



MESAS Newsletter

Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society

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The Potato-Dairy Connection Integrating Crop and Livestock Farms

Dairyman Bob Fogler and potato farmer John Dorman of Exeter, Maine were among the first of dozens of Maine farmers breaking a decades-long pattern of agricultural specialization, a process which severed the traditional connection between livestock production and crop production and left dairy farmers with an excess of nutrient-rich manure and potato farmers with short rotations and worn out soil starved for those same organic nutrients.

Fogler and Dorman farmed next door for years but not until the end of the 1980s did they come to see that each had something the other needed. It wasn't just nutrients, it was also land. Fogler, wanted to expand his herd and needed more land for forage production. Dorman needed more land for longer rotations and green manures so he could put some life back into his soils. The two came up with a plan. By jointly managing their 1500 acres of cropland, plus another 400 they rented together, Dorman could rotate his potatoes with barley and corn to feed Fogler's expanded herd and Fogler could maximize the utilization of the manure.

"I think in reality, John and I probably started working together more out of desperation than anything," says Fogler. The arrangement has been "win-win" for both and the only thing either would do differently now is to have started working together sooner.

"Sometimes I think Bob has invested more, and sometimes I think I have. But we really don't look at those things a lot. We just see the results and know that it really is working for the best for both of us."

The biggest question at the start for Dorman was the manure and potato scab connection. Would manure increase scab as farmers had believed for 50 years? Quite the contrary it turns out. "By increasing our soil holding capacities," says Dorman, "we seem to have less problems with scab than we had originally." It appears scab had less to do with manure and more to do with sawdust bedding which has been replaced by sand in recent years.

Another question that both had in the beginning was the "value" of the nutrients in the manure. Nutrient "value" differs from nutrient content in that value is only realized in the actual plant growth process and depends upon how and when nutrients become available to the crop. "If conditions are right," says Dorman, "you can grow potatoes with just straight manure." The right conditions include warm temperatures in the spring to catalyze the biological processes that make nutrients available.

Getting the potato crop off to an early start is critical for the market Dorman is dealing with in an area where markets are limited. His contract with Frito-Lay requires growers to plant only

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Farm Profile

Ricker Hill Orchard
Turner, Maine
Harry and Nancy Ricker

Ricker Hill Orchard is a 200-year old tradition in Maine and one of a dwindling number of large apple farms remaining in the State. They have 500 acres of orchard and produce half a million gallons of cider. But things have not been going well even for a top-notch producer like Ricker Hill growing quality branded apples for the fresh market and using Integrated Pest Management and ecosystem management for long-term sustainability and reduction of purchased inputs. Diversifying into other fresh markets with cranberries and certified organic apples, and keeping up with consumers' preferences for varieties both in this country and abroad have not insulated them from the declining apple market.



"There's nobody in the wholesale apple industry," says Harry Ricker, "that's financially well off right now.... The price of apples in 1999 was the same as in 1986, and our costs were up by fourteen years of inflation." Apple growers don't receive federal commodity payments and Ricker's gross receipts are above the \$2.5 million USDA limit for "family farm" so they aren't eligible for crop disaster payments despite being very much a family operation. "Gross sales don't say anything about net profit," says Harry, who doesn't believe the government should be bailing anybody out, "but it sure is hard competing with people who get that money."

The farm supports grandfather, father, three sons, their wives and children and all work together and live on the farm. Since their first priority is supporting their family, they have begun taking advantage of the good housing market by selling a few house lots to service their debt.

Diversification

"Everything we do is driven by economics," says Harry, "and 1991 was the last year that we were really profitable.... So back in

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MESAS NEWS

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Executive Director's Message

By Stewart Smith

Integrated farming systems are the cornerstone of sustainable agriculture. While the MESAS mission statement promotes integrated systems, we recognize they come in many shapes and sizes. All, however, have certain common characteristics essential to sustainable agriculture. For example, integrated systems of all types reduce the need for purchased inputs. Diversifying crop rotations and adding green manure crops reduces fertilizer and pesticide inputs. Adding livestock to a cropping system further tightens integration.

We often associate integrated farming systems with smaller, high-value vegetable farms that have a livestock component to provide manure for plant nutrients and to better utilize rotation crops. Elsewhere on these pages you will read about a different integrated system involving two larger farms, one dairy and one potato, that combine their land base and share equipment and labor while managing their separate enterprises. This is a promising venue for integrating some of Maine's existing specialized farms. It is also one of the strategies MESAS is evaluating and promoting through a USDA-funded research program that includes The University of Maine and colleagues at Iowa State and Michigan State as well as sustainable ag farmers participating in on-farm research and demonstration. While this type of integrated system may not work for everyone, it has distinct advantages for certain farmers.

Speaking of change, MESAS passed a landmark this year as leadership changed for the first time in its young life. Rob Johanson, who operates a mixed vegetable, fruit and livestock farm with wife and partner Jan Goranson, served as president of MESAS since its formal founding three years ago. His leadership was instrumental during MESAS' birth and gestation. At this winter's board of directors' meeting, Rob passed that leadership to Adrian Wadsworth. Adrian operates River Rise Farm, a dairy farm on the banks of the Androscoggin River in North Turner, Maine, and is an active advocate for sustainable agriculture, not only in Maine but through his work with other sustainable agriculture groups across the country. We look forward to Adrian's leadership as MESAS matures and continues to grow as a vital member of the Maine agricultural community. ▲

MESAS Joins National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture

MESAS signed on as an active partner in the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, a network of diverse groups whose mission is to shape national policies to foster a sustainable food and agricultural system that is economically viable, environmentally sound, socially just, and humane.

In February the Campaign celebrated "big wins" in the Senate version of the Farm Bill that "strike at the heart of industrial agribusiness interests" and begin to return power back to family farmers, ranchers and consumers and change the way industry does business. The Dorgan-Grassley payment limitations amendment passed by 66 to 31; the Harkin producer protection amendment won by 82-14, the Johnson packer ownership ban by 51 to 46, the Feingold dispute resolution amendment won 64 to 31, the "abysmal" House bill was defeated 59 to 38, and the Administration's "disastrous" proposal went down in a 55 to 40 vote. "All of these wins came about as a result of grassroots action, not the deep pockets of corporations" writes Chris Campamy who

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4th Annual MESAS Farm Tour August 5

The 4th annual MESAS farm tour is scheduled for Monday, August 5, 2002. This year's tour will visit three farms in York County just west of Portland. We will all meet at 1:00 PM at the Snell Family Farm on Route 112 in Bar Mills, Maine. Snell's is a diversified retail vegetable, pick-your-own apple, greenhouse and maple syrup farm. The next stop is Mark Faulkner's farm in Buxton, featuring on-farm composting. It is a former dairy farm, now converted to wholesale vegetables. Mark is a welder who has designed and built specialized machinery for vegetable production. The third farm visit is the Harris Farm in Dayton, a diversified dairy and vegetable farm retailing their own milk in glass bottles, offering cross-country skiing and agri-tourism.

We will return to the Snell Farm by 6:00 PM for a supper featuring seasonal foods from the local food shed. After the dinner MESAS will hold a B.O.D. meeting and anybody can stay. Sustainable practices that can be seen at all three of these farms include crop rotation, cover cropping, drip and overhead irrigation, hoop house season extenders, imaginative marketing and promotion and good agricultural practices that should be of interest to both conventional and organic farms. As usual MESAS will provide vans for group travel during the day.

Contact Andrew Files at (207) 581-3108 or e-mail at andrew.files@umit.maine.edu if you plan to attend so we can arrange to have plenty of food and transportation. Directions will be sent to all who pre-register. For spur-of-the-moment attendees (also welcome), Snell's farm is on Route 112 in Bar Mills, one-half mile north of the junction with Route 4A. There is no charge for the event, although donations are appreciated. ▲

MESAS Mentoring Program

We still have approximately 20 established sustainable farmers who are willing to work in a mentoring capacity with farmers who want to learn. Due to organizational problems last year, we missed some opportunities and hope farmers will be patient. Anyone who might like to lend a hand in getting the program rolling at the administrative end should give Andrew Files a call. Anyone interested in participating as a mentor or farmer should also contact Andrew at 5782 Winslow Hall, Orono, ME 04469-5782, phone: (207) 581-3135, e-mail: andrew.files@umit.maine.edu. ▲

National Campaign *continued from page 2*

coordinates the Campaign's Farm Bill work. "To call these victories profound—revolutionary even—is not an overstatement," he says. "They are also just a beginning."

The Senate version took a big hit in March when the Congressional Budget Office announced a \$6.1 billion error in costing which gave a leg up to the on-budget House bill. The Conference assigned funding levels to the bill's titles in early April, which Nebraska's Center for Rural Affairs says continue the dominant problem-creating policy of price-depressing, sector-concentrating, self-perpetuating production incentives by giving two-thirds of the additional \$73.5 billion over 10 years to commodity programs, a title which Company says is "still a disaster." The National Campaign will fight to maintain gains in the 2002 bill and mobilize to work on the next Farm Bill. "The cause we fight for is radical," says Company, "only because the status quo is so grievously dysfunctional, corrupt, unfair and undemocratic."

Maine's John Piotti (Maine Farms Project) and Russell Libby (MOFGA) sit on the Campaign's 17-member board of directors. Readers can check out the Campaign's website at www.sustainableagriculture.net. ▲

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1996 we decided to actively look for something to diversify into." Cranberries, at 85 cents a pound, were "unusually profitable compared to apples," and careful research convinced them they could do it. They "took on a lot of debt" to establish 14 acres of cranberry bogs over a three year period. But the cranberry market shrank by 33 percent when juice companies further diluted cranberry juice blends with less expensive juices thereby shrinking demand at the same time supply was increasing, which caused a price drop to 10 cents a pound for a crop that "costs 20 cents to harvest." They also grow organic vegetables—zucchini, onions, garlic, squash and two acres of ginseng started in 1997 which takes seven years to come into production.

"There's nobody in the wholesale apple industry," says Harry Ricker, "that's financially well off right now.... The price of apples in 1999 was the same as in 1986, and our costs were up by fourteen years of inflation."

The transition to organic apples on 40 acres was not a major change from the "environmentally sound" way they already grew their regular IPM apples, "working with Mother Nature" and not taking the easiest cheapest fixes that throw things out of balance and "come back to haunt you in the end.... It [environmental soundness] has nothing to do with how big you are," says Harry, "it has to do with what you believe" not only as a "way of life" but economically "you have to work with the environment if you want to sustain agriculture."

Because of difficulties with the strong dollar in the export apple market and changes in tastes of consumers, Ricker Hill is moving away from export and into new varieties for the domestic market "made popular from other parts of the world" that they think can be grown better in Maine than elsewhere. They have planted Gala, a New Zealand variety, and think Maine-can produce it "redder, harder and sweeter," and they anticipate a competitive

advantage with Honey Crisp, which was developed in Minnesota and "can't be grown in warmer climates." Hopefully these varieties "will compliment our Macintosh and Cortland base."

Harry Ricker "very much believes in free markets" if they encourage efficiency and quality production. He sees "globalization as the next step in a free market going past American borders" and he's willing to compete with the best of them. But problems arise when the playing field is not level, as with China their largest competitor, where the government subsidizes labor and land and apple production has tripled in a decade. In addition, some countries whose currency is not convertible will use, for example, apple juice concentrate in trade for products they need from other nations which then re-sell the concentrate to the U.S. at "prices that have nothing to do with the cost of production," a practice that's been going on for 20 years.

"Everything we do is driven by economics, and 1991 was the last year that we were really profitable.... So back in 1996 we decided to actively look for something to diversify into."

Marketing and Retail

Fifty percent of Ricker's sales are direct store deliveries to supermarkets and the rest are traditional warehouse. They have their own delivery and trailer trucks which they fill to capacity for efficiency by hauling in-season watermelons during the apple off-season, something "a normal Maine apple farmer wouldn't even look at."

A 14-month trial with direct-to-consumer sales through the Portland Public Market turned out to be "one of my bad ideas," says Harry, despite the research beforehand and visits to successful public markets in Seattle and Vancouver where "people bought their groceries" and average sales per customer were between \$7 and \$12. Per customer sales in Portland, however, averaged \$2.02 to \$2.30 to people who "were buying a snack on the way through.... We lost more money in 14 months than I pay myself in five years."

Future of the Farm and Agriculture

The Rickers believe that retail is the future for apple growers in Maine and New England—small retail operations which Harry has been suggesting to others for ten years, and which "many are already doing" successfully. Operations with ten or 15 acres, very few employees (Ricker has hired as many as 130 Jamaicans through the H2A program), and working 30 or 40 hours a week "do better financially than 100 acres wholesale," says Harry, and are beginning to look good to him too.

As for the future of agriculture in a globalized economy, Ricker believes that people will decide, as they did with sugar after WWII, that we need to have "some critical amount of production here and not have to depend on South America or someplace where we have no control." They will decide to "buy American" or "buy Maine" and be comfortable "paying only a little bit more" to make it profitable for farmers to stay in business. "I believe it's going to happen," says Harry, "and that's why I'm sitting here." ▲

A Reason to Buy Local

The Center for Disease Control reports that more than a quarter of the U.S. population suffers a bout of food poisoning each year. Every day in the United States 200,000 people are sickened by foodborne disease, 900 are hospitalized and fourteen die.

What Farmers Are Saying

[Editor's note: This issue introduces a MESAS original format for an op-ed page of excerpts from telephone conversations. It allows readers and thinkers to voice their opinions and ideas without requiring they be writers as well. We hope readers approve and will participate by giving us a call or e-mail if you prefer. Contact Pam Bell, (207) 866-4859 or pbellita@aol.com.]

About the Unlevel Labor Playing Field

"Allowing two million illegal immigrants into the country allows huge farms to have low-priced or under-priced labor, giving them the ability to farm thousands of acres and ship lettuce and strawberries and other labor-intensive crops into places like Maine and New England and destroy the markets during the season. Small and medium sized farms have born the brunt of the cost because they go bankrupt. Some day somebody's going to have to balance the ledger because there'll be nobody else to bankrupt." *Adrian Wadsworth, MESAS president and dairy/vegetable farmer.*

About Selling Cooperatively

"There are certain efficiencies to marketing as a group because you can approach larger markets. I really believe that regional groups of farmers should get together and have somebody who knows what they are doing in terms of sales and marketing, because sales is a pretty gut-wrenching business and most people are not comfortable with it. You have to be able to take a lot of rejection." *Jim Cook, farmer and sales rep for Crown O' Maine Organic Cooperative.*

About MESAS

"We need to move the organization forward. There's a whole group of farmers—the conventional 'industrial' farmers—and they are being ground to a pulp and they don't know what to do. That's the group that really needs to be addressed. They need to understand that they have to change the way they see the future. The dairy farmers have already been decimated, but they are still falling. The key is to keep that land from transitioning to houses or growing up to brush." *MESAS president Adrian Wadsworth.* ▲

Wolfe's Neck saltwater farm in Freeport was purchased by Lawrence and Eleanor Smith in 1946 who raised organic Black Angus beef. Several years after her husband's death, Mrs. Smith, who wanted the farm to continue as a model of alternative agriculture after her death, gifted it to the University of Southern Maine. Four years ago, when the farm was losing money and USM was making budget cuts, the farm was transferred to the Wolfe's Neck Farm Foundation with a 12-member board of directors, Erick Jensen as farm manager, and a small endowment that enabled them to restore the farm after years of neglect.

"We're going into Boston, Philadelphia, and Hartford, where incomes are high, and a lot of natural beef is coming from Montana and Colorado. I think beef from Maine is going to be much more marketable in Boston than beef from Montana."

Both the directors and Erick believe that "agriculture in Maine can really thrive again," and toward that end Wolfe's Neck has launched a bold new marketing venture which integrates the greater production capacity up north with Wolfe's Neck's greater marketing capacity down south in a "win-win situation." Erick is driven by the desire to help Maine farmers, especially those in Aroostook County where the economy once thrived.

Wolfe's Neck markets 300 steers a year but only 80 are produced at the farm. To make up the difference, Wolfe's Neck contracts with two Aroostook County feeder operations which produce to Wolfe's Neck standards—no antibiotics or hormones for the life of the animal and no animal by-product feeds. Marketing what would otherwise be a commodity under the Wolfe's Neck label yields a named product that commands a higher price. "It's Wolfe's Neck natural beef," says Erick, "and [producers] are paid five to ten percent more than the market price."

"The concept is not new," says Erick. "The model has already been established...and it works." Oakhurst and McCain's have contracted for years with dairy and potato producers who work under a specified production system and "get extra money for that... I think farmers [traditionally independent-minded] understand that if they don't change their practices, in 10 years they're not going to be in practice or be producing."

The North-South Connection Integrating Marketing and Production



Aroostook County is one of the most productive agricultural areas of the state of Maine and one of the most isolated from the end-market consumer population in the southern part of Maine and south of the Kittery Bridge. Bringing production capacity in the north together with marketing and sales capacity in the south of the state is one mission of Wolfe's Neck Farm whose natural beef label is recognized throughout New England.

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Unlike a for-profit firm, Wolfe's Neck financial books are open to viewing by producers or any one else interested in the economics of the farm and the marketing model. "We want this farm to be a model that can be replicated by other farmers in the state," says Erick. "That's part of our mission."

The production part of the operation "really is all market driven," says Erick. Rather than forcing products on the market, Erick is "looking at the markets and then finding a way to produce for those markets." The farm itself markets 15 percent of its products through mail order, the farm store, and a delivery route from Bar Harbor to Boston. The rest is handled by two New England distributors Erick met up with at the Portland Public Market.

Erick describes his experience at the Portland Public Market as both a success and a failure. Economically they were "losing a

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Frito's proprietary potato varieties which are "fair-skinned" and susceptible to bruising and discoloration in short seasons made shorter by cool spring temperatures. So Dorman is looking at using less manure and starting with some ammonium nitrate, or applying manure in the fall after barley, which is harvested early enough to get a green crop on to hold the nutrients, though some nitrogen will be lost.

Another challenge Frito presented to farmers is Frito's need to reduce costs by reducing the price they pay for potatoes which leaves farmers trying to figure out how to get Frito's costs down at the same time their own costs are going up. "They always have a challenge for us, every year," says Dorman, "and that's the case in all of agriculture today because there are fewer and fewer markets out there." Farmers cut every corner possible to make their product as cheap as they can and still make money. "At some point," says Dorman, "there's no way you can achieve that, so I don't know where it ends, but at some point it's got to end."

"Agriculture should be like every other product out there," says Dorman. "You should be able to get a return on your investment of at least 10 to 15 percent. When you get down around 2 or 3 percent return, it gets pretty scary."

"Agriculture," he says, "should be like every other product out there. You should be able to get a return on your investment of at least 10 to 15 percent. When you get down around 2 or 3 percent return," he adds, "it gets pretty scary." Innovative programs at the farm level can't fix everything, but both Dorman and Fogler agree that had they not started working together 12 years ago, they'd probably be out of business by now.

Integration of cropping and livestock systems is the cutting edge of sustainable ag research, but it was the farmers themselves who were the innovators. "They were already doing this," says Tim Griffin, who got USDA SARE grant funding in 1992 to support them with research and education. "They were the people at the forefront," says Griffin, "and we were just trying to keep them there." Griffin says farmers are working together at different levels of integration. "Some are totally connected like Dorman and Fogler. Others are just hauling manure down the road."

The Dorman/Fogler total connection developed over time to go beyond sharing land and nutrients to sharing equipment and labor, which adds to the cost savings for both partners. Dorman figures just the manure and lengthened rotations net him a savings of \$100 to \$125 per acre. Part of that saving is a drastic reduction in insecticide use since two-thirds of his potato acreage, thanks to the longer rotations, requires almost no treatment for control of Colorado potato beetle.

Another cost saving benefit more difficult to quantify comes from improvements in the quality of the soil. "The home farm soils were really in tough shape," says Dorman. "They just had no texture to them at all.... With this program we've been able to change those soils a lot.... When we started, Robert kept saying 'it's magic.' I used to laugh at him, but I think there is magic in what we've been able to do with our soil...and the quality of the potato crop has been as good as anyone else's or better than most.... As your soils improve, your crop improves," says Dorman.

Fogler too sees improvement in forage quality resulting from improved rotations which translates to improved milk production. He was milking 100 cows when he started working with Dorman. Now he is up to 500, working toward 1000, and he is working with other potato farmers in the area.

Dorman and Fogler have a hand-shake contract, nothing is written or needs to be, because for one to step out would be disastrous to their own operation. Neither bother to quantify the dollar amount of their own or the other's contributions. "Sometimes I think Bob has invested more, and sometimes I think I have," says Dorman. "But we really don't look at those things a lot. We just see the results and know that it really is working for the best for both of us."

The two have benefited from Extension's work on the value of manure and its affects on the crop, but Dorman thinks more is needed to understand how to maximize that value in order to maximize return. "That bottom line is what we're both looking at," he says. Both think the program would sell better to other farmers if there were more information on the budget side such as someone to sit down with both farms and work out five years of numbers to eliminate surprises and help farmers get through the first year when it doesn't look so good yet and stick it out together until it does. "This program takes time," says Dorman, and farmers are accustomed to quick results.

Fogler sees another advantage difficult to quantify. "It's been fun working with other farmers," he says, "and I think that has been important to our farm and our family.... It's fun to be able to go help them in a real busy time of year when you're slack...and it's been a good learning experience for us to understand the potato business. I think it's made us better farmers." ▲

What's a Farmer Worth?

The tendency to discount farmers and their contributions goes back to the early 1900s. Farmers became expendable once we decided, as a matter of public policy, to reduce the number of people engaged in farming in order to "free people" to work in industry and service professions to improve our quality of life. That policy may have made sense during the first half of the 20th century. Today it only perpetuates the myth that if two or three farmers could produce all of the bulk commodities we need for food and fiber, it would be a sign of incredible "progress."

Our continuing, simple-minded policy of reducing the labor force required to produce bulk commodities only makes sense if that is the sole objective of agriculture. If so, the United States needs to get out of the farming business altogether. Countries with cheaper land and labor costs can produce our bulk commodities more cheaply than we can.

Source: By Fred Kirschenmann, Director of the Leopold Center. Excerpted from *Leopold Letter*

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great deal of money...because the costs were too high." Long market hours pushed labor costs up and processing was \$200 per steer more than one would pay in the Midwest. On the positive side, the exposure to both consumers and trades people "was a blessing." Erick estimates that similar exposure through other channels would have cost ten times as much. "People came from all over New England and we've been able to use that [exposure] to expand in the markets throughout New England."

Producers were shielded from the higher than expected marketing costs incurred in Portland, Erick says, "because we locked in a price with our producers and we stuck to it regardless of how we were doing." Building that trust keeps producers on board for expansion of the marketing model that Erick anticipates. "Instead of several hundred steers," projects Erick "we may be utilizing several thousand throughout the State.... We're going into Boston, Philadelphia, and Hartford, where incomes are high, and a lot of natural beef is coming from Montana and Colorado. I think beef from Maine is going to be much more marketable in Boston than beef from Montana." ▲

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The Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society is a nonprofit organization of farmers and others who support the sustainable agriculture concept and its application to the production of food and other agricultural products. Our 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.

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Maine Farms for the Future Program Assistance for Business Plans and Implementation

The Farms for the Future Program responds to many farmers' expressed need for specialized business assistance from people who know something about farming. The first phase of the program helps farmers develop new business plans. Phase two provides grants of 25 percent of the funds needed to implement the plan up to \$25,000.

In December last year, 32 applications were reviewed and 15 farms of five acres or more were selected for phase one. Mort Mather who works with Coastal Enterprises, Inc. administers the program. He describes the selected farms as "15 farms with 15 different ideas...that they think will make them more viable and we're going to help them see if that will work."

In exchange for business plan support, farms agree not to develop their land for non-agricultural purposes for five years. In exchange for grant support, the protection agreement extends to ten years but can be terminated by paying back the grant.

The application and selection process established by the Maine Department of Agriculture lists criteria in order of importance: 1) the threat to the continuation of farming due to development pressures and current farm practices; 2) the opportunity for increasing the vitality of a given farm, and 3) the degree of positive environmental change.

Anyone interested in applying for the next round of support should contact Mort Mather (207) 772-5356 x114 or mkm@ceimaine.org. ▲

JOIN MESAS for sustainable agriculture

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