

Groups of Potential Interest

ATTRA — National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service (<http://attra.ncat.org/>)

What is ATTRA?

ATTRA - National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service is managed by the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) and is funded under a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture's Rural Business-Cooperative Service. It provides information and other technical assistance to farmers, ranchers, Extension agents, educators, and others involved in sustainable agriculture in the United States.

The National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) is a private nonprofit organization, founded in 1976, which operates a series of publicly-funded projects to promote self-reliance (especially for low-income people) through wise use of appropriate technology. Its programs deal with energy conservation, resource-efficient housing, sustainable community development, and sustainable agriculture.

USDA Rural Business-Cooperative Service (USDA-RBS) helps implement the rural development mission of USDA. Its mission is to enhance the quality of life for all rural Americans by providing leadership in building competitive businesses including cooperatives that can build sustainable economic communities. RBS objectives are to invest its financial resources and technical assistance in businesses and communities, and to build partnerships that leverage public and private resources to stimulate rural economic activity.

ATTRA has often been cited as an example of a successful partnership between a private nonprofit (NCAT) and a public agency (USDA-RBS).

Who does ATTRA serve?

ATTRA services are available to farmers, ranchers, market gardeners, Extension agents, researchers, educators, farm organizations, and others involved in commercial agriculture, especially those who are economically disadvantaged or belong to traditionally underserved communities. Anyone may read or download publications from our Web site, but we do not have the staff resources to respond to queries to our office from hobbyists and students.

How can I contact ATTRA?

The best way to contact ATTRA for information is by calling our toll-free numbers, 800-346-9140 or 800-411-3222 (our Spanish-language helpline) so that we can talk to you about your particular question. 800-346-9140 (English) 7am to 7pm Central Time, 800-411-3222 (Spanish) 8 am to 5 pm Pacific Time.

What happens when I contact ATTRA?

When you contact us by telephone, one of our program specialists will take the call, talk to you about your farming operation, and discuss the kind of information you may need to address your problem or concern. If we have existing publications that cover what you're asking, we'll send those to you. Otherwise, your question will be assigned to one of our agriculture specialists, who will research the topic and prepare a report on it for you.

If you're a first-time caller, you will also receive a copy of the publication "Sustainable Agriculture: An Introduction," a brochure about the project, a complete list of ATTRA publications, and a free two-year subscription to ATTRA's newsletter, ATTRAnews.

Gleaned from the ATTRA website: <http://attra.ncat.org/>

Maine Environmental Policy Institute

(<http://www.meeipi.org/>)

The mission of the Maine Environmental Policy Institute (MEPI) is to help Mainers understand the importance of healthy ecosystems to their families and communities. The Institute, an independent nonprofit organization based in Hallowell, Maine, is dedicated to researching environmental challenges facing the state and reporting this research to policy makers and the public. MEPI has received the Governor's Award for Environmental Excellence and the Sierra Club's Environmental Media Award.

MEPI projects include:

- Maine Environmental News

• Black Bears: A Situation Analysis on Baiting and Hounding, the centerpiece of a nonpartisan voter's guide to November's bear-baiting referendum

• North Woods Reports, featuring the work of veteran journalist Phyllis Austin

- Forest Practices in Salmon Watersheds

- Low Impact Forestry

- West Nile Virus Mosquito Control

- Eat Local Foods Coalition

William Sugg is the director of the Institute. Will has worked in conservation field work, research, and policy since 1986, for the Smithsonian Institution, The Peregrine Fund, the National Wildlife Federation, and the Forest Ecology Network. Will is past editor of *The Green Disk*, a computerized encyclopedia of contemporary environmental issues. He has a zoology degree from North Carolina State University, and a Master of Science degree in Environmental Science and Policy from George Mason University.

Contact MEPI: 210 Water Street, P.O. Box 347, Hallowell, ME 04347; Phone: 207.622.9766; Email: meeipi@meeipi.org

Gleaned from the MEPI website: <http://www.meeipi.org/>

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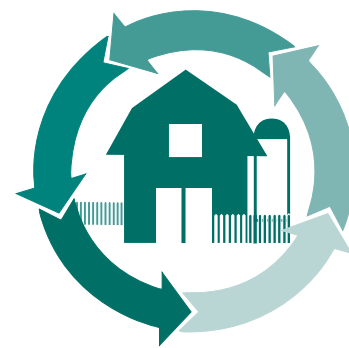
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MESAS Newsletter

Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society

Volume 8, Issue 1

Spring 2008

Word-of-Mouth Marketing

Marketing is one of those things that farmers can do to promote their operations, but most of the time it costs money. There is one type of marketing, however, that does not cost money – Word-of-Mouth Marketing – that is, having your customers learn about you and your operation, and then having them tell their friends. This concept was the focus of one of the Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society's sessions at the Maine Agricultural Trades Show held in Augusta in mid-January. Greg Franklin, from Gregory S. Franklin Associates in New Hampshire, is a marketing consultant who grew up on a New England farm and nowadays, when he isn't helping a client strategize their marketing approach, helps on his brother's farm in the Connecticut River Valley of western New Hampshire. So, in addition to marketing know-how, Greg also brings practical farm experience to his talks about word-of-mouth marketing.

Essentially, the key to word-of-mouth marketing is getting your customers to tell their family, friends, and colleagues about your operation. But where does one start? Well, Greg has some ideas. First of all, it begins with an understanding of what is marketing. One, "marketing is . . . a good story well told." Most people can tell a story, but the stories that people remember are the ones that are well told. So, it is with your farm and the people who work at your farm that marketing begins. If you can tell people about your operation in a memorable manner, people will likely be willing to come back and to tell others about your operation. And two, "marketing is everything... and everything is marketing." This is not a negative definition when one realizes that "marketing," in this case, is just telling your farm's story to your customers. Everything, then, that happens on your farm or at your farmers market stand is an opportunity to market your farm to the customer. Everything from answering questions about vegetable varieties or cuts of meat to helping carry bags of meat and produce to the customer's car is marketing. All these are potential times when you, or one of your crew, can tell the farm's story. If you have a crew, whether family or hired help, they all represent the farm in the eyes of the customer, and so they can all help tell the farm's story. However, as Greg points out, ". . . how an owner or employee acts is also telling the story – many times actions have far more impact than words. To me, this is the essence of 'everything is marketing, and marketing is everything' – every interaction in words and/or deeds is the opportunity to create a favorable impression . . . or not. Nice words can never overcome poor actions, but kind deeds can do more than words to create and sustain a favorable brand environment."

The reason why it is important to tell your story is that, as Greg points out, "what you have . . . is what they want." Less than one percent of the U.S. population farms for a living, and so the farm experience, as well as farm products, is one that many consumers long for. People have a desire to be part of a farm. So, if you can enable customers to come onto the farm that may benefit you in the long run. But it also puts some requirements on you and the crew – requirements such as maintaining the grounds and being ready to serve the

customers at all times. Because, as was noted above, "marketing is everything . . . and everything is marketing," whether that be conscious efforts, or unconscious efforts.

And whether customers come to your farm or not, provide them opportunities to learn about your farm. The obvious opportunities are when customers come directly to the farm or farmstand. Other less obvious opportunities are having a booth at a farmers market, having informational materials available at retail stores, and even taking part in sampling demonstrations at retail stores. In addition to face-to-face telling of your story, other means of getting the word out are recipes that customers can take home, hard-copy or e-mail newsletters, and a photographic display of the farm or farm family set out where customers can see it. In essence, inviting the customer into the life of the farm is the key to word-of-mouth marketing.

In his conversation with us, Greg pointed out that there are five aspects to talking about your farm. First, know your story – the people, the place, and the product. The people that work on the farm, not just the farm family, are integral parts of your farm and many of them might have interesting stories that can be shared with customers. Also, each farm has a history. It may be a short history, or it may be a long history. Either way, know the history and share it. It adds to your farm's "story." In addition, the product or products the farm sells are key aspects of the farm. As one farmer on the panel pointed out, his farm highlights melons – by tasting opportunities at farmers markets and by promotion leading up to the melon harvest. Second, create opportunities for your customers to connect with you and/or your family and crew. Third, after creating opportunities to connect, create conversation. A key to word-of-mouth marketing is telling your story and that generally calls for being personable and approachable. Take the time and make the effort to let your customers get to know you, your family and the farm. Fourth, create ownership amongst the customers. Since most Americans no longer have a connection to a farm, enable them to gain a feeling of connection with your farm, that for them, "this is my place." Create for your customer the sense that they are part of the farm and the community that makes up the farm. The goal is that the customer begins to feel, "I belong here." Lastly, by doing all these things, you have begun to create advocates for your farm – people who know your story (and your product) and are able to "stand up" and support it by passing that information on to others. Research indicates that people who are "advocates" are 10 times more loyal than customers who are just "satisfied."

The keys then to word-of-mouth marketing — create connections, be personable, be visible, be approachable. Another important aspect is that people don't trust your farm, they trust you. That is, it is the human element in a product or farm that people trust – not the product or farm, itself. And lastly, customers trust people they know, people who they seek out. If you are able to let them get to know you and your farm, they will likely seek you out and tell others about you.

Calendar of Events

March 25th-27th — Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) 20th Anniversary – national conference and networking in Kansas City, MO. For more info: www.sare.org

March 29th — Seed Swap and Scion Exchange. MOFGA's Common Ground Education Center, Unity, ME. FREE. Bring seeds, scionwood or cuttings to share. Classes in grafting and seed saving. For more info: www.mofga.org

April 5th — 3rd Annual Local and Sustainable Foods Conference: Growing Our Skills and Our Community; and Local Foods Dinner. 9:30 a.m. to ?? p.m., Unity Performing Arts Center, Unity, ME. Registration for the conference is \$5-50 sliding scale, suggested donation is \$15; dinner reservations, \$5-50 sliding scale, suggested donation \$10; no one will be turned away for lack of funds. To pre-register, e-mail info@foodformainefuture.org.

April 7th — Essentials of Business Planning for Small Farms. 2-5 pm, Western Mountains Alliance Conference Area, Church Street Commons, Farmington, ME. To register (\$18) contact the Western Mountains Alliance at 207.778.3885 or e-mail tcook@westernmountainsalliance.org

April 19th — Livestock Healthcare Workshop, MOFGA's Common Ground Education Center, Unity, ME. 10am to 2 pm, led by Dr. Paul Dettloff, who has practiced veterinary medicine since 1967 and who has worked with organic farmers since 1988. For more information, contact the MOFGA office at 207.568.4142

April 20th — "Just a walkin' and a talkin' forestry tour," Small Woodland Owners Association of Maine, Upper Kennebec Valley Chapter. From 9am to noon at Addin' Rings Treefarm. The tour is orientated to the new landowner but with tidbits for the pro. For more information, contact Ben Welch at 207.645.9394 or treefarmer@roadrunner.com

April 26th — Small Woodland Owners Association of Maine's 33rd Annual Meeting, Portland Expo, 9am to 12:30 pm. Exhibits on "All Things Wood" on the floor of the Expo from 10 am to 4 pm.

April 30th — Getting Started in Niche Marketing and Value Added Products. 2-5 pm, University of Maine Cooperative Extension, 7 County Drive, Skowhegan, ME. To register (\$35) contact the Western Mountain Alliance at 207.778.3885 or e-mail tcook@westernmountainsalliance.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."

MESAS Board of Directors and Staff

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Sandy River Farm, Farmington

Staff:

Andrew Files

Executive Director, Newsletter Editor

Kennedy, Sands, and Wadsworth Elected to Board

At the Annual Meeting of Members held at the Trades Show in Augusta in January, the MESAS membership elected Nanney Kennedy, Kerri Sands, and Adrian Wadsworth to three-year terms on the MESAS Board. This is Nanney's third three-year term on the Board. Nanney operates Meadowcroft, in Washington, Maine, a grass-fed, sheep-based meat and fiber farm. In addition, she runs a New England-based production chain of wool, blankets, and sweaters marketed under the names "Sea Colors" (wool and sweaters) and "The Maine Blanket" (blankets). Kerri has most recently been involved with MESAS as an appointed Board member serving two one-year terms. Kerri is program administrator of the Farms for the Future program, which is jointly administered by the Maine Department of Agriculture and by Coastal Enterprises, Inc. Farms for the Future has been helping Maine farmers for the past seven years diversify their farming operations in an attempt at making those farms more financially sustainable. Adrian has been on the MESAS Board from its inception in 1998 and has served as President for a number of those years. Adrian operates River Rise Farm, in Turner, which he is transitioning out of dairy production.

Smith Steps Down as Executive Director

At the February Board of Directors meeting, Stewart Smith stepped down from his position as Executive Director of MESAS and Andrew Files was named to replace him. Stew has been in that role since the organization was officially formed in 1998. Originally Stew did all the MESAS staff work, but as Andrew Files came on-board as Program Manager, Andrew has taken on increasing responsibility. The Board agreed with Stew that this was the right time for Andrew to assume the full responsibilities of Executive Director. Stew made it clear to the Board that his decision to step down in no way reflects any change in his commitment to the Society.

Executive Director's Column

by Andrew Files

I have had the privilege, and good fortune, of working for, and with, Stew Smith in one capacity or another for the past eleven years. That time has been very rewarding for me as I have been able to witness Stew's remarkable understanding of sustainable agriculture and the processes that establish agricultural policy. Stew's broad range of professional experience has enabled him to make a significant mark on Maine agriculture over the years and to serve MESAS extremely well over the past eleven years. While my education and experience are not nearly as notable as Stew's, the Board has put their confidence in me to undertake the role of Executive Director and it is an opportunity I look forward to. I do not anticipate filling Stew's "shoes," (that would be a very tall task) but I do hope to serve the Society and its members to the best of my ability.

In terms of the Society's future activity, that is in a developmental stage at this point. The Board recently decided to undertake a formal visioning and strategic planning process to help it chart the course for the Society over the foreseeable future. The timing for this could not be better as MESAS has gained a number of new Directors in the past few years, has a new President (Bob Spear), Vice President (Rick Kersbergen) and Executive Director, and has recently sold its major programming commitment (Farm Fresh Connection) and so has human resources available to redirect.

While work on the visioning and strategic planning process has already begun and will continue through the Spring and Summer months, finalization of the process is not anticipated until early in 2009. This is an exciting time for MESAS, and I will try to keep you informed of the progress that is being made.

Bartel, Smith Appointed to Board

Also at the February Board of Directors meeting, President Spear, at the recommendation of the Board, appointed Lavon Bartel and Stewart Smith to one-year, renewable terms on the Board. Lavon most recently has been Interim Director of the University of Maine's Hutchinson Center in Belfast. Before that, she served for over ten years as Director of the University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Prior to coming to Maine, Lavon spent seven years in Vermont as Associate Dean and Associate Director of Vermont Extension. "It was in Vermont," Lavon points out, "I got a full exposure to the necessity of 'sustainable agriculture systems' and the multitude of critical issues society will face if we can't effectively create these systems." As most of you are aware, Stew Smith has been involved in MESAS from the start serving the past 11 years as its Executive Director. In addition to maintaining a full professorship in the School of Economics at the University of Maine where he has been Professor of Sustainable Agriculture Policy since 1993, Stew also has begun "tilling the soil" again, as he works with his son to diversify the family's potato farming operation.

News From Away

Logan Greenhouse Seen as 'Statewide Destination'

Planners of the proposed new Logan Middle School greenhouse believe they have a statewide horticulture destination in the making. Site work has begun for a new \$15 million school on the property behind Logan, at 1515 Logan Avenue, after a construction contract was awarded in November. The 1,080-square-foot greenhouse will be on the southeast corner of the school, expected to be completed by August 2009.

A "statewide destination for horticulture knowledge" is how the greenhouse was described last week by Julie Evenson, consumer horticulturist for Iowa State University's Black Hawk County Extension office, during a meeting that included officials from a number of area governmental agencies. "We want this to be the go-to spot for horticulture knowledge in Black Hawk County and across the state of Iowa," she said. ISU Extension is partnering with Waterloo Community Schools to build and staff the greenhouse. Evenson's office will be next to the greenhouse.

The greenhouse's location in the new school is planned to capitalize on facilities that will be available there. "We've placed it directly adjacent to the sixth-grade science lab," said Brad Leeper of InVision Architecture, which designed the facility. The greenhouse will open to the science lab, providing access to the school's sixth-grade wing.

Evenson hopes to provide horticulture symposiums on the weekends and during the summers, drawing participants from across the state that would make use of the space. But she also wants find ways for it to be used by schools across Black Hawk County and the community at large. "The sciences, the horticulture sciences and the botanies are clear, but where can it go from there?" said Evenson. "It's just really remarkable where it can go, but I'm really looking at it bringing together cultures and ages."

Excerpted from Fresh Plaza: Global Fresh Produce and Banana News: http://www.freshplaza.com/news_detail.asp?id=16803

News From Away

Advice to Newcomers to Rural Living

For some, it's a lifelong dream — escaping the traffic and congestion of city life and moving to the country. For others, it may be a passion to restore a historic family or purchased home. While the idea of having a pond, woods, a crop field, or cattle herd next door may seem idyllic, there are things that newcomers to country life should consider, says Kansas State University Extension specialist Morgan Powell. To address those topics, Powell and his colleague Kerri Ebert developed a new KSU Extension publication entitled, "Living in the Country." It includes sections on risks and rewards, government, legal issues, public services, buying or building a home, utilities, ag, trash removal, being a good neighbor, and others. The 15-page booklet also contains a list of resources, as well as common acronyms used in everyday conversation by country dwellers.

Excerpted from NSAAS News Gleanings, week of March 17th. To view the 15-page booklet, go to: <http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/hous2/MF2798.pdf>

Connecticut Grown – The Local Flavor

The Connecticut Farm-to-Chef Program was scheduled to hold its first-ever annual meeting on Wednesday, February 13, 2008 at the Wadsworth Mansion in Middletown. Over 100 local chefs and farmers were expected to attend and discuss topics related to doing business with one another.

Jonathan Rapp, Executive Chef at River Tavern in Chester and creator of the Dinners at the Farm dining series, and Thomas Peterlik, Director of the Culinary Resource Center at Yale University, were scheduled to speak. A panel discussion was scheduled. The meeting was scheuled to conclude with an informal networking session and buffet CT Grown lunch, prepared by program chefs with ingredients from member farms.

Administered by the Connecticut Department of Agriculture, the Connecticut Farm-to-Chef Program helps connect local chefs and food service professionals with growers, producers, and distributors of CT Grown products. It also helps the public locate restaurants, institutions, and other dining facilities that serve foods prepared with CT Grown ingredients.

From NSAAS News Gleanings, as received via e-mail from the Northeast States Association for Agricultural Stewardship, which is an affiliate of the Council of State Governments' Eastern Regional Conference.

News From Across Maine

Maine Sheep Breeders Association Farm Tours Open to Public

The Maine Sheep Breeders Association has scheduled a number of farm tours for 2008. The tours are open to MSBA members and the public. Meetings of the Association will be held during the tours.

- April 27th – Open Farm at North Star Farm in Windham
- May 16th-18th – New England Livestock Expo in Windsor – MSBA Board Meeting in Windsor on May 17th during NELE – time to be announced
- June 7th-8th – Fiber Frolic (the Wool Pool is on Saturday)
- July 12th – Field Day and Board meeting at Blue Ribbon Farm in Mercer
 - FAMANCHA Training also
- August 30th – Open Farm and Board meeting at Spinnakee's Farm in Augusta. Chip Ridkey, USDA Veterinarian, and Dan Foster, Farm Family Insurance, to be in attendance.

Eat Local Foods Coalition of Maine Initiates New Networking Website

The Eat Local Foods Coalition of Maine recently initiated its new networking website that is designed to do a number of things: create

Practical Dairy Advisors Receive Training to Work with Profit and Target Teams

Twelve seasoned Pennsylvania dairy producers will share their skills and experience with other dairy farms participating in the Center for Dairy Excellence's highly successful dairy profit and target team programs. Recently trained as practical dairy advisors, these 12 producers will be matched with teams to offer guidance and advice to dairy businesses.

"Farms participating in the center's profit team program have seen significant success, with many of them increasing profits by nearly \$250 per cow, annually," said John Frey, the center's executive director. "Our goal is to use the practical dairy advisors to help farms take their profit or target team to a higher level to achieve even greater results for their businesses."

The 12 producers participated in the training focused on mentoring, working with profit and target teams, and understanding different personality styles to become a practical dairy advisor.

"Pennsylvania is fortunate to have a strong delegation of producers who have successful dairy operations and have first-hand experience working through many of the challenges other producers face on their operations," said Frey. "These producers bring a wealth of practical insight and expertise to the profit and target teams already established on many of Pennsylvania's dairy farms."

Any dairy farm in Pennsylvania can enroll in either target or profit team programs, which require minimal time and financial investments by the dairy producer. New farms enrolled in either program can receive \$3,500 to help cover the cost of paid team members, the use of a practical dairy advisor, and discovery-related resources. Discovery-related costs may include milk culturing, forage analysis, soil sampling, and business planning.

For more information about the profit and target team programs or to request a practical dairy advisor to serve on your farm's profit or target team, contact Heather Hostetter, program manager, at the Center for Dairy Excellence at 717-346-0849. Or log onto www.centerfordairyexcellence.org. Click on "Business Management," then "Profit Teams."

Excerpted from the PA Farm News, February 29, 2008 edition: http://www.pafarmnews.com/Articles/2008/080229_practicaldairy.htm

your own profile and Maine food-related blog; start or participate in an on-line discussion; post job and internship opportunities; announce upcoming food, ag, or fishing events; form a virtual group for finding and organizing like-minded people (this could be an issue-related group or a place-based group); and post Maine food-related photos or videos. To learn more about the site, visit <http://www.eatmainefoods.org/>.

MOFGA Starts "Marketing Opportunities for Maine Farmers" Service

The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association has begun publicizing marketing opportunities for Maine farmers. Due to the many requests for wholesale orders, farmers market information, and other marketing requests, MOFGA has started this service to help promote connections with local farmers. The first edition of the service appeared February 29th. An example of what was being requested in this first edition is: a listing of farmers markets seeking new vendors, seed production opportunities for Johnny's Selected Seeds, and wholesale requests, such as an ice cream maker in Portland seeking berries for their ice cream, and a Brooklyn (NY)-based chocolate and confection company that is looking to expand into jams, preserves, and sauces. For more information on the "Marketing Opportunities for Maine Farmers" service, contact Melissa White Pillsbury, MOFGA's Organic Marketing Coordinator at 207.568.4142 or Melissa@mofga.org.

UMaine Involved with USDA Organic Transitions Program

Organic agriculture became one of the fastest growing segments of U.S. agriculture during the 1990s. According to USDA statistics, organic acreage in the United States has doubled, and consumption of organically produced products has increased 20 percent per year for the past decade. Today, 80 percent of organic products purchased on the market are fresh fruits and vegetables. The potential consumer demand for other organic products, like meat and processed foods, is wide open. Organic agriculture's importance was further solidified when the USDA implemented the first nationwide organic standards—the National Organic Standards—in 2002.

The Organic Transition Program is an integrated research, education, and extension grant program that helps farmers surmount challenges of organic production and marketing. As the organic industry continues to grow at 20 percent per year, extension and other information providers report more farmers seeking reliable information on making the transition to organic production.

A part of the USDA Integrated Research, Education and Extension Competitive Grants Program, the Organic Transitions Program aims to:

- Develop approaches, tactics and systems that will support certified organic production guidelines
- Develop and conduct outreach and education programs for organic producers

This is an exciting program and one that the University of Maine has been fortunate to be involved with. The University of Maine has been involved in three Organic Transitions projects over the past four or five years, one of which has just been completed and two that are in the active stage.

The completed project, "Development and Implementation of Organic Pest Management Strategies for Lowbush Blueberries: A Multi-Year, Multi-Disciplinary Study," was a four-year project that investigated the yield and crop response to a number of different pest management treatments on wild blueberries. The lead investigator on the project is Dr. Frank Drummond. The project was designed to examine all aspects of blueberry management to develop an integrated approach to organic pest management in lowbush blueberries. Preliminary results indicate that lowering soil pH with sulfur (as opposed to not adding sulfur) and pruning the crop with a flamer (as opposed to mowing) both significantly increased crop yields. However, the organic practices of pruning, sulfur, and fertilization did not appear to have any effect on insect pests or natural enemies associated with lowbush blueberries. There are also results from a number of related research activities connected to this project. For the details of results or other information requests for this project, please contact Dr. Frank Drummond at 207.581.2989 or frank.drummond@umit.maine.edu.

The two projects still in the active stage are "Profitability and Transitional Analysis of Northeast Organic Dairy Farms" (which is a joint project with the University of Vermont) and "Reducing Off-farm Grain Inputs on Northeast Organic Dairy Farms." Rick Kersbergen, Cooperative Extension Educator and MESAS Board member, is the Lead Investigator at UMaine for the joint project "Profitability and Transitional Analysis" and is the Lead Investigator for the "Reducing Off-farm Grain Inputs" project.

Organic milk production has been the fastest growing agricultural sector in New England with the Maine and Vermont dairy industry reporting nearly 20% of the dairies in each state producing for the organic market. Higher milk prices, quality incentives, and reduced trucking costs were major incentives for dairy farmers to transition.

Despite this interest and growth, there has been little research on the cost of producing organic milk in the Northeast. One aspect of the "Profitability and Transitional Analysis of Northeast Dairy Farms" project collected production, demographic, and financial information from 30 farms for 2004 and 44 farms for 2005. Farm visits were conducted by personnel from both states in the winter and spring of 2005 and 2006. Tests of mean values of financial performance and farm characteristics indicated no statistically significant differences between the two states, so the data was pooled for analysis. One unexpected result of this study was that data from the study was used by organic dairy producers in the Northeast to negotiate for higher prices in 2006. Preliminary analysis of 2006 data indicates higher milk prices and profitability, but an increase in variation between farms in the study. Researchers also concluded that many organic farms would not be in business had they not transitioned to the organic market and that this market provides a very viable option for well-managed smaller farms in the Northeast. For more information on any aspect of the "Profitability and Transitional Analysis of Northeast Organic Dairy Farms" project, please contact Rick Kersbergen at 1-800-287-1426 or richardk@umext.maine.edu.

The "Reducing Off-farm Grain Inputs" project also already has a number of outcomes. Specifically, researchers have performed an evaluation of forage cropping and concentrate feeding systems, as well as an evaluation of alternative cultural and physical weed control strategies in spring cereals. In terms of the forage cropping experiment, purchased concentrates have previously been shown to be the single largest expense on organic dairy farms in Maine and Vermont. Optimizing forage quality and reducing purchased off-farm grain inputs can improve profitability. Researchers have evaluated the production and economic effects of four different forage cropping systems and two supplementation strategies. Preliminary indications are that producers would benefit from more accurate ration balancing and improved profitability by feeding commodity grains that best complement the nutritional profile of the forage mix they have on their farm. Further research will provide producers with a risk assessment tool that will help them choose sustainable forage and grain supplementation strategies with the land and machinery resources available. In terms of the alternative cultural and physical weed control strategies, weeds are a major obstacle in growing organic grains, as they decrease both yield and quality of the harvest. And to reduce their reliance on purchased concentrates, growers must be able to reliably produce grains on-farm. A field experiment was conducted comparing weed control and crop yield in spring barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) grown under alternative production systems that relied on either enhanced physical weed control or crop competition. The high density and wide-row sowing resulted in the lowest weed biomass at the time of harvest. This decreased weed level did not result in significant differences in barley yield, but there are implications for decreased weed seed production. Lack of physical weed control in two treatments highlighted the necessity of physical weed control and its importance in both reducing weed density and biomass and increasing yield at elevated weed densities. As conditions are not always ideal in Maine for effective spring-tine harrowing, hoed wide row cereals may prove to be a practical alternative for organic growers to effectively control weeds. For more information on any aspect of the "Reducing Off-farm Grain Inputs on Northeast Organic Dairy Farms" project, please contact Rick Kersbergen at 1-800-287-1426 or richardk@umext.maine.edu.