

University Outreach and Extension's New 'Focus Team' Approach to Setting Research and Extension Priorities and Programs for the University of Missouri and Lincoln University

Joan Benjamin

co-coordinator

Sustainable Agriculture Extension Program

In October 1999, the Sustainable Food and Farming Systems Focus Team (Sustainable Focus Team) was formed at the request of the Sustainable Agriculture Extension Program of the University of Missouri and Lincoln University (an 1890 institution). The Outreach & Extension program of these two Universities uses focus teams to give attention and resources to critical topic areas which have been neglected -- in this case sustainable agriculture and community food systems. In a news release announcing the formation of the new focus team, Tom Payne, dean of the MU College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources stated that "The sustainability of Missouri's agriculture is a priority." He explained that "This fact calls for added emphasis under the current farming crisis. The newly formed Sustainable Food and Farming Systems Focus Team will provide that emphasis." Ron Turner, University of Missouri executive vice-president and director of Outreach and Extension commented that "Sustainable farming has become a crucial area of interest to many Missourians" He emphasized that "This focus team demonstrates the university's strong commitment to Missouri farmers and rural communities, as well as to consumers and the environment."

The Sustainable Focus Team is a unique experiment because through its membership, and the membership of its Advisory Council, it brings together farmers (individuals and representatives of farmer organizations), University Outreach and Extension (UO/E) educators, campus faculty, government agency personnel, and non-government organization representatives. These partners are charged with developing outreach and extension programs that will help Missouri's small farmers and rural communities become socially, ecologically, and economically viable. In order to emphasize the cooperation necessary to make this partnership work, and insure that a variety of viewpoints are being taken into consideration, the Sustainable Focus Team is being led by a Leadership Council rather than a single leader.

The Leadership Council consists of the following people:

Joan Benjamin, co-coordinator of the Sustainable Agriculture Extension Program (this program has made it a priority to include farmers in every aspect of its work, from planning to program development and implementation), program manager for the Missouri Sustainable Agriculture Demonstration Award Program (a grant program, funded by the Missouri legislature, which provides funds for farmers to experiment with sustainable agriculture techniques on their farms), and Sustainable Team liaison;

Laura Bergman, program manager for the Sustainable Agriculture Extension Program and the Sustainable Communities Program (a Kellogg grant funded project, designed with this purpose: To help people find and reach their hopes and dreams while leaving equal or better opportunities for future generations);

Judy Grundler, program coordinator for the Integrated Pest Management Program of the Missouri Department of Agriculture;

Mary Hendrickson, network coordinator for the Community Food Systems Program (a program funded by the Missouri Department of Agriculture through a grant to UO/E. The program helps communities and individuals increase their self-reliance through local food systems;

Debi Kelly, program manager for the Missouri Alternatives Center (a resource center that provides alternative agriculture information for Missouri farmers); and K. B. Paul, program leader for Lincoln University's Small Farm Family Program (a program that assists limited resource and minority farmers through one-on-one assistance from Small Farm Family Education Assistants).

A UNIQUE PARTNERSHIP

A close collaborative working relationship has existed for several years among the Sustainable Agriculture Extension Program, the Missouri Department of Agriculture, the Missouri Alternatives Center, Lincoln University's Small Farm Family Program, and the Rural Sociology Department of the University of Missouri. The Sustainable Focus Team has formalized this collaboration,

to give it a higher level of visibility and credibility both within and outside of the University Outreach and Extension (UO/E) system, and to provide increased funding and support from within the UO/E system (through access to Outreach Development Funds). Adding the new state-funded Community Food Circles program to the collaboration has helped integrate the concepts of food, farming, and people in sustaining rural communities and mediating contentious issues between rural and urban community members.

Identifying a Purpose and Principles

The 25 members of the Sustainable Focus Team met for the first time in October 1999. At that meeting, the team members mutually agreed upon a purpose and a set of guiding principles. These were modified by the Team in November, and are listed below. The purpose and principles have generated enthusiastic and sometimes heated discussions. The language will continue evolve over time to reflect the needs of the Team, but the core meaning will remain the same.

The purpose and principles are of critical importance because they are the guidelines that effect all of the actions of the Team. The purpose and principles can best be understood in terms of the Constitution of the United States. The preamble of the Constitution, "We the people, in order to create a more perfect union..." sets out the purpose. The Constitution lays out the principles by which the government will function. These principles are not laws or rules -- the laws are made by Congress, and those laws must be consistent with the principles. The Courts check the laws against the Constitution to see if they follow the principles (are Constitutional).

The 25-member Sustainable Food and Farming Systems Advisory Council (Sustainable Advisory Council), is responsible for holding the Focus Team accountable to its purpose and principles, and will help insure that the needs of Missouri's small farmers and rural communities are met. Like the Focus Team, the Advisory Council is made up of a diverse group of stakeholders. The Sustainable Advisory Council includes extension and campus representatives of the University of Missouri and Lincoln University, representatives from the Missouri Department of Agriculture, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, the Sierra Club, Patchwork Family Farms, Small Farm Today magazine, Kingdom of Callaway Food Circle, the Christian Agriculture Research Institute, the Social Concerns Office of the Diocese of Jefferson City, the National Farmers Organization, and Natural Resources Conservation Service. The Sustainable Team will hold their first meeting with their Advisory Council in January 2000.

PURPOSE:

To develop and support sustainable food and farming systems that enhance families and communities ecologically, socially, and economically.

PRINCIPLES:

Grassroots involvement of farmers and citizens at every level

Listen to, Respect, and Attend to individuals equally
All decisions and actions have to be consistent with the principles of sustainability

Public/Community owns research and should have access to it. Team will facilitate access to information and communicate it to all members of the community

Actively seek diverse ideas and people

Enhancing sustainability: helping people thrive not just survive

Everyone a teacher, Everyone a learner (Co-learning, Collaborative)

In every deliberation, consider the 7th generation

Linking people, purpose, and place

Action will follow planning: We will Act!

Speak from the heart with integrity, authenticity

Help your neighbor

Actions are family friendly

Over the past two months, Sustainable Focus Team members have worked to define central issues, and begin designing and developing educational programs to address those issues. Team members have been successful at "thinking outside the box," to come up with programming that is truly new and different. They started out by developing an issue model and quickly discovered that all of the issues dealing with sustainable food and farming systems are interrelated, and all of the issues must consider the economic, environmental, and social aspects of sustainability. The Team members felt that even a mind map was too restrictive to illustrate their model, and eventually came up with the following bubble diagram that represents a three dimensional, ever-shifting grouping of issues.

Sustainable Food and Farming System Focus Team

Because all of the issues identified by the Team are inter-related, these three working committees take into consideration many more issues than those listed by the group titles. The following action areas were developed by each work committee. In January, the Sustainable Focus Team will present their action plans to their Advisory Council, and ask for their advice in implementing these programs.

Social	Safe Food
Ethics	Consumer
Justice	Economics
Spirituality	Finance
Stewardship	Marketing
Family	Value Added
Health/Nutrition	Ownership
	Energy
Politics	Processing
Research	Communications
Production	Transportation
Infrastructure	

Issue Model

AREAS OF INTEREST

Through team discussions with facilitator, Mel Zielinski, Regional Agronomy Specialist, Madison County Missouri Extension, the following areas were identified as having direct connections to the purpose of the Sustainable Team and its work.

ACTION PLANS

Once the Team identified issue areas, team members identified which issues were their highest priorities, then divided into three main groups:

- Research/Producer
- Marketing
- Social/Consumer

RESEARCH/PRODUCER COMMITTEE

The research and production component of the S-Team will be looking at existing research resources which apply to Missouri producers, specifically looking at systems based research that using sustainable practices. The research resources within the MU campus system, Lincoln University System and from other states will be compiled. The Sustainable Team will identify and outline areas which not currently addressed by existing programs for recommendations of future sustainable research proposals.

The Sustainable Team is also looking at what works well in specific outlying centers and developing a format which could be used at similar settings throughout the state. The farm walks which are conducted from the Forage System Research Center helps facilitate information sharing from producers to research and extension personnel and vice versa. The Sustainable Team will be looking at the historical development of the "farm walk" concept with the intent

of providing an outline of the process for other areas in the state.

The use of the Monitoring Tool Box will also be implemented in our state. This whole farm monitoring program, developed by the Land Stewardship Project in Minnesota, is designed to help farm families measure the success of their farm. Several different components are used in the measuring process such as financial data, quality of life, soil, streams, pasture vegetation, pesticide use and wildlife. The Sustainable Team will facilitate the use of the Monitoring Tool Box within different areas in the state with the intent of making modification for specific Missouri systems.

ACTION AREA 1: Outline a community based farm walk model after the Forage Systems Research Center at Linneus

GOALS/EXPLANATION: To strengthen farmer oriented research with the outlying centers, and strengthen interaction between farmers, university researchers, and extension personnel

ACTION AREA 2: Review and implement the Monitoring Toolbox, produced by the Land Stewardship Project

GOALS/EXPLANATION: To work with a select number of farms to implement the Monitoring Toolbox within Missouri and modify (if necessary) so that it is appropriate for our state

ACTION AREA 3: Outlining existing research resource information

GOALS/EXPLANATION: To determine what is currently being done in the area of farming systems research, so that existing findings can be disseminated, and new research projects initiate where needed

ACTION AREA 4: Continuing Education

GOALS/EXPLANATION: Attending the ACRES Conference: Building An Ecofarm: A Soils Up Approach, December 9-11

Marketing Committee

ACTION AREA 1: SARE Publications

GOALS/EXPLANATION: Work to increase the awareness of the SARE program by getting publications in every county office

ACTION AREA 2: Agriculture Lenders Seminars

GOALS/EXPLANATION: WORK with established Agriculture Lenders Seminars to include sessions on sustainable agriculture. Discussions with Ron Plain, Agriculture Lenders Coordinator, will begin now so that implementation can begin for next years' seminars. Ron Macher's brochures will be distributed in this years' seminars

ACTION AREA 3: Marketing Seminar (New Program)

GOALS/EXPLANATION: Development of a marketing seminar similar in format to Agriculture Lenders: BD day, 3 main topics. Initial topics proposed: financing/banking, marketing strategies, organizational structures, and record keeping. Minimum of 2 seminars per UO/E Region Proposed as an annual method of sharing information with farmers and citizens

ACTION AREA 4:

UO/E Guide sheet Development

GOALS/EXPLANATION: Immediate needs: Direct Marketing, Organizational Structures

ACTION AREA 5: Staffing

GOALS/EXPLANATION: Request regional directors to consider adding sustainable agriculture as a title and responsibility of existing staff as this years' staffing plan, and begin implementing the county's plans of work (As an example: During the previous staffing plan, some Agronomist positions were expanded to also cover Natural Resources, given an identified need in the community. This is one way of focusing staff resources on sustainable agriculture w/o new hiring

Social/Consumer Committee

ACTION AREA 1: Local Food Systems Approach to Food Security: Education **GOALS/EXPLANATION:** Submit an application for NC SARE PDP (Professional Development Program) funds to educate USDA agency employees, farmers, and others on how to use a Local Food System Approach to Food Security Proposal due 12/17/99

ACTION AREA 2: New Staff: UO/E 'Networker' in St. Louis

GOALS/EXPLANATION: Apply for ODF (Outreach and Development Funds) for a 2-year project to hire a Networker in St. Louis to link the public and various marketing opportunities for agricultural products with farmers in the East Central Region The proposal has been written and submitted once, with directions to submit through a Base Program Team, which this group facilitates

ACTION AREA 3: Public Education Forums in Urban Centers (Springfield/Joplin, St. Louis, Kansas City) Groups targeted include PTAs, Mothers Groups, Civic Organizations, etc.

GOALS/EXPLANATION: Topics: getting to know your food, future of your food supply, etc.

ACTION AREA 4: Children's Magazine

GOALS/EXPLANATION: Design a simple, fun booklet on sustainable agriculture aimed at a 4th grade level. Include pages to color, a story to read, puzzles, etc. Use those developed by the Missouri Department of

Agriculture for models

ACTION AREA 5: Portable exhibit on sustainable agriculture/ food supply concerns

GOALS/EXPLANATION: Exhibit will be available for use throughout the state, be interactive and fun, and targeted toward middle school aged youth while being appropriate for adults

ACTION AREA 6: Outstanding National Exhibit to be displayed at the Science Center or other public museums to generate awareness of sustainable agriculture and food issues

ACTION AREA 7: Curriculum on sustainable agricultures/food systems for high school classes and FFA

GOALS/EXPLANATION: Initial goal: A seminar for Vocational Agriculture teachers in July prior to their annual staff meeting

ACTION AREA 8: Curriculum development for elementary students

GOALS/EXPLANATION: Initial goal's Review the National SA Curriculum Guide in process through the Center for Rural Affairs and National SARE

ACTION AREA 9: Utilizing existing tools for youth education

GOALS/EXPLANATION: Using tools that are in place and popular with youth as an avenue of discussion on sustainable agriculture and food issues.

Examples: 1) SimFarm CD ROM game, 2) Murals depicting Urban development over the past 100 years (used currently in CD, could be expanded for farmland preservation and other discussions

THE FUTURE

The Sustainable Team has accomplished a lot in the first three months of its existence. In 2000, they will work with the Sustainable Advisory Council to develop an implementation plan for their programs. They will also develop a new and innovative evaluation plan to go with the new programming -- one that emphasizes empowerment of people, rather than strictly numbers.

The Sustainable Focus Team members find that they are energized by their meetings. The enthusiasm created by bringing together this diverse group of stakeholders has already increased communication between University Outreach and Extension and the farmers and communities it serves. Sustainable Team members are looking forward to developing programs to help small-scale farmers and rural communities survive and prosper. At the same time, they are creating a model for future community cooperation.