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# The Seedling Cultivating Agricultural Sustainability

Agricultural Newsletter of the Lake County Soil & Water Conservation District

Volume 3, Issue 2

## Sustainable Agriculture Primer

The term "sustainable agriculture" is not easily defined, and getting a consensus on a definition would be difficult. It can simply be described as "environmentally enhanced agriculture" to avoid a lengthy analysis. The environmentally friendly practices meet economic and social objectives at the same time.

The Lake SWCD endorses sustainable practices because they can help agriculture remain viable in our region, which is experiencing great pressures from urbanization. Sustainability practices help to keep the soil healthy and to keep it in place. This helps to produce a better crop—whether it is grapes or nursery stock—and keeps our waters clean. Our mission is to provide the leadership and technical expertise to guide the protection and conservation of the unique soil and water resources of the county.

Many resources on sustainable agriculture are available on the web to help you find options and opportunities that will work for you. Reading stories of other people's experiences with sustainability can help stimulate your own creativity, and give you a sense of belonging to a larger community.

ATTRA, the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service provides



Lake County Agricultural Operation

a wealth of information, covering everything from specialty crops to soil, water, and pest management, as well as marketing, business and risk management. Visit their comprehensive website at [attra.ncat.org](http://attra.ncat.org).

The New Farm website offers "Farmer to Farmer know-how from the Rodale Institute". You can find the latest research, book reviews, "farm voices", and training opportunities. The New Farm website is: [newfarm.org](http://newfarm.org).

Two more local sites are the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA) and Innovative Farmers of Ohio. OEFFA "is a membership-based, grass roots organization, dedicated to promoting and supporting sustainable, ecological, and healthful food systems". OEFFA provides grower as well as consumer information, extensive agricultural

### Inside this issue:

<i>FarmLink: A Testimonial</i>	2
<i>News Briefs</i>	2
<i>Funding Opportunities</i>	3
<i>Non-Point Corner</i>	3

resources, and an apprentice program. OEFFA is on the web at [oeffa.org](http://oeffa.org).

Innovative Farmers of Ohio states that sustainable agriculture integrates three main goals: environmental stewardship, farm profitability and prosperous farming communities. Their website ([ifoh.org](http://ifoh.org)) provides news, education, training and philosophy to get you thinking about the bigger picture.

All of these websites have links that can carry you as far as you want to go. If you still have questions, do not hesitate to give Lake SWCD a call, and we will help you to find what you're looking for.

Sustainable agriculture is not the same as sustainability of the agricultural industry! This topic will be addressed in the next issue of The Seedling. Stay tuned...

### LAKE COUNTY SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

125 E. Erie St., Painesville, OH 44077  
440/350-2730 FAX 440/350-2601

#### Toll-free Numbers:

428-4348 x 2730 Madison/Perry  
918-2730 Cleveland/Western Lake County  
800/899-LAKE outside Lake County only  
E-mail: [soil@lakecountyohio.org](mailto:soil@lakecountyohio.org)  
Web site: [www.lakecountyohio.org/soil](http://www.lakecountyohio.org/soil)

Office Hours: Mon.-Fri. 7:30 am-4:00 pm

#### STAFF

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PAM BROWN, District Secretary/Treasurer  
DAN DONALDSON, District Administrator  
CHAD EDGAR, Urban Stream Specialist  
BETH LANDERS, Education/Info Coordinator  
MAURINE ORNDORFF, Ag Programs Tech  
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JOHN NIEDZIALEK, WR RC&D Coordinator

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National Association of Conservation Districts  
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#### AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

All Lake SWCD and USDA programs and services are available without regard to race, age, gender, national origin, political beliefs, color, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or marital or family status.

The public is invited to attend Lake SWCD's monthly Board meetings, held the third Tuesday of each month at 7:00 pm at 125 East Erie St., Painesville. Meeting announcements appear under the public agenda in the News-Herald and on the District website. Please call in advance to let us know you will be attending.

## FarmLink: A Testimonial

by Beth Knorr, The Farmland Center

When I first started my farming adventure in 1998, I was lucky enough to find an organization that was interested in hiring a young, enthusiastic 'wannabe' farmer willing to learn in exchange for housing and a modest stipend. Over the years, as my experience grew and my skills developed, the responsibilities and position changed to reflect my evolution from an 'Apprentice' to an 'Assistant Farmer' and ultimately to a 'Harvest Manager.' The organization provided the land, equipment, tools and administration while I supplied the labor and eventually the farming and management skills necessary to run a successful farm. I also met my husband while working there, and together we made a very effective farming team.

While it was nice not having to invest in land, capital improvements or equipment, and even nicer having a steady paycheck and health benefits, my husband and I often discussed how wonderful it would be to have our own farm so that we could be the ultimate decision makers. Our efforts would pay us directly, and any 'extra' work or new endeavors we chose would benefit us directly, instead of going to the organization.

The biggest barrier we came across was the high cost of land. Neither of us grew up on a farm, so farming family land was not an option. Finding land

with good soil and a good water source that wasn't more than an hour from a large and interested population to which we could market our produce proved to be challenging. There was and still is some land available that fits those criteria, but competition from developers and others renders it unreasonably priced if you intend to begin a farming enterprise.

Having made modest wages as farmers, there was just no way we would have been able to purchase the land and the equipment necessary to begin a farm business that would be able to generate enough income to pay off the loans. Ultimately, we gave up actively searching, but are still keeping our eyes out for anything 'interesting.'

Other young farmers are struggling with the same issues. At the same time, the average age of farmers is increasing and many are planning for retirement. If this older generation of farmers has no one in their family interested in taking over the business, what options do they have for keeping their land productive into the future? Often they are led to believe that selling to developers is the only way they can meet their retirement goals, and in some cases their growing health care needs.

This is where the FarmLink program can help. The Farmland Center, a pro-

gram of the Countryside Conservancy, can help make the connections between these two groups of people in order to keep our farmland in production and contributing food and fiber as well as economic benefits to the community. As this program is established we look to many successful FarmLink programs across the country for inspiration and guidance. We see the tremendous potential for meeting the needs of a younger generation of farmers searching for land in Northeast Ohio to make their business ideas a reality, in addition to helping older farming generations find new partners that will help keep the land they have stewarded over the years fruitful. The options for crafting a farm transition arrangement between beginning farmers and seasoned farmers are nearly unlimited.

The Farmland Center can also provide resources for beginning farmers to help them succeed and for older farmers to help them achieve their retirement, estate planning or land conservation goals.

For more information or to participate in this exciting new FarmLink program contact Beth Knorr at (330) 657-2538 or at [beth@thefarmlandcenter.org](mailto:beth@thefarmlandcenter.org). Visit The Farmland Center on the web at: [www.thefarmlandcenter.org](http://www.thefarmlandcenter.org).

## News Briefs

### Conservation Tax Law Update

The 2006 tax law amendment, which increased tax benefits to modest-income landowners who donated a conservation easement (this includes agricultural easements) on their property, was set to expire at the end of 2007. Congress is working hard to make the law permanent and to ensure a consistent and stable tax policy for landowners who protect their property from development.

In January, Senate Finance Committee Chair Max Baucus introduced legislation (S. 469) to amend the IRS code and make permanent the special rule for contributions of qualified conservation contributions. On March 20, 2007, Congressmen Mike Thompson (D-CA) and Dave Camp (R-MI) introduced similar legislation (H.R. 1576).

The 2006 law extended the carry-forward period for tax deductions for donated conservation easements from 5 to 15 years and

raised the cap on those deductions from 30 percent of a donor's adjusted gross income to 50 percent- and to 100 percent for qualifying farmers. "By making this law permanent...it will help to keep farmers in agriculture, preserve open spaces and enhance the quality of our air and water", said Rep. Thompson.

### OAEPP & FRPP Deadlines

The Ohio Department of Agriculture has announced the deadline for the

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Funding Opportunities

**The Lake County Economic Development Center** offers a Microloan Program to Lake County businesses from \$1,000 up to \$20,000. Interest rates are prime plus one, with terms up to 60 months. Loans can be used for machinery and equipment, inventory, real estate, leasehold improvements and gap financing, but cannot be used for working capital or debt refinancing. Collateral is required, and a business plan may be required, depending upon the size of the loan. The Center encourages growth and development of small businesses in the community by providing alternate sources of capital and a referral of other services to assist with the success of those businesses.

Contact Cathy Walsh, Program Director at 440/357-2290 x 34, or visit [www.lcedc.org](http://www.lcedc.org) for further information.

**Value Added Producer Grants** are available through the USDA Office of Rural Development. The grants may be used for planning (for a maximum of \$100,000), working capital for marketing value-added agricultural products (\$300,000 maximum), and for farm-based renewable energy. Recently awarded grants in Ohio were for assessing the feasibility of generating wind on-farm, to provide working capital to market wine, and the development of a frozen tofu product to increase the use of soybeans as a food product.

The deadline for the 2007 funding cycle is May 16, 2007. An application guide can be found at [www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/coops/vadg.htm](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/coops/vadg.htm).

**Whole Foods Market**, one of the world's largest retail natural and organic food stores, will make \$10 million available annually for low-interest loans for small, local agricultural producers. Loan recipients must meet Whole Foods Market's quality standards, use the funds for expansion of an operation, and have a viable business plan and adequate cash flow to service the debt. Questions can be referred to [lp@wholefoods.com](mailto:lp@wholefoods.com).

*(Continued from page 2)*

2007 funding round of the Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program (AEPP) as June 1, 2007.

The Federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) funding deadline is April 27, 2007. Contact Maurine Orndorff at 350-5863 if you are interested in learning more about these agricultural easement purchase programs.

Conservation Easements are an important tool for preserving agricultural lands and open spaces for future generations. The easement purchase programs can help landowners receive fair compensation for their assets, yet they are very competitive. The new conservation tax amendments may make easement donations more attractive or accessible for some. For others, the desire to save their beloved land for future generations is the sole motivating factor. If you would like to discuss conservation options for your property, give us a call, and we can work together to find the best fit for you.

### Non-Point Source Pollution Corner...

#### ...Using Cover Crops in Vineyards

Soil is the foundation of your vineyard. It provides water, nutrients and air for the roots of your vines. If the soil between the rows is bare, then the topsoil will wash away, weeds will thrive, and soil sediment pollutes our waters.

Cover crops can improve soil quality, reduce erosion, and suppress insect pests and weeds. They provide a sustainable alternative to chemical pesticides and herbicides. Improper or excessive tillage, compaction of the soil and lack of organic matter will also damage the soil structure. Cover crops provide the simplest and most cost-effective means of keeping your soil in place and improving its structure. Vines growing in a soil with good structure can better cope with pests, diseases and weeds.

The Ohio State University Extension Midwest Grape Production Guide (Bulletin 919) recommends a sod cover of bluegrass between rows for a permanent-sod management cover. A grass mixture called Companion Grass—which is a mixture of Elka perennial ryegrass and Ensylva creeping red fescue

would also work well. You should avoid broadcasting seed under the trellis. To maintain the grass, mow as needed, directing the clippings to the middle of the row, and leave the clippings on the vineyard floor. On drier and better drained soils, keeping the sod short will reduce moisture competition with the vines.

Other types of cover crops can be used that are more of a sustainable practice. Some vintners are experimenting with broadleaf and flowering plants to provide a more diverse environment for beneficial insects. Cover crops can increase or deplete nitrogen from the soil, and different types can reduce or enhance vine growth. You will need to match the cover crop with the site and vine vigor and be aware of cover crop/vine interactions and how they change as the vine matures.

Using sustainable cover crops in vineyards is a relatively new science, and research is on-going. Some of the references on page 1 of this newsletter can provide more resources. The most important thing to do is to keep your soil in place, where it can do you the most good.