

## **U of M Creates New Sustainable & Organic Ag Programs with Assistance from the Land Stewardship Project**

By Bobby King, Land Stewardship Project

When Dave and Florence Minar of Cedar Summit Farm in New Prague converted their dairy operation to a sustainable, grass-based system some 15 years ago, there was little support available from the University of Minnesota.

“There really was no research on sustainable systems by the University that I’m aware of,” recalls Dave. “There were really no experts involved, no Extension people.”

A lot has changed. Over the years, organic food has become a force to be reckoned with in the grocery trade. The Minars, for example, now market their certified organic milk to Twin Cities co-ops under the Cedar Summit label. According to the USDA’s Economic Research Service, “organic farming has been one of the fastest growing segments of U.S. agriculture for over a decade.” And that growth is clearly evident in Minnesota. In 2005, the state was fourth nationally in organic cropland and fifth in the number of organic farms, according to the USDA. There are about 560 certified organic farms in Minnesota, and more than 170 certified organic processors, according to the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

That’s why the Minars and other members of the Land Stewardship Project (LSP) worked in 2007 to get the state Legislature to provide increased funding to the University of Minnesota. The Minars serve on LSP’s State Policy Committee and were leaders in this work at the Legislature. Once the funding was secured, the Minars and others from LSP met with key agricultural deans at the U to discuss the importance of spending some of that money on sustainable and organic agriculture. This April, that work paid off when the U of M announced it would create new resources and programs for sustainable and organic agriculture.

Florence says the University’s announcement sends an important message to the farmers and consumers who have been supporting and promoting organic and sustainable agriculture over the years. “This is an important investment in a quickly growing segment of agriculture that needs more research and outreach from the University,” she says. “Organic and sustainable agriculture production systems are attracting new farmers and new students to study agriculture, while helping existing farmers stay in business.”

Many of Minnesota’s small- and medium-sized crop and livestock operations are searching for markets that fit their systems in order to remain profitable, and sustainable and organic production offers that potential. However, there are challenges to alternative production systems that farmers feel land grant institutions can be leaders in addressing.

Bev Durgan, Dean of University of Minnesota Extension, says the U is increasing its support of sustainable and organic agriculture because of the opportunities this kind of farming is offering an increasing number of farmers in the state. “We want to help Minnesota be a leader in realizing this potential,” she says.

Allen Levine, Dean of the U of M's College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences, says it's become clear organic and sustainable agriculture have important research needs, and "the University wants to provide the science needed."

The U's new resources for organic and sustainable agriculture include:

- Establishing an organic dairy herd at the West Central Research and Outreach Center in Morris. This will make the U of M only the fourth university in the nation with an organic research dairy herd.
- Establishing a faculty position focused on organic and sustainable food systems at the College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences.
- Making the alternative livestock coordinator position at the University an ongoing position within U of M Extension. This position has helped provide critical assistance and information to farmers raising livestock on pasture and in other humane, non-confinements systems.
- Establishing a faculty position at the Southwest Research and Outreach Center in Lamberton devoted to organic crops.
- Providing funding for two or more graduate assistantships for organic research and extension.

In addition, Levine and Durgan are exploring the creation of an Organic Advisory Task Force comprised of organic farmers, University faculty engaged in organic research and outreach, and members of the organic business community.

For more information on the U of M's new organic and sustainable agriculture initiatives, see [www.landstewardshipproject.org](http://www.landstewardshipproject.org) or call 612-722-6377.