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## Engaging Everyone: Catalyzing Organic Leadership and Education in Minnesota

**Meg Moynihan**, Minnesota Department of Agriculture, 90 W. Plato Boulevard, St Paul, MN 55107

Corresponding author: Meg Moynihan. [meg.moynihan@state.mn.us](mailto:meg.moynihan@state.mn.us)

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### Introduction

Organic activity in Minnesota is becoming ubiquitous. It is happening within the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA), in University of Minnesota research programs, in state and county Extension efforts, inside at least four USDA agencies, at nonprofit agricultural organizations, in food businesses, and, ultimately, on a growing number of farms. There is no single agency or organization responsible for leading organic agriculture efforts in Minnesota. Instead, a collaborative approach built on personal relationships and shared leadership has evolved to further organic interests in the state. Public agencies (including federal, state, and land grant systems) and nonprofit organizations are collaborating to build agricultural institutions' and individual agricultural professionals' capacity to understand the principles of organic agriculture and the unique opportunities and challenges that organic and transitional farmers face. This activity, occurring as it has on many fronts, has furthered the credibility of organic production systems – perpetuating interest and support as a growing array of organizations begin to consider themselves to be organic stakeholders.

### Relationships

Strong personal and institutional relationships – both formal and informal – have made this collaborative model work because they foster trust and legitimacy for organic efforts. One formal partnership is a *Memorandum of Understanding on Organic Agriculture* (MOU). In April 2002, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture drafted this MOU, modeling it after a national agreement between the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Organic Trade Association. Leaders of the MDA, Minnesota NRCS, USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) in Minnesota, University of Minnesota Extension Service (Extension), and University of Minnesota College of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences (U of M) signed onto the MOU, recognizing organic as a choice preferred by growing numbers of farmers and consumers and pledging to undertake complementary efforts to assist organic producers' efforts to improve profitability, identify new market opportunities, and conserve natural resources. The agencies agreed to undertake activities including:

- Developing and implementing conservation farm plans for organic crop production;
- Providing staff support for organic professional development, service delivery, and outreach efforts;

- Sharing training opportunities for staff, farmers, and other professionals;
- Sharing information about innovative organic programs taking place in other states or countries; and
- Encouraging the use of demonstrations and field days with organic field operations to showcase conservation and organic production.

This recognition and support for organic at the highest levels of these agencies communicated to staff people that working in and for organic agriculture was legitimate. For example, the MDA increased the organic responsibilities of agricultural specialist Meg Moynihan, who now spends more than 80% of her time on organic activities, and supports her active participation in the National Association of State Organic Programs. NRCS State Conservationist Bill Hunt has authorized a large number of his staff to attend, has approved travel funds for, and has co-sponsored numerous state and regional organic trainings, workshops, and conferences. The State FSA Director has made it possible for one of his state staff members to serve on the MDA's Organic Advisory Task Force. Extension educators have received support from the Dean's office for using time and funding to conduct organic variety trials and on-farm research projects with organic farmer cooperators, and to deliver educational sessions at conferences and workshops. University of Minnesota faculty and research associates have investigated agronomic, economic, and policy implications of and for organic agriculture (including studies on University-owned certified organic land and on farms across the state).

Each January, representatives designated by the signatories meet to reflect on MOU-related activities their organizations undertook during the previous year, and to set goals for the coming year. During these discussions, the representatives inevitably identify areas in which they can cooperate to carry out projects of mutual interest. There is ongoing discussion among the five initial signatories about whether and how to expand the MOU partnership to include other members.

While the MOU is a formal partnership, another critical relationship-building mechanism has been the Minnesota Organic Network – a self-selected group of people who are interested in working together to coordinate and support organic agriculture in Minnesota. The network currently has 61 members, who have a wide array of affiliations. Members include organic farmers, university faculty, extension educators, USDA-NRCS and FSA staff, food cooperative administrators, food writers, for-profit business people, staff from nonprofit agricultural organizations (both organic and non-organic), crop consultants, independent organic inspectors, Minnesota Department of Agriculture officials, and interested consumers.

In practical terms, the network operates through two mechanisms: monthly conference calls and an e-mail listserv to connect multiple stakeholders, facilitate information sharing, and promote collaboration around emerging organic opportunities. Leadership of the network, too, is a shared responsibility. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture hosts the listserv, on which members announce events and action items, share news and journal articles, and ask for other members' opinions and experiences with regard to various organic production, marketing, and policy topics. The Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture at the University of Minnesota (MISA) sponsors the conference calls which typically have 10 to 20 participants. Different individuals volunteer to moderate and take and disseminate notes each month. Each call includes a "round robin" section, in

which participants share news and announcements, keeping other members connected with organic happenings across the state. Finally, the nonprofit Sustainable Farming Association (SFA) is currently developing a website for the Network. Sharing responsibility for the network has kept financial and administrative costs to the sponsors low and has fostered an egalitarian esprit – no single group has assumed ownership (either real or perceived) of the group or imposed an agenda on it.

### **Collaborative Activities: Sharing Leadership and Sharing Credit**

The other main driver for interest in and legitimacy of organic agriculture among agricultural professionals are activities undertaken by groups of partners. Agricultural organizations in Minnesota, including MOU signatories and Organic Network members, have jointly undertaken a number of special projects. Collaborative approaches have been successful because they have resulted in projects that better meet agricultural professionals' needs, have engaged more and broader ownership of the sponsored activities, and have resulted not only in shared responsibility for the work of the project, but in shared *credit* for the sponsoring organizations which, in turn, has promoted shared ownership of, and recognition for, organic agriculture in Minnesota.

### **Organic Short Course**

One outstanding example of these mutual efforts was the "Organic Short Course for Ag Professionals," a two-year, \$60,000 project funded by the North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (NCR-SARE) Professional Development Program.

In response to complaints from farmers about difficulty locating information and support from the agricultural service sector, and to concerns from agricultural service providers that clients were coming to them with organic questions the service providers couldn't answer, this project created a professional development program and delivered introductory-level organic agriculture information to agricultural service providers at six locations throughout Minnesota.



Fig. 1. Organic short course locations, 2003-2004.

The MDA put together a statewide program team to identify desired outcomes and design the training program framework, and assumed responsibility for coordinating the team, submitting the proposal, and administering the grant. Team members included representatives from the USDA's NRCS, FSA, and Risk Management Agencies, the University of Minnesota, the U of M Extension Service, the MISA, the MDA, and the farming community. These individuals remained involved throughout the term of the project to help advertise sessions, evaluate feedback, and make recommendations for changes to the delivery of sessions. Their involvement and support were also recognized on publicity materials. Courses were publicized using print media, radio, and electronic networks and direct mail to agency leaders. For later courses, postcards to "alumni" of the program asked them to encourage colleagues to attend.

To encourage *local* ownership of and identity for the programs, planning and local arrangements for each event were undertaken by local groups. In five of the locations, the MDA contracted with the area Resource Conservation and Development Districts (which, in turn, are affiliated with MOU partner NRCS) to serve as the host for the session. For the Southwest Minnesota course, the MDA contracted with the University of Minnesota Southwest Research and Outreach Center (the SWROC, affiliated with the U of M College of Agriculture, another MOU partner). The regional approach benefited both the coordinating organization and the project. Local hosts benefited by gaining programming funds and visibility as the event organizers within their communities. The project benefited from better, more effective sessions — local committees were more familiar with the needs of agriculture professionals in their areas of the state, and with local resource people, including organic producers. Contact with farmers was critical because they were some of the most important instructors we had for all of these sessions.

Each local host organization convened a planning group, which typically included host organization staff, NRCS, Extension, MDA, consultants, FSA, and producers. A subgroup of the team that wrote the project proposal designed the first training with a curriculum that included general presentations by two or more organic farmers about their motivations and practices, a session covering the National Organic Rule and the certification process, an overview of market trends, and topical group field trips to organic operations in the afternoon — crops, livestock, business/marketing, greenhouse, etc., appropriate to the type of agriculture in a given part of the state. This design worked so well that, for the most part, planning teams for subsequent sessions kept the same format, with large group sessions in the morning, and field trips in the afternoon.

The project trained 200 agricultural professionals, reaching service providers at the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, Risk Management Agency, University of Minnesota Extension, Minnesota Department of Agriculture, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Minnesota State College System Farm Management Program, crop consultants, and lenders. The U of M offered continuing education credits.

A pre-course assessment was designed to get the trainees thinking about major issues and to assess their familiarity with organic agriculture. Attendee knowledge was generally weakest about the federal organic regulation and enforcement responsibility. Respondents said they thought the biggest motivators for farmers to transition to organic were financial/economic, followed by environment/stewardship, health/safety (of consumer and/or operator), and philosophical/moral. We also used the pre-workshop assessment to get a sense of how far people traveled to attend this training. The team that conceived the project specifically designed it to offer separate, stand-alone introductory trainings in diverse regions of the state in

order to give these trainings a competitive advantage in a world of busy schedules and decreasing travel and training funds. The project team reasoned that agricultural professionals would be more likely to attend trainings that were closer to them geographically. Our strategy worked; nearly 40% of attendees traveled less than 50 miles round-trip to attend their workshop of choice. Two-thirds of them traveled less than 100 miles round-trip to attend. Only 15% traveled more than 150 miles round-trip.

Responses to an end-of-day survey (return rate 68%) validated the effectiveness of the pedagogy, which used a model based on adult learning preferences. Respondents rated the quantity and quality of information high (average score 4 out of 5). A full 96% said the course was worth the time and effort to attend, and well over two-thirds said they'd recommend the training to a colleague. The best-liked portions of the day were morning organic farmer presentations (nontraditional presenters for groups of trainees like these) and afternoon organic farm visits/tours (active and inter-active learning). There was a great disparity in their reaction to the session on the National Organic Rule. While some called it their favorite session, more called it the least useful.

Responses to a one-page follow-up mail survey sent to the Organic Short Course attendees six to nine months after the course indicated that the attendees remained interested in and engaged with organic agriculture after they returned to their workplaces. About 58% of trainees returned the follow-up survey. The high return rate – outstanding for a mail survey – indicates that the graduates felt that providing feedback about the training was worth their time and effort. A majority of the survey respondents had worked with organic growers, and had discussed organic agriculture with colleagues since attending the training. As in the end-of-day evaluations, the farmer presentations and tours remained the sessions that participants rated most useful when surveyed several months after the workshop, further validating the power of tapping farmers as educational presenters and of incorporating active learning for adult students.

The MDA shared the evaluation report for this project by posting it on a public web site and sending copies directly to project partners, so they could incorporate lessons learned (about delivering educational programs locally and regionally, for example, or the power of including farmer presenters and field trips) into their own institutional programming.

### Other Shared Efforts

There are many other examples of shared projects as well – usually initiated by one organization or group with significant assistance and participation by others in the state:

- The U of M Southwest Research and Outreach Center in Lamberton, MN, where University faculty members have been conducting applied research on certified organic land for more than 10 years, has offered organic training courses for agricultural professionals, principally the NRCS, and included Extension educators, MDA staff, individual Minnesota Organic Network farmers, and a crop consultant as instructors and session facilitators at the courses.
- The state Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Professional Development Program, housed at MISA, has used some of its professional development funds in the last year to underwrite organic professional development activities, sending eight agricultural service providers (MDA and extension) to workshops, trainings, conferences, and events, and additional funds to sponsor organic conferences and other events.

- An annual two-day Minnesota Organic and Grazing Conference has targeted producers and agricultural professionals and has succeeded with significant planning help, financing, and session delivery by all of the MOU partners and many other agricultural groups in the state.
- The Minnesota NRCS incorporated organic transition into its EQIP cost-sharing program.
- The MDA secured \$85,000 from USDA-RMA for an organic outreach project carried out in partnership with the SWROC, the Sustainable Farming Association, and several other Minnesota Organic Network participants, all sharing the work of the project and the credit for it. The project undertook three specific organic outreach activities, which engaged and benefited agricultural professionals and their ability to serve the organic sector:
  - (i) Expanded and refined a pilot organic farmer mentor program network (certified organic farmers who answer questions from beginners) to ensure geographic and production diversity, as well as reliability. The MDA contracted with the U of M SWROC to accomplish this objective and promoted the service to agricultural professionals throughout the state as a resource they could use or to which they could direct clients.
  - (ii) Created 10 farmer-initiated, on-farm outreach demonstrations of organic practices through which growers share insights about organic production and economic issues of organic agriculture. A number of these farmers sought help with their projects from extension educators or other agricultural professionals.
  - (iii) Produced and disseminated organic processing fact sheets to expand value-added and marketing options. Three fact sheets (feed, meat/poultry, and basic food processing) were created and promoted as educational tools to agricultural professionals working in value-added agriculture.
- With land and financial support from the U of M College of Agriculture, the Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station, and MISA, U of M faculty and students have created a two-acre organic student farm on the U of M's Saint Paul Campus to educate the next generations of agricultural professionals about practical aspects of organic agriculture.

### Importance of Context

While the commitment of individuals and the formal support of agricultural institutions in Minnesota have promoted activity and engagement in organic agriculture, it is important to recognize that context has been a contributing factor to an increasing respectability or legitimacy of organic systems across the state. Consumer response to organic food has been enthusiastic and steady, steep demand has ensured premium prices for farmers. Every new story about organic agriculture that runs in lifestyle magazines or business sections of newspapers, every new organic section that appears in a mainstream grocery store, every organic conference or workshop publicized on an agricultural radio broadcast, contributes tacitly to the legitimacy of organic agriculture in the eyes of the farming community and the

agricultural professionals who serve their interests. Visibility contributes to credibility, perpetuating even more activity and involvement.

Partnership and collaboration continue to be the keys to increased organic activity on Minnesota farms and in Minnesota agricultural organizations. While from an organizational perspective it can be frustrating to have no single entity "in charge," sharing the work and credit of organic programming have galvanized enormous activity, resources, leadership, and institutional buy-in by administrators and agricultural service providers, resulting in a broad and growing spectrum of support for organic agriculture in Minnesota.