

Letter

A NEWSLETTER OF THE LEOPOLD CENTER FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

VOL. 11 NO. 4 WINTER 1999

The Keeney imprint: *This is the last issue with Dennis Keeney as Leopold Center director. See pages 9 and 10 for more impressions.*

“I appreciate that through the Issue Teams the Leopold Center was willing to take a chance to fund some projects where there was no guarantee of results. Dennis also was one to start from what farmers were already doing and work from there. He realized that for many farmers, sustainable agriculture might seem like some far-out thing but to others not a far reach.”

— *John Miller, partner in a Black Hawk County livestock/grain operation near Cedar Falls, and one of two farmers on the original Leopold Center Advisory Board*

“The Iowa Legislature Class of '87 was blessed with a cadre of environmental activists who created the Leopold Center, which in turn was blessed with Dennis Keeney as its director. Keeney kept the center on the cutting edge of progressive agriculture, championing the concepts of low-impact farming and survival of the small farm. Aldo would have been proud of one of his most devoted pupils.”

— *Bill Leonard, editorial writer and editor, The Des Moines Register*

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Looking beyond crisis in agriculture

TO OUR READERS: *Achieving sustainability in agriculture requires more than just changing farm practices. It also includes sustaining those who care for the land. Much has been written about the current farm situation, as both a crisis and a transition in agriculture that could spell the end of the family farm. We assembled a roundtable of five Iowa*



Participants in the Leopold Center's discussion on the farm economy were (left to right): Rich Pirog, Naomi Maahs, Jerry Peckumn, Dave Deyoe (in back), Keith Sexton, Mike Duffy (in back) and Mark Roose.

producers to give us their views from the front lines. We also asked them for solutions—what would help them stay in farming? Look on pages 6-8 for a partial summary of the conversation. We talked in late August, before the start of this year's harvest and news of federal assistance for farmers. — Laura Miller, Editor

Comparing apples to apples

A study of food pathways



Once a top apple-producing state, Iowa now provides only an estimated 15 percent of the 1.3 million bushels of fresh apples eaten by Iowans every year. More information about changes in Iowa's apple industry, and potential for local sales today, are available in a report at the Leopold Center's Web site, <www.leopold.iastate.edu>.

The report contrasts the pathways—from harvest to Iowa consumer—for Iowa and Washington-grown Red Delicious apples. It was written by Center education program coordinator Rich Pirog and intern John Tyndall. They found that while a typical Iowa-grown apple is sold within one day to two months of picking, apples grown in Washington are kept for as long as eight months or

longer in controlled atmosphere (CA) storage before sale. Iowa apples are available mostly during the fall harvest.

The Delicious variety was discovered as a chance seedling by Madison County farmer Jesse Hiatt. A peak 9.5 million bushels were grown in 1911, but the Iowa industry was devastated in 1940 by the infamous Armistice Day freeze that killed many apple trees. Today, Iowa ranks 31st among the 36 states that grow apples commercially. Washington state ranks first in U.S. apple production, growing more than half of the nation's fresh apples.

The Leopold Center report uses apples as an example to explore the

APPLES

(continued on page 11)

Ongoing dialogue in sustainability begins

Iowa State University's new Henry A. Wallace Endowed Chair for Sustainable Agriculture doesn't start work officially until February 1, but already Lorna Michael Butler has been listening to people, gathering ideas, and starting the conversation.

Butler, an extension anthropologist and professor at Washington State University, spent a week on campus in October to begin what she hopes will be an ongoing discussion with numerous groups and people who are interested in sustainable agriculture. The Wallace Chair's appointment is for three to five years, extendable to eight. It was established in 1997 with a \$1 million grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, a \$500,000 gift from the Wallace Genetic Foundation, and support from the Leopold Center and ISU College of Agriculture.

"First, I'm going to spend a lot of time listening and learning, on campus, in Iowa communities and elsewhere," explains Butler. "This is important because I'm not from Iowa and agriculture is just one piece of the sustainability puzzle. While I have a particular interest in the human and community dimensions, I want to pay careful attention to the technical, political and natural resource pieces as well."

Such discussions are important in participatory research, a method of immersing the learner in a community to gather information from people who know the situation best. Butler hopes to work with graduate students in this manner. She has found this approach helpful in projects in Washington state, East Africa and the Middle East.

Butler grew up on a cattle ranch in Alberta, Canada. After graduating from the University of Manitoba, she helped direct 4-H programs in British Columbia. Fully intending to return home for a career in agriculture and consumer marketing, she went to Colorado State University for a master's degree in extension and continuing education. At Colorado, she met her

husband, Bob, a sociologist who grew up on a farm in Iowa near Northwood. Her doctorate program in agricultural anthropology at Washington State University took her to East Africa, and she has been involved in international agriculture work ever since. Her most recent WSU responsibilities have included activities to broaden public understanding and appreciation of agriculture, and to strengthen the linkages between farm and non-farm communities.

The Wallace Chair comes at just the right time in Butler's career and in Iowa agriculture.

"There's a critical mass of people here interested in sustainable agriculture, both inside and outside the university," she says. "People may have different interpretations of

sustainable agriculture, but if anything is going to happen in the future to benefit agriculture for all of society, it will be in Iowa."

Butler said she would like to work with the Leopold Center on campus-wide discussions about sustainability. She also has high hopes for the development of a new degree program in sustainable agriculture at Iowa State University. She invites comments or questions before her appointment begins. She can be contacted at butlerl@wsu.edu, or (253) 445-4551.



Lorna Michael Butler



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The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture seeks to identify and reduce adverse socioeconomic and environmental impacts of farming practices, develop profitable farming systems that conserve natural resources, and create educational programs with the ISU Extension Service. It was founded by the 1987 Iowa Groundwater Protection Act.

The *Leopold Letter* is available free from the Leopold Center at 209 Curtiss Hall, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011-1050; (515) 294-3711.

Editor: Laura Miller



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Nurturing the new oak

In the spring of 1998, the Leopold Center honored the 50th anniversary of Aldo Leopold's death by planting a native Iowa oak, a chinkapin, on the Iowa State University central campus. Located on a line between our offices in Curtiss Hall and the ISU Campanile, the tree is passed by hundreds of students each day. It is close to the sidewalk I walked as a youth attending 4-H Congress, as an undergraduate and later a graduate student, and for the past 11 years while serving as director of the Leopold Center.

Our new oak honors the "good oak," which Aldo Leopold described in his *Sand County Almanac* essays on the passing of the seasons at his shack on the Wisconsin River. Leopold's good oak was killed by a lightning stroke 80 years into its life, and was felled the following winter. Leopold, reflecting on the history encompassed by the growth of the good oak, writes in the chapter entitled, "February": "These things I ponder as the kettle sings, and the good oak burns to red coals on white ashes. Those ashes, come spring, I will return to the orchard at the foot of the sandhill. They will come back to me again, perhaps as red apples, or perhaps as a spirit of enterprise in some fat October squirrel who, for reasons unknown to himself, is bent on planting acorns."

The new oak on the ISU campus has many parallels to the Center at this time. This little oak will have many challenges as it grows. Already it stands in the shadow of the well-rooted older trees of the campus, those with power and seniority. They can shelter the new oak as it grows, but also compete with it for nutrients and light. It will have to survive the extremes of Iowa weather and diseases. It will grow slowly and carefully, not spreading branches beyond its strength, to be stripped in

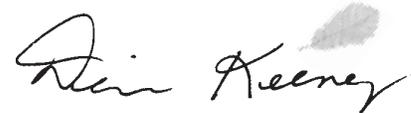
a summer windstorm or a winter ice storm. It will be a harbor for wildlife, a source of food for our fat October squirrel, and shade for young and old during hot summer days. It will be a place for beauty at all times, and a symbol of integrity and stability in a world of chaos.

All these noble things characterize the Leopold Center as well. It started with the seed of an idea in the Iowa legislature, was nurtured by those who love the land, and has grown slowly and with care. It will have to find its niche in the ecology of the university and Iowa agriculture. As in all evolutionary processes, the environment will change and adaptation to new forces may require new branches. The new oak and the Leopold Center will endure, and hopefully some day there will be the great oak and the great Leopold Center at Iowa State. My wife Betty and I will stroll by during alumni days and recall the prophetic words of

noted Leopold historian Curt Meine at the site on April 22, 1998:

A hundred years from now, we may look back and see this (referring to Leopold Center programs) as the Leopold Center's most significant contribution: helping us to learn to live well on the land that produces not only our food and fiber, but our sense of place, and our sense of belonging; helping us to find ways "to live not as conquerors of the land, but as citizens with, and within, the land." If this be the legacy of the Leopold Center, then it has truly lived up to the visions of Aldo Leopold.

It has been my great privilege to help plant and nurture the Center. I wish it well.



Dennis R. Keeney



[The Leopold Center] started with the seed of an idea in the Iowa legislature, was nurtured by those who love the land, and has grown slowly and with care. It will have to find its niche in the ecology of the university and Iowa agriculture. As in all evolutionary processes, the environment will change and adaptation to new forces may require new branches.

Will 'Kervorkian economics' destroy family farms?

By Richard A. Levins, professor of applied economics and extension farm management specialist, University of Minnesota

One of the things I enjoy most about Minnesota is its longstanding support for family farming. Lately, however, we are challenged with a very different kind of economic thinking, one I call "Kervorkian economics." The New Kervorkianists see that many of our family farms are in trouble. Rather than search for ways to help them, these theorists devise "transition" programs that get farmers out of agriculture. It is as if Dr. Jack walked into the room and said we are all going to die sooner or later, so we might as well let him help us get it over with tonight. Such thinking may bring about cheap grain, but only at a cost of losing family farming as the economic backbone of rural Minnesota. This is simply too high a price to pay.

A look at Swift County

This year I have been working with a wonderful group of Swift County leaders to find ways to strengthen farming in the county. In doing the background research for the project, I learned that we are much farther down the road to losing farming as a foundation for rural Minnesota than I would ever have guessed. Farm sales and government payments for Swift County were \$112 million in 1995. They rose to \$135 million in 1996. Judging by these numbers alone, farmer income would appear to be a very important part of the local

economy. In the past, it was. For example, in 1975 farmers accounted for slightly over 30 percent of total county personal income. Today, things are much different.

In 1995, the contribution of farmer and farm employee income to total personal income in the county was 1.63 percent. Granted, farm income bounces around more than most other types from year to year, but that is a shockingly low number. The three-year average for 1995 to 1997 was a bit higher at 7.29 percent. On the other hand, the farming contribution to personal income in the county was negative in 1993. The corresponding numbers for other southwestern Minnesota counties are much the same.

There is, of course, more to the story than farm income. Farmers pay land rents, buy supplies, pay property taxes, and affect the economy in many ways that are not reflected in farmer and farm employee personal income. Nonetheless, the income and well being of farmers is the crux of the matter when we speak of rural economies. Agriculture has changed so much that we can no longer use the words "agriculture" and "farming" interchangeably. Agriculture includes all sorts of agribusiness activities and landlord income that certainly benefit someone. They don't, however, always benefit rural areas.

We looked closely at land rents and ownership in our Swift County project. Ninety percent of the tillable acres are planted to corn and soybeans. A survey we did of 62 Swift County farmers showed that about 60 percent of the

tillable acres in the county are rented, while 40 percent are owned by farmer/operators. The trend is toward more, not less, rented land. Rented acres grew by 29 percent between 1993 and 1998. Furthermore, the older farmers we surveyed talked most often of renting out their land when they retired. The survey also showed that there are many more landlords than farmers associated with the land in Swift County: the 62 farmers rented from 198 landlords.

Absentee landlords

Records kept by the University of Minnesota's Southwest Farm Business Management Association show returns for corn and soybean production on rented land during 1983-1997. For corn, the farmer never once made as much as the landlord. For soybeans, farmers made as much as the landlord in two years and less in every other year. With so many of the farming dollars going to landlords, it is of obvious importance that those landlords live in the county. Otherwise, the only local benefit is likely to be the cost of a stamp to mail a rent check to Arizona! But one out of three landlords in the Swift County survey did not live in the county, and this number is likely to increase as farmers will their land to children who have long since left the county.

Something else that surprised me in the Swift County survey was that one out of three farmers think that large agribusiness interests "don't care at all" about farmers' survival. Only five percent rated agribusiness as "very concerned" on this question. In my 25 years in farm management, I have thought farmers viewed themselves as in partnership with agribusiness. But with a flood of mergers, acquisitions, patent fights, contracting, and other heavy-handed moves, agribusiness is losing its favored status among farmers in a big way. Farmers are in the best position of all to see that what benefits agriculture does not necessarily benefit farming!

Should we all be worried about bigness in agribusiness? I went to Professor Willard Cochrane, President

KERVORKIAN (continued on page 5)

EDITOR'S NOTE: The economic health of agriculture has prompted many groups to seek new direction and programs. After working with farmers in south central Minnesota, economist Dick Levins notes some discouraging trends, which he shared with Minnesota legislators on an interim rural issues study committee. This is an edited account of his August 25 testimony in Alexandria, Minnesota. Levins is finishing a senior fellowship at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy in Minneapolis. He can be reached at dlevins@dept.agecon.umn.edu.



Dick Levins

KERVORKIAN (continued from page 4)

Kennedy's chief agricultural economist, now widely regarded as one of our greatest proponents of family farming. He asked me to imagine that a giant elephant had walked into my living room. "It doesn't matter if it is a good elephant or a bad elephant, it's still going to break something," he said. Size brings about economic power, and that power will be used to foster the ends of global agribusiness, not farmers and the rural economy.

Agribusiness booms

He has a point. The size of modern agribusiness giants defies comprehension. For example, last year Cargill, DuPont, ConAgra, ADM, and Monsanto all had gross sales greater (often much greater) than all 87,000 Minnesota farms put together. DuPont paid more to buy Pioneer than all 87,000 Minnesota farmers combined have ever spent on production costs for any year. And for those who think that there is no money in agriculture, I again remind you that agriculture and farming are not the same thing. Farmers are in a staggering crisis, but the agribusiness story is very different. As pork producers suffered under the lowest prices in a generation, the nation's two largest pork processors found \$14 million to reward their CEOs. That's peanuts compared to the \$51.8 million compensation package Robert Shapiro, CEO of Monsanto, hauled in for 1997. Meanwhile, the average farmer in Minnesota made less than \$15,000 last year.

In all of this, it has become fashionable to blame the farm crisis on failed government policies. Then, in the best tradition of Dr. Kervorkian, we try to abandon public programs altogether. I hope you will not think that way. The public has every right to decide how its food will be produced and who will do it. The Minnesota Legislature has already made a wonderful statement on the value of family farming, and the leaders of Swift County are among the many citizens who have not given up on our family farm tradition. We must continue in that tradition—our rural economy is at stake.

FROM THE FIELD: Andy Demuth

Keeping the family farm: One Iowa story

If a family farm could have a face, it would have the easy smile and dark but optimistic eyes of Andy Demuth. But behind that facade would be determination—the against-all-odds kind of toughness—needed to make difficult decisions to stay with the land because life there is good.

Demuth's family has been making plenty of difficult decisions since October 28, 1986. A harvest-related collision killed his father that day. The farm operation has never been the same.

Andy Demuth was only eight years old, but his brother, Dan, decided to quit a construction job and take over the family grain and livestock operation near Waverly.

"I'm glad he had the courage to do it," says Andy of his big brother. "My dad was farming 1,000 acres [including a 320-acre home place] and that's a lot to just step in and do when you're only 24 years old."

But the decision came at a high cost. They now own only 40 acres of the original 320 acres, the rest reclaimed during the 1980s farm crisis to meet payments for livestock facilities expanded before Don Demuth's death. The family still has the hog operation, and Dan has recently been able to purchase 230 acres within three miles of the home place. Andy, 21, is in the middle of his junior year at Iowa State University majoring in agricultural studies.

"I hope to get into farming with my brother," he says. "It's what I enjoy and all I've ever wanted to do. But chances are it isn't going to happen right out of college."

Demuth envisions a job in agricultural sales and management, possibly in the Bremer County area so he'll be able to farm when he can. He knows that land rents are high, and that difficult decisions lie ahead. In May, low hog prices forced his brother to sell his livestock (he has facilities for more than 2,000 head) and now do only custom feeding. "My brother didn't think he'd ever do that, but he had to," he adds. "Even so, a farm is a great place to grow up and that's where I want to raise kids."

Demuth has one of 100 Christina Hixson scholarships at ISU—one from each Iowa county—awarded each year to incoming freshmen students who might not otherwise have an opportunity to attend college.

"I knew if I didn't go to college right out of high school, I probably wouldn't go," Demuth explains. "I also knew that if I wanted to farm I really needed a four-year degree as something to fall back on."

He is active in the ISU Farm Operations Club, Collegiate Farm Bureau and the Ag in the Classroom program. He was preparing to visit a fifth-grade class in Ames and suspected that they would be a largely urban group. What kind of picture would he paint of agriculture?

"I'll tell them agriculture is important to them every day, when they drink their milk, or eat in the cafeteria," Andy said. "It's the foundation of America and I would like them to appreciate it."

No more than Andy already does.



Andy Demuth, a junior in agricultural studies at Iowa State University, hopes to return to the farm some day.

Participants in the discussion

From the Leopold Center were education coordinator **Rich Pirog**, who moderated the discussion, associate director and ag economist **Mike Duffy**, and newsletter editor **Laura Miller** who took notes.

Dave Deyoe has a 200-sow farrow-to-finish conventional and hooped building operation and farms 100 acres of crops near Nevada where he lives with his wife and two children. He has farmed since 1987.



Naomi Maahs raises fruit and vegetables on 20 acres near Adel, part of which has been taken out of production for a four-lane highway. On weekends she has operated a pick-your-own pumpkin patch, and works with other Iowa growers.



Farm crisis or ag in transition:

How is this crisis different than in the 1980s?

Today there's more of an income crisis than an asset crisis...A lot of people I talk to are saying maybe they should get out of farming and get another job.
—Jerry Peckum

RICH: How would you contrast the farm problem and crisis now with what happened in the 1980s? What is the same and what is different?

DAVE: There's more uncertainty about the future than in the 1980s. All the mergers and acquisitions in agriculture drastically affect how farmers do business, and you wonder who will be farming the land. In the 1980s, farmers knew that if they could hang on, they would eventually start making money again, but now you just don't know if you'll make it through this one and what you'll be coming back to.

KEITH: Land values dropped 60 percent in the 1980s but we're not seeing that now. At least in the 1980s you had some positive cash flow, but not in today's crisis.

JERRY: I agree. Today there's more of an income crisis than an asset crisis. Livestock facilities will keep their values but there's less hope of making money in hogs than in the '80s. I think about getting out.

NAOMI: In 1983 when I got started, there was a lot of encouragement toward diversification. For me, it worked. If you find the right location and have a population base nearby, you can earn an income from the soil. But even today we're having problems with prices; we're constantly forced to lower prices to compete with Canadian tomatoes or apple juice from China.

MIKE: One big difference is in land values. In the 1980s we had seven years of buildup, so it was a very hot market for land. This time we've only had two years of buildup, and the peak wasn't as high. There's also a general concern now about structural changes, and people are concerned about the impacts of biotechnology on cropping practices. It makes for a different outlook and different attitudes.

JERRY: A lot of people I talk to are saying maybe they should get out of farming and get another job.

MIKE: A lot of people I worked with in the '80s asked, "How can I hold on to get through this?" Some of the people I'm working with today are saying, "How can I get out?"

RICH: What do you think about federal efforts? Are they adequate to keep you farming profitably?

DAVE: I've talked with Congressman Leonard Boswell about the relief for hog payments. A lot of us didn't even qualify for the first round; the threshold was too low. I get 85 percent of my income from hogs, yet this program couldn't help me.

JERRY: I'm also concerned about the crop program. I've heard that we should raise the loan deficiency payment limit on crops, but it would seem to increase overproduction and favor only larger operations.

KEITH: I'm afraid that any time there's a perception of a guarantee not to lose money, you're going to draw outside investment.

JERRY: That's a problem. The loan rate is somewhat above most people's variable expense. It guarantees that we'll follow the alternative to only raise corn and soybeans.

KEITH: I like programs where farmers create their own kind of crop insurance. You then move into a revenue-based rather than the traditional commodity production-based program.

NAOMI: Crop insurance would be helpful for fruit and vegetable growers, too.

KEITH: And include livestock.

MIKE: I'd like to see more recognition of the true cost of agriculture. Some farming operations can create a lot of environmental problems. Farm payments could be based on grassed waterways, riparian buffer strips and other practices. I'd also like to see it encourage farm succession—people passing the farm along.

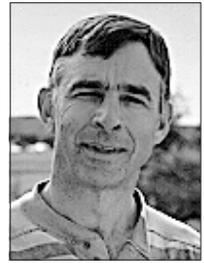
Jerry Peckum started raising hogs in 1979 and purchased his current farm near Jefferson in 1988. He grows primarily corn and soybeans, and raises cattle. He and his wife have three children.



Mark Roose has been farming ten years near Pella. He grows certified organic corn, soybeans, oats, hay and barley on 235 acres. He manages a 35-head cow-calf herd, 240-head beef feedlot, and a 17-sow farrow-to-finish operation.



Keith Sexton lives with his wife and three children on a farm near Rockwell City where his mother was raised. He farms 1,000 acres in a corn/soybean rotation, and has farmed about 20 years.



How do farmers see it?

JERRY: And maybe subsidize no-till operations. That might be one of the factors that limits me from going all no-till, the idea that I'm probably going to have reduction in yield.

RICH: Let's bring the discussion back to your own farms. What are things that would help you to continue farming profitably?

DAVE: Higher prices. [laughter]

KEITH: I'd prefer lower costs.

NAOMI: Lower labor costs. You have to compete with McDonald's and K-Mart. With 20 acres, I hire about five part-time people and pay minimum wage. It's a big cost of your operation if you're diversified with crops like fruits and vegetables because it is so labor-intensive.

JERRY: I see us converting agriculture to unskilled labor, maybe not minimum wage, but I think that's what happens when we have so much consolidation. One example would be a dairy. With 3,000 head of cows, maybe the majority of jobs would be unskilled labor that would take the place of ten 300-head family-sized farms that had been earning a good wage.

KEITH: My main concern is consolidation. I fear we may just end up being an unskilled laborer for a major corporation a couple generations down the road. There may not be a market for entrepreneurial skills in agriculture.

MARK: Is that the farmer's fault? Have we done that to ourselves?

KEITH: Partly. Companies promote their new technology. By buying into it, we're adding fuel to their fire to consolidate. Not only are we signaling that we want the technology, which costs so much to develop that it necessitates consolidating the research budgets of two or more companies, we're also providing the companies with profits to consolidate.

DAVE: When the government allowed companies to patent genes in plants, it changed everything. It was worth a lot of money to go this route, and we may be heading the same way on animal genetics.

JERRY: It seems like the GMOs, genetically modified crops, in the short run at least, have cost the farmer money because we've added in the case of Bt corn, maybe 5 percent supply that we didn't always have. How much would that decrease the price?

NAOMI: And some countries refuse to buy GMOs.

MARK: That is the folly of the American farmer. Rather than saying, "OK, the consumer is not interested in what we're producing, let's produce something they want," we moan about why consumers won't change their mind.

MIKE: If the customer is king—or queen—then you provide them what they want.

DAVE: I think it works both ways. I don't think there's necessarily anything wrong with any of these new genes and things like that. But what difference does it make if people have made up their mind that it's something bad—then it really doesn't matter.

RICH: What can be done to address market niches and segments so that Iowa producers can get more of the consumer dollar?

MARK: Let's say we get a co-op slaughterhouse in Iowa. Is the farmer benefiting? It's good for Iowa but is it good for the farmer? Can we produce something that doesn't need value-added? Do more direct marketing.

NAOMI: When you're close to Des Moines, it's really amazing to see people paying \$50 to fill their trunk up with pumpkins. The consumer wants to see what is growing and how you are growing it.

What would help you farm profitably?

My main concern is consolidation. I fear we may just end up being an unskilled laborer for a major corporation a couple generations down the road. There may not be a market for entrepreneurial skills in agriculture.
—Keith Sexton

DISCUSSION (continued on page 8)

How do you feel about the future?

I tell my kids that farming is not a white collar job. You've got to get your hands dirty. A lot of my peers are failing. All they really want to get out of farming is \$40,000+ and a lot of cab time. But that doesn't work. —Mark Roose

Farm crisis or ag in transition? What farmers say

DISCUSSION

(continued from page 7)

KEITH: I commend the Leopold Center for promoting “Iowa-raised” meals at various conferences. Promoting Iowa food is a service to agriculture. Even if I don’t produce the food that is served, if enough people demand that type of food, I may get into it.

DAVE: Farm Bureau just recently is trying to buy everything they can from Iowa for the cafeteria there and they serve hundreds of people a day.

JERRY: Maybe they could serve Iowa food at the State Capitol?

NAOMI: Wouldn’t that be a nice gesture if all the food came from Iowa?

RICH: What else can the Leopold Center do with its programs to help Iowa producers of all kinds?

JERRY: How about marketing? This is one of the biggest barriers for organic food or Iowa-produced foods. Part of the marketing problem is getting people concerned about where it comes from, also finding markets to sell your produce.

KEITH: Mike had mentioned earlier about making it easier for a younger person to get involved in a farming operation. Unfortunately, our estate tax laws encourage land owners to hold on to their farms till they die.

JERRY: The reason I’m a farmer is because an individual was concerned about another family farm starting. My landowner has really never been recognized by anyone for taking the risk of letting me farm his land and helping me get started.

DAVE: We see a lot of farm management in our area. Instead of trying to find some young producer to take it over, retiring farmers who own their land go to a farm management firm, or the person already growing 5,000 acres. These people already have machinery, and the landowners think they can get a better return.

MARK: I don’t know how to change that attitude. Ten years ago I had this family come and ask me if I’d like to farm their farm. I was enroute to college and I hated school, so it was an easy decision for me. But if it wasn’t for them, I probably wouldn’t be in agriculture.

MIKE: The young person cannot start off with a big debt load. They’ve got labor, not capital, but our system today is capital intensive. We need to show farmers as they retire that their farm is worth more as a unit than it is busted up. In other words, instead of having an auction and getting rid of the equipment and everything, it’s better to transition to another generation. But it’s difficult.

JERRY: I don’t think there’s any doubt that our farm policy has really encouraged the intensive capital and larger farms. The Leopold Center should try to educate people about that, and work toward federal farm legislation that encourages smaller farms.

RICH: How do you feel about the future?

JERRY: I’m apprehensive because it’s changing so fast and I don’t know if we’re going to have family farms. I don’t know if I’ll have an economically viable unit ten years from now.

KEITH: I’m optimistic that I’ll be able to compete for the rest of my career. I am concerned about my children and grandchildren.

JERRY: Would you want your children to farm? All of them?

KEITH: If they want to, sure.

JERRY: My dad was a wise man. He told me not to farm. I have told my children that I’d like to have them farm if they’d like to, but they’d better have a profession they can fall back on.

DAVE: I wouldn’t let my kids farm right after high school. I’d tell them they’ve got to go to college and experience working somewhere else first.

KEITH: That would be a requisite for my kids, too.

NAOMI: Our children are all in their own careers. Even my daughter who worked for me didn’t want to start up in a fruit and vegetable business. I’d like to see people be able to stay on the farm. It’s a great way of life. It’s a good thing to do a hard day’s work and sweat a little bit.

MARK: I tell my kids that farming is not a white collar job. You’ve got to get your hands dirty. A lot of my peers are failing. All they really want to get out of farming is \$40,000+ and a lot of cab time. But that doesn’t work.

JERRY: I agree. I’ve never been a big believer in government subsidies, but I think the family farm is worth saving because of the type of environment it gives children. I’d like to see us redirect our government subsidies to support family farms. If we’re going to put out money, we should use it to achieve a social means that’s worth achieving.

For a full summary of this 90-minute roundtable discussion, go to the Leopold Center web site, or request a copy by mail.

Keeney impressions and imprints

At the end of December, Dennis Keeney will officially step down as the Leopold Center's first and only director. What will be remembered from his 11 years of leadership? The story is best told by those who have watched the Center grow, and by those who have worked most closely on projects and programs.

“Dennis is one of those people you feel like you've always known. I started working with him almost as soon as he was hired by the Center and I was with the Story County Conservation Board. Dennis was a wonderful resource when I was in the Iowa Legislature, always providing us with the information we needed to make important decisions. His work has been key in helping the Center develop from humble beginnings into one of national regard and prominence.”

—Cele Burnett,
a three-term Iowa representative and
Story County Conservation Board
environmental educator who is now with the
Vermont Governor's Commission on Women

“Prior to development of the Leopold Center, there were few grazing research and education efforts in Iowa. Dr. Keeney recognized the key role that forages can play in minimizing soil erosion, enhancing nutrient cycling and optimizing profitability of agricultural systems, and the need for a team approach that included farmers. Some of the most novel research included development of year-round grazing systems, the evaluation of cover crops and strip crops as nutritional supplements for grazed corn stalks, and the effects of grazing corn crop residues on soil properties and subsequent crop yields. Thanks to Dr. Keeney's vision, there has been a resurgence of interest in grazing-based livestock production systems, which will be part of his legacy well beyond his retirement.”

—Jim Russell,
ISU professor of animal science and head of
the Center's Animal Management
Issue Team



Keeney, a frequent presenter outside Iowa, talked about conservation efforts on working farms during a four-day international conference, “Building on Leopold's Legacy: Conservation for a New Century,” in Madison in October.

Photo courtesy ISU College of Agriculture Information

“In addition to research and demonstration projects, Dennis Keeney's tenure has resulted in several benefits to Iowa and U.S. agriculture. Sensitivity to sustainability issues has been elevated for all Iowans, as well as for faculty across the ISU campus and other Iowa campuses. More judgments by more state and federal agencies have been more broadly based, and probably more accepted by those affected. Dennis should feel good about a job well done, and continued satisfaction from the work and impact of the Center in the years ahead.”

—Duane Acker,
Atlantic farmer and ag policy leader who
headed numerous food/agriculture programs
during the Reagan and Bush administrations,
and past president of Kansas State
University

“Dennis made certain that the Leopold Center belonged to the state of Iowa and was a center for all interests. He brought all interests and groups into the fold, which was especially important at early stages to make certain the Center not be labeled as biased or ‘bought out.’ This kept farmers, managers, industry, extension, non-profits and scientists all working together. Plus, he has insisted on quality science and does not fall prey to ‘feel good’ approaches to assessment of sustainability of agroecosystems.”

—Tom DeLuca,
1990-1993 Center research associate and
graduate student, now associate professor of
soil science for the University of Montana
School of Forestry

“Dennis Keeney brought to the Leopold Center and Iowa State University a solid background in soil and crop science. Dennis Keeney's tenure has established a strong awareness of sustainability and stewardship of our land and a new vision for a sustainable community. I think he delivered a bold approach to the land ethic of today as was so strongly voiced by Aldo Leopold. The vision Dennis Keeney had for the Leopold Center was to ‘help maintain the connection of science with the community and the land,’ which is parallel to the legacy of Aldo Leopold.”

—David Williams,
Villisca farmer and member of the Leopold
Center Advisory Board

“Just over a decade ago we had a statutory center on paper and, to its everlasting credit, the Iowa General Assembly gave it a good name, too: The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. But it took Dennis Keeney to breathe a spirit into the Center and to give it the life and character envisioned for it...

Dr. Keeney's previous recognition for inspired research, teaching, and academic and organizational leadership assured that he would be heard. Thanks to him, sustainable agriculture is now considered a legitimate and necessary pursuit for human kind. Only he could have brought worldwide attention to our efforts in Iowa and making this university the center of attraction for those who would lead other environmentally sensitive agriculturalists along the sustainable path, whether they till the soil, plant and harvest the crops, or play supporting roles in the food chain.”

—John Pesek,
ISU C.F. Curtiss Distinguished Professor,
Professor Emeritus and retired head,
Department of Agronomy

“When the Leopold Center was established by the Iowa Legislature, I was probably one of the more skeptical, albeit silent, individuals about what success may be attained by yet another tax on Iowa farmers. At the first annual meeting of the Center it was obvious that Dennis was going to be a quiet but forceful leader in the quest for keeping soil in place and for cleaner water, not only for Iowa but for the nation that would soon be noting and following the direction Iowa was taking in sustainable agriculture. Dennis' visionary legacy has been a tremendous gift to Iowa.”

—Ralph Neill,
Corning cattle producer and original
member of the Center's Animal Management
Issue Team

Keeney impressions and imprints

“ I’ve gotten to know Dennis through the Leopold Center’s partnership with Practical Farmers of Iowa. Usually professionals only talk to other professionals, but this has been a good opportunity for scientists and farmers to be on the same program together, with the same goals in mind.”

— *Dick Thompson,*
Boone farmer and one of the state’s leading conservationists

“ When I first met Dennis in his official capacity, I must admit to thinking, ‘Why this guy?’ In retrospect, the simple response would have been, ‘Because he’s the perfect choice to negotiate a sea change in agriculture’s paradigm both in the field and, for the most part, on campus.’ “

— *Sue Mullins,*
former Republican legislator and northwest Iowa farmer who helped write the 1987 Iowa Groundwater Protection Act

“ Since Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* was published in 1949, his words have guided and inspired millions of readers. But a critical piece of his legacy is that Leopold’s technical and philosophical approaches to conservation are still being implemented on the landscape and in the minds of men and women. No one has been more responsible for this current implementation than Dennis Keeney. We thank him for his contributions to improve Mr. Leopold’s definition of conservation: ‘harmony between men and land.’ ”

— *Buddy Huffaker,*
director of the Aldo Leopold Foundation, Baraboo, Wisconsin

“ Dennis will leave a truly remarkable legacy. Together with his staff and his board, Dennis has built the Leopold Center into a global center of excellence in sustainable agriculture, while remaining firmly responsible to the state that the Center was established to serve. The Center’s operations have had a major influence on public research through the competitive grant and Issue Team funding, and on the quantity and quality of information available to farmers. The Center has ensured a flow of important research funds to high-caliber public scientists and community groups around the state.”

— *Bill Vorley,*
1994-1997, visiting scientist at the Leopold Center, now with the International Institute for Environment and Development, London

“ Dennis Keeney broadened the vision of sustainable agriculture to include livestock management, farm families and rural communities. Through his leadership, he simultaneously required solid science and interaction with farmers. He crafted a sustainable agriculture commitment to sound academics, responsiveness to farmers and the public, and vision to the future. He ‘operationalized’ the ‘long view’ in agricultural research and demonstration.”

— *Mark Honeyman,*
director, ISU Research and Demonstration Farms and head of the Center’s swine systems (hooped buildings) initiative

“ From his arrival at the Center in 1988, Dennis reached out not only within the agricultural community, but also far beyond to policy makers, the media and most importantly, the public. His leadership in honing the research agenda of the Center and communicating its implications is inestimable. Iowa’s landscape and water are more sustainably productive, cleaner and better protected because of Dennis.”

— *Linda Appelgate,*
director, Iowa Environmental Council

NEWS & NOTES

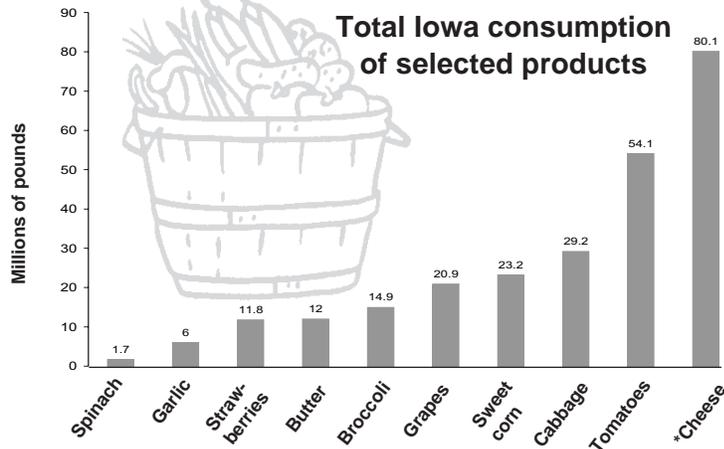
The Leopold Center-funded **spring sustainable agriculture seminar** will open its sixth year with a focus on alternative marketing. The series will run ten Wednesday nights, beginning at 7 p.m. Jan. 19, on the Iowa State University campus and numerous Iowa Communications Network sites throughout the state. Featured speakers include Diane Endicott, who has successfully marketed Rainbow Farms “natural” beef in the Kansas City market, Iowa producers who are part of the Precision Beef Alliance and several organic growers. Other sessions highlight the certification process, green labeling, electronic marketing and institutional use of local foods. The program is open to the public without charge except for students who are enrolled for credit. For more information, contact ISU professor Jim Russell at (515) 294-4631, or jrusell@iastate.edu.

Three members of the Leopold Center Advisory Board were recently named to the Governor’s Agriculture Task Force. They are **Craig Struve**, Calumet, who represents the Iowa Agribusiness Association of Iowa; Villisca farmer **David Williams**; and **Wendy Wintersteen**, who heads ISU Extension’s agricultural outreach programs. Their first task was to provide specific ideas for the new federal farm bill.

Leopold Center Advisory Board member **Robert Sayre** has edited a new book, *Recovering the Prairie*, a 224-page collection of essays, photographs and illustrations about America’s vast inland sea of grasses. The book brings together people from many fields to consider the connections between landscape and culture. The book is published by the University of Wisconsin Press, and includes a previously unpublished essay by Aldo Leopold.



One of the Leopold Center’s more well-known efforts has been agroforestry research along Bear Creek in Story County. This aerial view, taken during a September event to celebrate its national status, shows buffer strip vegetation at the Ron Risdal farm.



How much of Iowa's bounty do Iowans eat? This table, researched by education coordinator Rich Pirog, provides yearly consumption estimates for a select group of commercially produced fresh fruits and vegetables, plus cheese and butter. The amount supplied by Iowa growers is unknown for most of these foods, although it is believed that these percentages are small. "We need to get a better handle on how much food Iowa producers and processors are putting on the table for Iowa consumers," adds Mike Bevins, state horticulturist with the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, and chair of the Local Foods Task Force. "For example, there hasn't been a survey on horticultural crops since 1989, so for most items we are guessing as to how much of the produce Iowans consume is grown within the state."

Table estimates are calculated by multiplying the per capita consumption or utilization by Iowa's population. Data for per capita consumption and utilization are taken from USDA Agricultural Statistics, 1999, and the Fruit and Tree Nuts Situation and Outlook (1997 and 1998 data). Estimates do not include production for home use. Population of 2.862 million is based on 1998 figures from the Iowa Fact Sheet prepared by the USDA's Economic Research Service.

(*Cheese data does not include cottage cheese.)

NEWS & NOTES

Leopold Center director **Dennis Keeney** has been named to an advisory committee that will study the impact of industrial animal production. The project is a partnership of the Center for a Livable Future at Johns Hopkins University and the Global Resource Action Center for the Environment (GRACE). He also will be serving on the advisory committee for Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (ICASH), located at the University of Iowa.

* * *

The **Iowa Local Food Task Force**, which included members from Leopold

APPLES *(continued from page 1)*

potential for local food systems to augment Iowa farm income. Market studies show a growing interest in local food systems, where local farmers sell their products to nearby consumers. Printed copies of the apple pathways report also are available from the Leopold Center.

Center staff, advisory board and several Leopold grant project leaders, recommends establishment of an Iowa Food Policy Council and appointment of a full-time local food systems coordinator. Iowa agriculture secretary Patty Judge appointed the task force to study ways to expand local markets for Iowa farmers. The group's report is at the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship web site, <<http://www2.state.ia.us/agriculture/foodtaskforce.htm>>.

Follow-up shows conference brings change, hope

By Rich Pirog
Education coordinator



It took place during some of the worst times in years for Iowa hog producers. But the Leopold Center's Swine System Options Conference last February resulted in positive changes, a follow-up survey of participants shows.

The conference drew about 350 people including more than 175 swine producers. Co-sponsored with nine organizations, the program focused on management, marketing and production information on alternative production systems for swine producers with small- to medium-sized operations. Follow-up surveys sent six months after the conference assessed how the event helped participants. More than 40 percent of the hog producers responded, providing comments and suggestions. Among the producers, the survey showed that:

- 64 percent had raised hogs at least 20 years, 17 percent less than 10 years;
- 47 percent indicated that the conference played a role in changing management, production or marketing practices for their operation;
- 47 percent had examined alternative markets for their pork since the conference;
- 39 percent had contacted other producers, researchers or educators they met at the conference for more information;
- 25 percent had changed marketing strategies since the conference, and
- 15 percent had built new or remodeled existing structures, and many of the new structures were hoop buildings.

For a copy of the survey summary or conference proceedings, contact the Leopold Center. Co-sponsors included a number of ISU groups plus the Iowa Pork Producers Association, Iowa Farm Bureau and Practical Farmers of Iowa.



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Letter

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Jan. 6—Beef and Forage Bonanza, Creston. Contact: Brian Peterson, National Resources Conservation Service, (515) 782-4218.

Jan. 14-15—Practical Farmers of Iowa annual meeting, Ames. Contact: Nan Bonfils, (515) 294-8512.

Jan. 21—Kick-off for "Earth Year 2000," Des Moines Convention Center. Contact: Diane Ford-Shivvers, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, (515) 281-0878.

Jan. 29—Fifth Anniversary Iowa Local Food Systems and Community Agriculture conference, Des Moines. Contact: Robert Karp, Field To Family Project for Practical Farmers of Iowa, (515) 232-5649.

Feb. 19—Organic Production conference, Cherokee. Contact: Dave Stender, ISU Extension, (712) 225-6196.



Feb. 29—Neely-Kinyon Research Farm annual meeting, Greenfield. Contact: Kathy Rohrig, Adair County Extension, (515) 743-8412.

March 7-8—"Agriculture and the Environment: Wake Up Call for Iowans" water quality conference, Ames. Contact: Richard Larson, ISU Agronomy, (515) 294-6429.

March 8—Northeast Iowa Grazing Conference, Dubuque. Contact: Larry Tranel, ISU Extension, (319) 583-6496.

A bird's-eye view of the tree-lined buffer strip on the Ron Risdal farm in Story County taken during an open house in September.