated grain/livestock small farm sustainable at the pre-1950 average acreage before chemicals came into use, to maintain economic viability during the transition from conventional to organic agriculture, and to provide year around grazing for 70 Highland cow/calf units, 10 Welsh mares, and their Curly foals.

"We started what we are doing for the sake of our beef market and ended by using all of the livestock to restore the soil," said Linda Grotberg. "We are committed to sustainable, organic, responsible agriculture and we are convinced that it is our responsibility to teach the concept to others by how we live, what we think, and what we eat."

The group has researched, learned, and made use of expert advisors to begin to restore their chemically dependent soils to full health and to make the most of crops and livestock integration in the preparation for organic production. Their goal was to establish a base line of their soil's health in order to both compare and measure the success of the project. The on-farm soil quality monitoring project they conducted during their SARE grant project monitored changes in soil quality in contrasting land management practices over time. In particular, the work examined the transition from conventional to organic farming in the Midwest and the corresponding changes in soil biology and fertility.

Evaluations were conducted on-farm for paired no-till organic, conventional tillage, and pastureland.

Their fields now are approximately 25 to 44 acres each, and are designed to follow the contours of the land. With a 9 year rotation, they include grasses and numerous small grain crops. The data collected from this study will provide feedback to land owners and provide training opportunities for NRCS field staff and others on issues related to soil quality. This project can serve as a baseline for soil quality on a system that is in the process of conversion to an organic system. At this point, few studies have been conducted on farming systems that are transitioning from conventional systems to organic.

"It is now all about building healthy soil," said Dick Grotberg. "Our Highland cattle are so helpful. All the land is fenced with high tensile electric fences. We rotate graze the grass and as well graze harvest after mass. Also we interseeded with turnips and rape seed along with other species to eventually get to the place where we graze 10-12 months. Even now there is no more feed lot manure, as we place the bales on end at present in a pattern to have all the manure and urine spread by the cattle and horses."

Bethany Prairie hosted the Northern Plains Sustainable Ag Society Summer Symposium and included the Central ND Pastured Poultry Field Day in the event. 130 meals were served with 140 and 150 people attending.

Read more about the Bethany Prairie Farm Fellowship project online at http://www.sare.org/reporting/report_viewer.asp?pn=FNC06-625&ry=2007&rf=1, or contact the NCR-SARE office for more information at ncrsare@umn.edu.

Since 1988, the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program has helped advance farming systems that are profitable, environmentally sound and good for communities through a nationwide research and education grants program. The program, part of USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, funds projects and conducts outreach designed to improve agricultural systems.

Bethany Farm Day with Linda Grotberg in the foreground – photo by Sheryl Smith, USDA-NRCS.