

HARVEST Foodservice Journal

Connecting sustainable food systems with the foodservice industry

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TRAINING TO MEET DEMAND



Minnesota Food Association Executive Director Glen Hill, third from left, led a tour of the non-profit organization's facilities and farmland in May. The MFA trains immigrants Certified Organic farming methods and helps them build a successful business selling to various markets.

By Mike Mitchelson

There's more to farming than working the land. The Minnesota Food Association's Big River Farms Training Program sets immigrant farmers on the road to a sustainable, profitable business by tapping wholesale markets.

About 10 miles northwest of Stillwater, Minn., in May Township, tucked within a ring of forest, rests 60 acres of farmland that has a unique history. The land was once part of a large farm owned by Morgan May in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the man after whom the township was named. The land is now owned by the Wilder Foundation, a St. Paul, Minn.-based non-profit, as part of its 900-acre Wilder Forest wildlife sanctuary.

Those particular 60 acres, however, are leased to another non-profit organization, the Minnesota Food Association (MFA). Since the time May owned the farmland, immigrants have worked it. May employed Swedes and Norwegians. Now, Hmong, Latino, Somali and other minorities are learning Certified Organic farming techniques as part of the MFA's Big River Farms Training Program.

Many of the participating immigrants were farmers in their native countries, or have farmed in the United States. In addition to farming, the Big River program trains them in sound business practices and helps them develop markets for their produce. "This is not a gardening program," said Glen

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Tracing your food's lineage: Not a new idea

By Jonathan Locke

Locavorism trumpets origin, but the pedigree of ingredients—from here and abroad—has always been a selling point.

For those of you who have the great good fortune not to follow food trends, it may come as a surprise that you can now trace your macaroni and cheese back to its source.

A bit of history: We are all acquainted with the practice of menu co-branding. TGI Friday's was one of the great early practitioners—how many years has it been since they introduced their first Jack Daniel's sauce? Must be close to 20, by now, and it's still there, toiling away and making money. It was a brilliant, obvious idea: take a booze with high name recognition and a semi-cult following, get a license for the name and the use, and make a bunch of stuff with it. Easy. Worked. And it was vastly better for the integrity of the menu than selling Pepsi a

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Mike Mitchelson
Managing Editor

‘Diversity’ the word for farming, job satisfaction

America’s farmers are getting old. According to the USDA’s 2007 Census of Agriculture, which included ranches and farms, their average age increased nearly two years, to 57.1, since the last census in 2002. Also, the number of farms continue to decline. Although that has slowed considerably—rounded estimates remain at 2.2 million in this survey—the number of farms declined by 90 between 2008 and 2009.

This matters to us in the foodservice industry for obvious reasons. Still, we see greater interest in agriculture and read more stories about a new generation diving into it, whether it’s on the ranch, the field or aquaculture. Nearly all those stories include the themes of “sustainability” and “organic.”

But many of those stories we hear and read are like this: “MBA gives up corporate life to grow organic food”—food they likely experienced at an up-scale restaurant with the sourcing efforts listed on the menu. And all that is good. It really is. But that isn’t the majority who are the new growers. Another finding in the USDA survey is farming’s increasing diversity. The number of Asian, American Indian, and Hispanic farmers grew measurably from 2002 to 2007, and the greatest increase was in the number of women “principal operators” in farming, up 30 percent to more than 306,000.

(It’s important to note that, according to the census, the vast majority of farmers in the United States—60 percent—claim farm income of less than \$10,000.)

Reflecting this trend is the Minnesota Food Association, which trains immigrant farmers in a Certified Organic agriculture program. As you will read in the story off the front page, it’s not just lessons in how to work the land,

but how to build a client list (including wholesale accounts) and a successful business. It’s a great organization. There are similar operations across the country, but none as comprehensive, leading farmers to their own land and with business agreements in place.

The MFA’s executive director, Glen Hill, is a story himself, as is his wife, Shoko, a native of Japan. They met in Thailand at a meeting concerning the welfare of refugees. She worked for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, him for SWISSAID, a foundation that provided money to grass-roots community development programs (which included agricultural training) across the globe. He was based in Thailand for seven years and Burma for five, the bulk of his time in agricultural development with small communities. After they met, she went off to Croatia, Pakistan and Afghanistan. “But we somehow maintained a relationship, and four years later we were married (in 2001),” Hill said. They lived and worked in Burma, returning to the U.S. and the Midwest in 2006. Hill began his position at the MFA in March 2007.

It’s an interesting journey that led Hill from a kid growing up in suburban Chicago, to Montana for college, to his career abroad. During college, Hill’s summer jobs were on Montana ranches, and he carefully observed how the owners managed the operation. “I started out thinking I would be a wildlife behavioral scientist and follow animals around in the woods and make documentaries, then I realized that the animals can do quite well by themselves if we just leave them alone,” Hill said with a laugh. “If you’re really concerned about the animals, you’ve got to work with people.”

His experience on three different ranches revealed different methods of land management. “All the ranches I worked on were wildlife havens,” Hill said. “The landowner had a lot of control over whether the wildlife would thrive or not.”

All of that sparked his interest in ag-

riculture, development, land and natural resource management, and the Peace Corp was what took him out of the country. It’s often a serendipitous route that lands a person in what appears to be a perfect gig for their skill set. With Hill at the helm since 2007, and Big River Farms Training Program formally established in 2008, the Minnesota Food Association has become a leader in local efforts to build a more sustainable food system.

Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction often depends on whether or not a person is being challenged or presented opportunities for growth, either intellectually or moving up the career ladder (or, in the best of cases, both). One can draw some parallels between our overall food system and a certain segment of the foodservice industry—those handling the food.

As a country, we lack diversity in our food—what is grown, and how its

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The IFSS: Linking global food issues to foodservice

The first International Foodservice Sustainability Symposium took a bold step to link global food production issues to everyday foodservice operations.

“The first year is always challenging,” said Cindy Railing, co-organizer of the first International Foodservice Sustainability Symposium, held May 24-25 in Chicago. “It’s risky.”

But if the goal of a first show is to succeed enough to have a good reason for a second, the IFSS pulled it off, drawing food industry pros and journalists from across the country (and a few from other continents). The speaker line-up alone rivaled those at the National Restaurant Association Show the IFSS immediately followed in Chicago. “We wanted to put some movers and shakers together, to see how different (topics) come together,” said IFSS co-organizer Christopher Koetke, the executive director for the Kendall College School of Culinary Arts in Chicago.

This conference had some “nuts and bolts” aspects to achieving sustainability (building layout, energy use and marketing seminars, plus a discussion panel of leaders who have introduced sustainability initiatives into their business), but the dominant speakers delivered broad-themed presentations. A look at the list: Writer, farmer, former USDA National Organic Standards Board member and current Leopold Center fellow Fred Kirschenmann led of Day 1 with “Is our Agriculture System Sustainable?”

Day 2 was highlighted by award-winning Australian author and science journalist Julian Cribb, with “The Coming Famine: Can we stop the train?” Cribb was followed immediately by Roger Beachy, who was the first director for the USDA’s Institute for Food and Agriculture, and his presentation, “Heading Off The Coming Famine: Where do we go from here?”

The big-picture discussions are important, Koetke said. “We need education with action, otherwise we don’t know why we do it,” he said. “These are macro-realizations that will drive deci-



Kendall College School of Culinary Arts Executive Director Christopher Koetke.



Former USDA Institute for Food and Agriculture Director Roger Beachy.

sion making. As individuals, we have to watch what’s happening in the world.”

And, also as foodservice professionals, attention must be given to global events. “Chefs are more and more interested in hearing it,” Koetke said. “We’re all connected.”

Perhaps most interesting about the show was how some presentations challenged common themes in the sustainability movement, namely that genetic research and modification is antithetical.

Lending some insight to the sustainability discussion was Beachy, who is also a member of the National Academy of Sciences, and served as chief scientist of the USDA in 2010. He built upon Cribb’s keynote speech, “The Coming Famine.” (Look for future coverage of Cribb’s presentation on the Harvest website, www.harvestfoodservice.com).

While Cribb detailed the shortfalls of current agricultural practices, the potential global disasters waiting, and possible solutions and opportunities, Beachy made the case that scientific advancements and continued research—including genetic modification—can and must be part of the sustainable movement.

To begin his presentation, Beachy stated three items:

1. Sustainability is required in the face of increases in global population, change in climate and consumer demand.

2. Sustainability in food production can be defined scientifically—it is measurable.

3. Science and technology play a role in developing sustainable practices when intensive crop production (is needed) to achieve global food security.

The problem, Beachy said, is that current global annual agriculture production increase is at 1.4 percent. “We need 1.7 percent,” he said. “The gap of 0.3 percent every year (compounding) becomes more critical.”

Climate change makes increasing production more difficult. “Climate change requires plant breeders to study (plant) varieties,” he said. “Scientists—even genetic engineers—are required to tackle the problem.”

Beachy then went through what “sustainable agriculture” means and what it should do. Sustainable agriculture, Beachy said, are practices that will enhance the ecosystem of agriculture, namely by improving the fertility of soil (maintaining good organic matter, mineral content and microbial balance); reduce the use of chemical inputs, including chemical insecticides, fungicides, nematocides, etc.; and maintain water quality.

Sustainable agriculture must also be economically sustainable. “The producer derives an income that keeps him/her involved,” Beachy said, particularly since the vast majority of farmers—in some surveys, up to 80 percent of the 2.2 million farmers—earn about \$10,000 or less of their annual income from their farm.

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Hill, the executive director for the MFA. That is the first message conveyed to potential candidates applying to join the program. “You are growing products that you are going to sell. It could be \$500, or it could be \$50,000—that distinction we don’t make. But (the question is), ‘Are you planning to grow vegetables to sell that are going to go into the food system?’”

It’s a serious question, as is the one regarding labor. Most of the farmers applying have a full-time job, and must consider how they will make time themselves and bring in help. Many involve family members in the business.

The answers to those questions are important not only for the farmer, but the MFA. Big River Farms is a serious organic food supplier (and fundraising mechanism) with 160 members in its Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, and it sells produce to eight wholesale markets, plus restaurants like Savories Bistro in Stillwater, Minn., and to St. Paul Schools, the sec-

ond largest independent school district in Minnesota. In 2010, total gross sales of produce for Big River’s CSA and wholesale accounts was \$95,000. It’s those connections to various markets that help give farmers in the Big River program a very good chance at success when they head out on their own.

The next wave of farmers

The MFA was founded in 1983 with the goal to help build a sustainable, local food system in Minnesota. The MFA began training immigrant farmers in 1998, and formally started the Big River Farms Training Program in 2007. It’s a three-year program teaching Certified Organic agricultural methods, taking in and “graduating” about five farmers per season. First-year farmers are allowed to farm only a quarter-acre plot, Hill said. “Generally, they’re not happy with that, but we’re trying to teach efficiency, and what you think you can grow on four or five acres, we’re going to teach you how to grow it on one or two. And we’re go-

ing to do it in an ecological, sustainable way.”

For example, Hill explained, experienced farmers from different cultures might till the land and simply broadcast (toss widely) seeds, “and what comes up, comes up.” Through the program, they learn row planting, which leads to higher production and easier weed control, among other practices. Further, heavy chemical use in agriculture is not unique to the United States, and the alternative must be taught.

There is a lot to those lessons in farming, and particularly for the organic program taught by Big River Farms—namely, no pesticides or herbicides are used and no fertilizers, other than organic compost and the nutrients restored to the soil via cover cropping. All of the practices result in rich, fertile soil, but farmers must take the time to maintain the field and crops. “They need to keep weeding under control,” Hill said, which means, using their hands to do so. “And

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Farmers in training readied their plot for planting this spring within the Minnesota Food Association’s 60 acres of farmland near Stillwater, Minn. The Association’s Big River Farms Training Program lasts three years.

then (the question is), can you harvest in quantity.”

Farmers rent the land for \$350 per acre, prorated (that quarter acre only costs \$87.50). The fee includes four hours use per season of the MFA’s tractor, the MFA’s fencing, liability insurance coverage, basic composting and cover cropping, irrigation and any water testing fees, portable toilet, hand washing station and garbage disposal. “It’s not just, ‘Here’s your bare ground, have at it,’” Hill said.

In addition, the association charges \$200 a year for “infrastructure,” which includes use of the MFA’s harvest shelter and washing and packing area; space in the walk-in cooler and barn for storage; use of weeding tools, a seeder and harvest containers; and use of a resource computer and desk in the MFA office. “We used to include (the infrastructure charge) all together,” Hill said. “But we had farmers who don’t need washing and cooler. For example, they were only growing dry beans, and they didn’t want to be charged for this.”

The MFA also offers many training sessions for an additional \$250, including 12 classroom courses during the winter months; the first four dedicated to first-year farmers. The remaining eight sessions cover subjects ranging from organic crop growth, yield planning and seed purchasing to the minutiae of record keeping and filling out the federal Schedule F tax form for farm income and expenses. Included in the fee is registration for the Annual Minority & Immigrant Farming Conference in St. Paul, Minn., in-field classes and training sessions, and many hours of individual consultation.

Total cost, if the farmer is using one acre and elects to pay the infrastructure costs, is \$800 for one year. “(The fees) help farmers realize there’s more than just having land,” Hill said. “If you’re running your own operation, you’ve got to have a cooler, a washing place, and a space to store all of it. It’s not free, it costs money.”

Eight hundred dollars for land, equipment, storage, insurance, a fence, training and resources is cheap. “The

real cheap part is the training fee,” Hill said. “We’re going to show them how to lay down drip tape or irrigation pipe. We’re going to show them how to trellis tomatoes. ...We’ve also organized three trips to other farms. They learn a lot, and it’s really interesting to see how an established farmer is doing this. But the other thing is all the individual consultations that they get—we have a training coordinator and a farm manager...and they spend hours per individual.”

With the immigrant and refugee populations the MFA works with, that individual consultation is critical—particularly during the first year—for them to learn correct practices. Language barriers are relatively easy to overcome during in-field training sessions, and interpreters are present for classroom sessions. It’s the “cultural competencies,” Hill said, that take time to build—and that goes for the instructors, too. To build those cultural bridges, the various ethnic groups in the program deliver short educational sessions on their culture. The groups represented in the MFA fields reflect the increasingly diverse populations in Minnesota—those from Bhutan, Somalia, and other countries now join the once predominant Hmong and Latin American farmers.

Hill said that once farmers are deep into the program, they agree the initial cost outlay is a remarkably good deal, particularly when they begin searching for their own land and equipment when their training is complete. But those “graduates” are usually in great shape to manage those startup costs. “Once they’re in their second and third year (in the program), if they get their markets worked out, their gross sales are \$12,000 to \$15,000 an acre,” Hill said.

The business of selling

The MFA’s Big River Farms is a non-profit training program, but it’s a business, and that is perhaps the great-

est lesson taught to the farmers. Big River purchases 80 percent of its CSA needs from farmers in the program, but nothing from those in their first year. “It’s hard to plan CSA (shares) without a proven track record,” Hill said. “So, all the produce grown on their plot is theirs, and they can sell it to wherever they want.”

The training program also helps farmers connect to various markets, develop a CSA or sell at farmers markets. By the third year, the farmers have the business and yield aspects of their business figured out, are selling products to Big River and beginning to achieve their own goals.

Frequently, Big River will develop a contract with a restaurant company or institution, then pass that contract off to one of the second or third year farmers in the program, or a graduate.

“This is not a gardening program,” said Glen Hill, the executive director for the MFA. That is the first message conveyed to potential candidates applying to join the program. “You are growing products that you are going to sell.”

That’s what happened this year with second-year farmer Vince Xiong. The association matched the Stillwater Residence, a retirement community, with Xiong for its produce needs. The contract is about \$1,000—\$50 to \$80 per week. Not large, but a great step for

Xiong’s business, and it’s only about eight miles from the farm, Hill said.

Large accounts are also passed off. Last year, Big River passed off the contract it had for three years with Chipotle for green bell peppers to a Big River “graduate” who left the program and purchased his own land. “It’s a \$16,000-a-year contract,” Hill said. “One-hundred cases of green peppers a week for (about) ten weeks. It takes a while for a farmer to reach that scale to be able to confidently tell them that yes, I will deliver 100 cases—2,000 pounds a week—of green peppers for 10 weeks. That’s a bold step for a farmer.”

It’s Big River’s goal to hand off accounts to its qualified farmers—but only when they’re ready. Many businesses

contact the MFA to purchase produce, Hill said, and depending on the business and its needs, the MFA can decide if the account can be handed immediately to a farmer or handled by its Big River arm as a broker until a farmer grows their business enough to meet the demand—the Chipotle account was a perfect example.

“St. Thomas University called us (this year) and said they want to buy quite a large amount, and because it’s a large amount, we’re going to be the broker this year and we’re going to buy in produce from our farms and deliver it to St. Thomas,” Hill said. “We wouldn’t feel comfortable—and our farmers wouldn’t feel comfortable—to turn over such a large account right away. You’ve got one chance and if you screw it up, you’re done, and they’re not going to call you back.”

Making the grade

River Market Community Co-op, a natural and organic foods grocery in downtown Stillwater, contracts with Big River for green beans, cauliflower and broccoli, said Trista Boe, the co-op’s produce/bulk manager. It also purchases other available items, “extras of this or that,” she said. “Sometimes we get spring mix from them, sometimes cucumbers. A lot of times it just relies on whatever they have available that’s in excess.”

But it’s those three contracted items that make up the core agreement. “For the broccoli, it can be as much as 120 pounds a week that we purchase from them,” she said, adding that, because they are a retail grocery store, while size and shape aren’t top concerns, quality must be “superior.” “The Minnesota Food Association really has never let us down on that.”

Part of the education process for the local farmers—not only those in the Big River program—is distinguishing between what is perfectly fine, edible produce and what is saleable at a market, Boe said. That issue is particularly acute with the immigrant and refugee farmers, many of whom come from parts of the planet where selecting only symmetrical



Vince Xiong hauls seedlings from the Minnesota Food Association’s greenhouses for planting. Xiong entered his second year in the Big River Farms Training Program with a contract to sell produce to a retirement community.

and visually perfect produce to sell is, well, kind of ridiculous.

The co-op crowd is more forgiving, however, and generally better educated about heirloom vegetables and their quirks. “They’re a little bit more savvy as to how things grow, and that you can’t always be promised this perfectly ripe, round, gorgeous, flawless tomato that will always weigh three-quarters of a pound—they actually shy away from that,” she said. “They’re a whole lot more understanding if lettuce has tip burn on it than, say, somebody shopping at Whole Foods.”

Grading produce for those different

markets and expectations are all lessons taught to the farmers. “River Market (Community Co-op) wants immaculate green beans, and will pay \$2.75 per pound for them,” Hill said. Conversely, the Emergency Food Shelf Network, a hunger-relief non-profit supplying the Twin Cities food shelves (and one of Big River’s accounts), “will take any green bean you’ve got for \$1 a pound.”

Restaurants and institutional food-service operations are a little less particular with the aesthetics of produce, depending on what they are doing with it. Savories European Bistro, also lo-

cated in Stillwater, Minn., buys from several local farmers to fuel its seasonal menus. Big River is one of their suppliers. Kristen Klemetsrud, who owns the restaurant with husband (and the bistro's chef) John, said the relationship with the producers is not based on a contract, but availability and the telephone. "They call us and say, OK, here's what we've got...and we'll say OK we'll take that, that and that," she said. It's what's left over after the farmers have filled their CSA orders and any other contracts.

It works out well. "Our inspiration (for the menu) is whatever is coming from the farmer," she said. And the price is good, too. "It probably is better (than ordering from a large purveyor). There's no middle man working with the farmer, there's no commercial trucking involved, and I hope that I am working the system with those folks so we are both benefiting. If, by going directly to the consumer, they can get a better price, then they should do that. I'm sort of their next tier."

She got involved with Big River about three years ago, and appreciates the training program, but even more the top-notch produce, particularly the Sun Gold cherry tomatoes. "We can't get enough of those."

Growing the program

Hill's tenure began at the MFA in March of 2007, and those that have graduated the program remain farming, he said. "It's a great success rate in the last three to four years," Hill said. "And 33 percent of them are running their own CSAs now on a small scale. But we're curious about the people that were in the program 10 years ago."

The training program was started in 1998, Hill said, but with staff turnover and location changes, data for those first nine years does not exist. The MFA has been at its current site since 2005, and with that stability is planning a comprehensive evaluation. "We've probably trained 700 to 800 people in the program," he said. "We want to find and interview 200 of these people. This is what our evaluator has set out as her goal, to find out how the training affected them,

what they are doing now, what worked or didn't work for them. It's really exciting, and it's about time. We should have this information."

Some of the recent successes include May Lee, who emigrated from Laos in the early 1970s. She has a business with her daughter, Mhonpaj, called Mhonpaj's Garden, and grows enough produce for a 30 member CSA, some wholesale accounts and works various farmers markets—including St. Paul, Mill City, and White Bear Lake. There is Xiong, who is growing his fledgling business with the Stillwater Residence account and others.

Another farmer, Hill said, has grown to supply their own market, a 16-member CSA and restaurant contracts. That farmer has applied for a Farm Service Agency loan as they move on from the training program.

Big River Farms this year has about 30 farmers working on 10 plots ranging from one-quarter to 2.5 acres. There are only about 22 acres out of the ar-

able 53 in production or in cover crop rotation, so the program would like to add more farmers as funding allows. As the demand grows for organic and locally grown foods, the need for those to produce those foods has also increased. Big River Farms recently started working with refugees and immigrants in the U.S. for less than five years—which is a group that requires more cultural intervention and attention. But it's well worth the effort, Hill said. This season, the MFA has six Bhutanese refugees working on one plot, and a Somali man running another. "They're just so interested, they're gung ho, they want to do it," he said. "Their enthusiasm, their work ethic is inspiring, it's addicting—you can't deny it. So you just feel like, yes, we have a long way to go, but we have to do this."

For more information on the Minnesota Food Association and Big River Farms, visit www.mnfoodassociation.org.

MFA/Big River Farms cover crop effort

Other lessons are taught to the Big River Farms Training Program farmers informally—the Minnesota Food Association started "intensive" cover cropping in 2009, MFA Executive Director Glen Hill said, in addition to crop rotation.

After a farmer harvests crops from their plot (at least by November), that land is planted with a mixture of rye grass and vetch (a legume). The rye and vetch grows to about three feet high in June. The growth is tilled under, and the fast-growing buckwheat is planted. The buckwheat grows small flowers that attract pollinating insects, which benefit the harvestable crops in surrounding plots, which are also blossoming. The buckwheat is tilled into the soil at the end of August or early September, and then a mixture of peas and oats or sorghum is planted,

which grows to the end of the season. At the end of October or beginning of November, that cover crop is tilled in, and the rye vetch mixture is planted.

"Initially, a couple of farmers I talked to thought it was pretty crazy," Hill said. "They were like, you're tilling up this land, you're putting in these seeds, you let it grow for a while and then you just cut it down and till it back in. And then you put in more seeds, (laughs) and then you do it again. And you're putting in \$500 an acre, and not getting anything out of it."

But, once they were rotated onto a field that had been cover cropped, "they got it right away." Now the farmers ask about the rotation and the seeds they need to duplicate the practice on their own farms once they leave the program.

Technological and genetic developments in agriculture does not mean those practices are inherently unsustainable, Beachy summarized. “Insect-resistant crops reduce the use of insecticides by millions of gallons per year,” he said.

Further, he presented that judicious fertilizer use, combined with reduced soil tilling, can improve biomass in the soil and increase yields. No-till agriculture should also be practiced when possible.

Beachy acknowledged that talking about scientific advancements within agriculture as being necessary to advance sustainability draws criticism. “It’s very easy to instill fear,” he said. However, sustainability and technology are not on opposite ends of the spectrum, he reiterated, and, during a panel discussion following his presentation, Beachy said that much of the skepticism and fear of technological advancements in agriculture built during the last two decades is a failure of the scientific community to effectively refute incorrect claims against developments in GMO crops. “What we know from the last 25 years is that... nutrition is not affected,” he said. “There is no documentation of illness from genetically modified products. Part of the problem is we (the scientific community) have stopped talking about it.”

A history of food production

“The problem isn’t defining sustainability, the problem is how to maintain something,” said Fred Kirschenmann, who keynoted Day 1 of the IFSS. “How can we keep sustainable agriculture—food systems—going?”

Kirschenmann began to answer that question by running through a quick-yet-exacting rundown of humans’ food gathering and agriculture techniques through the last 35,000 years, quoting some from Ernest Schusky’s scholarly work, “Culture and Agriculture: An ecological introduction to traditional and modern farming systems.” The point being to demonstrate how energy consumption has increased greatly in our efforts to produce food.

Humans’ first 25,000 years as hunter/gatherers was our most efficient, ener-



Writer, farmer, former USDA National Organic Standards Board member and current Leopold Center fellow Fred Kirschenmann.

gy wise, with one unit of energy spent for every 20 units hunted/gathered, Kirschenmann explained. About 10,000 years ago, as we began practicing agriculture, domesticating plants and animals, that ratio shrunk to 10-1. “That also began to change how we relate to nature,” Kirschenmann said.

Fast forward to 1930, and we enter the “neo-caloric” era. “It’s going to be a short era,” he said. “We’re using old calories (fossil fuels) that can’t be renewed. At some point, it’s not going to work.” Our efforts to create ethanol, for example, cost us more energy in input than we get out of it, and our current industrial agricultural methods are heading the same direction.

Kirschenmann’s theme seemed to be that those involved in the food industry look at it on scientific and economic terms, removing the political from the discussion. “It doesn’t do us a lot of good to get into the food fights we’ve already been in.”

The “neo-caloric” era in food mimics the industrialization of all our economic models, he said. “To maximize efficient production for short-term economic returns. ... That (formula) is not designed for sustainability, and none of our farming systems are.”

What is sustainable? Simply put: “That we would produce food that did not jeopardize the future of food production.”

Without even considering the difficulties in agriculture being imposed by climate change, given that fossil fuels are getting scarcer and harder to extract,

a worldwide phosphate rock shortage (used in manufacturing fertilizers) and with fresh water being used at an unsustainable rate across the planet, we have little choice but to change our agricultural practices, Kirschenmann said.

It’s not just how we produce food, but who produces it. According to USDA surveys, there are 2.2 million farmers in the United States, but that definition is broad, and includes anyone making more than \$1,000 per year. “Seventy-five percent of our goods are produced by 165,000 farmers—and they are aging,” Kirschenmann said.

There is tremendous opportunity, however, and many solutions being banded about. “Some are saying that we need to intensify our technologies and increase global trade, genetic research, etcetera,” he said, adding that science will definitely play a role in food production.

But for any of that to happen in a meaningful fashion, one thing must happen: “Accept we’ve used up the old calories (fossil fuels), that the system is unsustainable, and (ask), ‘How do we move forward?’ ... We need to use nature as a model.”

Using nature as a model doesn’t mean going back to horse and plow, however. “For those farmers who say they don’t want to go back, we’re not,” said Kirschenmann, who also operates a 3,500 certified organic farm in North Dakota. “I don’t want to go back.”

Solutions exist, such as perennial crops (perennial wheat is already being resurrected by plant breeders), which offer huge benefits to sustainable farming, their deeper root systems contribute to increased soil health, combat erosion, and need to be replanted only once every five to six years.

Chefs, restaurateurs and the foodservice industry play a huge role in changing attitudes and creating demand for products, Kirschenmann summarized at one point in his discussion. “We can use the food system to show that a better life (overall) is possible.”

For more information on the IFSS, visit www.ifssymposium.com.

—Mike Mitchelson

F2S study: Labor, revenue worries (mostly) unfounded

Looking at four farm-to-school programs across the country, the study found enthusiasm and success, but also resistance from parents, school administrators at some sites.

The salad bar is one of the easiest and most popular ways a school can begin implementing a farm-to-school program. But, simply making fresh fruits and vegetables available to students during school lunch doesn't mean they will eat them.

Well, duh.

That's one of the results of a multi-site farm-to-school program evaluation conducted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Center for Health Promotion Disease Prevention (UNC HPDP) for the National Farm to School Network. But as schools attempt to meet nutritional standards with annually constricted budgets, some concrete data is welcome to help allocate funds effectively.

A more, um, newsworthy conclusion from the study, however, is that the arguments against implementing a F2S program—namely worries about decreasing student participation in school lunch, labor and productivity issues and revenue—are largely unfounded.

Based on data from the 2008-2009 school year, the kids didn't stop eating school lunch, revenues didn't drop, and while there was increased labor involved with fresh vegetable prep work, worker productivity didn't decrease; the work was incorporated into the regular daily routine and, with a few exceptions, workers didn't mind more challenging roles. In fact, most appreciated the challenge and felt better about themselves and their jobs.

"We saw the foresight of school foodservice workers who said, 'Yes, we work harder, yes it's more work, yes we've learned to deal with more work, and it's all worth it because it really benefits the kids,'" said Phyllis Fleming, director of the Evaluation Core at the UNC HPDP during a webinar discussion in May. (Fleming conducted the

study with Amy Paxton, social research associate for UNC HPDP.)

The study focused on four school districts across the country: Riverside Unified in California, which placed salad bars in four elementary schools; Saratoga Springs in New York, which introduced a "formal" farm-to-school program; Springfield in Oregon, which started an educational program revolving around a school garden and a "harvest of the month" meal; and Union 74 in Maine, which began by incorporating a Focus on Agriculture in Rural Maine Schools (FARMS) program.

Among those districts, there were three ways the F2S programs were started: School foodservice directors were the motivators at the California and New York sites, who brought together other stakeholders—such as the school board—and included the foodservice staff's input in the program's implementation. In Maine, a concerned parent developed connections with community stakeholders. And in Oregon, a farm-to-school coordinator implemented the educational program.

All had their strengths and drawbacks, but those that were the most successful had the eventual support of as many stakeholders within the district as possible, including teachers. The Oregon program, for example, despite good results that showed school children had increased knowledge about healthy food, farms and actually ate a half serving more fruit per day, a lack of support from district and school administration prevented a more efficient evaluation.

Outcomes

Oregon: The education program was based on school garden sessions, curriculum, farm field trips, "tasting tables" with fresh produce from local farms and "Harvest Days" (students prepared

lunch in their classrooms with produce from the school garden).

- Students' fruit consumption (assessed by the School Lunch Recall) increased by 0.5 servings per day.

- Students' knowledge about Oregon-grown foods and agricultural processes (assessed by a knowledge test) increased from baseline to post-intervention and increased experiences on farms and in gardens.

Educators also contributed their perspective to the program, and also the farmers who participated in field trips and Farm to School experiences (assessed through one-on-one interviews):

- School garden educators were enthusiastic about integrating gardens with Farm to School programs and identified potential for building garden education into the school curricula.

- Classroom teachers were concerned about integrating the programs

into time-restricted school days.

- For the participating farmers, the primary challenge for small-scale farms to sell to the Oregon schools was their inability to fill large orders. To establish a successful relationship with schools, farmers need to be flexible to fill orders, reduce packing costs and have a central delivery system. They did, however, appreciate opportunities to teach children about agriculture and ecology, and to potentially expand their market to those children's parents in the community.

Maine: While the FARMS program was initiated as a broad-based educational effort in Maine to link local agriculture to the overall community through schools, it benefited from schools' support and promotional efforts:

- FARMS now reaches all Union 74 students.

F2S STUDY: CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

space to put a logo.

Co-branding itself is an outgrowth of a practice that is centuries old. In fine-dining restaurants, the pedigree of the ingredients has always had a degree of marketing importance: think of Spanish saffron, Hungarian paprika, prosciutto di Parma. That weird bubbly wine they grow in Champagne gets popular, and everybody steals the name. The location becomes the style, and the confusion becomes so widespread that the E.U. steps in with a

new set of laws: Champagne must come from Champagne. Cognac comes from Cognac. Liver comes from Luverne.

This idea morphed as it moved. When I was in California during the early '80s, the trendier eateries were already anticipating the farm-to-table movement. You couldn't sit down for a nice quiet arugula frappé without listening to a dissertation on the origin of a cheese, a wild boar, a thymus gland or a fish egg. It gave the same sort of credibility that a vintage and vineyard give to a wine—or so we thought—but the receiving end of all this information was pretty tedious. I can remember a waitress taking ten minutes to describe three specials. Somewhere in the midst of it I realized that a humble, unassuming cheeseburger would already be happily inside me by now.

Although we were self-consciously creating what we called “California Cui-

sine,” we were not religious about local sourcing. Our produce was local, of course: most of it grows there anyway, and anything that doesn't, gets stopped at the border by armed guards. Seafood was all over the place. I got calls from a boat in the morning, but I also remember

When I was in California during the early '80s, the trendier eateries were already anticipating the farm-to-table movement. You couldn't sit down for a nice quiet arugula frappé without listening to a dissertation on the origin of a cheese, a wild boar, a thymus gland or a fish egg.

serving Chesapeake Bay softshell crabs, Louisiana shrimp and New Zealand greenlip mussels. In those days, the “local” in seafood was defined by time from the water: the crabs and mussels came in alive, and

the shrimp were caught the day before and shipped in fresh, so they came from the same relativistic distance as the sole I got from the eastside docks. Space, time, who's counting?

Nowadays the discussion revolves exclusively around physical distance, which I regard as an insult both to Einstein and to New Zealand apples, of which I'm quite fond, and which actually leave less of a carbon footprint—never mind. We locavores are convinced that within a few short miles of home, we will find economic recovery, robust good health, a cleansed environment, the communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins. This calls into question the desire to take a vacation, of course, but let's not be petty.

So in case you have doubts about your burger's origins—Brazilian bridge sweepings? Ukrainian faux-Kobe?—there is now an app for that. Partly in re-

sponse to the local food movement, the University of Michigan has launched a pilot program to trace your beef from farm to table. Beginning with radio-frequency ID tags in a doomed steer's ear, it follows the critter through all the stages of life—and afterlife, where his joy in sun and field and forage will reach its apotheosis between the two sides of a bun. To learn of his journey, just swipe your smartphone over the barcode, and the whole story will reveal itself. Not only will waiters now be able to tell you on which ranch your beef was raised, they'll be able to tell you that his name was Henry, and that he liked alfalfa and long walks on the beach. I anticipate a reexamination of the value of ignorance.

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grown and processed. Our drive for efficiency on that side of the equation has also impacted the food-preparation side, particularly where achieving a low price is the primary goal. Those jobs are usually monotonous affairs. You can see it most obviously in the fast food industry, but also in our schools. On page 9, you'll read a story summarizing a study of four farm-to-school programs. The positive impact on students and the community (after some resistance) is becoming a common theme. But what is

most interesting about the study is the impact the farm-to-school programs had on the foodservice workers—again, after some resistance.

Kitchen staffs needed training, such as knife and equipment skills to handle fresh produce, but once into that stage, and good food is going out and compliments from kids and parents come in—and the workers began eating the healthier food themselves—job satis-

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OFF THE PATH

GroOrganic: Not your garden variety franchise

By Sean Kelley

Photos from groOrganic

Q: What do celebrities Tori Spelling (of TV's "90210" fame) and the Kardashian sisters have in common with the inner-city students of New Heights Charter School in South Los Angeles?

A: They all eat fresh, healthy produce from their own organic gardens thanks to Karen Cancilla and groOrganic.

A few years back, Karen Cancilla, a single mother of five children (now remarried with six), recognized a growing number of people wanted the benefits of chemical- and pesticide-free organic vegetables and fruits fresh from their own gardens. But she also recognized the enthusiasm of these beginners was surpassed only by their inexperience and shortage of time. So, Cancilla founded groOrganic, a company that installs, maintains and even harvests customized organic vegetable gardens and vineyards in a minimum of space and with a minimum of fuss for its customers.

The groOrganic concept was an immediate hit—meeting the need for a convenient, effective way for individuals, businesses, schools and senior health-



Karen Cancilla, groOrganic founder and owner.

care facilities to reap the benefits of their own organic gardens. GroOrganic is also a publicity goldmine, effortlessly earning high-profile exposure in national media and on such television shows as "The Biggest Loser," "Keeping Up With the Kardashians," "Tori & Dean: Home Sweet Hollywood" and "Access Hollywood."

What's driving the incredible media attention and growth of this young start-up? Cancilla seems to have developed the right concept at the right time. She's also on a mission to ensure everyone who wants healthy food can have access to it.

When fourth-grade teacher Marissa Hutter wrote that her inner-city students at New Heights Charter School didn't know how food was grown, nor run their hands through real soil, groOrganic awarded the school a free organic garden. It donated its time, labor and materials to install the garden, plus provided a unique gardening-enrichment curriculum program that encompasses both California Board of Education Content standards and state standards. GroOrganic currently has seven active territories, five of which are franchised. Karen Cancilla plans to have 20 franchises up and running by 2012.

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Atlantic Cod Upgraded to "Good Alternative" by Monterey Bay Aquarium

The Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch upgraded trawl-caught Atlantic Cod from Iceland to a "Good Alternative" for consumers. The second category after "Best Choices" on Monterey Bay's rating scale.

The Seafood Watch, started by the Aquarium in 2000, empowers seafood consumers and businesses with information and data allowing them to make purchasing choices that will support healthy and sustainable oceans. According to the scale, "Good Alternative" reads: "These items are an option, but there are concerns with how they're caught or farmed—or with the health of their Habitat due to other human impacts."

The ultimate result of these conclusions is that 900,000 out of 1.1 million tons of Atlantic Cod are recognized as a "Good Alternative." These highly significant findings are a result of the work and cooperation of the Monterey Bay Aquarium, Iceland, and committed efforts of major stakeholders such as Icelandic USA and Aramark.

After many years of observing the Icelandic Cod stock management practices in Iceland waters, scientists from the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch team traveled to Iceland to establish a direct dialog with Icelandic institutes responsible for fisheries management in Iceland. The other Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch categories:

"Best Choices: Seafood in this category is abundant, well-managed and caught or farmed in environmentally freindly ways.

"Avoid: Take a pass on these items for now. They are caught or farmed in ways that harm other marine life or the environment."

For more inforamtion on the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch, visit www.montereybayaquarium.org.

- More scratch cooking is done in school kitchens—school foodservice workers are recognized for their efforts, and are more satisfied at work.
- Increased school meal participation from both students and teachers (assessed through interviews).
- State and national recognition for FARMS, influencing farm-to-school policies in Maine.

New York: The school lunch director who implemented the Farm to School program built strong relationships, won the support of key stakeholders and professionalized the school food service staff. She received support from school administration (including the superintendent, the school board president and individual school principals) and the school foodservice staff. At the time, only two farmers would sell produce to the school district outside of the winter farmers' market, although all farmers interviewed admired her commitment to a farm to school program. Many students and some parents resisted moving from processed foods to healthier foods. Despite challenges, the following was achieved:

- New foods and food preparation methods added to the lunch menu.
- Produce purchased from two farmers.
- Taste tests and educational activities for students.

- School gardens and composting program added.
- Collaboration with farmer to organize a potato recipe contest.
- The school nutrition director became a Farm to School spokesperson in surrounding counties and states.
- A winter farmers' market space was created at one elementary school in exchange for products served with school lunches.
- School district decision-makers' support for the Farm to School concept—a short-term increase in the foodservice budget were given to accommodate potential higher prices of locally grown foods.
- Improved cafeteria food.
- Foodservice staff improvements: new skills learned and expanded roles, positive attitude toward their jobs and

Reward to Farmers

In addition to the rewards of being able to educate students on how food is grown and the connection between community and agriculture, farmers supplying the Riverside Unified School District in California earned much more tangible rewards by working with the schools—so much so that they formed a cooperative to market products from small farmers to other institutions and school districts. For the 2008-2009 school year, \$381,017 was paid to five local farmers supplying the district.

greater interest to serve healthy foods to children. Further, school foodservice became more integrated into the school community.

- Positive media attention for school food service.

California: Four schools received salad bars without any related educational activities and served as intervention schools; two comparison schools did not receive salad bars until 2009-2010. The results:

- Salad bar eaters ate two times more fruit servings and 1.66 times more vegetable servings than hot bar eaters. (Assessed by the School Lunch Recall).
- No decrease in school foodservice worker productivity, as measured by "Meals per Labor Hour."
- The program did not decrease revenue per child.
- Fifty to 100 percent of salad bar offerings purchased from local growers.
- Monthly salad bar participation ranged from 21 to 67 percent, depending on when the salad bar was introduced.
- Improved perceptions that foodservice staff had of their jobs and roles in the school (assessed through one-on-one interviews).

To see the study in full, visit the Farm to School Network website at <http://www.farmentoschool.org>.

faction increased. "We had school foodservice staff tell us that parents would come into the schools to see what their children were eating, because their children would come home and talk in such glowing terms about it," said Phyllis Fleming, director of the Evaluation Core at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Center for Health Promotion Disease Prevention (UNC HPDP),

which conducted the study for National Farm to School Network. "One of the things that was a surprise is that when this wonderful food is being served, the status of school foodservice staff both within the school and the community increases, and the amount of recognition that they get increases."

Further, the study showed (based on interviews) that the opportunity to

expand skills and roles at work generated a more positive attitude among the school foodservice staff, and with the educational component behind farm-to-school programs, school foodservice became more integrated with the greater school community—again, adding to job satisfaction.

It seems a painfully obvious conclusion, but in any industry, often in our drive for efficiency we forget workers' brains need to be stimulated from time to time with opportunity—even in jobs that might not lead to promotion. A new skill or challenge and some recognition will often suffice. Once again, our schools are teaching us important lessons.

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