University of Illinois introduces new wheat suited for organic production

By Phyllis Coulter

A new, taller wheat variety designed for hardiness and the organic market has been certified, and was introduced to the public last September during an event celebrating farm-to-fork research at the University of Illinois.

The Erisman soft red winter wheat variety is named after Jack Erisman, an Illinois organic leader, who has been growing high-quality, food-grade corn and other organic crops in Pana in central Illinois since 1990.

The variety was developed by Frederic Kolb, a University of Illinois plant breeder and crop scientist, along with a team including research scientist Allison Krill.

“The development of a variety takes a long time. Erisman took 10 years, which is typical,” Kolb said.

Developers said they hope to have it commercially available for planting in 2018.

Development of Erisman wheat started in 2007. It is part of an ongoing wheat and oats breeding program at the university, which is focused on developing taller lines that compete well with cover crops to ease in harvest and to decrease diseases including fusarium head blight. And, of course, increase yield.

The new variety was evaluated at four Illinois locations in 2012-2015.

By 2016, Harold Wilken was growing the seed grain on his organic farm in Steward in northern Illinois. He grew 80 acres this fall, both for testing in mills and baking, and for seed.

Kolb has been working on varieties that resist fusarium head blight since 1993. The U.S. Wheat and Barley Scab Initiative helped with funding to control the blight, which is caused by a fungus. It reduces yield and test weight and produces toxins that can be detrimental to live-stock and humans, Kolb said. Beer brewed with barley containing fusarium has been known to gush right out of the bottle, he added.

This variety also is meant to be resistant to stripe rust, which was a problem for Illinois growers two years ago. It also has a good test weight to benefit growers and have a short enough season that it could be double cropped with soybeans, for example, to make it profitable.

“It is always a challenge juggling all these traits,” Kolb said. In addition, the wheat must be evaluated for baking quality and tested with chefs, so both agronomic and milling traits are important.

As far as yield goes, Wilken estimates that the organic wheat has been running about 60 bu./acre on his farm.

Riggs Beer Company in Urbana is also growing the new variety. Darin Riggs, brewery vice president, said the wheat fields give both atmosphere outside the eastern Illinois brewery as well as product that will be used for brewing in the 2018 season. About three acres of Erisman wheat was harvested June 28 at the brewery, yielding about 70 bu./acre.

“It’s a great variety for malting,” Riggs added.

This is an edited version of a news story published in Illinois Farmer Today. Reprinted with the permission of the reporter.

Organic hydroponics not yet on solid ground

By Audrey Alwell

At the fall meeting of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), the board narrowly voted down a proposal to prohibit hydroponic systems in organic production—a move that made national headlines as the “downfall” of the National Organic Program. Dramatic headlines aside, the 8-7 vote did not give a clear stamp of approval to organic hydroponics.

“There was not a decisive vote either way,” said Harriet Behar, who is now vice chair of the NOSB, and one of the seven who voted in favor of prohibiting hydroponics. The board’s rules require a “decisive vote,” which means 10-5. “We haven’t given hydroponics the ‘thumbs up’ or changed the status quo,” Behar said.

Hydroponics have been allowed under the current regulation. Certifiers could certify operations as long as the operations use approved inputs for fertility and pest management. This vote allows that to continue. Eight board members voted “no” against prohibiting hydroponics, while seven voted “yes” to prohibit.

CCOF is one of the USDA-accredited certifiers that encouraged the NOSB not to prohibit hydroponic production. The agency has been certifying over 130 container-based operations, which range from water-based systems to substrate container systems.

“Certified organic hydroponic producers, like all organic producers, must use organically approved materials, protect natural resources, and foster biodiversity,” explained Kelly Danmewood, CCOF policy director. “I understand the call to reserve the organic label strictly for in-ground systems, but CCOF sees room for innovative, new types of systems when it allows the producer to adapt to their unique site-specific conditions and so long as the producer complies with the standards.

In its comment to the NOSB prior to the fall meeting, CCOF took the position that hydroponic systems are not inherently better or worse than in-ground systems, pointing out that “a range of factors contribute to the sustainability, quality, and viability of any organic operation.”

The agency addressed concerns brought up by the NOSB Crops Subcommittee about hydroponic operations being less sustainable or resilient than in-ground systems. CCOF noted that container systems helped many growers survive California’s six-year drought.

The agency’s comment also countered the claim that hydroponic operations use a lot of energy, explaining that some hydroponic growers use renewable energy. CCOF encouraged the NOSB to develop standards that “push all producers” toward using renewable energy, adding that all producers and handlers should “account for impacts to natural resources through their energy usage.”

“This is a complicated issue, and CCOF
Many groups contribute to success of agriculture

By John Mesko, MOSES

We all know the business of farming involves more than farmers. While farmers make up a little less than 2 percent of the working population in the U.S., over 11 percent of all workers in the nation work in agriculture and food-related sectors of our economy. Overall, agriculture, food, and related industries contributed almost $1 trillion to the U.S. gross domestic product in 2015.

In addition to farmers, these numbers include everyone who handles farm products after they leave the farm all the way through the food production process until food ends up on a grocery store shelf.

But there are others who work closely with farmers to help bring about the highly productive food system we enjoy in the U.S.—the commercial businesses, government agencies, educational institutions, and independent nonprofit organizations that make up the agriculture support network.

Commercial Businesses

Commercial businesses are critically important to modern agriculture. They supply everything from equipment to clothing, seeds, and loans for farmers. In a market economy, they offer their goods and services to farmers at a price determined by the market. They manage their businesses with an eye toward profitability, rewarding employees and shareholders. In theory, the more they sell, and the more reliable they are as a support network, the more successful they will be.

Some aspects of support in the agriculture community are best supplied by the market in response to supply and demand of capital, goods, and services. Commercial businesses are uniquely set up to best supply this kind of support, and we need them.

Government Entities

Government entities are called on to represent the greater good desired by the American people. These agencies work to ensure the country has things like safe, available food, and clean water.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) plays an important role in supporting agriculture by providing resources to farmers in support of conservation efforts, collecting and distributing production and price data to the market for use in moving product through the food system, regulating food handlers to protect consumers and many other important roles.

State departments of agriculture fit in here, as do county-based soil and water conservation districts. All of these taxpayer-supported entities are in place to ultimately create a productive environment for agriculture, both here and abroad.

Educational Institutions

Land Grant colleges provide research and education in science and agriculture in every state. They also provide Cooperative Extension education services directly to farmers and rural communities. These taxpayer-supported institutions produce scores of new agriculture workers every year with some graduates entering farming directly, while many others work for commercial businesses, government agencies, the educational institutions themselves, or even our next category of support workers.

Nonprofit Organizations

Nonprofits have a long history in agriculture. These groups focus largely on community building, education, and advocacy. Most commodity groups are 501c(3) nonprofit organizations. Obviously, they advocate for producers of their specific commodity. These groups are often supported by mandated checkoff dollars farmers are required to pay.

Other nonprofits, like MOSES, educate and advocate primarily on behalf of a specific segment of agriculture, such as organic agriculture, or the environment, animals, or natural resources. Some of these groups have broad
Changes in the works to strengthen National Organic Program’s organic seed policy

By Kiki Hubbard, Organic Seed Alliance

The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) Crops Subcommittee currently is tweaking its organic seed policy proposal introduced at the fall NOSB meeting in preparation for the board’s spring meeting. The proposal aims to do two things: 1) update the organic seed regulation, and 2) strengthen the National Organic Program’s (NOP) organic seed policy guidance document for certifiers.

The proposal recommends a requirement that farmers demonstrate annual improvements in organic seed sourcing until they reach full compliance. The recommendation allows certifiers flexibility in working with operations to meet this goal and in measuring improvement. The proposal also provides detailed recommendations for improving the NOP’s 2013 guidance document on organic seed and planting stock (NOP 5029), a crucial resource for certifiers who are charged with interpreting and enforcing the organic seed rule. If passed by the NOSB and implemented by the NOP, these changes would result in clearer guidance and more consistent enforcement of the organic seed requirement.

Current organic regulations require organic farmers to use organic seed when commercially available. Because the organic seed supply was insufficient when the rules were implemented, farmers have been allowed to plant conventional, untreated, and non-GMO seed when organic seed is unavailable. This exemption was meant to provide a transition time for the organic seed supply to catch up to demand.

Over the last 15 years, we’ve made much progress in increasing the quantity, diversity, and quality of organic seed available. Though the exemption is still needed given supply gaps, it is more important than ever that organic operations continuously improve their use of organic seed. The benefits of doing so go well beyond meeting a regulatory requirement.

Organic Seed Matters

Organic plant breeders and seed producers are working for organic farmers by focusing on characteristics that are especially important to low-input systems, such as quick emergence, weed competitiveness, nutrient-use efficiency, disease resistance, and more. Too much of our seed is currently bred and produced under conventional, agrochemical conditions, and with breeding goals that often don’t benefit organic farmers. The organic community has an opportunity to create a path for organic seed that’s distinct from the dominant seed industry controlled by agrochemical interests.

We all have a role to play in creating this path. As mentioned, increasing the availability of organic seed isn’t just important for helping organic farmers meet a regulatory requirement—the benefits are potentially far-reaching. Seed holds endless potential for transforming our food system, especially when coupled with the principles that built the organic movement—diversity, health, ecology, and fairness. We can breed and grow more organic seed that is adapted to organic farming systems and regional climates, and that contains traits important in the field and on our plates. This path is shaped by our individual decisions to choose organic seed when appropriate, to communicate ongoing supply gaps and challenges to the organic seed community, and to advocate for collaborative solutions to meet these needs.

It is no one’s intent to advocate for actions or policies that force organic farmers to use organic seed that isn’t a good fit for their production systems and markets. Yet the allowance to use non-organic seed has also proven a challenge to growing the diversity and quality of organic seed available. This modest proposal recommends that organic operators who don’t make an effort to source more organic seed over the years be encouraged to take extra measures to demonstrate improvement. This is a practical proposal that signals to the broader organic community that organic seed is important to organic integrity, and that further investments in organic seed will have a positive ripple effect that leads to more high-quality seed options that are well-suited to organic systems.

GMO Contamination in Seed

The NOSB is also working to address genetic integrity issues in organic and other forms of non-GE seed. The unwanted presence of genetically engineered (GE) material in seed used by organic growers remains an unfair burden on the organic sector. Organic crop producers, seed producers, and seed companies are responding to the challenges GE contamination poses through routine testing, prevention strategies, and by redirecting contaminated seed to less valuable conventional markets. These practices result in burdens that go beyond the cost of testing and monitoring the problem, resulting in risks to reputations and breeding projects.

To date, the NOSB Materials/GMO Subcommittee has published three discussion documents and one report on the topic of seed integrity issues in organic systems.

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"Have land that has been managed organically for more than three years. Do I still need to wait 36 months to transition it to organic?"

**Answer by Lauren Langworthy**

Farmers who have been utilizing organic practices for years, but have not been certified, might not have to wait a full 36 months between when they decide to transition to organic and when they can harvest their first organic crop. This is commonly referred to as “fast tracking” land.

It is important to understand that land being fast tracked must comply with all the same rules as any other transitioning land. The land must have been free of prohibited substances and managed in accordance with the National Organic Program (NOP) for 36 months or more.

Farmers who think their land is immediately eligible will need to prove the land’s eligibility to a certifier. The operator (or previous operator) can sign a declaration explaining the land’s use during the previous 36 months, showing that no prohibited substances have been used. The most important fact to include in this declaration is the date when the last prohibited substance was used. Often, this will be the date that a field was last sprayed with an herbicide, pesticide, or synthetic fertilizer.

A common example of “fast tracked” land is grassland expiring from the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to transition into organic pasture land. Because the landowner can provide documentation of how long that land has been a CRP contract and any waivers for pasture, small-scale vegetables, or other low-maintenance fields that they manage without the use of prohibited substances. These are all likely candidates for fast tracking. However, it is important to make sure that the land’s history does, indeed, qualify for organic transition. Some farmers believe that they are following organic rules as any other transitioning land. The land that they manage without prohibited substances. The landowner can write a short explanation of the land’s use and managed in accordance with the National Organic Program (NOP) rules, but it is important to make sure that the land has been free of prohibited substances. The certifier may contact the MOSES Organic Specialists at 715-778-5775 or 888-551-4769 for more than three years. Do I still need to wait 36 months to transition it to organic?"

**MOSES Organic Specialists answer your questions about organic production and certification.**

**CALL:** Organic Answer Line 888-551-4769 or 715-778-5775

**SUBMIT:** Click “Ask a Specialist” button at mosesorganic.org/ask.

**READ:** Browse answers to questions at mosesorganic.org/ask.

**DOWNLOAD:** Organic Fact Sheets at mosesorganic.org/publications/organic-fact-sheets.
By Dana Jokela

Back in 2014, Chris Blanchard had closed down his organic vegetable farm after 15 years, and was in a long-distance relationship with his future wife, Angie Sullivan (who worked for MOSES at that time). During their frequent four-hour drives to visit one another, they both began listening to podcasts. On one particular drive northward—this time driving together from Chris's farm near Decorah, Iowa to the vegetable farm Gardens of Ragan in Northfield, Minn.—Angie turned to him and said, “Chris, you should make a podcast! I think you would be really good at this.”

Chris’s initial modest skepticism of the idea faded after Angie asked fellow farmer Jennifer Nelson whether she would listen to a farming podcast hosted by Chris. “Oh, yeah, definitely. I would listen to that!” she replied. That evening, Angie and Chris banked down at the nearby Froggy Bottoms River Pub and sketched out what that podcast would look like. The Farmer to Farmer Podcast was born.

The first podcast episode went online in February 2015 during that year’s MOSES Organic Farming Conference. With Chris having no background in interviewing, audio recording, or podcast production, the Farmer to Farmer Podcast admittedly had amateur beginnings. Chris recalls needing to re-record some early interviews due to unacceptably poor sound quality, and making last-minute changes to the podcast’s intro and outro at 4 a.m. in a La Crosse hotel room, just hours before the podcast was scheduled to be launched. Chris recorded take-after-take of the podcast’s now-well-recognized welcoming words: “It’s the Farmer to Farmer Podcast about how to balance farm work with other aspects of life when he gives the keynote address Saturday, Feb. 24 at the 2017 MOSES Conference.”

It doesn’t matter who the farmer is or whether I’ve ever heard of them, I know I’m going to learn something from the interview,” said Daniel Brisebois of Tourne-Sol Co-operative Farm in Quebec. “Occasionally an episode will flip all my assumptions and give me a whole new perspective on an aspect of running a farm. I’ve always read every book I can find on farming, and subscribed to a number of magazines to get new farming ideas, but the Farmer to Farmer Podcast has become my number one source for inspiration and discovery.”

This sentiment is shared by Mike Racette of Spring Hill Community Farm in Prairie Farm, Wis. “I have listened to nearly every one of the Farmer to Farmer Podcasts, and without fail, I learn something every time. Chris’s unique gift is to bring forth every guest’s story. He knows how to get people to talk about themselves, and get out of the way—there are very few who can do this, and Chris is among the best. While the particulars of the growing and marketing of vegetables is valuable and interesting, it is the unique story of each guest that touches upon our common joys and struggles as small-scale growers. That is what keeps me tuning in each week.”

Chris has been similarly impacted by ideas and insights brought by his guests. Sometimes guests present farming philosophies that upend defining characteristics of his approach to farming in the past. He recalled being stunned to hear Jean-Martin Fortier, pioneer of the bio-intensive micro-farming movement, state, “We work on our farm from 8 to 5.” Chris admitted never truly attaining balance between work and family life during his farming career, saying “because I defined myself by my work, I was very willing to bury myself in my work.” This mindset, for better or for worse, is shared by many farmers.

As a vegetable farmer, I’d like to speak for farmer-listeners and reciprocate this gratitude. Ideas and advice from podcast guests have provided great inspiration to many listeners.

Through the podcast, Chris has created a conduit for ideas and made our community of widely dispersed market farmers a little tighter-knit. In the words of Katie Bishop of PrairieEarth Farm—the 2017 MOSES Organic Farmers of the Year—the podcast is “like getting invited to grab a beer with a handful of really good farmers, and just getting to listen in on their conversations.”

Find the podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, or online at www.FarmerToFarmerPodcast.com.

Dana Jokela owns and operates Sogn Valley Farm, a 22-acre certified organic farm near Cannon Falls, Minn.
Hydroponics — from page 1

has put much thought and time into developing our position,” Damewood said. The agency’s 12-page comment is online at bit.ly/CCOF-HydroponicsComments.

Damewood suggested another approach that the NOSB could take rather than trying to prohibit hydroponics: labeling.

“Continuing to allow hydroponic systems, but requiring a hydroponic labeling statement would provide transparency to consumers while maintaining the viability of organic producers of all backgrounds and growing regions in the U.S.,” she said.

Several NOSB members mentioned a desire for a labeling compromise before voting on this issue at the fall meeting.

MOSA Certified Organic, another USDA-accredited certification agency, certifies a “small number” of hydroponic operations. Kristen Adams, the agency’s certification team leader, said MOSA was “pleased that these innovative systems were not prohibited from organic certification.” Adams called the NOSB’s vote “adequate for now,” adding that many questions remain for certifiers.

“How do we evaluate the use of inputs (nitrogen and fertility inputs) in both hydroponic and land producers, size/scale of all producers, and the use of lights and indoor growing environments?” Adams asked. “We are hoping for continued guidance about on-farm recycling and other sustainability issues in the future.”

That’s exactly what the NOSB Crops Subcommittee is working on for the board’s spring meeting. When the board reconvenes April 25-27 in Tucson, it won’t re-examine a ban on hydroponics and aquaponics (which was also allowed to continue under organic regulation by an 8-7 vote). Rather, NOSB Vice Chair Behar explained, it will review the Crops Subcommittee’s yet-to-be-written proposal on field and greenhouse container production.

“This is a unique form of farming,” she added. “Their methods have not really been fully reviewed. We’re continuing to do that.”

The proposal will address use of artificial light in terms of duration, type, color, and intensity; use of synthetic mulches, including plastic and woven fabric landscape cloth; and, disposal/recycling of crops, pots, and substrate materials at the end of the crop’s production cycle.

The public comment period prior to the NOSB’s spring meeting should open mid-March. The proposal on field and greenhouse container production will be posted on the NOSB meeting page at www.ams.usda.gov/event/national-organic-standards-board-nosb-meeting-tucson-az.

The subcommittee presented the discussion document on these topics at the NOSB’s fall meeting. (www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/CSFieldandGreenhouseContainersNOPFall2017.pdf.) The next step is writing the proposal and allowing public input before and during the NOSB’s spring meeting.

The USDA-AMS still has not posted transcripts of the NOSB’s fall meeting. Those should be posted at www.ams.usda.gov/event/2017-national-organic-standards-board-nosb-meeting.

Audrey Alwell is the communications director for MOSES.
produce. Their doors opened the same month as our farmers markets started back up and our CSA pickups began. Plus, Blue Apron, Hello Fresh, and whatever other home delivery options were sprouting up faster than I could count. In addition, our community in central Illinois is rumored to have the most restaurants per capita than any other place in the country. Dining out has replaced cooking as a hobby.

With the survey results in mind, as well as what I had learned from my research, and the pressure I was feeling from the perceived competition, I decided my CSA program needed a handful of tweaks to stay relevant.

First, my members needed more flexibility. Of course, more flexibility for them usually means more work for us, but I knew they needed alternative pick-up arrangements when they were running late or going out of town. We worked with a locally owned grocery store to allow us to drop off boxed-up shares for those who missed their pick-up. Also, the survey results reflected many members were interested in home delivery. We created a delivery schedule that coincided with our existing wholesale delivery route, charged a $5 delivery fee and offered it to our members. Only a handful signed up.

Next, common feedback from members indicated that they didn’t know what to do with all the vegetables they received in their shares. I had already been sending weekly newsletters with recipes and preservation tips, and years ago I had written a cookbook organized by vegetable, specifically for my CSA members, and offered it at a significant discount. In response to their latest feedback, however, I thought I could do more.

I created a YouTube playlist of “Katie-curated” videos relevant to the items in their shares each week because I knew they weren’t taking the time to read the newsletters. I frequently posted recipes in our private CSA Facebook group and solicited contributions from members. I hosted a food preservation class, exclusive to members, but only 14 out of 175 attended. I made a snazzy infographic on how to store all the produce they’d be receiving. Yet they were still throwing produce away, not sure what to do with it, or not inspired enough to use it.

Third, they wanted the option to order more food to fit their family size. That was an easy fix. We updated our online store each week, allowed food to fit their family size. That was an easy fix. We updated our online store each week, allowed them to special order extra veggies, sometimes at a discounted rate, and we’d bring them to the CSA pick-up. We also made arrangements with local organic farmers and food producers to come to our pick-up and offer honey, chicken and duck eggs, beef, pork, lamb, turkeys, goat cheese and whatever other food they could count. In addition, many CSA members noticed that they weren’t taking up faster than I could count. In addition, our community in central Illinois is rumored to have the most restaurants per capita than any other place in the country. Dining out has replaced cooking as a hobby.

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Inside Organics — from page 3

Some questions that remain unanswered:
- What are the best sampling procedures and testing methods?
- Who bears the brunt of testing costs and the consequences of rejected seed?
- What, if any, threshold is appropriate and feasible for unwanted GE material in organic and other non-GE forms of seed?
- Who should pay for the costs associated with contamination when it is identified?

Plant Breeding Excluded Methods
The Materials/GMO Subcommittee is tackling a second complex seed issue: excluded methods as they pertain to plant breeding. Crop improvement methods—such as controversial gene editing techniques—continue to evolve rapidly and are outpacing current regulations that oversee new forms of agricultural biotechnology. Understanding and addressing new breeding techniques that may or may not align with organic principles are important challenges the organic community must confront.

In 2016, the NOSB passed a proposal that includes principles and criteria for evaluating the appropriateness of new methods for organic production systems. The proposal also includes definitions that clarify the broader excluded methods definition, describing terms like “traditional breeding” and “genetically modified organism.” The proposal has a terminology chart for clearly referencing which methods are excluded, which are allowed, and which are yet to be determined. Collectively these various pieces serve as a framework for reviewing new and existing methods to establish if they should be excluded.

At the November 2017 meeting, the NOSB voted to exclude three more methods—agreenfiltration, cisgenesis, and intragenesis—and also charged the Materials/GMO Subcommittee to develop clear definitions for these and other methods listed in the terminology chart. The organic community will likely have the opportunity to review and comment on these definitions ahead of the April 2018 meeting.

Next Steps
Organic seed policy issues are complex, to be sure, and the NOSB is striving to honor this complexity by providing practical recommendations that balance reality on the ground with regulatory requirements. The next NOSB meeting is scheduled to take place April 25–27, 2018, in Tucson, Arizona.

Stay abreast of organic seed policy comment opportunities by following Organic Seed Alliance on social media (Facebook and Twitter) or by signing up for our quarterly enews at seedalliance.org. Or contact me directly with questions or ideas at kristina@seedalliance.org.

Kristina (Kiki) Hubbard is the director of advocacy and communications for the Organic Seed Alliance.

Executive Director’s Column — from page 2

appeal and are able to garner resources from a large membership base.

Groups like this are generally not national groups, they focus on a state or a region for the most part. If they have members, they are likely mostly farmers or passionate supporters who understand the importance of farming in ways that improve the environment, farm profitability and rural communities.

When they aren’t membership-based, nonprofits rely a great deal on the resources available to them through direct donations from constituents. Often the people these nonprofits serve are those least likely to have the resources available to make large donations in support of the overall mission.

Shifting Sands
In the past 20-30 years, we’ve seen a melding of these various categories of support organizations, leaving nonprofits as the last bastion of support from the people, for the people. As resources for research and education have become limited, for-profit businesses in agriculture, especially the largest groups often referred to as “Big Ag,” are growing in their influence on the land grant system. For years, the largest groups often referred to as “Big Ag,” are growing in their influence on the land grant system.

For years, the largest organizations, commercial businesses, and government agencies have a role in protecting and encouraging good use of our country’s natural resources. Research and education are keys to forward progress. Land grant institutions, even when supported significantly by the commercial sector, play a significant role in this aspect of agriculture.

But nonprofit organizations are the key grassroots entities that can most clearly represent specific, often tightly held, passionate beliefs and positions about important areas of life, such as food and agriculture production models. We need strong nonprofits working with educational institutions, commercial businesses, and government agencies to help craft the way forward.

I encourage you to identify and get behind a nonprofit organization that directly supports farmers, especially those who farm in ways that are consistent with your values.

John Meak is the executive director of MOSES. He has worked in many aspects of agriculture, spending the past decade in the nonprofit sector.

Options
• Who should pay for the costs associated with contamination when it is identified?
• What, if any, threshold is appropriate and feasible for unwanted GE material in organic and other non-GE forms of seed?
• Who should pay for the costs associated with the consequences of rejected seed?
• Who bears the brunt of testing costs and the consequences of rejected seed?

At land grant universities, this claim is at best tenuous.

Agroindustry corporations now routinely funding research to agriculture. With large agriculture, especially the largest groups often referred to as “Big Ag,” are growing in their influence on the land grant system. For years, the major players at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and then back to Monsanto in the 1990s is well documented. While business experience is certainly useful for working in government, our American sensibilities assume those working in government work for all the people, an assumption which can no longer be safely made.

Nonprofit organizations, by definition, belong to the citizens they serve. With oversight by a board of directors from that audience, nonprofits are truly the lone entities in the agriculture-support network which are still connected to the individual. Nonprofit organizations adhere to a strict code of conduct and transparency which is essential to ensure the fair and honest use of tax-deductible donations.

At MOSES, we value greatly the individual donations we receive from our community, both in terms of what those dollars allow us to do to support farmers, and, equally as important, what those dollars represent in terms of community engagement and support. Just like most other nonprofits, MOSES accepts sponsorships for our events from commercial businesses. We also apply for and accept grants from government agencies like the USDA to fund our work.

We will continue to pursue these sources of revenue, as they greatly enhance our ability to support organic farmers and farming practices.

However, in order to strengthen the voice of independence, nonprofits like MOSES need individuals’ financial support, both as a source of revenue to carry out our mission, but also so we can stand independent of commercial businesses, government entities and educational institutions to carry out our missions.

Roles to Play in Agriculture
Our agriculture industry needs all manner of support organizations. For-profit commercial businesses have the wherewithal to develop and provide key solutions in agriculture, many of which require an entity to take on significant financial risk in order to develop these solutions. Government agencies have a role in protecting and encouraging good use of our country’s natural resources. Research and education are keys to forward progress. Land grant institutions, even when supported significantly by the commercial sector, play a significant role in this aspect of agriculture.

But nonprofit organizations are the key grassroots entities that can most clearly represent specific, often tightly held, passionate beliefs and positions about important areas of life, such as food and agriculture production models. We need strong nonprofits working with educational institutions, commercial businesses, and government agencies to help craft the way forward.

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Get involved — from page 2

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Paul Bickford has come to terms with the fact that farming involves risks. Sometimes big risks.

Bickford, of Bickford Organics in Ridgeway, Wis., took a big risk with his dad in installing a high-tech milk- ing parlor for 300 cows in the 1970s. Another when converting to intensively grazed pasture for 750 cows in the 1990s. And, again when converting to organic row crops after problems with stray voltage in 2011.

“I’m not afraid of change,” Bickford noted in a recent discussion. He pointed out that often change is forced by economics or external factors. “If you’re not making it with what you’ve got, you have the option of going broke for sure, or trying something new,” he said. He’s OK with the risk and work of trying something new. Not every farmer is.

Soon turning 65 years old, Bickford is in the beginning stages of another big change: partnership with a young couple, John and Halee Wepking, who may eventually become owners in his 950-acre operation.

“I’m of the age where I want to slow down, work towards getting out,” Bickford explained. But, he also emphasized his eagerness to pass on what he knows to someone who would value it. “I learned from the school of hard knocks, made plenty mistakes. I’m not sure that what I know will be useful in the next life.”

Farm transition is a complex undertaking, particularly for owners without an obvious heir who is up to the task. Millions of hours and dollars go into building and maintaining a successful farm operation. Bickford decided he’d approach transition by first finding the right person to step into the business as an employee, and see where things could go. He scouted around a little in the organic community, but found what he needed through a simple ad posted online on Craigslist.

Here’s the base of what he posted:

“I am seeking a forward-thinking individual or couple to join my 950-acre organic farming operation to assist in all facets of growing feed crops and to assist in marketing of corn, soybeans, small grains and hay.

Ethics and trust are a cornerstone of organic farming and are important to my operation. I want to share my 40 years of farm experience with someone who is willing to work to improve my farm. This position could evolve into a partnership or other long-range business association.”

Several people contacted Bickford in response to his ad. Many had no farming experience, several weren’t a fit for the farm’s scale. Plenty offered idealism rather than on-the-ground knowledge. And some just didn’t have the right attitude. “You can teach about equipment and production, but you can’t teach nice,” Bickford claimed. “Farming is a very tough, risky business. You have to work harder than anyone else in your class, and be really smart. Only the best employee on a farm will be offered the opportunity to invest.”

Not long after the ad was posted, John and Halee Wepking saw it and applied. The couple was living in a newly purchased home an hour west in Lancaster, Wis., where they were operating a farm-to-table breakfast and lunch cafe, as well as working on John’s family’s 200-acre farm, expecting their first child, and exploring their dreams of working in agriculture.

The Wepkings’ path to agriculture was not direct. John spent his early childhood years on or around the Lancaster farm; Halee grew up in northern Arizona. They met while in New York college backgrounds that prepared them for other restaurant and baking industry, after advanced college backgrounds that prepared them for other roles. They came back to Lancaster because John ‘couldn’t see working in a cubicle’ the rest of his life. Their experience in the food industry was leading them back to agriculture.

Bickford and the Wepkings started discussions about what was needed for the partnership to succeed. Bickford admired John’s early farm experience, knowledge of computers, his organizational sense, and his positive attitude.

The Wepkings were at first a little cowed by the scale of Bickford’s operation. Moving from 200 acres of beef to 900+ acres of row crops was intimidating. John was a little shy about his mechanical skills. Bickford just bought a house, and were hoping to stay amidst family, even if working on the home operation was a continual challenge due to extended family dynamics.

But, the young couple brought a diverse set of skills, and an enthusiasm for the entrepreneurship Bickford felt was needed to move the farm to the next level. John was soon hired and the learning began.

Bickford has always invested back into the operation, and his multi-million-dollar farm was highly leveraged when Wepking came on as an employee in 2014. The Wepkings had no equity to bring to the operation. But, John brought great ideas, good connections in the restaurant and baking industries, and an entrepreneurial spirit.

The team sees their ideas and partnership as a mechanism to build equity and develop a viable business to make payments toward a farm transfer. “We started by looking at the end goal and are now discussing things we can do to get there. It will certainly include value-added,” Bickford explained.

The team worked together to upgrade an older house for the young couple, with Bickford contributing funds and Wepkings putting in sweat equity. “This will be recognized when we get to the point of a valuation,” Bickford claimed.

The Wepkings purchased a small beef herd with a $50,000 FSA Microloan, and are utilizing marginal land and other forage that otherwise would not be used. As the herd grows, income will be available for equity investments.

Capitalizing on the Wepkings’ connections and interests, production has expanded to food-grade small grains with a local market focus, which the team sees as having huge potential. They have purchased grain storage and processing equipment to invest in a grain cleaning and processing facility as well as a small flour mill. “John has lots going on,” Bickford said with admiration. They have adopted the name “Meadowlark Organics” for the labeled milled products, but keep the name “Bickford Organics” for the farm.

Bickford and John Wepking are quick to point out that their partnership is a work in progress. They haven’t had time to create the legal framework yet, but together have a clear vision of where things could go.
University partners with local farmers on greenhouses for winter production

By Greg Schweser

On a cold day in late November, the Organic Consumers Association (OCA) is planting a winter crop of baby greens and kale in a University of Minnesota Deep Winter Greenhouse. The OCA, located in the small northern Minnesota community of Finland, is testing whether it is possible to profitably grow crops in Minnesota winters with as little fossil fuel heat as possible.

What are Deep Winter Greenhouses? DWGs, as they are often called, use passive solar heat collected through a south-facing steeply sloped polycarbonate glazing wall. That heat is stored in an insulated underground thermal mass made of crushed river rock and is available in the above-ground area during the coldest nights. Backup heat may be required to kick in when the ambient temperature drops to 35 degrees. The result is a growing environment ideal for production of brassicas, lettuces, Asian greens, and sprouts and shoots—crops that tolerate and often thrive in low heat and low-light conditions.

Through its Deep Winter Greenhouse initiative, the University of Minnesota Extension’s Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships (RSDP) and five producers throughout the state are testing a DWG prototype. (The plan for this prototype is available to the public for free download at umn.edu/DWGplans.) Partners include the above mentioned OCA; the Bemidji Community Food Shelf Farm; Grampa’s G’s farm in Pillager; Alternative Roots Farm in Madelia; and Lake City Catholic Worker farm.

These DWGs will not only be available for producers to grow crops for winter CSAs and food shelves, but also as facilities for University research, public outreach, and workshops. With a DWG in each region of the state, Minnesota farmers interested in DWGs will be able to answer questions and provide advice.

History

The DWG initiative has its roots in a 2009 UMN collaboration with Carol Ford and Chuck Waibel, a pioneering husband-and-wife team from rural Milan, Minn. Ford and Waibel sought a sustainable greenhouse production method that could withstand dramatic variations in fuel prices, be resilient to a changing climate, and withstand the brutal prairie winds that too often devastate hoophouses. They also wanted to grow crops all winter long, not just in the shoulder seasons around summer. Waibel researched all season crops to sprout up around the state, offering each other advice and assistance through the Sustainable Farming Association’s Deep Winter Producers Association. Ford worked with the RSDP to identify opportunities to increase awareness and support for the emerging group of winter producers. Ford and the RSDP envisioned creating a stand-alone prototype design that could be utilized, free of charge, to anyone interested in building a DWG on their farm. The University of Minnesota (UMN) could collaborate with producers in each of the RSDP’s Greater Minnesota service regions to build and field test this prototype. This innovative community-university partnership would provide an interactive and educational opportunity for anyone interested in DWG production to come “kick the tires” and meet a DWG producer first hand.

In 2015, architect Dan Handeen of the UMN Center for Sustainable Building Research visited the DWGs and conducted performance tests to identify opportunities to improve on the design. A considerable design change that emerged from Handeen’s research was changing the way hot air fills the solar mass rock bed.

The original Ford/Waibel greenhouse is a thermal mass design that collects heat air near the ceiling of the greenhouse, which is then pushed into the ground with a fan, and dispersed with a system of perforated drainage tile buried in the rock bed. Loose soil placed atop the rock bed allows the hot air to escape into the ambient above-ground space.

For greater efficiency, the new prototype seals the rock bed with a hardpan surface, reverses the direction of the fan to pull rather than push the hot air into the ground where it fills the rock bed (without a system of perforated drain tile connected to blowers). Cool air is drawn out of a manifold near the base of the greenhouse creating a circulating system that keeps the thermal mass charged with hot air.

With cost-share funding from several agricultural lending banks (Agribank, Compass Financial, and AgCountry Farm Credit Services) and a newly improved DWG prototype, the RSDP released a request for proposals and received 40 applications. Five partners were chosen, one in each RSDP service region. To receive funds, producer partners agreed to allow the University of Minnesota the opportunity to host open houses and workshops, as well as provide a portion of space for research trials.

“We are excited to use the DWG to contribute to the evolution of our farm,” said Brooke Knisley of Alternative Roots Farm. “We will be changing our structure to focus less on summer production and more on fall and winter production with apples and, now, the winter greens. This will help us keep in touch with our customer base throughout the Minnesota winters.”

To Deep Winter Greenhouses next page
Deep Winter Greenhouses — from previous page

Construction Costs

The first project came with sticker shock. The project team had estimated construction costs by getting quotes for all of the items on the materials list from big box stores and greenhouse supply companies. The team estimated as double the materials costs. All said, DWGs should cost about $30,000 plus electric hookup and water delivery, which could vary dramatically depending on the distance from available electricity and water sources.

OCA was able to construct its prototype during the winter of 2016-17, months before others were able to start construction, and thus served as a project guinea pig. After all was said and done, the price tag was slightly more than $65,000. The team poured over OCA project receipts to find a culprit for the higher-than-expected costs. Although material costs were slightly higher than expected, labor and related expenses (delivery) on the North Shore were much more than expected.

The next prototype was built by Brooke and John Kniely of Alternative Roots Farm near Madelia, Minn. They also contracted out all of the labor and had project costs just under $40,000. Still higher than expected, this price tag brings the DWG initiative closer to the goal of being a cost-effective investment in winter production. The Knielys attribute some of the excess charges to higher-than-expected delivery charges.

The Bemidji Community Food Shelf Farm, which broke ground in mid-2017, was able to save on some of their labor costs through donations of time. Their final project costs came in at just under $22,000. The Bemidji Food Shelf Farm will also reduce costs by utilizing rain barrels filled from a nearby well, rather than have water available directly inside the greenhouse.

The final two DWGs at Grampa G’s and Lake City Catholic Workers Farm will be constructed primarily without hired labor, so project costs for those are expected to be less.

In response to these higher-than-expected project costs, the UMN team is working with established DWG producer Sue Wika of Paradox Farm to identify opportunities to cut costs from the DWG prototype. Wika constructed her DWG on the south-facing side of a milking barn, extensively utilizing salvaged materials or materials that were found on her farm. With an understanding that decreasing project costs will have tradeoffs (e.g., reduced building longevity or performance), it is essential that farmers interested in utilizing DWG technology have affordable options. What will emerge from research and experience will be a range of expected construction costs that vary depending on a site location’s available labor supply and capacity of farmers to provide that labor.

Research Trials

Now that several of the prototypes are completed, UMN researchers Mary Rogers and Claire Flavin will begin horticultural trials in the 2017-18 winter production season. While a list of powerhouse Asian greens like Tokyo bekana, mizuna, and giant red mustard grow well in the DWG, other popular crops like spinach and arugula have shown a little more sluggish growth. Although these crops may be popular with customers, filling up valuable growing space with slower producing crops reduces overall yields. Researchers will test new varieties of such crops to determine which are suited for cold-climate DWG production.

Researchers also will tinker with seeding densities and substrates to determine if boosting yield in can be achieved. Currently, crops seeded in hanging gutter systems are densely seeded and allowed to grow to a baby green level. After a first cutting, new access to light presumably allows sluggish smaller plants to thrive and grow alongside the previously cut crops for a second or third cutting. While this works well for many crops, some crops, like arugula, have reduced yields on second and third cuttings. Trials with variable seeding density and substrate mixes will help determine whether specific growing practices can be beneficial for specific crops to boost overall production yield.

Concurrent with the horticultural research, UMN Extension Educator Ryan Pesch will survey existing DWG growers to determine production costs and revenues to gain an overall picture of the enterprise value for the DWG system. Pesch conducted a similar study in 2015 and determined that average net revenue for DWG producers was $1,862 for a season with a range of a loss of $526 to a gain of $4,491. Labor hours per week from all but one (who worked 45 hours/week in the greenhouse) ranged from 7-16 hours. A major weakness of this study was that only six DWG producers were interviewed, some at educational facilities that were not producing with a profit motive.

Existing figures and anecdotal accounts suggest that DWG production is optimal for small-scale farmers as a part-time winter add-on to an existing farming enterprise. With more DWG producers up and running since the first study was conducted, Pesch will be able to get a more detailed picture of what kinds of economic returns one might expect with DWG.

The UMN recognizes that efforts need to be made to maximize production capacity of the DWG through better use of three dimensional planting areas, boosting product yield, and identifying “off season” uses of the system (e.g., food dehydration in summer). Above all, the University of Minnesota is most interested in providing prospective DWG producers with the knowledge they need to make an informed decision about setting up a winter production system.
CSA Struggles — from page 7

gelatin, mushrooms, flowers, blueberries, apples, and pears.

Finally, I really focused on this aspect of a shared space. I wanted our CSA members to remember that we were partners in this. The outcome of our partnership was better quality air, soil and water, more biodiversity, stronger relationships with each other, safer food, protecting the wealth of our rural community, teaching each other skills, supporting farmworkers rights, and so on. To do this, I posted videos to our Facebook group of the farm in action and offered invites to the farm by appointment for individual VIP tours. We brought back the annual harvest party complete with a farm-to-fork meal, live music, hayrack rides and a bonfire. We offered volunteer work days to help harvest potatoes or work the farmers markets. The farm has an open-door policy for our members—I encouraged them to think of it as their farm, too.

I was confident this was going to be the best CSA season yet. We'd return to that 80 percent retention rate we had enjoyed five years ago; I was hopeful we had created a system that would allow this mutually beneficial relationship between the consumer and the farmer to really flourish. I had covered all the bases. What more could they need or want?

But what kind of story would this be if I just ended it there? In my opinion, a great farmer is one who is optimistic, relentless, and refuses to give up. One who looks across their fields, their spreadsheets, their soil test results, and their CSA retention rates with some perspective and commits to trying again and again.

Why have we been working so hard to make a program one-size-fits-all and expect our diverse group of customers to be able to accommodate our needs? I was tired of trying to convince my members that it’s their responsibility to totally change their shopping, food prep, cooking and eating habits just to support my for-profit farm. While I never actually came out and said, “It’s your duty! Put your money where your values are and enjoy this 5-pound head of kohlrabi for the second time this month!” there were times I really wanted to.

It suddenly dawned on me mid-September (when it’s never a good time to make massive upheavals to anything on your farm) that we have to do this. We have to make a bold change to stay competitive. We have to take a risk to be remarkable.

For our 2017 Winter CSA, running from November through December, we gave our members complete control over their shares. Using a CSA management software program, we started offering a “Choice CSA” where members can decide what goes into their share each week, adjust quantities and even place their box on hold. It just made sense to us. While we’re still working out the kinks, and I’m terrified at the thought of packing 175 boxes when the full season starts, I am confident this is the way forward for us.

In the first 6 weeks we’ve been running this “choice” program, we’ve received fantastic feedback. Just as I had hoped, our members are excited about picking up their boxes each week. While we might not be able to move as much daikon radish this fall as we had planned, our members have begun rushing to sign up for 2018’s full-season program. They’re even telling us they’d be willing to pay more for this service because they’re saving money in the long run because there isn’t so much waste. I’ve had businesses and physicians offices reach out to host pick-ups. The sentiment I hear most often: “This is the best of both worlds. I get what I want, but I get to support you and Hans, too.”

I sincerely believe we, as small-scale, organic farmers, will stay competitive with the industrial food system because of our unique relationships with our customers and our ability to connect with those we grow food for. But I also believe we have to continue to evolve and be flexible enough to know when the old way isn’t working. I’m so grateful for our CSA members, not only for their support of our farm—5-pound heads of kohlrabi and all—but their feedback and patience and gentle guidance towards success. A true partnership is when both parties’ needs are met. What better way for that to happen than within the confines of community supported agriculture.

Katie Bishop, her husband, Hans, and his father, Dave, are the 2017 MOSES Organic Farmers of the Year. Their farm, PrainEarth, is in central Illinois.
MOSES, partners help beginning farmers boost skills through New Farmer U

By Jennifer Nelson

As we cultivate our priorities for the 2018 Farm Bill coming quickly down the field row, one of the many important parts MOSES staff are considering is how to best use federal funding resources to support new farmers growing food. The USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) is an integral piece of that support puzzle. With current 2015-2018 USDA BFRDP funding, MOSES and partners Renewing the Countryside held two of four New Farmer U events during fall of 2017.

Over the years, MOSES has developed great collaborations that allow us to tap into farming communities outside our home state of Wisconsin. These relationships help foster the farmer peer-to-peer learning and networking that we are known for in our greater organic farming community.

With the overarching goal of preparing farmer entrepreneurs to enter our rapidly shifting agriculture markets, our content planning team for both events focused on a blend of farm business- and production-related workshops. New Farmer U kicked off Friday night with beginning farmer networking opportunities, and went through Saturday and Sunday.

The weekend training included 12 workshops, with two concurrent workshops per 90-minute session. Workshops covered topics such as designing a resilient farm, soil fertility, holistic farm management, organic certification, farm law, land access, and more. Saturday’s general session included a panel of regional farmers in their first 10 years of farming answering the question, “What would you do differently and keep the same in your first five years?” The New Farmer U events also included exhibit tables showcasing helpful resources and relevant information for beginning farmers.

New Farmer U participants evaluated both events as “excellent to above average” overall. Here’s what they said about New Farmer U:

• “Very informative. Covers a lot of topics from production to marketing to enable gaining insight and perspective.”
• “It was wonderful! The connections are incredibly valuable to me.”
• “A wealth of information and resources to guide smart decisions for farmers of ANY experience level.”
• “It was enjoyable to be around others who are interested in farming. There was an incredible amount of information presented to us.”
• “New Farmer U had relevant, interesting, and useful workshop topics and speakers in a more intimate setting that allowed for quality interactions between everyone involved.”

The 2015-2018 USDA BFRDP funding supports four New Farmer U events, including those already held in Minnesota in 2016, and Iowa and Illinois in 2017. The final New Farmer U will be in Wisconsin Dells, April 27-29, 2018. For details and registration, see NewFarmerU.org.

Jennifer Nelson coordinates beginning farmer programs for MOSES.
First compliance date for FSMA this month, enforcement in 2019

By Bailey Webster

The first compliance date for most produce under the Produce Safety Rule, which is part of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA), is Jan. 26, 2018. However, the FDA has said that there will be no inspections or enforcement until 2019. The agency is in a period of education and outreach right now, allowing farmers time to understand and comply with the rule without concern about penalties. This is a good time to study up on the rule and understand how FSMA affects you and your farm.

The Produce Safety Alliance is the definitive resource for FSMA. See producesafetyalliance.cornell.edu. MOSES also has put together a webpage with resources: mosesorganic.org/farming/farming-topics/food-safety.

The first thing growers will want to do is understand whether their farm is covered by the rule, not covered by the rule, or eligible to be qualified exempt. See the chart below to understand which category your farm falls under.

### Not Covered

Farms that are not covered by the rule have no legal obligation to do anything for FSMA. All growers should follow basic food safety practices, of course. To learn best practices, consider taking a class. MOSES offers two: the Organic University all-day course Feb. 22 in La Crosse, Wis. provides an overview of food safety, GAP, and FSMA rules and marketing opportunities for farms that achieve certification. See OrganicUniversity.org. We’re also offering a food safety workshop the Friday prior to New Farmer U April 27 in Wisconsin Dells. This workshop takes you step-by-step through developing a food safety plan for your farm. See mosesorganic.org/events/food-safety-workshop.

### Covered

Farms that are covered by the rule must have one person on staff who has successfully completed a Produce Safety Alliance (PSA) Grower Training Course or equivalent training. Growers who have completed the seven-hour PSA Grower Training Course are eligible to receive a certificate from the Association of Food and Drug Officials (AFDO). This certificate does not expire, and belongs to the individual, not the farm. If that employee should leave the farm, another person from the farm would have to attend the training and receive a certificate.

The Produce Safety Alliance website lists upcoming grower trainings in every state. See producesafetyalliance.cornell.edu. Farming/farming-topics/food-safety. Covered farms must also comply with the requirements of the FDA Produce Safety Rule. (www.fda.gov/Food/GuidanceRegulation/FSMA/ucm334114.htm) Inspections and enforcement will be handled differently depending on the state, and will not go into effect until 2019 at the earliest.

### Qualified Exempt

Farms that are qualified exempt must keep sales records documenting that they do not reach the minimum sales requirement for covered produce. Qualified exempt farms must also notify consumers of the complete business address of the farm where the produce is grown, harvested, packed, and held. These requirements are covered in Sections 112.6 and 112.7 of the Produce Safety Rule.

### State University Representatives

While the requirements of the Produce Safety Rule are federal, enforcement falls to states. Because the FDA is in a period of education and outreach, states are still in the process of planning their enforcement strategies, which could vary by state.

For questions specific to your Midwestern state, contact your University representative:

**Illinois:** Mosbah M. Kushad, Ph.D. University of Illinois 217-244-5691 or kushad@uiuc.edu

**Iowa:** Angela M. Shaw, Ph.D. Iowa State University Food Safety Extension 515-294-0868 or angelaml@iastate.edu

**Minnesota:** Annalisa Hultberg University of Minnesota Extension 612-625-1951 or hultb006@umn.edu

**North Dakota:** Julie Garden-Robinson 701-231-7187 or Julie.Garden-Robinson@ndsu.edu

**South Dakota:** Rhoda Burrows Group GAP for Food Safety 605-394-2236 or rhoda.burrows@sdstate.edu

**Wisconsin:** Barbara H. Ingham, Ph.D. University of Wisconsin-Madison 608-263-7383 or bingham@wisc.edu

Bailey Webster is a certified Produce Safety Alliance trainer, and can answer produce safety questions. Reach her in the MOSES office at 715-778-5775 or email bailey@mosesorganic.org.
**Food activist points out path to more inclusive food system**

By Bailey Webster

At the opening of her 2013 TED talk, LaDonna Redmond tells the audience, “I am an activist. I have always been an activist, and I always will be an activist.” She became a food activist, in particular, when her young son was diagnosed with food allergies. He couldn’t eat eggs, shellfish, dairy products, or peanuts. Like any mother, she wanted what was best for her son. So she started looking for healthy, organic food that he could eat. What she discovered was that it was easier to get a handgun than a tomato in her neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. She highlights this comparison as a warning—lack of access to healthy food is as much a public health emergency as easy access to handguns.

Redmond will address the issues of equity and justice in the nation’s food system during a workshop at the 2018 MOSES Organic Farming Conference (11 a.m. Friday, Feb. 23). She plans to challenge participants to examine their own positions in the food system to explore ways to build a more diverse and inclusive food system.

Back in her Chicago neighborhood, Redmond set out to increase healthy food access by converting vacant lots into urban gardens, where she grew vegetables with and for her community. She also organized farmers markets, drawing farmers in from the surrounding area.

Seven years ago, Redmond moved to Minneapolis and is now the education and outreach coordinator at Seward Co-op. She has continued her food justice work there, focusing on diversity and inclusion as the co-op recently expanded to a second location in southeast Minneapolis.

The most rewarding part of her work is that she gets to make people happy by helping them find their way and identifying fair solutions to food access issues, she said. “Happy people do things they hadn’t thought they could do, get answers that they didn’t think they could get.”

What people don’t understand about food justice, Redmond explained, is that “it’s about dignity—not just about giving people handouts or SNAP benefits. It’s about the right to food, but also about the right to feed oneself. We’re talking about eliminating wealth inequalities.”

If she could change one thing about the food system for the greatest impact, she would make sure that there were no hungry people. There is enough food to feed everybody; we just have to find the political will to move it around, and make sure that nobody is hungry, she added.

In food justice work, Redmond said there is an area of concern around the use of the word “they.” There is an “idea that people are speaking for anonymous groups of people, in hopes that they receive some fairness or equity without really investing in a dialogue with them,” she said. “We need to become more curious in all of our assumptions. When we ask questions, we become more curious. People operate out of their assumptions, and I wish they would check their assumptions more.”

Redmond recalled having had a heated argument with a farmer she worked with in Chicago about bok choy, of all things. This farmer had been used to selling “boutique” vegetables—specialty varieties and sizes that are popular with fancy restaurants. The farmer had brought bok choy (a variety of Chinese cabbage) to the market, and couldn’t sell it. Meanwhile, people were asking him for regular head cabbage. He was frustrated that no one would buy his bok choy, and felt that he knew what people “should” want. Redmond explained to him that “you can’t assume that people are picking something because they don’t know any better. Who told you that was better for them? We have deep assumptions around what we think people know and what they ought to do, and we get into trouble with that.”

On another occasion, one of her vendors ran out of spinach at the market. Redmond stirred some Swiss chard and told people it tasted like spinach, and handed out samples. People liked it when they were able to try it. There was dignity in their ability to choose, rather than just being told what to do. People should have the right to make their own choices, and shouldn’t be judged based on them, she said.

Redmond believes farmers can be part of the solution to food justice issues.

Farmers aren’t necessarily going to change the crisis of the food system, but they can change hearts and minds by having conversations where they are,” she explained. She went on to say that farmers need to unlearn the system of independence, and recognize that we’re dependent on one another. We can’t ignore diversity.

As organic farmers know, if you ignore diversity on your farm, you run into all sorts of problems and imbalances. The same is true of human diversity. “People of color are growing food all over the country, and they are really bringing it!” Unfortunately, people of color are often left out of the conversation around food justice because they aren’t in positions of power, she added.

Redmond challenges farmers in predominantly white rural areas who may despair of ever having a diverse community to find diversity in the people around them. “What’s underneath the label of ‘whiteness,’ and how has it been used to erase the ethnicity of European descendants?”

She suggests beginning on the path to social justice by understanding your own cultural positions and assumptions. “You can only be authentic when you examine yourself, come from a place of authenticity, and come from a place of deep knowing (of yourself).” There are people of diverse backgrounds in every community, and it’s valuable to understand all sorts of diversity, she added.

For those wanting to take it a step further, Redmond recommends traveling to new places. “Go to Chicago, have some interactions with folks of different cultures, urban farmers, Latino producers and workers, etc. Migrant workers are really out there hustling!” She acknowledges that it takes a tremendous amount of courage to begin interacting across cultures, but “as long as there is no ill will and good intentions, you can get pretty far. Assume you are getting together with people of diverse backgrounds in every community, and it’s valuable to understand all sorts of diversity, she added.

For those wanting to take it a step further, Redmond recommends traveling to new places. “Go to Chicago, have some interactions with folks of different cultures, urban farmers, Latino producers and workers, etc. Migrant workers are really out there hustling!” She acknowledges that it takes a tremendous amount of courage to begin interacting across cultures, but “as long as there is no ill will and good intentions, you can get pretty far. Assume you are getting together with people of diverse backgrounds in every community, and it’s valuable to understand all sorts of diversity, she added.

“Cultivating curiosity is the cornerstone of racial equity,” Redmond said. “Unlearning unconscious bias is really having curiosity about your own assumptions.”

Bailey Webster, MOSES Events Coordinator, manages workshops for the MOSES Conference.
Book provides thorough look at role of fungi beneath our feet
By Matt Leavitt

I’ll admit I am a bit of a mushroom enthusiast. There is nothing more satisfying than bringing home a bounty of delicious, free harvest after a long hike in the woods. The mushrooms change with the seasons and are utterly fascinating (above and below ground). My dog-eared copy of Mushrooms Demystified by David Aurora always accompanied my forage forays. In that way, Michael Phillips’ new book, Mycorrhizal Planet, already captured my interest before I even opened it. Upon reflection, it is a wealth of detailed scientific information on the important ways that fungi and plant systems interact, focusing mostly on the below-ground communities of fungi.

It becomes abundantly clear, even in the first few pages, that Phillips has done an extensive review of scientific literature, but includes enough real-world humility, humor, and Bob Marley quotations to keep you afloat during particularly dense passages. Phillips is a holistic apple farmer (when he’s not reading scientific papers) and his observations and experiments are so beautifully detailed and written that they have a way of pulling you into the woods.

He lays it out best in Chapter 6 when he writes, “There’s even a chapter devoted to edible mycorrhizal mushrooms for the amateur mushroom forager or the serious mushrooms collector.” But really, every chapter is a gold mine of knowledge, to do the same. There’s even a chapter devoted to edible mycorrhizal mushrooms for the amateur mushroom enthusiast; just right for me!

I’d like to start with Chapter 1, which Phillips titles “Heaven is under our feet.” There’s a whole book’s worth of information here, but I’d like to focus on the first two key points he makes. First, the author quickly hones in on the amazing interaction of plant cells colonized by arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi which aid the plant in water and nutrient uptake. Plants direct 20 percent of their photosynthetic sugars and 40 percent of all photosynthetic production to their mycorrhizal partners in this grand natural bargain. Amazingly, mycorrhizal fungi can even confer disease-resistance and immunity to the host plant. This holistic synergy between plants and fungi gives a unique window into the evolving web of life on earth. Second, the book detailed in the early chapters: that plant roots and fungi are all intimately interconnected in every landscape we come in contact with; from the apple tree to the alder tree; from the prairie to the desert; from the jungles to the tree branches in winter, further emphasizing the synergistic approach to living systems that Phillips finds so unifying and fascinating.

The mycorrhizal threads that colonize plant root hairs wind their way between plant cells and within plant cells enlarging the surface-area of the plant by 10 to 100 times, and act as the “normal nutrient-absorbing organs of the majority of plant species.” Phillips discusses the different types of mycorrhizal fungi, their life cycles, role in soil nutrient dynamics, and how plant cells absorb dying fungal networks.

Chapter 2 covers the role of fungi in healthy plant metabolism. Not only do fungi aid in making primary nutrients available to plant roots, but secondary metabolites can help plants boost photosynthesis and withstand environmental stress, diseases, and pests—they even aid in plant signaling. Fungi are intimately intertwined in every step of plant functioning.

Chapter 3 picks up the thread of Chapter 1 by diving farther into the underground interaction of the soil food web, with the mycorrhizal interaction with plant roots playing a primary role. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present a how-to guide of building a long-term nutrient reserve by activating the fungal network to work in concert with your farming system. These chapters also provide more practical solutions towards building an active mycorrhizal soil in different farming environments.

There’s even a chapter devoted to edible mycorrhizal mushrooms for the amateur mushroom enthusiast; just right for me! My only criticism is the frequency of focus shifting from the most convincing emphasis of the book detailed in the early chapters: that plant roots and fungi are all intimately interconnected at every level of functioning. When chapters range from a discussion of mycorrhizal inoculant products to types of soil carbon, from hugelkultur mounds to phosphorous types and testing, they can leave one struggling to hang on.

Awareness is growing, both in the scientific and farming communities, of systems-based thinking vs. reductive analysis and the natural balance and wisdom in regenerative agricultural practices. Plants are healthy and thriving when the entire soil system is working together as it evolved to function. Though the scale of farming practices detailed in Phillips’ book is decidedly smaller and focused on hand labor, the challenge remains to apply these awareness principals on a large scale. If more farmers had the same reverence for the small but powerful interactions happening beneath our feet and tractors, we certainly have more progression towards a healthy soil future. Michael Phillips is operating on a fungal wavelength and invites us all, with humor and a wealth of knowledge, to do the same. As with many books, I could have read this not once or twice but many times, and each reading would provide new insights and have me questioning the way I think about my backyard or the world at large.

Matt Leavitt recently joined MOSES as an organic specialist. He has a master’s in agronomy and plant genetics, and was a consultant for Albert Lea Seed prior to joining the staff at MOSES.

Michael Phillips presents Successful Biological Orcharding at this year’s Organic University course Feb. 22, just prior to the 2018 MOSES Organic Farming Conference in La Crosse, Wis. The course is $180 through Feb. 8. Seats are limited and filling quickly. Register at OrganicUniversity.org.
their partnership is heading. They discuss things as they come up, making decisions as they go. They seem to get on very well. “It is in both our interests for this to work out,” Bickford claimed. “I want out and John wants in. If we work together, and succeed, we’ll both get what we want.”

“The farm would have no real direction without John’s input,” Bickford said. “He has a real opportunity to make a huge impact on the local food and bakery industry, as well as in land conservation. This could all be wildly successful.” But, he also admits that he has had to invest a lot in new equipment, and if the Wepkings decide to bail, he’ll be sitting on a lot of stuff that he doesn’t want to run.

Wepking chimed in that it has taken him a while to embrace the concept of larger-scale farming. “At first I was a little embarrassed to tell people that I worked on such a big farm,” he said. “But now I understand the value of farming at a larger scale—the conservation benefits, the presence in the community. I’m really proud now.”

Both farmers are thrilled with their so-far successful partnership, but know the road is not easy for those looking to transition on or off a farm. The economics work against it, for it to work.” And, he said, a giving up thinking about buying land and think instead opportunities like that where new farmers can learn must be made.

The pair was a part of the MOSES Farmer-To-Farmer Mentoring Program, and see opportunities like that where new farmers can learn directly from established farmers as critical to this transition in a way that can be a model for others, but agree that they’re not there yet. Several more years of decisions and investments must be made.

The 29th Annual MOSES Organic Farming Conference takes place Feb. 22-24 in La Crosse, Wis. The event features 66 workshops, 11 all-day Organic University courses, and more than 170 exhibitors—all the stuff you need to recharge your battery for the 2018 farming season! Conference registration is $225 through Feb. 8; the on-site price is $300. Conference details and registration are online at mosesorganic.org/conference.

Farmers can dig deeper into a farming topic with an Organic University all-day course Thursday, Feb. 22. The 11 courses are each $180 through Feb. 8; on-site price is $220 for unfilled courses. See the course descriptions at OrganicUniversity.org.

Wisconsin Farmers Union has a long history of developing the leadership and cooperation skills of farm, rural, and urban youth. At the 2018 MOSES Conference, the staff of Farmers Union Camp at WFU Kamp Kenwood will lead educational activities in Teen Space. Youth ages 12-18 are invited to join staff and special guest presenters to make new friends, have some fun, and learn about leadership, cooperatives, and more. Follow the teens on social media with #MOSESYouth to learn about their adventures in education while participating in your own.

MOSES partners with Renewing the Countryside and Land Stewardship Project to offer a weekend training for beginning farmers April 27-29 in Wisconsin Dells. The event includes 90-minute workshops on topics such as holistic farm management, organic certification, farm law, land access, and more. There’s also a panel presentation featuring experienced farmers explaining what worked well and didn’t work in their early years, plus activities and time for networking and connecting with local service providers. Cost for the training, lodging, and meals is just $125, with a $25 discount for farm partners. See newfarmeru.org.

Farm Finances Workshop
Two of the authors of Fearless Farm Finances, Dr. Craig Chase, Iowa State University, and Paul Dietmann, Compeer Financial, will teach an all-day workshop on basic farm financial management April 27, 2018, just prior to New Farmer U in Wisconsin Dells. The workshop is $50 and includes lunch and a copy of Fearless Farm Finances. See details at mosesorganic.org/fearless-farm-finances-workshop.

MOSES offer a workshop to help produce growers develop a food safety plan for their farm. The all-day workshop takes place Friday, April 27, 2018, just prior to New Farmer U in Wisconsin Dells. The workshop is $50 and includes lunch and a binder with food safety recommendations and room for storing the farm’s food safety plan. Cost to attend is $50. Register online at mosesorganic.org/food-safety-workshop or call 715-778-5775.

Matt Leavitt has joined the MOSES team as an organic specialist. He has a master’s degree in agronomy from the University of Minnesota, and has worked the past eight years as an organic agronomist with Albert Lea Seed, helping farmers select seed best suited to their operations.

Leavitt is fielding farmers’ calls on the MOSES Organic Answer Line (715-778-5775). He’s also coordinating a project to train NRCS conservation staff about conservation practices appropriate for organic systems. He’ll staff the MOSES booth at the 2018 MOSES Conference. Reach him through the Organic Answer Line or matt@mosesorganic.org.

Two new members have been elected to the MOSES Board of Directors: Charlie Johnson of Johnson Farms in Madison, S.D., and Sara Tedeschi of Dog Hollow Farm in Ferryville, Wis. They replace Carmen Fernholz and Melinda Hemmelgarn whose terms ended in November. Johnson and Tedeschi each have a three-year term. Johnson, the 2013 MOSES Organic Farmer of the Year, operates 2,400 acres of certified organic corn, oats, soybeans, and alfalfa with his brothers and a son. They also have a 200-head cow-calf operation. He served on the board of the Northern Plains Sustainable Ag Society for six years, leading it for three. He is active in Dakota Rural Action, South Dakota Farmers Union, and local politics. MOSA Certified Organic recently hired Tedeschi as a certification specialist, bringing her “full circle”—she was MOSAs first certifier and was there when MOSES was created in the 1990s. She worked for years as Organic Valley’s outreach and education manager. She also has been active in farm-to-school and farm policy initiatives.
In Her Boots Podcast

The latest MOSES “In Her Boots” podcast features Kara O’Connor, government relations director for Wisconsin Farmers Union. Lisa Kivirist, In Her Boots coordinator, interviews O’Connor about how she became an advocate for family farms, and her advice for others who want to champion family farmers.

Recent podcast episodes featured April Prusia of Dorothy’s Range in Blanchardville, Wis., talking about how she got into raising heritage hogs, and how she added farm-to-table dinners to showcase her farm’s pork. New episodes post every other week through the winter. The In Her Boots podcast is available on iTunes, Stitcher, and at messeorganic.org/in-her-boots-podcast.

Progressive Farmer Tax Credit in Minnesota

Beginning Farmer Tax Credit in Minnesota

Minnesota is the first state to provide incentives for selling farmland to beginning farmers thanks to a new law effective Jan. 1, 2018. The law provides tax credits for the rent or sale of farmland or a variety of farm assets to beginning farmers. Details are online at www.mda.state.mn.us/grants/bftc.aspx.

The Central Minnesota Young Farmers Coalition, which worked to pass the law, hosts a celebration Thursday, Jan. 25 from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at Bad Weather Brewing Company in St. Paul. See www.evenfhrite.com/bftc-tax-credit-celebration-tickets-41113031183.

Healthy Fields & Farm Economies Act

A bipartisan bill introduced in the House of Representatives by John Faso (R-NY) and Mario Ducey (R-FL) would provide funding for in-depth monitoring, reporting and identifying measurable outcomes of farmers enrolled in conservation programs. The Environmental Quality Incentives Programs (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) would all fall under the expanded evaluation framework.

This proposed legislation would provide the USDA with data to quantify the environmental effectiveness of these voluntary conservation programs, increase transparency to taxpayers & legislators, and identify improvements to existing program. This bill is currently supported by leading conservation advocacy groups.

Grants for Farmer-Veterans

The application period for the Farmer Veteran Coalition’s 2018 Farmer Veteran Fellowship Fund runs from Feb. 1 to March 1. The fund is a small grant program for veterans who are in their beginning years of farming or ranching. It gives money to third-party vendors for items the veteran has identified will make a crucial difference in the launch of their farm business. See details at www.farmvetco.org/fvfellowship.

Survey for Veterans

Teteh Effion, a U.S. military veteran and graduate student at North Carolina A&T University is researching veterans’ intention to adopt farming as a means of coping with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He’s asking veterans to take this survey: www.surveymonkey.com/r/6FL28Y7T.

Illinois Sustainable Ag Award

The Bishops of PrairiErth Farm in Atlanta, Ill., the 2017 MOSES Organic Farmers of the Year, just received another farming award. The Illinois Department of Agriculture has given the Bishops the annual R.J. Vollmer Award for Sustainable Agriculture.

Specialty Crop Webinars

North Dakota State University Extension Service presents “Field to Fork,” free webinars about safely growing, transporting, and processing specialty crops. The first one-hour webinar Feb. 14, 2018 covers buying seeds. The series continues weekly through April 25. Other topics include organic weed management, cottage food law, and safe food sampling. See www.ag.ndsu.edu/fieldtofork.

Minnesota Organic Research Fund

A new endowment fund hosted by longtime University of Minnesota Extension agent Jim Stordahl encourages farmer-led organic research projects in the northwest region of Minnesota. The fund also provides scholarships for farmers from the region to attend organic conferences. For more information, contact Nancy Frosacker at frosa001@umn.edu or 701-212-2471. Gifts can be sent to University of Minnesota Extension Development, 9 Coffey Hall, 1420 Eckles Ave, St Paul, Minn., 55108.

Awards for Johnny’s Selected Seeds

Two organic seed varieties from Johnny’s Selected Seeds have been named All-America Selections: Red Ember cayenne pepper and Valentine grape tomato. See details at www.johnnyseeds.com/about-us/news/in-the-news.html.

Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship

Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship is an accredited national training program that provides a structure of support for the transfer of knowledge, skills, and farms from current and retiring organic dairy farmers to the next generation.
For Sale: 32’ by 96’ Gothic style hoop house, still standing, very good condition, no plastic $4,500. Walks in cooler, 9’ by 8’ with CoolBoost technology. Farm very efficient, used for organic produce. $800 1/2HP irrigation pump/pulls $250. Charles Johnson 618-748-0459. Zeeland, MI. 49464, charles.johnson112@gmail.com


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Elaine Ingham “Soil Foodweb” Workshop  
Jan. 30 - Feb. 1 | $400 | Sioux Falls, S.D.  
Dr. Elaine Ingham explains the wonders of soil life, and how to enhance the life in the soil. OCA, SD #1: 605-649-6327

Supporting Farmers in Stressful Times Workshop  
Jan. 31 | 9 a.m. - noon or 1:30 - 4:30 p.m. | Free | Marshall, Minn.  
Stress factors are on the rise for Minnesota farmers. Learn how to offer your support at this workshop. 651-201-6012

Webinar: Melody Medley  
Jan. 31 | 1 p.m. | Free | Online  
Learn how organic production practices may improve yield and fruit quality and decrease food safety risk in melons. Visit mosesc.org/community for more details.

MOA Conference 2018  
Jan. 30 - Feb. 2 | $125 | Minneapolis, Minn.  
Attend the Minnesota Organic Association conference. Visit mosesc.org/community for more details.

SFA Forage Council Winter Meeting  
Feb. 1 | 9 a.m. - 3 p.m. | Staples, Minn.  
Topics include grazing management, cover crops, and integrating livestock into cropping systems. SFA: 844-922-5273

Organic Grains Conference  
Feb. 1 | 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. | Champaign, Ill.  
Explore tools to strengthen the organic grains industry. The Land Connection: 217-840-2128

Farmland Ownership & Rental Workshop  
Feb. 2 | 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. | Free | Madison, Wis.  
The conference is based on farmer to farmer networking and information sharing. Cara Strader: 608-204-3170

Lake Agassiz Free Hydroponics Workshop  
Feb. 3 | 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. | Free | Kensington, Minn.  
Learn the basics of hydroponic vegetable production in a hands-on workshop. SFA: 218-280-5253

SFA Annual Conference  
Feb. 10 | 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. | St. Joseph, Minn.  
The conference sessions will be tailored around the wishes of the SFA community. SFA: 844-922-5273

Wine Grape Soil Fertility Seminar with Neal Kinsey  
Feb. 12 - 14 | 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. | Napa, Calif.  
An unforgettable three days of intense learning from author and agronomist Neal Kinsey. Aces USA: 800-355-5313

Webinar: Farm Bill 101 for Livestock Farmers & Ranchers  
Feb. 14 | 9 a.m. - 1 p.m. | Free | Online  
Learn about key issues being considered as part of the 2018 Farm Bill. Visit mosesc.org/community for more details.

MOSES Organic Farming Conference & Organic University  
Feb. 14 - 17 | $600 | Corvallis, Ore.  
The program features workshops, 2 keynotes, round-table discussions, and 6 all-day intensive. NOFA-VT: 802-434-4122

Local Food Fair  
Feb. 17 | 11 a.m. - 3 p.m. | Stevens Point, Wis.  
The program features workshops, 2 keynotes, round-table discussions, and 6 all-day intensive. NOFA-VT: 802-434-4122

Webinar: Adaptive, High-Stock Density Grazing  
Feb. 17 | 11 a.m. - 3 p.m. | Free | Online  
The presenter is Dr. Elaine Ingham, USDA-NRCS Soil Health Division. Visit mosesc.org/community for more details.

Supporting Farmers in Stressful Times Workshop  
Feb. 21 | 9 a.m. - noon or 1:30 - 4:30 p.m. | Free | Austin, Minn.  
Stress factors are on the rise for Minnesota farmers. Learn how to offer your support at this workshop. 651-201-6012

MOSES Organic Farming Conference & Organic University  
Feb. 22 - Feb. 24 | $125 | Madison, Wis.  
Learn valuable information from industry-leading experts. Visit mosesc.org/community for more details.

High Plains Organic Farming Conference  
Feb. 27 - 28 | $50 | Osage, Wyo.  
Visit mosesc.org/community for more details.

Webinar: Planning Ahead for Turkeys  
Feb. 28 - 29 | $50 | Fergus Falls, Minn.  
Expert advice on how to raise turkeys on pasture. Visit mosesc.org/community for more details.

Organic Farming Research Foundation Benefit Luncheon  
Mar. 6 | $80 | Ashland, Calif.  
From the Natural Products Expo West at the Ashland Convention Center in Ashland, California. ORRF: 831-426-6606

Land Trust Conference  
Mar. 10 - 11 | $50 | Onalaska, Wis.  
Presentations and round-table discussions on priority topics to propel land conservation forward in Wisconsin. 608-251-9131

Supporting Farmers in Stressful Times Workshop  
Mar. 16 | 9 a.m. - noon or 1:30 - 4:30 p.m. | Free | Online  
Stress factors are on the rise for Minnesota farmers. Learn how to offer your support at this workshop. 651-201-6012