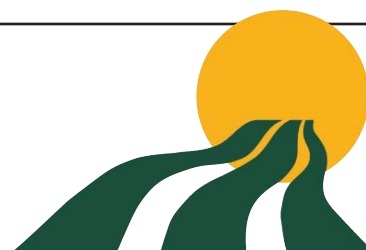


NORTH CENTRAL REGION SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

FIELD NOTES

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE
NCR-SARE PROGRAM

SUMMER/FALL 2006



Rex Spray Receives 2006 NCR-SARE Madden Award

Rex Spray grew up farming with his family near Mt. Vernon, Ohio, in the 1940's. They didn't use chemicals on their crops and nobody called them organic farmers. They just farmed. Today, Rex, along with his brother Glen, and nephew Howard still farm, and they still don't use chemicals. Now they are called organic farmers. And now Rex Spray has been awarded the NCR-SARE's 2006 Patrick Madden Award which recognizes the contributions of farmers and ranchers who have adopted sustainable practices that are profitable as well as beneficial to the environment and their communities. So why the recognition? For Rex Spray it's a long story.

"We moved here from West Virginia in 1940," said Spray. "My dad bought a 162 acre farm and I was only 10 years old. We all got through school and we kept adding to the farm. We'd buy pieces of small ground that came up for sale. My brother and I both were drafted in the service and when we got out we decided that we wanted to farm. We had a chance to buy some more ground so that's what we did. We basically kind of boiled it down to a few things that worked good for us."

For a while, Rex and Glen used most of the same farming practices that they learned growing up with their dad. Then, came the 1950's and farming methods throughout the country started to change.

"The chemicals came out in the '50's. We started getting the sprays such as atrazine. We used a lot of these different products just like everybody else. And we went on with them for several years."

At first the Sprays didn't think too much about using herbicides on their crops.



Rex Spray, organic farmer shown here on his farm in Mount Vernon, Ohio, was awarded the NCR-SARE 2006 Madden Award in recognition of outstanding achievement in sustainable farm practices.

"Back then they didn't tell us not to throw that stuff with our hands. We did all kinds of things with the chemicals until eventually we just kind of got tired of putting up with them. One day my brother and I got to talking and I said, 'Let's just quit using this stuff. We used to do it without it.' And so we did. For a year or two we had some problems until we learned how to keep the crop rotation in place and go to a shallow tillage. I tell people that we went back to doing a lot of the things that we did when I was a kid. It wasn't so crazy to do something like this."

Spray was awarded the very first organic certification in Ohio in the 1970's. The process began as a grassroots movement of farmers who helped create the Organic Crop Improvement Association to help certify organic farming operations.

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Rex Spray Receives Madden Award

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“We were already strictly organic,” said Spray. “But one day we had some meetings and decided to have the certification set up with all the paper work. We went over on a Sunday afternoon and five of us signed up. I just happened to be the first one. My certification number was 101.”

Things changed after that for the Sprays, but not all of it was pleasant.

“I can still remember in 1986 we had a meeting and this one reporter said she wanted to come out and talk to me. So she came out and took a picture of me on a tractor hooked up to a corn planter. Lo and behold this was Ohio Farmer magazine. The next issue of Ohio Farmer there was a picture of me right on the front page -- on the cover -- and I thought, ‘My, oh my.’ That’s when things really broke loose and the stories started, and neighbors and people in the county just started ridiculing us, and telling stories and lies about what we were doing. They had stories going all over the state that we went out at night and spread fertilizer.”

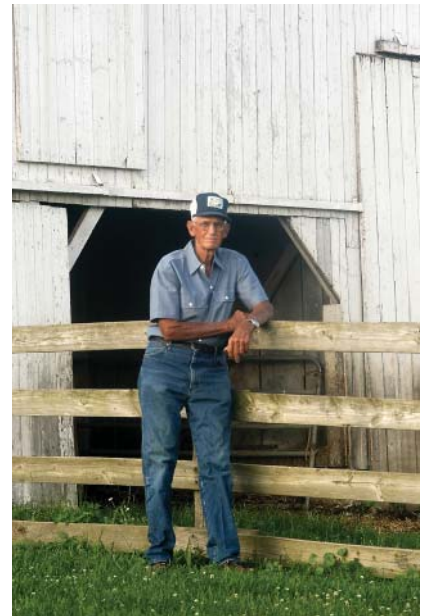
Eventually researchers in the area began to help turn the tide for the Sprays.

“We were going through all this ridicule and one day Deb Stinner (an agricultural researcher at Ohio State University) called. She came down to meet me with [her late husband] Ben and they were thinking the same way we were. Ben Stinner did a two year research on our farm showing what we were doing and how we were doing it and showing that it worked. It showed that we had as much profit or more than the conventional farming people and it gave us



Valerie Berton, from National SARE office with Western SARE Region’s Madden Award recipient Paul Muller at the SARE 2006 National Conference in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. Other Madden Award recipients for 2006 include Alex and Betsy Hitt of Southern Region SARE, and Edwin and Marian Fry from Northeast Region SARE.

Rex Spray, who has been farming with his brother Glen since the 1950’s, was awarded the very first organic certification number in the state of Ohio. Today the Sprays continue to practice sustainable farming methods including direct marketing of soybeans to be used in the production of tofu.



some real solid backing and credibility. The whole attitude changed. We got so many more people involved in it and it turned into quite a movement.”

Spray currently has a four crop rotation of soybeans, corn, wheat, and hay. He also raises beef cattle which he sells to Ohio’s only certified organic slaughterhouse. One of his biggest farming successes came from a source he never anticipated.

“I told my brother that if we go to raising this organic product we’ve got to get a premium price for it to make it pay. And I heard about some markets in particular for soybeans. We found a used bean cleaner and built a new building and put the grain cleaner in it. Since that we’ve cleaned and bagged all of our own beans and sold them for tofu. That was the high dollar product that really got us going.”

Spray has also been cited for inspiring other farmers to begin organic operations.

“Many farmers in Ohio will identify Rex as the primary influence,” said Carol Goland, executive director of the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association. “Rex has never turned anyone away from visiting his farm. Rex once hosted a group of Japanese businessmen who were developing an organic tofu product in Japan. They came to Rex in order to learn how he was able to grow such high quality organic soybeans.”

Spray admits that after 50 years of farming he is beginning to slow down. Fortunately, his consistent approaches to farming have already inspired countless other individuals throughout the country and the world to adopt sustainable approaches to agriculture. And according to Spray, maybe a few old approaches too.

The Nicodemus Homecoming

“Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” – John 3:4

Tucked away in the sprawling prairies of Northwestern Kansas is a town not unlike thousands of other rural communities spread across the country. It is a town built on agriculture that has subsisted for over 130 years on the determination of its citizens and their love of the land. The only outward sign that sets this community apart from the other towns around it is that its citizens are predominately African American. They have their roots in the post-Civil War movement which freed millions of individuals from plantation slavery. Their town is called Nicodemus.

In 1870, Nicodemus boasted over 700 residents and was on its way to discovering a self determination that might have seemed impossible ten years before that. Nicodemus thrived for 100 years and everything that was needed was provided even throughout the tough times that would befall farmers from all walks of life.

Like so many other rural communities, times have changed in Nicodemus. Now there are fewer than 50 residents and the town is governed primarily through the Graham County commissioners. Most of the black farmers have retired and it is difficult to know what will become of the town. Nevertheless, there is a hopefulness in the town that gets replayed every year during the annual Nicodemus Homecoming. The Homecoming brings hundreds of the area’s former residents back to town for parades, music, food, talent shows, dance, and worship.

In July of 2006, the Kansas Black Farmers Association (KBFA) held an event to closely coincide with the Nicodemus Homecoming called “Spotlighting USDA in NW Kansas.” Edgar Hicks, President of the KBFA, was on hand to partake in the Nicodemus Homecoming. For Hicks, the Nicodemus story has become a passion in his life.

“One of my greatest disappointments is that people just see a piece of history in Nicodemus,” said Hicks. “They just see five old buildings and they think their heyday is over so let’s just let it die peacefully. I see the history of that county as the best economic engine that a community could have.”

It seems the national news media agrees with Hicks. National Public Radio, ABC News, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and others have all made their way to the small Kansas town of Nicodemus to tell their story.

“We’ve had all these news agencies that come out and buy into it but leadership has to be there too. It has to be a team effort to make the project a success and that just hasn’t happened.”



Edgar Hicks celebrates the Nicodemus Homecoming with representatives from the USDA and local farmers.

A current project taking place near Nicodemus that Hicks is most interested in is the Tef Project. Tef is an Ethiopian grain that is currently being researched through the KBFA, in coordination with Kansas State University and the University of Nebraska. The possibility of introducing a new crop into the economy is exciting to Hicks. And although it is not officially a SARE project, Hicks, who previously received a SARE grant through the KBFA, sees it as one.

“To me it’s like the ultimate SARE project because that’s what it’s about -- sharing. The whole idea of this is a cultural one to start with. Nicodemus is a faith driven community. Even the town name, Nicodemus, being born again is like an emancipation proclamation. I forget how many times [Nicodemus] is mentioned in the Bible, but there’s a real connection there.”

That rebirthing idea is what drives Hicks to not let the town’s original essence and character die.

“The people of Nicodemus were really people who were just barely able to read and write after the Civil War and they were very interested in what was happening on the continent of Africa. There’s a connection between how those communities existed back then. When you read the early 1880’s newspapers, they are writing about Ethiopia and Liberia. And even though people from Nicodemus weren’t from Ethiopia the newspapers from Kansas identified the people and lumped them all together and called them Ethiopians.”

The connection with growing tef to help build a sustainable community in Nicodemus goes even further than the Ethiopian issue for Hicks. Issues such as current Great Plains drought conditions, the fact that tef is mostly gluten free, and traditional friendship values all interrelate when it comes to growing tef.

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The Nicodemus Homecoming

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“Tef is drought tolerant so it doesn’t use a lot of water. It’s also a medical and nutritional issue for those people who are gluten intolerant with the celiac disease. It grows fast. And when you sit down and eat bread it’s communal. In Latin, bread means something like companion and that’s really what we need. All the symbols that this project represents feed you in different ways.”

Perhaps most important to Hicks is an issue which resonates with him regarding empowering all farmers.

“The bottom line is that I want to see farmers have control of their own destiny. It bugs me when I hear what’s going on with what the energy companies make and what the railroad companies who are some of the biggest users of energy make. They still make profits. It really is an inequity when the farmer is the only guy who can’t tell you what you’re going to pay for the product that he’s selling. So that’s my focus. I think when they finish outlining the opportunities and risks for growing tef it will be a little more embracive. This stuff goes for good money. I went to a whole foods store and I paid \$7.00 for 18 ounces of tef flour. So it has value. It’s just a very small seed and it is labor intensive but the best part is that the farmer controls the pricing of it. And that’s what it’s all about -- how does the farmer control the pricing and say, ‘I’m setting this price. I’m not taking this price, I’m establishing a price.’? There’s a bottom line and hopefully we can build a community off of that and also a bridge between the Ethiopian communities and communities like Nicodemus.”

Hicks has been working for some time trying to generate interest to major corporations to invest in the area. He is aware that tef alone can’t solve everything that needs to be accomplished in Nicodemus. He recognizes that it will have to come from local initiative and the same work ethic that originally founded Nicodemus.

“A day doesn’t go by that I’m not working on some aspect of the project. I still think it’s a powerful economic development tool for the whole area. Not just for the county but for the surrounding areas as well. The companies have an interest and we just need to go to them and say, ‘Hey, this is our plan.’”

The commitment that Hicks has to the Nicodemus area through sustainable agriculture and community planning may just be the key to another rebirth.

To find out more about the event visit the NCR-SARE web site at <http://www.sare.org/ncrsare/nicodemus.htm>. Other information about Nicodemus can be found through their National Historic web site at <http://www.nps.gov/nico/>.

Images From the Nicodemus Homecoming and from Spotlighting USDA in NW Kansas



Edgar Hicks looks on with fellow visitors as Sarah Evert from Kansas State University explains the values of tef.



Gary Alexander surveys the tef plot currently being cultivated by the Kansas Black Farmers Association.



The Nicodemus Homecoming included a parade featuring a reenactment of the famous Civil War-era Buffalo Soldiers.

Organic Pecans in a Nutshell

Drew Kimmell has a practical attitude regarding the benefits that Missouri pecan growers have received from going organic and combining their resources.

“When you provide a person that already has a crop with significantly more money for the same crop by being alert to national and international trends, there’s sure nothing wrong with that,” says Kimmell. And that, in a nutshell, is what Kimmell’s Missouri Northern Pecan Growers (MNP) collective has been doing the past several years.

Kimmell was the Project Coordinator for a NCR-SARE Farmer Rancher grant which assisted Missouri area pecan growers in certifying their crops as organic in order to market themselves to suppliers who pay premium prices for the organic pecans. By significantly increasing the grower base for native, organic pecans, Kimmell saw a unique opportunity to dramatically increase profits for growers.

“If you’re in the pecan business in Vernon County (Missouri) very long you tend to know a good part of the other people in the business. You’re going to run across them either at a farm show looking at pecan machinery or when you get together to sell. All of the guys have understood that if you’ve got 20,000 pounds for sale you won’t get near as good a bid as if you’ve got 120,000 pounds for sale. The bigger lots attract more buyers. There are some buyers from the South that will not show up unless you’ve got a quarter million pounds ready for them. So they have learned over the past 15 or 20 years to get along with each other and get all the pecans gathered together as many as possible if you’re going to sell to these big Southern buyers.”

Kimmell’s challenge was to take that idea of pooling the resources of Missouri pecan growers and also apply it to the organic market.

“In 2001, bulk pecans got down to 38 cents a pound and that was by the trailer load. If you only had 10,000 or 15,000 pounds they were probably 32 or 33 cents a pound. And that’s cheap. You can’t even harvest them for that.”

A feasibility study was conducted which confirmed the market potential for organic pecans. The study also found that Missouri pecan growers were already using many sustainable practices but had little knowledge or consideration of what becoming organic could do for their business. Coincidentally, the price for conventional pecans also began to rise in the early 2000’s.

“I started telling people about the organic process. I just made them a promise that I would put a floor under them of 70 cents. We haven’t even come close to that floor since then because the entire pecan market has been higher. In 2003, conventional pecans were bringing 70-75 cents a pound by the truckload and



The move to organic pecan orchards have dramatically increased profits for the Missouri Northern Pecan Growers

I was paying a dollar on the organic. So that’s a 30-35% higher price. When these growers get to talking to each other then some of them will say, ‘You know, I think I can do that too.’ So word of mouth is big.”

In addition to word of mouth, Kimmell also used SARE funds to initiate a quarterly newsletter which specifically targeted growers as to the benefits of organic certification.

“That frequent contact helped keep the guys in line on organic,” said Kimmell. “We got these guys together to learn the organic system and what record keeping was required. There is quite a bit of record keeping and I think one reason we’ve been successful is that we have taken on the burden ourselves of completely and thoroughly understanding what it takes to be organic.”

Another issue for Kimmell to contend with is the fluctuation in size of pecan crop harvests. It has meant spending a lot of time with bankers to alleviate their concerns regarding inconsistent harvests.

“The pecan tree is alternate bearing by nature. If you take a normal five year period you’re going to have one huge crop, one blank, and three in between. Last year was the huge crop. Usually you have a certain amount of rain or snow during harvest so you don’t get them all. Well, we had one sprinkle the entire harvest season and everybody got every pecan. So the production that we bought last year was eight times as big as it was year’s previous. That can make it difficult on the marketing side when you have such an erratic production. It’s not real easy to keep capital requirements where they need to be when production can vary by that much. I’ve never made a banker so nervous in my life.”

Even through all of the fears, Kimmell has continued to use

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Staff Updates at NCR-SARE

In 2006 SARE has added a few new faces to the staffs in our Minnesota and Nebraska offices.

Marie Martin came to the NCR-SARE program at the University of Minnesota from the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. Her career with the UW System included six years of administrative experience, office management, and public relations. She has a bachelor's degree in English from UW Oshkosh, and is completing her master's degree in Public Administration. Marie intends to remain in the public higher education sector, with a greater emphasis in public relations.

Annie Marshall is the new Associate Administrator in the St. Paul NCR-SARE office. Before accepting this position, she worked in the University of Minnesota Sponsored Projects Office as a Grant and Contract Administrator. Annie is currently coordinating the Graduate Student and Research and Education award set ups with the Minnesota grants office.

Sherry Komenda is the grant specialist for NCR-SARE and National extension projects at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Sherry joined UNL in the spring of 2006 and focused her efforts on updating the SARE project invoices and amendments for each of the SARE projects. She also processed the National SARE conference vendor contracts, payments and reimbursements.

Organic Pecans in a Nutshell

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determination and hard work to alleviate those anxious moments.

"Nobody has attacked the pecan business nearly as big as we have in this part of the country. We've been here five or six years now and our sales this year will be in seven figures so things are going along well. I went to see the banker about two hours ago and he was all smiles. It also didn't hurt that one banker went to Kansas City and happened to go to a whole foods market and saw the prices that people are getting out of organic foods and the number of shoppers there. It cemented in his mind that we are definitely on the right path."

The MNPG currently supplies hundreds of retail stores and restaurateurs with organic pecans. Even Kimmell has a hard time keeping track of all his current customers.

"We've got a long customer list and I really enjoy that. I don't like putting all my eggs in one basket. If we were dealing strictly with a Wal-mart and they decided they found somebody else cheaper, where would we be? We don't have any one customer that can hurt us very bad and I think that's a pretty good philosophy."

And what kind of nut could argue with that?

Grass Fed Cattle Transform Life on the Ranch in New SAN Publication

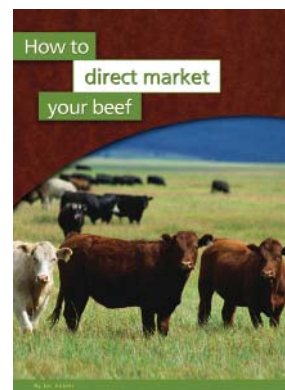
"How to Direct Market Your Beef" portrays how one couple used their family's ranch to launch a profitable, grass-based beef operation focused on direct market sales. From slaughtering to packaging, through labeling and advertising, Jan and Will Holder transform their real-life experiences to a compelling narrative rich with practical tips.

A special Entrepreneurs section features farmers and ranchers -- four of whom received or benefited from Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program grants -- who demonstrate real-life successes in direct marketing sustainably raised food in innovative ways.

Dairy/Beef producer, Jim Goodman of Wonewoc, Wisconsin described the book as "...an excellent overview and how-to manual for someone interested in starting a direct-market beef operation."

The book includes information on starting out, selling product, growing profit, and many other helpful resources for those looking to revitalize their beef production.

Download a complete copy of "How to Direct Market Your Beef" at www.sare.org/publications/beef.htm for free. To order print copies (\$14.95 plus \$5.95 s/h) visit www.sare.org/WebStore, call 301/374-9696 or send check or money order to Sustainable Agriculture Publications, PO Box 753, Waldorf, Maryland 20604-0753. (Please specify title requested when ordering by mail.) Discounts are available on orders of 10 or more.



A boom crop in 2005 netted over 700,000 pounds of Missouri organic pecans compared to 80,000 pounds their first year.

Current Timelines for NCR-SARE Grant Programs

Timeline projections are subject to change, so please consult our web site at <http://www.sare.org/ncrsare> for updated information.

Farmer Rancher Grant Timeline

August 2006	Call for Proposals
December 1, 2006	Proposals Due
March 2007	Authors Notified on Status of Proposal
April 2007	Funds Available to Recipients
August 2007	Call for Proposals
December 2007	Proposals Due

Research and Education Grant Timeline

Late Fall 2006	Full Proposals Due
March 2007	Funding Decisions Made by NCR-SARE
Spring 2007	Authors Notified on Status of Proposal
Next Grant Cycle Begins	
April 2007	Call for Pre-Proposals
June 2007	Pre-Proposals Due
Early Fall 2007	Authors Notified on Status of Pre-Proposal

Professional Development Grant Timeline

Mid-January 2007	Call for Pre-Proposals
Mid-March 2007	Pre-Proposals Due
April 2007	Authors Notified on Status of Pre-Proposal
July 2007	Full Proposals Due
November 2007	Funding Decisions Made by NCR-SARE

Graduate Student Grant Timeline

Fall 2006	Call for Proposals
January 2007	Proposals Due
March 2007	Funding Decisions Made by NCR-SARE
Spring 2007	Authors Notified on Status of Proposal
Fall 2007	Funds Available to Recipients

2006 Farmer Rancher Grant Call for Proposals

The 2006 NCR-SARE Farmer Rancher Grant Program Call for Proposals is now available. The deadline for submitting proposals is December 1, 2006.

Call our office at 1-800-529-1342 for more information or access the application on our web site at:

<http://www.sare.org/ncrsare/prod.htm>

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The 2006 SARE National Conference was held August 15-17 in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. Over 650 people attended the event from 47 states and the conference included over 100 presenters talking on a wide range of sustainable agriculture issues. Pictured to the left is Carl Barnes of Turpin, Oklahoma. Barnes' talk titled, "The Value of Traditional Corn Varieties" focused on preserving and restoring the availability of traditional Native American seed corn. Barnes spent additional time in the North Central region following the conference. He visited Sitting Bull College located at the Fort Yates Standing Rock reservation and attended a planting of the 'Three Sisters' gardens in association with participants from North Dakota State University. "It was a vision come true," said Barnes who also gave a presentation at the planting and participated in the ceremonies.

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