

Field Notes

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Great expectations—the real Chesapeake Fields Institute

Eric B. Johnson, Jr., M.P.S.A., CFI Director

As a relatively young organization with increasing momentum and a host of continued successes, CFI is challenged with maintaining a consistent sense of identity and purpose. My father used to tell me, “You can’t be all things to all people.” This saying certainly applies to each of us individually and to the organizations with which we are involved. Though CFI cannot, and should not be all things to all people, it must be many things to a variety of audiences in order to successfully fulfill its mission: “To strengthen the profitability of traditional agricultural markets for family farmers, while conserving the region’s natural and cultural resources.”

It has been almost two years since CFI incorporated in July of 2000. During this time CFI has been presented to a wide range of diverse audiences throughout the United States and even abroad. When asked who we are, even the most informed of sources might say, “They do agricultural research.” Another source might say, “I think they are trying to keep the Upper Eastern Shore green.” In response to this potential identity crisis, allow me the opportunity to present the full picture that illustrates who we really are. I think you’ll be surprised at how much we’ve grown while still being able to maintain our original purpose.

Grown out of a Kent County, Maryland study circle of citizens, CFI emerged as a result of concerns surrounding local agricultural conditions. Meeting for about a year, the study group determined that the Upper Eastern Shore of Maryland, also known as the corn belt of the Eastern Seaboard, produces corn, soybeans, and wheat as its principal farm products. Almost all of these feed grains are sold to a commodity market, with most being used for animal feed. The study circle understood that rapidly changing markets, coupled with losses in local buying competition and other factors, have reduced the premiums received by area farmers. In addition, data was reviewed indicating Upper Eastern Shore farmers are experiencing negative cash flows and many farmers are in fact leaving the industry altogether. Armed with this information, the study group realized that a set of strategic solutions would need to be investigated and implemented to reverse the trend of an eroding industry. More specifically, the traditional focus by farmers on production quantity, as opposed to quality, would have to be reversed to ensure a sustainable and more profitable agricultural industry.

If our farmers are going to become profitable, if Chesapeake Bay watershed land is to be preserved through a sustainable agricultural community, then value-added products and new markets must be identified. Furthermore, a community owned and driven infrastructure must be developed to enable our farmers to access these new markets. Finally, ongoing educational and marketing programs must be developed and introduced to reinforce the importance of agricultural preservation/profitability, food origin and security, multifunctional land usage, and environmental resource stewardship. The bottom line is that a multidimensional and comprehensive strategic approach is necessary.

Collaborations and strategic alliances are required to build the infrastructures necessary to enable our farmers to access more profitable markets. CFI is collaborating with over 30 different local, state, and federal government agencies, as well as a variety of non-profit organizations. In addition, CFI has been asked by Congressman Wayne Gilchrest to be the champion of the Delmarva Conservation Corridor Initiative, a proposed federal pilot project.

Solid and continuous research, coupled with collaboration-based infrastructures, will result in the emergence of a sustainable agricultural system that brings farmers to the economic development table. As a result, agricultural industry and land will be preserved through profitability. With a foundation of quality, rather than quantity driven research as a backbone to this project, successful achievement of agricultural profitability is only further cemented. The preservation of agricultural land through increased profitability will not only rescue an eroding agriculture, but will also have an immeasurable positive impact on the Chesapeake Bay watershed region, its water supply, its wildlife and other natural resources.

Each of the three strategic model components (below) has a distinctly different function, but yet all three are integrated by the nature of a mutually beneficial relationship. Guests visiting the education center ideally will also tour the production facilities where sustainable/profitable agricultural practices are demonstrated. The production facilities may house, in addition to the locally owned value-added infrastructure, other value-added production facilities. Already in gear and operating on the basis of a variety of grant funding sources, the research/development arm is working to provide the data needed to strengthen the planning and other elements of both the education and ag/economic production centers.

CFI is “thinking globally and acting locally,” but just what is its target geographical region, where exactly is it “acting locally”? As was mentioned, CFI has grown out of a Kent County, Maryland study group and is still provided much needed support from local government sources. While preserving strong roots in the Upper Eastern Shore of Maryland, CFI has accumulated a team of researchers and other collaborators that spans many states, academic institutions, and agencies/organizations. It has become more than clear that CFI will cement its propensity for success by engaging a truly regional approach. A focus beyond Delmarva not only enhances CFI’s competitive standing for grants acquisition/other fund raising, but also will better accommodate investment requirements for the farmer-owned value-added organization. An Eastern Shore of Maryland focus will not capture the total farmer investment required for successful business development as research suggests that only 20% of farmers will be able to invest in a value-added venture. A regionally expanded focus will not only be of benefit, but will be a prerequisite for achieving a sustainable and profitable agriculture.

In summary, CFI is still “acting locally,” but has expanded its focus beyond the borders of Maryland’s Eastern Shore. Interestingly enough, by focusing on locally owned and driven Delmarva solutions, CFI is producing a model that can be successfully duplicated throughout the world, thereby affecting a global impact.

Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program authorizes ten new markets, extends redemption date

Connie Ruohomaki, FMNP Program Manager—MD Dept. of Ag.

ANNAPOLIS—Despite the tumultuous resolution of the recent Farm Bill negotiations, Maryland is continuing with its 2002 Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program by authorizing ten new markets to redeem WIC and Senior Nutrition Program coupons and by extending the redemption date from June through October 31.

Authorized Farmers’ Markets in all 23 Maryland Counties will be able to redeem the Nutrition Program coupons beginning June 1, reports FMNP Program Manager Connie Ruohomaki. She said that 10,236 coupon books valued at \$15 per book will be distributed to residents 65 years of age and older through the Department of Aging Senior Center locations within each county. Another 18,000 coupon books valued at \$20 each will be distributed to participants in the Women, Infant and Children programs throughout the state.

The total redemption value of the Senior coupon program is \$153,581 and the total redemption value of the WIC coupon program is \$180,241, payable to participating farmers who exchange locally-grown fruits and vegetables for the coupons which are later redeemed for payment by check. Last year more than 400 Maryland farmers participated in the FMNP and received a total of \$448, 412.

Ms Ruohomaki hopes to expand the Maryland FMNP’s Transportation Initiative by assisting local communities and Farmers’ Market locations in procuring bus or train card outreach such as was done on Baltimore buses last season. Through an in-kind matching fund arrangement, the Maryland Department of Agriculture was able to place information cards that described market locations on Baltimore buses. One market reported that the placement of the cards increased its coupon participation by 25%.

Communities seeking to learn more about the Farmers’ Market Transportation Initiative, “Ride the bus to a Farmers’ Market,” may call Connie Ruohomaki at 410-841-5774, or email her at: ruohomCK@mda.state.md.us

Sustainability Grant pre-proposals due June 14

Helen Husher, Northeast SARE

The Northeast Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program, which funds research and education grants and professional development grants, has made a change in the grant application process. For the 2003 funding cycle, SARE will require a pre-proposal--a one-page description of performance targets and project design--for early review. Writers whose projects are both compelling and consistent with the SARE outcome statement will be invited to proceed with a full application. Pre-proposals for 2003 must be postmarked on or before June 14, 2002.

This new process allows applicants to have proposal concepts reviewed before developing a detailed application. It also gives reviewers an opportunity to focus on projects that most advance the SARE mission. This change does not affect the Northeast SARE Farmer/Grower grant program, but does affect the Professional Development and the Research and Education grant programs.

Pre-proposal materials are now be posted to the Northeast SARE web site at www.uvm.edu/~nesare/ and can be requested in hard copy by calling 802/656-0471.

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CFI negotiates first value-added contract

Jim Miller, Vice President of the CFI Board of Directors

The Virginia based Montague Farms, an exporter of food grade non-GMO soybeans to Japan, has entered into an agreement with CFI as its exclusive area agent to grow 500+ acres of natto beans. The Japanese consider these soybeans a delicacy and the demand for them is rising.

On a fact finding excursion in March to Virginia, CFI board members met with Montague Farms and other potential customers. CFI was the formally approached about growing food grade soybeans in the Upper Eastern Shore area and, after many e-mails, telephone conversations and meetings, a deal was struck.

Because of the late notice of the contract, this year's acres are somewhat limited because most farmers had already finalized their planting intentions and seed purchases. Still, the reception by area farmers has been very positive— 500+ acres in Kent, Cecil, and Queen Anne's counties has been engaged in less than one week!

These soybeans must be segregated and cannot be planted in a field that has had GMO soybeans (Round-up resistant) the previous year. All equipment, planters, combines, trucks, etc. must be contaminant free with respect to other seeds so as to maintain purity.

In order to maintain Identity Preservation, records must be kept and inspections will be performed. The soybeans will be conditioned after harvest to a uniform size and color and will then be loaded into bulk containers for export.

The premium for the soybeans that make the grade (usually 85% to 90%) will earn \$.75 above the price of regular soybeans and the remainder will be sold at market price. CFI hopes that this will be the beginning of many such endeavors in the future for area farmers!

Newly revised "Steel in the Field" book available through SARE

Valerie Berton, SARE Communications Specialist

Weed control demands time, labor and expense for every farmer every year. "Steel in the Field: A Farmers Guide to Weed Management Tools" shows how today's implements and techniques can control weeds while reducing – or eliminating – herbicides. In practical language, the 128-page book presents what farmers and researchers have learned in the last 20 years about cutting weed-control costs through improved cultivation tools, cover crops and new cropping rotations.

Newly revised with 2002 tool sources and prices and tool company World Wide Web sites, "Steel in the Field" combines farmer experience, commercial agricultural engineering expertise and university research. It directly tackles the hard questions of how to comply with erosion-prevention plans, how to remain profitable and how to manage residue and moisture loss.

Farmers – 22 of them – do a lot of the talking, sharing their struggles and successes with tools, weeds, herbicides and cropping systems. Their advice ranges from the specific — setting mini-disks 0.75 inches deep and 2 inches away from 2-inch tall plants — to the general, such as one farmer's estimate of the correct speed for using his coil-tine weeder: "As fast as you can hang on is fine." This book is a must for anyone looking to reduce or replace pesticide inputs. Index, contact list, detailed illustrations and tool source list included.

"This book addresses the four main concerns farmers have about mechanical weed control: cost, effectiveness, dependability and soil impact," said Joe Johnson, and agronomist at Mississippi State University. "The field equipment sections are the most descriptive I have ever seen."

To order the \$18 book, call (802) 656-0484 or go to <http://www.sare.org/htdocs/pubs/>
