

Volume 15, Number 4
July/August 2010

A voluntary partnership with private landowners

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Make Time for Conversations About Conservation & Stewardship

Information is power. So take time for public relations and teaching others about agriculture with every chance you get.

By: Kindra Gordon

It's a statistic that is quoted often – "Less than 2% of the population today lives on a farm (or is involved in production agriculture)."

Looked at from another angle that means 98% of people know little or nothing about what happens on farms, points out Donna Moenning, who raises cattle with her family on a farm in Minnesota.

Moenning has a long history of educating others about agriculture. She was formerly on staff with the National Livestock and Meat Board and worked as a radio farm broadcaster in southeastern Minnesota. Today, she is vice president of image and industry relations for the Midwest Dairy Association, which represents dairy producers in nine states.

Because of her roots in agriculture, Moenning is a passionate advocate for teaching consumers about the process behind bringing food from the farm to their table.

She says, "Food is very emotional and personal. Many consumers don't have a clue what we do on farms – and yet, they choose to buy our products – milk, meat, grain."

However, because so many consumers are removed from agriculture, Moenning says it does not take much for them to get misinformation about their food products and the farming process.

She asks producers to consider, "How has that lack of information impacted you and your business?" And more importantly, "How are consumers going to get the right information about what farmers and ranchers produce?"

Moenning says, "It starts with the producer. They are the most credible source."

She recognizes that everyone is busy on their farm and doesn't need "one more thing to do." But she points out that, often the consumer media doesn't portray agriculture's story accurately. And she says to producers, "If you don't tell your story, someone else will."

Likewise, Lynn Gordon with the Nebraska Department of Agriculture encourages those in agriculture to take time to educate consumers about the products they produce. Gordon, who is division administrator for NDA's Ag Promotion and Development Department says, "Information is power, and an informed consumer is more likely to be supportive of our agricultural industries."

She adds, "Ag producers should be open-minded when visiting with non-ag folks; don't assume they understand your industry. Often, they only hear or read about agriculture second-hand, and it may not always be correct information."

And, it's not just consumers in urban centers like New York or Los Angeles who need to be educated about agriculture. Even Midwestern areas like Omaha, NE, have many consumers and families that have limited knowledge about agriculture," says Gordon.

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Make Time for Conversations

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Crucial Conversations

Gordon and Moenning suggest that producers should always be looking for opportunities to inform and educate the public about their farm or agricultural operation. Perhaps it is through conversations you have with neighbors or moms at community or school events; maybe it is talking with people who are attending county or state fairs during the summer, or perhaps you are hosting school tours.

Whatever the setting, Moenning stresses that you should understand your audience and keep your message simple. "Simplicity is not an option – it's essential," she says, and adds, "A confused mind says no." For example, she says the consumer doesn't want to understand every detail about cloning. They maybe only want to know why it's done and if the food produced is safe.

To keep your message to consumers effective and understandable, Moenning suggests having a few key messages that you want to convey identified in advance, so you are prepared for whatever situation you are in. This is the message you want them to remember about your farm or industry when they get back home.

For instance, food safety, the environment and nutrition are often the key concerns that consumers have. Thus, Moenning suggests being prepared to offer assurances such as these:

- **Food safety:** Our goal is to produce a product that is wholesome and good to consume. Our cattle must be healthy and well cared for in order to produce safe products. Our livelihood is based on the food we produce.
- **Environment:** As a farmer who lives on /near this land we understand the importance of protecting our natural resources. My family lives here, so it's important to care for the land and water. We depend on this land for our business.
- **Nutrition:** Beef and/or milk offer a powerful package of nutrients including zinc, iron and protein. Moenning suggests being well-versed in these nutrition facts so you can speak about them confidently.

Additionally, Moenning and Gordon suggest that you should be knowledgeable about the economic impact your industry has on your county or state. Be prepared to tell others how livestock production produces jobs which in turn has a multiplier effect on local spending.

For instance, in her state of Nebraska, Gordon shares that agriculture is an \$11 billion industry with 1 in 3 Nebraskan's making their livelihood from an ag-related industry.

More Messages

In addition to one-on-one conversations with consumers, Moenning says there are endless opportunities to convey positive messages about your farm or ranch to the public. She encourages producers to consider some of these:

1. Post a farm sign so neighbors and passersby will recognize your farm identity and what you produce.
2. Establish a farm mission or vision statement and then post it where visitors to your operation can read it. "This says a lot about who you are, what you do, and what you stand for," says Moenning.
3. Develop a brochure about your farm or business. Moenning says this can be a useful handout to provide others information about your farm when you are at events. And, if you host classroom tours, it's a good resource to give the teacher to provide students background information before the class arrives.
4. Develop a website about your operation. Like a brochure this can provide information about your business, but you can also include links to other websites that provide useful information about your industry.
5. Host farm tours. This could be for local school children, college students, business professionals, or community groups. Moenning stresses that different approaches will be needed for different audiences, but farm tours can be a great way to teaching others about agriculture.

That said, she also emphasizes that not everyone feels comfort-

able hosting farm tours, so if you aren't, find other ways to share your story. For instance, maybe you prefer to go to the classroom and make a presentation or share photos and products from your farm. Moenning says that can be equally as effective.

6. Host on-farm events to build neighbor/community relations. Moenning suggests hosting a winter chili supper for your neighbors or a summer picnic for local businesses and their employees as a way to bring people to your farm to teach them about what you do.

Gordon points out that open house events such as these demonstrate an "open-door policy" to neighbors and the community so they can see the environment where animals are raised and get their curiosities answered.

Or, if you prefer to take agriculture to them, put together a basket of beef and cheese sticks – along with industry brochures or recipes – and take them to a local business during your state's beef or dairy month or on Earth Day.

"Neighbor relations a decade ago were less of a concern, but today many non-farm families live in the country and know little about agriculture. So it's important to do these things," suggests Moenning.

7. Include a mention about your industry in Christmas cards. Moenning suggests including a short paragraph about your industry in your annual Christmas letter to friends and relatives – maybe it's a unique fact or maybe you direct them to a beef website with recipes. "This is just another simple way to make every conversation count," says Moenning.

Additionally she suggests that you can also promote your industry through gifts that you give – be it for graduation, birthdays or weddings. She suggests beef cookbooks, steak knives and beef certificates. "Think out of the box and promote your product every chance you get," she says.

8. Become a member of your local Chamber of Commerce. "You are a local business in your community, and this is a great way to network and share your industry information," Moenning says.

Likewise, consider making informative presentations about your industry to local community groups such as Lions, Kiwanis or the chamber. "They want to hear from you," says Moenning.

9. Enter in local parades. "This is a simple way to be involved. It's not about self-promotion; it's about self-preservation of your industry and creating awareness.

10. Combine efforts with other industries to promote ag. For instance, Moenning suggests donating milk to the Girl Scouts for a "milk and cookies" event. Or, partner with local dairy producers to provide cheese and beef sticks at special community activities.

11. Host an "ag" story hour at the library. Moenning suggests selecting a book about farm life and reading it to preschool children at the local library. She says this can be a great way to educate moms too.

12. Adopt a classroom at the local school. You may go in and make presentations about your farm or industry a couple times a year. Or, perhaps you are an e-mail pen pal to the class and tell them about what's happening on your farm each month through the school year and then host an on-farm tour in May.

13. Work with the news media. Moenning suggests being proactive and contacting your local media to let them know you are willing to be a source for interviews about agriculture. She suggests working with your industry organization to help you prepare and feel comfortable for such a role – and many of them will provide talking points about specific industry issues. Moenning says writing letters to the editor can also be an effective way to share your message through the media.

Lastly Moenning emphasizes that you don't have to do every item on the list to be an advocate for ag, but she encourages producers to take time to identify a few things that they feel comfortable doing to promote their industry and then "do them well," she says.

She concludes by reminding producers, "If you don't tell your story, someone else will."

GET WEED WISE

New Book Profiles Training Cows to Eat Weeds

What really makes a plant palatable, how creatures choose foods and protect themselves from toxins in plants, how to use a cow's natural behaviors to get her to eat a weed in as little as five days. Those are some of the issues covered in "Cows Eat Weeds: How To Turn Cows into Weed Managers."

Author Kathy Voth details her revolutionary process for training cows to eat weeds in as little as 10 hours over a 10-day period. Trained cattle gain weight at expected rates, and teach their herd mates and offspring. Even better, trained cows become more open-minded about forage in general and choose other pasture weeds on their own.

Learn more about the 150-page book (available for \$38, plus shipping and handling or \$68 for a book and DVD) at <http://www.livestockforlandscapes.com/cowseatweedsbook.htm>. Contact the author at kvoth@livestockforlandscapes.com.

Online Weed Calculator Now Available

A weed calculator developed by an Agricultural Research Service (ARS) scientist tells ranchers the number of additional cows they could raise if they eliminated one or two widespread exotic invasive weeds.

Rangeland ecologist Matt Rinella at the ARS Fort Keogh Livestock and Range Research Laboratory in Miles City, MT, created the computer model that predicts weed impacts on forage production.



Leafy Spurge

Data for developing the model came from 30 weed researchers working throughout the western U.S. In addition to developing the calculator so that ranchers can calculate what weeds are costing them on any given site, Rinella used the data to estimate what weeds are costing ranchers in a 17-state region. He calculated that if leafy spurge were eliminated, ranchers in that entire region could graze up to 200,000 or more cows a year and save tens of millions of dollars.

Spotted knapweed is another exotic invasive weed, which if eliminated, would greatly increase the number of cows ranches could support, and the calculator also predicts its impacts.



Spotted Knapweed

All the rancher needs is a datasheet, a clipboard, a pencil, a yardstick, and homemade sampling frames of any size, rectangular or circular. Ranchers can download datasheets for recording weeds. They tally weeds in each frame, grouping them by their heights. The necessary data can be gathered in about 30 minutes.

When the numbers are entered into the calculator, the ranchers learn how many pounds of weeds they are producing per acre and how many more cattle they could raise per acre if those pounds of weeds were replaced by forage plants.

It's important to quickly spray or hand-pull small weed infestations before they expand. But with large weed infestations, the calculator reflects a fundamental principle of integrated pest management: It's only worth controlling a pest if the profits from doing so outweigh the costs.

Interested parties can access the calculator at: <http://199.133.173.229/WeedImpact/>.

For more on the calculator, contact Rinella at (406) 874-8232 or matt.rinella@ars.usda.gov.

-- Source Agricultural Research Service

STATE SPOTLIGHT: ILLINOIS NRCS “GOOD GRAZING” CAMPAIGN

Submitted by: Jody Christiansen, NRCS IL Public Affairs Specialist



NRCS has begun a multi-year campaign to promote good grazing practices throughout Illinois. The campaign “Good Grazing Makes Good \$ense,” contains messages, testimonials and informational materials to encourage graziers to include conservation planning in their production. The Illinois Grazing Manual is highlighted on all materials as an important resource along with references to NRCS technical and financial assistance.

The purpose of the campaign is to help graziers’ be aware and understand the benefits of good conservation planning and practice of proper grassland management and where to find help. The campaign encourages producers to contact NRCS, GLCI and other partners in order to incorporate conservation in their operations, make contact with other successful graziers, attend grazing schools, and review grazing manual materials on-line.

Materials developed include grazer profile fact sheets that detail and highlight different Illinois producer’s operations. Banners were developed to appeal to and showcase specific operations. They are free-standing, vertical banner stands with the campaign tag, various slogans, and large photos of pastures and grazing livestock. There are four different types highlighting beef, goat, dairy, and sheep operations (see photo). A companion general grazing fact sheet was also developed. A Grazing Planner for 2011 is in the beginning stages of development along with other possible products later this year.

The first significant exhibition was at the AFGC Annual meeting held in June 2010 in Springfield, Missouri. Interested parties in support of the campaign include Illinois GLCI and the Illinois Beef Association. To learn more about good grazing management, visit www.il.nrccs.usda.gov

WISCONSIN FEATURES PASTURE WALK WITH JERRY BRUNETTI ON SEPT. 14

The Vernon County Land and Water Conservation Department, the Vernon County Grazing Group and Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) are featuring Jerry Brunetti on Sept. 14 for a four hour pasture walk on Sylvan Meadows Farm outside of Viroqua , WI . The walk will be followed by a catered evening meal on the farm, and then ending the day with a special presentation at a banquet facility in Viroqua. For more details about this event contact Kelly Jacobs, County Conservationist, Viroqua , WI , phone: 608-637-5475 or e-mail kjacobs@vernoncounty.org.

To have your GLCI activities or upcoming events highlighted in this newsletter, contact Kindra Gordon at phone 605-722-7699 or kindras@gordonresources.com.

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National Association of Conservation Districts (202) 547-6233
Dairy Industry (517) 323-6575
American Sheep Industry (303) 771-3500
American Grassland Council (800) 944-2342
American Farm Bureau Federation (202) 484-3608
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