



"Building healthy land, people, communities and quality of life, for present and future generations."

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The NSAS Newsletter is a bimonthly publication of Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society, a private, non-profit organization. Our mission is to promote agriculture & food systems that build healthy land, people, communities & quality of life, for present & future generations. The purpose of this newsletter is to inform its readers about sustainable agriculture issues, resources & activities. Members receive this newsletter as a benefit.

A Farm of our Own by Crystal and William Powers

We have been hoping to start our own little farm for several years now; learning, planning, dreaming, and this summer we felt we were finally able to pursue purchasing our own place. Four months, dozens of phone calls, and many twists and turns later, we finally are proud new farm owners! We'd like to share our experience for any other aspiring young farmers out there and offer what we learned along the way.

Nearly everyone we know in farming came into it two ways: inheritance or saved a bunch of money. Well we had neither, but still wanted to make our family farm dream a reality. Our first step was to start learning about all the mortgage programs that are available. We found that no one place even listed all the programs! Our new hobby became looking at different programs and talking with reps from each one. Online materials were a great place to start, but we only discovered the "true" limitations and offerings of a given program after talking with reps. Not all banks work with all mortgage programs, and even within those banks, only certain loan officers can help you, so make sure you are talking with the right person!

We continually evaluated which we were qualified for, which fit our needs, and which gave us the best situation.

The best way to start is just that, start! It was not until after doing pre-approvals for a couple mortgages that we discovered where our initial limitations were and really got into the details. Once we thought we had the "right" bank and program, we put an offer on the house and formally applied for the loan. At this point was when we first discovered the term "closing costs" was a figure of speech. It ended up that nearly a half of the "closing" costs were due much before closing and many were not refundable if for some reason the deal went south, so make sure you have those monies budgeted early.

Even after all our homework and chats, we still ended up getting tossed out of our original loan a week before closing since the land was valued much higher by the appraiser than either we or the bank anticipated. What a crazy week! All the closing amounts and paperwork had to change for the new loan program. I think we ended up signing our names a couple hundred times with all the changes!

Through it all, we finally completed everything and closed on the farm a few weeks after the initial closing date. The intricacies were often maddening, and often it seemed that we were the only ones looking out for our own interests, but having a place of our own was worth all the hassle!

Our biggest take-aways:

- Have a lot of patience
- Do your homework
- Be clear and frequent in your communications
- Start saving as soon as you can

I found it amazing that we did not end up using any of the "rural" or "farm" programs. We found that these programs just were not written with us, and maybe even a majority of would-be farmers, in mind.

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Press Releases

USDA LAUNCHES TOLL-FREE HELP DESK FOR SMALL MEAT AND POULTRY PROCESSORS

WASHINGTON, December 7, 2009 - The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) today announced the opening of its new small plant help-desk, which will provide for operators of small and very small meat, poultry and processed egg products establishments seeking help with agency requirements with direct access to knowledgeable staff specialists. The help-desk also will provide assistance to state and local food regulatory agencies - FSIS' partners in keeping meat, poultry and egg products safe for consumers.

"USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service is committed to providing assistance to businesses of all sizes that provide American consumers with access to a safe and healthy food supply," said Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety Jerold R. Mande. "The small plant help-desk will help the development of small, local producers by offering a one-stop shop for questions about how to make sure their meat, poultry and processed egg products are safe, wholesome and properly labeled."

The new help-desk will support USDA's "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" initiative by helping small processors to reduce the time and expense of dealing with agency requirements. "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" is designed to continue the national conversation about developing local and regional food systems and finding ways to support small and mid-sized producers. It emphasizes the need for a fundamental and critical reconnection between producers and consumers, building on the 2008 Farm Bill, which provides additional flexibility for USDA programs to promote local foods. More information on the "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" initiative can be found at: www.usda.gov/knowyourfarmer.

The FSIS small plant help-desk will serve as a "one-stop shop" for plant owners and operators with questions. More than 90% of the 6,000 plants inspected by FSIS are small or very small. FSIS staff will assess callers' requests and provide information and guidance materials that best meet their needs. In situations where the answer is not readily available, the staff will research the issue and follow-up with the caller. As appropriate, the help-desk will provide a portal to other services, such as AskFSIS, FSIS' existing internet service offering official agency responses to inquiries on agency policy.

Inquiries can be made to the small plant help-desk by toll-free telephone or by email. The help-desk is open from 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. EST, Monday through Friday, excluding Federal holidays. To speak to a staff specialist during this time, call 1-877-FSISHelp (1-877-374-7435). Customers may also contact the help-desk by email at InfoSource@fsis.usda.gov.

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY TAKES PROTECTION OF ORGANIC PRODUCTS TO NEXT LEVEL

A research group is studying natural antimicrobial ingredients to determine their effectiveness against pathogens in organic processed meat products. Released December 4, 2009

AMES, Iowa - Ready-to-eat, organic processed pork products look similar to conventionally cured meats. The organic versions have become popular among consumers as processors work to meet the demand. Although the natural and organic processed meat products are manufactured to simulate traditionally cured meat products as closely as possible, they're not exactly alike.

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One key difference is that the traditionally cured pork products contain nitrate and nitrite. Nitrite is a chemical preservative that's effective in inhibiting the growth of certain foodborne pathogens. Under government regulations, the organic products are not permitted to contain preservatives such as nitrate or nitrite. Instead, the organics may contain vegetable products that are considered natural ingredients and that contain high concentrations of nitrate, which is acceptable because it is from a natural source. The vegetable-based nitrate makes the organic pork product look and taste like it was traditionally cured.

The problem is that the organic products, lacking the directly-added nitrite, don't have the same level of built-in protection against pathogens such as *Clostridium perfringens*, *Clostridium botulinum* and *Listeria monocytogenes*. "Consumers can't tell the difference, except that they're labeled natural and organic," said Joseph Sebranek, an Iowa State University food science professor who is researching the case for the Food Safety Consortium. "From the standpoint of consumers, if they have a natural organic hot dog, it looks the same. The issue is if consumers expect that product to be identical in terms of handling requirements and refrigeration, and if they happen to do some temperature abuse, there is going to be more potential for problems to develop."

Sebranek said his research team's analysis has determined that naturally occurring nitrate is not present in the organic products at as high a concentration as the nitrite preservative is in traditionally cured products. But the level of concentration isn't the only factor that affects the product's ability to fight off pathogens. The researchers are reviewing what other formulations in the products could have an effect. The research has found that there is a way to use natural ingredients to fight the potential of pathogenic contamination in organic products to make up for what nitrite isn't present to do. Natural vinegar, lactate and lemon powder have recently become commercially available for use as natural preservatives in foods. Sebranek's group tested their effectiveness against the pathogens and found them to be effective against *L. monocytogenes* and *C. perfringens*, although not to the extent that nitrite is effective in traditionally cured products.

More remains to be explored. Sebranek's research group is studying other natural antimicrobial ingredients to determine their effectiveness against pathogens in organic processed meat products.



NOW THROUGH FEB. 1, TIME TO ENROLL IN CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

LINCOLN, Dec. 11, 2009 - The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has set February 1 as the cutoff to rank applications from farmers and ranchers wishing to receive cost-share funds for the installation of soil, water, grazing, or wildlife practices, according to NRCS.

Steve Chick, NRCS state conservationist, said last year more than \$52 million in federal dollars, not counting the landowner's investment, were committed in conservation programs. Most of these programs are in a continuous sign-up where farmers and ranchers can apply any time.

The programs available include:

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). "This is the base conservation program for most people," said Chick. "Irrigation practices, erosion control, grazing practices, animal manure systems are just a sample of the options available," he said.
- Within EQIP, there are also several special initiatives funds for which people can apply. These initiatives target: forestry, organic agriculture, wildlife habitat legacy areas, the Agriculture Water Enhancement Program (AWEP), targeting five areas in Nebraska for water conservation, and the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI), which targets the removal of invasive vegetation from fully and over-appropriated river basins in Nebraska.
- Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) aims to improve wildlife habitat on private lands.
- Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) helps landowners restore wetlands on their property by providing an easement payment or cost-share funds, depending on the option selected.
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), which rewards producers for past conservation practices and offers enhancements to do additional conservation work, is also under a continuous sign-up. "The ranking cutoff date for this program is not yet determined but will be after Feb. 1, 2010," said Chick.
- Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) allows enhancement of plant and animal biodiversity, and protection of grassland under threat of conversion to other uses, while retaining the right for grazing.
- Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), which provides matching funds for development rights to keep to vulnerable range or cropland in agricultural uses.

The important action for farmers and ranchers to remember is February 1 is the cutoff for NRCS to rank applications on hand. Landowners can get help for any of these programs at any NRCS office in their USDA Service Center. For additional information about NRCS conservation programs visit www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov/programs.

Neighbors

Certified Naturally Grown Label Gives Direct-Market Farmers a Choice

by Rita Brhel, P & D Correspondent

It was only a few years ago that growing organic crops and livestock was considered almost an oddity, certainly a rarity, among agricultural producers. Today, this niche market - with the help of the green-living movement, occasional food safety scares, and the popularity of local foods networks - has gone mainstream.

More and more consumers seek out organic produce and meat, and an increasing number of farmers and ranchers are seeking the rights to add "organic" to their operation's description. The problem is, certification through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program can be a significant expense - up to \$2,000 per year in some cases - which can be difficult for the small family farmer to justify.

And is why a growing number of producers are instead striving to become Certified Naturally Grown (CNG) - a label with just as stringent of standards as USDA organic certification, some say even more so, but without the cost limitation to producers. "Before the government took over the term 'organic,' it used to be farmer-controlled," said Victor Novak of Beulahland Farm near Lyons, Neb., which has had the CNG label for the past five years. "Certified Naturally Grown continues the practice of organic certification being farmer-driven."

A nonprofit program not at all affiliated with the USDA, Certified Naturally Grown started in 2002 only months after the USDA National Organic Program was put in place, and has attracted nearly 500 farmers from 47 states including three farms in South Dakota and two in Nebraska. Certification requirements match the USDA requirements, with one exception: In addition to mandatory annual inspections, about 10 percent of all certified operations are randomly selected for soil chemistry checks each year. And, as with the USDA program, there are also marketing materials and advertising available through the CNG site, NaturallyGrown.org.

Unlike the USDA, CNG's label puts an emphasis on local foods. While the USDA certifies agribusinesses and producers, CNG is for the family farmer.

"What consumers don't realize is that about 10 percent of foods labeled Certified Organic come from China, which is one of the most polluted places on earth," Novak said. "So, for example, because I am (CNG) certified in Nebraska, I can sell in Nebraska and in the surrounding states, but a producer in California could not send Certified Naturally Grown foods 1,600 miles to Nebraska."

"Another major difference is the lack of the notoriously high fees associated with the USDA National Organic Program.

Instead, CNG requests only an annual donation of at least \$50 to the organization itself.

"People don't like Certified Organic because the fees are so high," Novak said. "Really, there is no need to have the fees so high. Certified Naturally Grown isn't trying to make a profit; it's just trying to cover its operating expenses."

Because of CNG's internationally recognized standards, Novak has found the alternative to the USDA label to be held in high regard by consumers. In addition to a Community Supported Agriculture operation, through which he sells food subscriptions to consumers, he markets through an Omaha, Neb., farmers market and retail outlet, the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society, and the Nebraska Food Cooperative.

"There's a lot of loyalty out there," Novak said. "People like to put a face on their food. If you think about it, you want to know your barber, your banker, and maybe your grocer or postman. But most people don't have any idea who produces their food - something that they put in their bodies. This way [through CNG], people can get to know their food producers and re-learn the importance of being able to trust the person who produces their food."

Overall, "Certified Naturally Grown goes farther than [USDA] Certified Organic," he said - not only in what the CNG label offers producers in market opportunities, and consumers in food security, but also the future of family farming.

"Certified Naturally Grown is committed to a real renaissance that wants to strengthen the family farm and see them multiple," Novak said. "It's really about direct marketing. So many farmers have tried and failed at making a living off the commodity markets."

The CNG label offers the possibility of sustainability to production agriculture in a way that commodity markets cannot.

"When the government takes over something, he who pays the fiddler picks the tune. In the USDA, those are the Tysons," Novak said. "We want to give agriculture back to the family farmers."

CNG is also a way to give young people the opportunity to get into farming and to make it financially. "I think the CNG label is wonderful. If it's possible to help farmers make money again, we're more likely to get young people back on the farm," Novak said. "If you're growing food, you don't need a lot of land, you don't need a lot of debt, and you don't need a quarter-million-dollar combine. It's a whole different kind of farming. What I'd like to see, and what I believe Certified Naturally Grown can help with, is farmers growing food again."



OCIA News

Organic Crop Improvement Association, Nebraska Chapter #1 Newsletter

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Crop Improvement Workshop OCIA NE Chapter #1 and University of Nebraska Saturday - January 9th 2010 from Noon to 3:30 pm

“Weed Control with Flaming Research and Results”

There is an increased interest in organic production among farmers and industry in the United States and especially in our state, Nebraska. This interest is based on the strong consumer demand for environmentally friendly food. Weed control ranks as the number one problem limiting crop production.

Stevan Knezevic- UNL Associate Professor, Integrated Weed Management and George Gogos, Professor of Mechanical Engineering at UNL and their research team: Santiago Ulloa, Chris Bruening, Avishek Datta will share the most current findings about our custom designed flammers as well as weed and crop tolerance to broadcast flaming. We will share information on broadleaf and grassy weed control in field corn, sweet corn, popcorn, soybean, and wheat.

Farmer Panel: In 2009, four organic farmers from Butler County, NE participated in a project “Reducing Soil Erosion through Thermal Pest Control” and worked with Dr. Knezevic to compare controlling weeds in their corn crop using a flamer verses cultivation. They will share their thoughts on how the experiment worked - followed by a discussion on how to improve the use of flaming to control weeds in corn and soybeans.

East Campus - Plant Science building - Room 280 go to the northwest entrance, up the stairs, toward the department office. You may park outside the building (avoid meters and handicapped stalls). Lunch will be provided free. To make a reservation call Pat: 402-584-3837. For more information about the conference call Liz: 402-309-0944.

The Organic Crop Improvement Association was established in 1985. It is a non-profit international association of organic farmers, processors, traders, and manufacturers who have joined forces to promote partnerships, provide information to help growers improve crops and soil, build environmental stewardship, and provide certification services.

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"In The Vault"

Gifts from the Garden

by Tom Tomas

Last year at this time, I wrote about planning to grow a small patch of garden to make money. This time, I would like you think about planning to grow a small patch of your garden to share with others. Once you begin to share, you will reap bigger dividends than you can ever realize in the marketplace. Plant an extra row of flowers that you can cut and give as birthday bouquets. Plant a few more vegetables (not zucchini!) so you will have a surplus to share. There are many older people in every community who can no longer garden, but who appreciate fresh flowers and vegetables. You will be surprised how much you can learn from them when they tell you about their gardening years ago.

If your community has a food bank, a soup kitchen, or a church pantry, plant an extra row in your garden to help people who are hungry. Most food banks and churches tend to get a lot of contributions around Thanksgiving and Christmas time, but not during the growing season. Providing good, fresh produce to these service organizations in the spring and summer, and storage crops like potatoes in the winter, could make a real difference for people who don't have enough food.

Give flowers to children for their birthday instead of some plastic gadget from K-Mart. Save seeds from your garden to give when their birthdays come in winter. You can also share your love of gardening with them. That is something of value that can last a lifetime.

Braided onions and garlic or strings of dried hot peppers make good gifts for most any occasion. Dried flowers can be given year round. If you are willing to do a little more preparation, you can give canned fruits and vegetables from your garden. All this will take some planning now while you are watching the snow fall, and a little extra effort next spring. Think of the people you would like to share with and what you can grow that they would like best.

Share your love of gardening with urban people who may never have stuck their fingers in the soil, planted a seed, or harvested a tomato. Teachers in the Lincoln and Omaha area ask NSAS to link them with farmers who can teach their students about growing food. Gardening can provide city kids with skills that can provide food for their families, generate income, boost their confidence, and keep them out of trouble. More than that, it can provide urban people with healthy food, the sense of peace that comes from working the land, and an understanding of agriculture when they go to the polls. Remember, while you are sharing the produce of your garden you will also be sharing the values of sustainable agriculture and sustainable communities that you live by. You cannot

share these values by preaching. You can only share them by doing.

Anybody can buy things to give as gifts, but only you can share from your garden.

The YSEC!

Youth Scholarship Essay Contest

This contest is for youth up to the age of 18. The essay should be between 250-400 words. Scholarships for the annual conference in February will be awarded to the top essays, and will appear in subsequent NSAS newsletters and be accessible on the website. Please include a short bio about yourself and a picture of you on your farm would be nice as well! Submissions are due by January 15th and can be emailed to William at healthyfarms@gmail.com, or mailed to 414 County Road 15, Ceresco Nebraska 68017. Reviewers will include current NSAS members, board and staff.

The topic is: What does Sustainable Agriculture means to me?

Ideas for brainstorming and writing

- What does your ideal family farm look like?
- Personal definition of Sustainable Agriculture.
- Why it is important to you?
- Why it is important to your family's farm?
- The essays should reflect the principles and values of NSAS which can be accessed via the website at www.nebsusag.org

Loan Program Overview, continued from cover article

This is not a complete list, but hopefully will give you an idea of some things to look for.

Banks: >20% down, many will not work with property over 20 acres, standard interest rates

USDA /Nebraska Investment Finance Authority - Rural Development: 0% down, no mortgage insurance, income and purchase limits based on county, lower interest rates, land must be <30% appraised value,

USDA Beginning Farmer: 5% down, >3 years farm management experience but <10, must be unable to obtain regular bank financing

FHA: 3% down, structurally sound house (no structural repairs needed, which is open to interpretation by the appraiser/inspector that is sent), land <35% (not sure on this number but it is at least this) Appraised value, need mortgage insurance, lower interest rates, income and purchase limits

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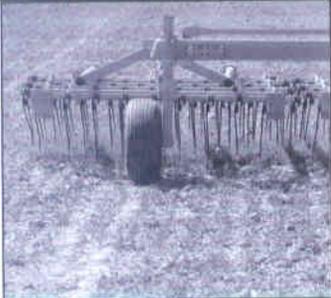
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Thank you for your support!

Please clip and return to: NSAS, PO Box 736, Hartington, NE 68739.
Please make checks payable to the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society

Upcoming Events

Rural Advantage/Healthy Farms Conference: February 5-6, 2010, Lincoln

February 5-6-2010 at the Holiday Inn-Downtown in Lincoln, NE. Deadline for early bird registration rate and family rates is January 25th. Deadline for exhibitors for inclusion in conference materials is January 10th. (We will accept exhibitor applications until all spots are filled) The conference is headlined by Congressman Jeff Fortenberry with a capstone luncheon by John Ikerd. Several sessions are being lead by NSAS members including Kevin Fulton, Paul Rohrbaugh, Dave Welsch, and Kevin and Charuth Loth to name a few. There is a full slate of youth programming as well so bring the entire family. To register, visit: <http://go.unl.edu/healthyfarmsconference>. For exhibitorship and sponsorships email William at: healthfarms@gmail.com

A Culture of Conservation: The Tools We Need to Grow Workshop: January 13, 2010, Ames, Iowa

Improving Iowa's soil and water quality is essential. This forum is geared for farmers, educators, agency personnel and others who want to do a better job of telling the story about conservation from the heart. For details, visit: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/ilf/JanuaryConference1.html>

Great Plains Vegetable Conference: January 7-9, 2010, St. Joseph, Missouri

Successful growers and researchers will cover topics such as: Small Fruit, Farmers' Markets, Organic Production, Marketing, Beginning Grower, Vegetable Production, Pest Management, High Tunnel Production, All day Saturday Cut Flower Track. For details, visit: <http://extension.missouri.edu/buchanan/GPVGC.shtml>

Practical Farmers of Iowa Conference: January 8-9, 2010, Marshalltown, Iowa

The focus of this year's conference will celebrate the roots of Iowa's sustainability by looking at the inspirations and techniques that have grown out of our dedication to Iowa's farms and communities. For details, visit: <http://www.practicalfarmers.org/events/annual-conference.html>



***The board and staff of NSAS wish everyone
a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!***

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