

**Minnesota Organic Advisory Task Force  
Meeting Minutes  
November 17, 2011 (conference call)  
Approved 1-13-11/mm**

Members Present: Lynn Archer, (chair) Robin Martinek, Chuck Schwartau, Tony Schiller, Elia Romano, Susan Stewart, Lynn Brakke, Paul Sobocinski, Wes Moechnig, Karen Coune, Jamie Hoch, Mike Miller (for Jamie Pfuhl)

Members absent: Michelle Menken, Rob King, Emily Zweber

Staff present: John Byrnes (UMN), Meg Moynihan (MDA)

Lynn Archer convened the meeting at 10:05

**I. REVIEW/APPROVE MINUTES FROM 7/17/10**

Karen Coune offered a correction - she was not developing sustainability curriculum but is using it in conjunction with the Northwest Earth Institute. **Karen Coune moved to accept the minutes as amended. Paul Sobosinski seconded. Motion passed.**

**II. OLD BUSINESS**

**1) Reports on Report on recommendations from 7/7/10** John Byrnes and Meg Moynihan reported on the following recommendations: 1) NRCS offer "Conservation Activity Plan for Organic Transition" and 2) that Commissioner and Deans encourage Minnesota's congressional delegation to oppose a bill eliminating the National Organic Cost Share program. John reported the Deans' will not be sending letters; their procedure is to share their perspectives through the NALGUs – that's their procedure. They attended an APL meeting earlier this week. Dean Durgan intended to share the information with the association's lobbyist. Several questions were asked about the association's agenda and priority-setting process. There was no information on the recommendation to research best practices for organic corn stand establishment.

Meg reported that Commissioner Hugoson sent a letter on 9/9/10 to Natural Resources Conservation Service State Conservationist Don Baloun encouraging the agency to offer the "Conservation Activity Plan for Organic Transition" and thanking Minnesota for its leadership on organic issues. The Commissioner wrote to members of Minnesota's Congressional delegation on 9/9/10 with regard to H.R. 5326, the bill to repeal the National Organic Cost Share Program, explaining how the program has benefitted organic operations in Minnesota and voicing concern about efforts to repeal it. Paul Sobocinski requested copies of the letters.

**2) Reports from Standing Committees**

**Crop insurance:** Lynn Brakke reported the committee has not met. A new insurance program for certain organic crops has been introduced but little is known about whether and how it will be implemented.

He voiced concerns that the new program is based on a set premium over conventional prices. There are other concerns about commodities not listed in this new program (for some, the only option is written agreements with RMA and these are not always if available.) Lynn will participate in a session on organic crop insurance at MN Organic Conference.

**Transition Support for Organic:** Robin reported the Conservation Activity Plan for Organic Transition will be offered in MN equip in 2011 and that NRCS will need help getting the to get word out to farmers. No trainings for technical service providers have been scheduled yet. These would need support of NRCS management. The State Technical Committee was identified as an important venue at which to press this need.

**MN Grown Organic** – Susan reported Meg and two staff members from MDA’s communications department filmed a few segments for consumers at the Wedge. These will be YouTube videos on how to look and decipher organic labels and what organic really means. Meg expressed appreciation for use of Wedge space and forbearance of staff and owner-members. Lynn Brakke commented on the importance of consumer education regarding the difference between “organic” and “natural.”

### III. MEMBER/SECTOR UPDATES

**Lynn Archer** - no report

**Robin Martinek (NRCS)** The signup period for EQIP – including the organic initiative – is now open, as is the Conservation Stewardship Program. These signups are ongoing – there are currently no deadlines. Rankings will be done Jan/Feb. High tunnels will probably be offered in 2011. NRCS will help MDA get word about Minnesota Organic conference producers out to TSPs.

**Chuck Schwartau (UMN Extension)** Has been receiving a number of calls asking about the organic conversion process as well as more inquiries (mostly from small livestock producers) about selling “natural” products. They seem to be considering “natural” because they are wary of rigor of organic recordkeeping. Lynn Brakke noted that surveys say consumers think “natural” is more natural than organic, plus “natural” has lower price point. The Extension Dairy Team took stopped at Joe Borgerding’s organic dairy (Belgrade) and at Pride of Main Street organic dairy in Sauk Centre on a recent tour.

**Wes Moechnig (organic dairy farmer) Reported** low price of organic grain is threatening the solvency of some operations; predicts it will continue to be a big issue going into next year. Recordkeeping for new pasture rule (30% dry matter intake from forage for minimum 180 days) is challenging and requires detail that Wes and many other operations have not previously recorded. Information about what the regulation is/says and recordkeeping template(s) would also be helpful. Dairies will need help in order to remain in compliance. Certifiers will also be monitoring whether land and forage quality is adequate. Certifiers differentiate between rotational and permanent pasture.

Mike Miller for Jamie Pfuhl – no report

**Tony Schiller (SunOpta)** – Harvest is wrapping up. Soybean yields were good to excellent, with no aphid issues. Corn yields are fair. Market prices are low and a lot of growers are contemplating leaving organic,

although recent downward price pressure in conventional market may be changing some of their minds. Tony predicted organic prices will be closely tied with conventional prices this year. Livestock producers and end users of crops fear the markets getting out of hand again (e.g., \$12 corn and \$30 soybeans). “If we lose them (livestock operations and other crop buyers) again this time, we fear they won’t come back.”

**Elia Romano (Albert Lea Seedhouse)** Low prices have organic farmers depressed and there’s talk of jumping ship. Knows a number of large farmers switching back to conventional. Albert Lea has had reports of farmers hauling organic 2009 grain in to local elevators and selling as conventional. In general, organic growers had good production year. Soybean production and seed production were very good. Albert Lea’s own seed production yields were up. 2011 seed availability will be good except for legumes. Production problems in Canada will make legume seed supplies tight.

**Susan Stewart (Co-Op Partners Warehouse and Wedge Coop.)** – Warehouse had best year ever, with a 30% increase in sales; most of the products (97%) have been organic. The warehouse deals mostly in vegetables, but they also cross dock and help farmers aggregate. They are adding a lot more farmers.

Food coops in the Twin Cities area (including Cambridge and Northfield) had double digit sales increases. New stores are doing especially well. The Wedge is still growing and gave back \$1 million in patronage refunds. The Wedge uses its website to educate shoppers (including about “natural”) and to emphasize the meaning behind the organic label. Consumers are particularly confused about personal care product label claims. Meat, seafood, and bread sales are up. The Wedge celebrated Organic Harvest Month with banners featuring USDA label and MN Grown Organic label. Other educational efforts include topics like GMO food, GE sugar beet and alfalfa, and national food safety bill (getting lots of consumer interest and activity - calls to Congress, etc. because of concerns small producers will be harmed by legislation if it is not scale-appropriate.)

**Lynn Brakke (organic grain and beef farmer)** – Local organic growers meet monthly. Is hearing a lot of persistent concerns about low prices. Conventional prices higher than normal and compared to conventional prices, organic farmers feel they are not being compensated adequately for the additional risk and work that organic requires. Some producers have already left organic. If conventional prices were to drop significantly, the concerns would quiet down, but Lynn would prefer to see organic prices rise instead.

**Paul Sobocinski (public)**. Attended presentation at UMN Southwest Research and Outreach Center (Lamberton) by a cropping system candidate and is hoping that position will be filled soon. Worked to get “Troubled Waters” film shown when the University cancelled its original air date. He explained that the film talks about how agriculture can improve the environments and features organic dairy farmer Arlene Nelson.

**Karen Coune (public)** Recently joined Lakewinds Coop’s board of directors and concurs with Susan that coops are doing well. The organic and natural section of the grocery store is the only component of retail food industry that is growing, but the rate may be so slow and regional that it is too slow for

farmers. Whole Foods will be opening a 4<sup>th</sup> store -- in Minnetonka and Edina near Trader Joe's. She sees this activity as an indication that consumers **do** want these foods.

**Jackie Hoch (organic fruit grower/processor)** – Both organic and conventional apples and other fruits in MN experienced a bad year with late frosts, a wet summer, and hail. Hochs lost 40% of their crop but saw extremely strong sales and support from co-ops; sometimes demand exceeded supply. Jackie attended the National Organic Standards Board meeting in Madison, WI and testified about streptomycin use, recommending that it remain available for post-infection use in a limited capacity against fireblight in apples and pears. The item is being deferred until spring meeting. Jackie expects it will remain available for limited use. The Organic Tree Fruit Association working Michigan State University faculty to explore look at fireblight management options other than streptomycin.

#### **IV. NEW BUSINESS:**

**Genetically Engineered (GE) Sugar beet and Alfalfa:** Susan asked that the task force recommend that the UMN MDA write letters to support continuing bans on planting GE sugar beets and GE alfalfa. On Nov 4 and 5, a notice that Monsanto and another company have applied to deregulate GE sugarbeets was published in the Federal Register. Labeling of sugar produced with GMO seed as “natural” and the strength of the sugar lobby was discussed. Lynn explained that GE sugar beet is popular with conventional growers. Previously, producers had to spray many times during the course of the season. Additionally, some GE varieties have better disease resistance and yields. Further discussion about conventional practices and consumer, and pesticide drift ensued. Meg explained the State drift law, MDA's role in investigation and enforcement, and provided an update about “Driftwatch” land use database that the OATF first learned about in Wisconsin last April.

**Susan Stewart moved that Lynn Archer send letters to the deans and commissioner outlining OATF opposition to partial deregulation of GMO sugar beet and alfalfa and requesting that they write a letter on this issue in line with the OATF's concerns; that a cc go to the Wisconsin task force; and that the OATF respond directly to the USDA requests for comments. Second by Karen Coune. Motion passed.**

Karen and Susan agreed to draft the letter for Lynne.

#### **Other items:**

Lynne Archer moved to table until January a discussion about how to summarize and present organic concerns and recommendations to a new agriculture commissioner.

Meg provided a brief overview of Minnesota Organic Conference planning, commenting that several of the issues raised by the OATF today (including pasture rule, organic market outlook, organic crop insurance) are on the conference breakout session agenda.

Meeting adjourned approximately 2:30 p.m.