

MESAS Completing Risk Management Education Project

By Dr. Aaron K. Hoshide

The Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society is completing a USDA Risk Management Education grant helping dairy farmers in Maine and other states decide about relocating to Aroostook County to integrate their farms with area potato farms. Integration here involves exchanges of manure, livestock feed and other cropping activities between potato and dairy farms. Dairy farmers benefit from expansion of their operation while avoiding developmental sprawl. Potato farmers benefit from growing fewer unprofitable potato rotation crops and more profitable dairy forages, increased soil quality and higher potato yields. Third-party farmers may grow dairy forages, potato rotation crops and handle manure spreading so dairy and potato farmers can focus just on livestock and potatoes respectively.

The project is developing a formal integration contract through ABC Potatoes since dairy farmers may be relocating without purchasing cropland. Other project collaborators, participants and interested parties include Maine Potato Growers, Maine Dairy Improvement Association, The University of Maine, University of Maine Cooperative Extension and Witter Research Farm, Upper Valley Economic Corporation, The Flying Cow, Inc., Dairy Marketing Services, Dairy Farmers of America, Dean Foods, Farm Credit of Maine, Northeast Ag Sales, Feed Commodities, ABS Global, USDA's Agricultural Research Service, the Maine Department of Agriculture, plus about 30 Maine dairy, potato and forage farmers.

There are advantages to starting new dairy farms in Aroostook to integrate with potato farms. First, Aroostook is not facing land development pressures like elsewhere in Maine and New England. Second, the Northeast has a milk deficit but has surplus processing capacity. Third, Aroostook is already attuned to farming. Fourth, milk prices in the Northeast are favorable since so much milk is fluid and since Maine has tier price supports. Fifth, new farms have more financing options. Sixth, expansion is enjoyable and exciting. Seventh, integration allows farmers to increase soil quality and yields from a longer rotation.

Challenges to dairy relocation and integration in Aroostook include how the move would be financed. Second, the distance to major processors is farther with higher milk hauling costs. Third, there is financial risk since the move would be heavily leveraged by loans. Fourth, relocation is dependent on the next generation being involved and taking the farm over when the relocating farmers get older. Fifth, integrated potato crops have to meet 80% of Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification requirements including manure plant-back restrictions for food safety. Failure to do so could disqualify a farm from selling to processors.

There have been farmer interviews, on-farm meetings, two farmer kitchen table talks on October 21 and December 9, 2006 and two farm tours. The Dairy Tour on March 20-21, 2007, was a success with 17 participating potato, dairy and forage farmers. Aroostook potato farmers visited modern Maine dairy farms in south-central and central Maine. There was a tour of the Garelick milk processing plant in Bangor and a dinner meeting at Governor's Restaurant in Lewiston. The Aroostook Tour was held on August 14-15, 2007 and toured Aroostook potato and dairy farms with a Tuesday dinner meeting at Governor's Restaurant in Presque Isle. Parties interested in integration are recommended to contact Aaron Hoshide at aaron.hoshide@umit.maine.edu or at 207.659.4808.

Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society
The University of Maine
5782 Winslow Hall
Orono, Maine 04469-5782
Phone: (207) 581-3135
e-mail: andrew.files@umit.maine.edu

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Spotlight on a MESAS Board Member Kerri Sands

In 2006, MESAS President John Snell, Jr., at the recommendation of the Board, appointed two non-farmers to one-year, renewable, terms on the Board. Kerri Sands, administrator of the Farms for the Future program, was one of those non-farmers appointed. By mutual agreement between the MESAS Board and Kerri, Kerri is currently serving her second one-year term.

Kerri has a wide range of experience that has enabled her to effectively fill the role she currently holds. In addition to working as a small farm apprentice in Ireland, she also volunteered for Coastal Enterprises, Inc. staffing taste-test demonstrations of locally-produced foods at convenience stores and other venues in western Waldo county. As a student at College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, she managed COA's Beech Hill Farm farmstand and she worked at a restaurant that featured the use of local produce. All these experiences have helped Kerri develop an awareness and understanding of the needs of farmers, especially those who sell direct to consumers. As she reflects, "[My experience is] all very much part of the same thread . . . I learned through apprenticing that my primary talents weren't in managing crops and livestock. I wanted to work with people and the greater network of agricultural systems." For Kerri, the interest lies with "people, communities, landscapes, resource management, and regional identity." The fact that Kerri is a native of central Maine (Carmel) gives her an extra keen motivation to make Maine's farm and rural economies sustainable.

With specific reference to her experience managing COA's farm stand, Kerri notes, "That was one of the most valuable things I could have done. I was placed at the interface between the farmer and the consumer . . . I got a really good handle on what a small scale farmer has to do to manage a number of direct-sale outlets – farmstand, CSA accounts, store accounts, catering accounts, etc. . . . Being able to witness the marketing system has been so valuable when sitting down to meet with farmers working on their business plans." And in terms of what drives consumers to buy locally, Kerri emphasizes, "It's about way more than nutrition . . . [it's about] deeper connections to history and place and natural cycles." Just prior to her being promoted to administrator of

Farms for the Future, Kerri worked as Farm Development Specialist under then-administrator, Mort Mather. In that role, primarily advising farm teams (groups of specialists organized to work with farmers to develop a business plan), Kerri had the opportunity to work intimately on various farm teams helping to strengthen various components of a team's business plan, especially the marketing component. And it is that type of work that Kerri enjoys most and helps her to realize how important Farms for the Future is. She believes in giving farmers the structure to develop planning skills, through conversation, training, and number crunching. "I'm trying my best to find that balance," she notes, "between being out



Kerri Sands

on the farms and back in the office making sure the program runs as efficiently and effectively as possible." As she notes, her top priority is "to use the program the best as we can to benefit the farmers and citizens of Maine." From Kerri's years of experience with Farms for the Future, she thinks that what Maine needs is "a bunch of farmers who can think in terms of business planning. Of course we need farmland protection and market development and friendly regulations, but then to go along with that you need farmers who can think about how they are going to manage resources for the next few years."

To continue to make the program better and to help others, Kerri is using what limited time she has available after meeting her primary obligations to take the lead connecting with similar farm viability programs in other states. In November 2007, she will

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Calendar of Events

December 11–13, 2007, New England Vegetable and Fruit Conference, Manchester, NH (for more information, go to www.nevbc.org)

December 18, 2007, Deadline, Northeast SARE Farmer Grant Program. (for more information, go to www.uvm.edu/~nesare/FGinfo.html)

January 15–17, 2008, Maine Agricultural Trades Show, Augusta Civic Center, Augusta, Maine (for more information, contact Judy Blaisdell @ 207.287.3702 or judy.blaisdell@maine.gov)

January 23–26, 2007, 28th Annual Ecological Farming Conference, "Root Values: Connecting Ecology, Community and the Land," Asilomar Conference Grounds, Pacific Grove, CA.

February 7–9, 2007, Farming for the Future Conference, State College, PA. For more information, go to: www.pasafarming.org/FarmingForTheFuture.html (i.e., on the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture website)

March 14, 2007, Making the Connection III – the 3rd Maine-based conference on links between human health disorders and chemical pollution. (for more information, contact Physicians for Social Responsibility Maine @ psr_maine@yahoo.com or 207.772.6714)

March 18, 2007, Ag Day at the Legislature; Hall of Flags, State House, Augusta, Maine.

March 25–27, 2007, Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) 20th Anniversary — national conference and networking in Kansas City, MI (for more information, www.sare.org)

The MESAS Mission is "to explore, develop and promote agricultural systems and practices that allow Maine farmers to retain a greater share of consumer expenditures for farm products. This will be accomplished by developing methods to reduce the need for, and cost of, purchased inputs and by adding value to farm production."

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Farm Fresh Connection Goes Private

Toward the end of this past May, after receiving official approval from members, the MESAS Board of Directors sold Farm Fresh Connection to Martha Putnam. As many of you may know, Martha had worked as FFC's Project Director since its inception, and is now running the program as a for-profit business under the name FFC, LLC. Martha was very matter-of-fact about her rationale for buying FFC, "We had a lot of commitments out to buy stuff and we had a lot of businesses that depended on FFC. And I had committed to those people. And that's basically why I did it . . . and I like it."

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present at a conference in Columbus, Ohio, which is focusing on farmland preservations and viability programs.

Farms for the Future is a statewide economic development program targeting farms. The program is the responsibility of the Maine Department of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Resources and is currently administered by Coastal Enterprises, Inc. (CEI), a non-profit community development corporation based in Wiscasset. The two-phase program provides selected farms with: 1) assistance in developing new business plans aimed at increasing farm viability (Phase 1), and 2) a grant of 25% of the funds needed to implement

MESAS had operated Farm Fresh Connection for roughly four and a half years during which time over 100 Maine farmers had supplied product to over 60 restaurants, institutions, and retail outlets. The experience of operating Farm Fresh Connection and helping to fill a niche in the wholesale market was a positive experience for MESAS and the Board of Directors feels confident that Martha Putnam is the best person to take over the program and have a chance at successfully running it profitably. Martha described the current state of FFC, LLC, "Things are going good. . . We're doing a lot of business, so it's good. We have a lot of loyal suppliers and a lot of loyal customers so it has been good."

For more on MESAS' involvement with FFC and the recent sale, please see the **Executive Director's Column** below.

the business plan, up to \$25,000 (Phase 2). In exchange for this support, farms participating in Phase 2 enter into a farmland protection agreement that prevents their land from being developed for non-agricultural purposes for five years. The farmland protection agreement may be terminated by paying back the grant. For more information, or to request an application packet, contact Kerri Sands at 207.772.5356 x114 or kcs@ceimaine.org.

Some information in this article was gleaned from "Appropriate Scale" an article written by Loie Hayes which appeared in the Summer 2006 issue of COA Magazine.

Executive Director's Column

A Happy Graduation Day Leaves (Temporary) Empty Nest

by **Stewart N. Smith**

You may have experienced this feeling: You raise your first child, she graduates from school, then she leaves home to grow and mature. For a short time thereafter you find your home a bit emptier, until it fills up again with other activities.

MESAS has recently experienced that empty-nest feeling. While our child, Farm Fresh Connection (FFC), was birthed only five years ago, it commandeered a large proportion of our home. Much of our attention, both of directors and staff, has been devoted to helping FFC grow from an important idea to an enterprise that could stand and prosper on its own.

FFC was conceived to help Maine farmers sell more product to local markets, especially institutional markets like colleges and restaurants, as well as stores. We believed that while it would require external funds to create the initial linkages, once the connections became well-established, FFC could operate as a private firm that would not be dependent on public financial support.

With funding from a USDA Rural Development Value Added Producer grant as well as several private foundations, including the Betterment Fund and especially Common Good Ventures, which supplied important technical assistance as well as welcomed

funding, FFC grew into a healthy enterprise that connected many Maine farmers to new markets and provided many food users a convenient and efficient way to access local food products. Much of this success can be attributed Martha Putnam, the face of FFC, who made it work on the ground.

This spring we agreed that it was time for FFC to leave its original home and grow on its own. Martha was ready to assume the responsibility of operating FFC as a private firm and the MESAS membership and Board agreed it was time to set it free before the summer marketing season began.

The summer experience has demonstrated the wisdom of our timing. FFC is now a private company operated by Martha Putnam as Farm Fresh Connection, LLC. While there has been a fundamental ownership change, the operation remains similar. Martha maintains the close working relationship with Market Fresh Produce. While Market Fresh Produce does much of the distribution, Martha sources Maine product from local farms and sells to her customers. The linkages that MESAS envisioned when it voted to give birth to FFC continue to grow.

Meanwhile, the nest here feels a bit emptier — and likely will until we move our attention to other programs. FFC has consumed a substantial amount of our time over the past five years. We're delighted to see our efforts succeed, but you will excuse us if we take a few moments to ponder our next projects. That was the subject of a recent Board meeting; we will likely report on those efforts at the Members meeting this winter.

MESAS 2008 Maine Agricultural Trades Show Program

Augusta Civic Center • Tuesday, January 15, 2008 • 1:45 – 5:00 p.m.

This year's program is divided into two sessions followed by the Annual Meeting of Members. The first session focuses on marketing one's farm by "word of mouth." The second session focuses on barriers to integrating crops and livestock on the same farm, specifically as this relates to the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) standards.

Getting Your Customer to Tell Your Story

1:45 – 3:00 p.m.

Moderator

Bob Spear, President, Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society

Presenter

Greg Franklin, Principal, Gregory S. Franklin Associates Consulting

Panel Members

John Bliss, Broadturn Farm, Scarborough, Maine (tentative)

Mark Guzzi, Peacemeal Farm, Dixmont, Maine

Gloria Varney, Nezinscot Farm, Turner, Maine (tentative)

Barriers to Integration

3:15 – 4:30 p.m.

Moderator

Rick Kersbergen, Extension Educator
University of Maine Cooperative Extension

Presenter

Dave Handley, Extension Specialist
University of Maine Cooperative Extension

Panel Members

Dick York, Nature's Circle Farm, Houlton, Maine
Organic certified and GAP certified

A representative of Whole Foods Market (tentative)

Annual Meeting of Board Members

4:40 – 5:00 p.m.

Treasurer/Secretary's Report

President's Report

Election of Directors

Other Business

News From Away

Leopold Center Consumer Survey Looks at Link Between Local Foods and Climate Change, Health, Food Safety

A recent survey shows that American consumers are skeptical about the safety of the global food system and many believe that local foods are safer and better for their health than foods from afar.

These are the views of a representative, nationwide sample of 500 consumers who participated in a web-based survey conducted by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture in July 2007. Their responses are summarized in a new Leopold Center report, "Consumer perceptions of the safety, health, and environmental impact of various scales and geographic origin of food supply chains." The paper was written by Rich Pirog, who leads the Center's Marketing and Food Systems Initiative, and Iowa State University graduate student Andy Larson.

Objectives of the study were to gauge consumer perceptions regarding:

- Food safety;
- The impact that various scales and production methods of the food system have on greenhouse gas emissions;
- Willingness to pay for a food system that achieves a net reduction in greenhouse gas emissions; and
- Health benefits from local and organic foods.

Survey respondents placed high importance on food safety, freshness (harvest date), and pesticide use on fresh produce they purchase, with somewhat lower importance placed on whether the produce was locally grown, the level of greenhouse gas emissions it

took to produce and transport the produce, and whether the respondent could contact the farmer who grew it.

Health factors also have an effect on consumer attitudes. More than two-thirds of respondents (69 percent) "somewhat" or "strongly" agreed that local food is better for their personal health than food that has traveled across the country. This is in spite of the fact that there is little or no research documenting such benefits, Pirog noted.

"With the dramatic rise in popularity of local foods, the farmers who grow these foods and the organizations that champion both the farmers and the foods will be called upon to prove the existence of economic, environmental and health benefits stemming from these products, and to ensure their continued safety as part of the food supply," Pirog said.

The 45-page report is available on the Leopold Center website at: <http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubs/staff/consumer/consumer.htm>.

The Leopold Center also offers a competitive grants program across all three research initiatives in Marketing and Food Systems, Ecology, and Policy. Through its research and education programs, the Leopold Center supports the development of profitable farming systems that conserve natural resources. Center funding comes from state appropriations and from fees on nitrogen fertilizer and pesticides, as established by the 1987 Iowa Groundwater Protection Act.

For more information, contact:

- Rich Pirog, Associate Director and Marketing and Food Systems Program Leader, 515.294.1854, rspirop@iastate.edu
- Laura Miller, Communications Specialist, 515.294.5272, lwmiller@iastate.edu
- Go to the Leopold Center website at: www.leopold.iastate.edu.

GAP Standards . . . What Are They? Who Needs Them?

Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) Standards are fast becoming the industry standard for large-market food retailers and processors, including the government, that purchase wholesale produce. The standards were developed, at the request of some agricultural industry groups, by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in an attempt to address microbial food safety of fresh fruits and vegetables. Although developed by the government, the standards are actually **voluntary** and, as such, are left to the wholesale purchasers to require or not.

As part of the educational process, the FDA and USDA have published "the guide," a publication entitled, "Guidance for Industry — Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables." The guide addresses microbial food safety hazards and good agricultural and management practices common to the growing, harvesting, washing, sorting, packing, and transporting of most fruits and vegetables sold to consumers in an unprocessed or minimally processed (raw) form. According to Dr. Steve Johnson, Maine Extension Potato Specialist, the FDA guidance document identifies the following areas that participants should demonstrate control of in their operations to minimize microbial hazards in fresh fruits and vegetables: water, manure and municipal bio-solids, worker health and hygiene, sanitary facilities, field sanitation, and transportation, among others.

A number of wholesale buyers of Maine produce will be requiring Maine farmers supplying them to be GAP certified this year. Steve Johnson, Maine Extension Potato Specialist has spent a

great deal of time pulling together information for vegetable and fruit growers to get certified in Good Agricultural Practices located on the Maine Potato website: http://www.umaine.edu/umext/potatoprogram/gap_good_agricultural_practices.htm

While there are many positive aspects of these standards, there are also a number of concerns. First, there are currently limits in the standards relating to raising crops and livestock for human consumption on the same farm (or in the same vicinity). This may be helpful for food safety, but goes against a lot of what sustainable and organic agriculture has been promoting for years. Second, since these standards are voluntary by the wholesale purchaser, and since many wholesale purchasers seem to also be using the standards as a marketing tool, there are other parallel standard and certification programs currently being developed. While these parallel programs may be helpful for the corporations and consumers, they can create many headaches for farmers attempting to sell into those markets. Third, what does **not** having GAP certification mean for a farm? While most of the GAP standards are directed at farmers selling to large wholesaler purchasers, what happens when farms at the local farmers market become (or choose not to become) certified? Consumers may wonder, "Why, if Farm A is certified, is Farm B not certified? Are Farm B's fruits and vegetables not safe to eat?"

So, while the Good Agricultural Practices Standards are, in theory, helpful to consumers and large food retailers and processors, there seem to be a number of issues that could create serious concerns for Maine's farmers. The Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society plans to address one of these issues when it holds a presentation and discussion on the afternoon of Tuesday, January 15th at the Maine Agricultural Trades Show on the topic of "GAP Standards and Manure: Is There Some Common Ground?"

Organizations From Around the State

Maine Grass Farmers Network

The Maine Grass Farmers Network (MGFN) has been created to gather and provide information and support to interested farmers. In response to the increased interest by many livestock farmers in the effective utilization of pasture for raising and finishing livestock, MGFN has been created with the support of a grant from Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (NESARE), the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA), the Maine Department of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Resources, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA/NRCS), and the University of Maine Cooperative Extension.

Many livestock farmers in Maine are learning about potential advantages of growing grass as carefully managed pasture for their livestock. Growing grass in Maine takes advantage of the short growing season and cool climate. Keeping land in pasture reduces soil erosion caused by row crops. Grass farming and pasture-raised livestock utilize pastureland effectively, while improving animal health, product quality, and market advantage. Pasture-raised milk, meat, poultry, and eggs have the potential for high nutritional content and higher market prices. Grass farming can increase profitability, helping to keep farms and farmland viable and maintaining the rural character of many of Maine's communities.

For more information, go to the Internet at: www.umaine.edu/umext/mgfn or contact: Diane Schivera, project

coordinator at MOFGA @ 207.568.4142; Rick Kersbergen with Cooperative Extension @ 1.800.287.1426; Dee Potter with Cooperative Extension at 1.800.287.1421; or Paula Roberts of Meadowsweet Farm @ 207.338.1265 or by e-mail at: mgfn@prexar.com

Maine's Agricultural Mediation Program

Community Mediation Services is home to Maine's Agricultural Mediation Program, which is the USDA-certified agricultural mediation program for Maine and is for producers who disagree with USDA actions and are offered mediation as part of the Department's informal appeals process. Mediation is a **voluntary** process in which a neutral third party (the mediator) assists farmers, agricultural lenders, agencies, families and citizens to resolve disputes in a non-adversarial setting outside of the traditional legal and regulatory process. Situations or issues mediated include, but are not limited to: unfavorable decisions made by USDA agencies; conflicts between farmers and their neighbors or community; agricultural credit issues; family farm or estate planning concerns; and any dispute affecting an agricultural operation. Mediation administered through Maine's Agricultural Mediation Program is **free of charge**. For more information, visit www.communitymediationservices.org, or call 1.800.381.0609 or 207.621.6848.