

The Whole Farm Planner

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Farm Profile—

Whole Farm Planning at Sunup Ranch in Northern MN

Greg Booth, a horse rancher, shares his farm planning experience.

The animals remain the most constant resource at Sunup Ranch, our family Quarter Horse and Angus cattle operation in north central Minnesota. While we raise a new crop of foals and calves every year, they're part of a tradition of raising good-looking, working type horses and grass-fed beef. Less constant is the economy, the development of land around our farm, equipment needed for the operation, and how the family is involved in the ranch business. I've always liked to plan, but didn't have much of an idea how to look at the big picture—family, environment, finances, resources. That's why, when we received a brochure on a whole farm planning workshop sponsored by the Sustainable Farming Association (SFA), it sounded like a good first step. (*See p. 4 for more on the workshops.*)

My wife, Vickie Kettlewell, and I work on Vickie's family farm. Vickie's parents, Reed and Barbara Kettlewell, started the operation from scratch on another farm in the 1950s. Before I met Vickie, I had been on a horse only a few times, and had never driven a tractor, herded a cow or fixed a barbed wire fence. At 39, I still feel like a newcomer to farming and ranching, but I enjoy learning and working with my hands. I've gradually become more comfortable with the horses, and for the past few years have managed the breeding operation and most other parts of the ranch. I've learned how to plow a field, halter-break a colt, and give an intravenous injection to a horse.

Vickie works full time off the ranch, and spends her days off working full time on the ranch. She has a passionate interest in the horses to go with her natural abilities with them, and she also has a devotion to small family farms. Vickie's sister Jennie is a graphic designer who handles the ranch's brochures and advertisements. We write our own ad copy and do our own photography to market our Quarter Horses, which have gone to nearly every state, Canada, Switzerland, England and Germany.

THE WORKSHOP

One of the benefits of the workshop was just getting things rolling, actually talking about planning and finding out that discussion is a big part of the plan. Thirty-two people met in late January 1998, in the middle of a mild winter that made everything seem possible.

Workshops can be elementary or over your head or impersonal, but this setting seemed ideal because of the

mix of people. There was Audrey Arner, an energetic and passionate farmer who works with the Land Stewardship Project. Dennis Rabe talked about his own farm economics in terms that everyone could understand. Wayne Monsen of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture explained what whole farm planning was all about, encouraged us to meet again, and provided lots of contacts for more information.

For us, it was a way to talk about goals that involved everything on the farm. The workshop setting helped us concentrate. I was a little nervous about telling other workshop participants, like Joe Younk, a cattle farmer, that we raised Quarter Horses, wondering if they would think we were hobbyists. We found out that we had a lot in common, including horses.

I was also nervous about what I didn't know about farming and planning. Under Audrey's direction, we began writing goals for the ranch. We had made lists of goals before, but now we were taking in an even bigger circle in our planning. It was encouraging to find out that some of the things we were doing already fit well into what was emerging as our whole farm plan. I had begun renovating our hay fields two years earlier, and the results are just beginning to show. In addition to using composted horse manure on our fields, we began last year to use a neighbor's turkey manure, which increased the hay yield by three times. We had also had a woodland inventory done by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources several years ago.

FINANCES AND QUALITY OF LIFE

Just sitting down together and writing, without the immediate pressures of farm chores, helped get touchy subjects out in the open. In a "quality of life" worksheet, a question asked, "What things would you like to change in your life?" That's a powerful question. One of the most difficult parts of planning—and, sometimes, of the day-to-day operation—is that our ranch is in a generational transition. While Vickie's father died in 1986, her mother, Barbara, is still involved in the ranch. We don't always agree on how everything should work, or how money should be spent. While we had talked about financial planning before, the workshop really made us realize that we had a lot of work to do. It pushed us to drive 100 miles to visit with a farm financial planner,

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Workshops Train Farmers, Advisors to Plan for Farm Goals

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) has been involved in the state's Whole Farm Planning Working Group since its inception almost four years ago. MDA's outlook on farm planning is that the desires of the individual farmer have to be the starting point in any farm plan. If a plan is designed only to protect natural resources, for example, as many government programs are, it may not be effective, because the farmer's goals, and the farmer's role as ultimate decision-maker, have not been considered. On the other hand, plans that take into consideration goals for business, lifestyle, and stewardship can help farmers care for natural resources as a part of day-to-day farm operations.

This past winter, MDA led a small group in designing a series of workshops to train farmers and service providers in whole farm planning. Three workshops were held in Little Falls, MN, in a collaborative effort sponsored by the Central chapter of the Sustainable Farming Association (SFA), which was instrumental in organizing the workshops and recruiting the farmers and farm service providers who participated. At the workshops, a farmer presented his whole farm planning process. Farm organizations and farm service providers presented worksheets and activities on goal setting, natural resource inventories, and keeping income on the farm. Between workshops, participant farmers worked on their own farm plans. (*Greg Booth, a horse rancher, describes his experiences with the workshops in this issue's Farm Profile, page 1.*)

FURTHER COOPERATIVE EFFORTS

A second set of workshops is underway now, involving farmers and service providers in southwestern Minnesota, again in cooperation with the SFA. The Coteau Ridge chapter has enhanced the program used in Little Falls. Their participants are interested in capturing more of the value of livestock and crops, in "getting out of the rut of just dumping farm products in conventional markets and taking whatever price the market dictates," as Wayne Monsen, coordinator of the MDA whole farm planning program, puts it. Sessions devoted to incorporating alternative marketing strategies into farm plans have been added.

Adding the sessions of local interest has been a very positive change, according to Wayne. Future sessions, in the planning stages for southeastern Minnesota and the Red River valley in northwestern Minnesota, will include meeting with a group of participants to find out what issues are important to their farms, and then developing materials to address those issues. Having a workshop tailored to participants' needs allows them to focus whole farm planning methods around their concerns, and gives them hands-on experience with integrating solutions to problems into other aspects of their farm operations.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Wayne believes that this workshop approach should help

build better relationships between farmers and those who work with them. He thinks of the workshop participants as a "learning community," who will openly share ideas as they build trust in each other. Through sharing different opinions and approaches, they help each other think to creatively and integrate new ideas into farm plans.

Wayne says it's important to have farmers and technical support people learning whole farm planning at the same time, since no one person can do all the planning for a farm. If farmers are excited about the idea of developing comprehensive plans, and they turn for assistance to extension educators, soil and water conservation districts, agronomists, crop consultants, lenders or livestock specialists with no background in whole farm planning, they are unlikely to be able to come up with truly comprehensive farm plans. But when advisors and farmers have similar backgrounds in planning, they can expect to successfully develop plans that address the many aspects of each farm operation.

Contact Wayne Monsen for more information about the MDA workshops at 651-282-2261

The Whole Farm Planner is published by The Minnesota Project, coordinating organization of the Great Lakes Whole Farm Planning Network. The Network brings together farmers, farm service providers, sustainable agriculture groups and farm organizations to develop and disseminate information about whole farm planning. The project, begun in January, 1995, involves working groups in Ontario and each of the Great Lakes states. The Network is funded by the Great Lakes Protection Fund, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and the Joyce Foundation.

The Minnesota Project is a nonprofit organization working with leaders in rural areas as they build their capacity to resolve their own issues of sustainability and natural resource management.

For more information, contact John Lamb at The Minnesota Project: 1885 University Ave. W. # 315, St. Paul, MN 55104; email: water007@gold.tc.umn.edu; 651-645-6159.

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Jill MacKenzie, production editor.

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and while we haven't finished doing a lot of things he's recommending, we feel it is a good start.

As with many farming operations the size of ours, money can be a real problem. Dennis helped emphasize some points that seem obvious, but sometimes get overlooked. Where does the money go, in relation to the money kept on the farm? One of our goals has been to stay out of debt. That can be a good long-term goal, but it creates some hardships in the short haul.

We started to think in new terms about ways in which our ranch is successful—its rolling pastures and woodlands are part of the natural features of the glacial drift region we live in; the operation helps support not only our chosen lifestyle but also the lifestyles of our employees, who live on the farm or nearby; and we are producing horses that people like and are willing to buy.

We don't use any pesticides or herbicides on our ranch. This year, we're experimenting with marketing some of our beef directly to consumers. One of our small goals, even before the workshop, was to eliminate barbed wire from our pastures. Every year, colts and mares would get tangled up in the wire, resulting in injuries and vet bills. By this summer, we had re-fenced all the lines that divide the four pastures we rotate the horses between, and we plan to continue replacing the perimeter fences with smooth electric wire.

A few years ago, I thought we would eventually produce all the hay we needed for our 106 horses. While we have increased the production, I now realize it makes sense to develop good relationships with a few hay producers who can be more efficient at what they do and deliver top quality hay every year. The peak of haying season is also the peak of our breeding and sales season, when we are concentrating on getting 40 or so of our own mares bred along with perhaps 30 to 40 outside mares. We stand 10 stallions, and in May and June we check from 12 to 25 mares a day for breeding.

Another goal of mine, to saddle-break more horses that we keep for breeding, fits into our ranch plan in several ways. It makes the breeding stock easier to handle. It provides enjoyable work on the ranch. It makes the horses more valuable should we decide to sell them. And, having more broke horses available means we ride through our pastures and woods more often to check on things like fences, ponds, calves and trees.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

I mentioned how our ranch fits into the surroundings, and we have begun to look more at how it fits into the community. We are in the middle of one of the fastest-growing townships in the state, with development taking place right up on two ranch property lines. We decided that our whole farm planning shouldn't stop at those property lines, and I have become involved in our township government, first as an organizing member of our township planning and zoning commission, and then as an elected township supervisor. We are developing a

comprehensive plan for the township that addresses agriculture and how it fits into the community.

We've gotten to know our neighbors better. One neighbor, recently retired, brought his sons over to re-roof a building this summer. The sons came back to help with a fencing project. Another neighbor, 15, has proven to be our best helper at haying time. Our longest-term employee manages one of our barns, and is also a good friend and neighbor. Another young neighbor has grown up over five summers on the ranch and now works for us full-time.

We'll always want to do more than we can, and whole farm planning has helped us set some priorities and organize our planning. DeEtta Bilek, our SFA chapter coordinator, organized two follow-up workshops that were designed around what the participants wanted to work on. (These meetings drew fewer than half of the original participants.) We now have inventory lists, and long-range and short-term goals. We visited a farm this summer that is successfully using Holistic Management®.

We're still not good at financial planning, our least favorite thing to do. We still buy more hay than we'd like to. We still don't agree on which horses to keep and which to sell. We still have a big eroded sandy slope in one of our pastures. We still wonder if we'll be able to make the ranch support us all without outside income. We still brainstorm ideas and change our plans. Those are some of the reasons we'll go to the next whole farm planning workshop.

—Greg Booth manages the family ranch near Brainerd, Minnesota and is a freelance writer and photographer.

Research Needs for Whole Farm Planning

What does research offer whole farm planning advocates? This question was the topic of a discussion at a meeting of the steering committee of the Great Lakes Basin Farm Planning Network last March.

As a group, we had asked many questions about whole farm planning since the beginning of our project in 1995. For more than two years, though, we have been unable to locate published research findings answering our questions. Entering the third year of the project, members generally felt unsupported by research in their day-to-day work as whole farm planning advocates. Our discussion in March was a way to test general impressions about research needs and to help organize and extend our knowledge of these needs so that universities and journals might shape their agendas around them.

Rather than envisioning “ideal” farm planning research, the group concentrated on identifying existing research that had been helpful in the past. The most useful published studies linked components of the farm, such as nutrient budgets and economics, or the presence of fencerows and pest management. Some used multi-dimensional matrices to present findings.

BIOPHYSICAL STUDIES

Agronomic research studies have been most helpful when they included economics, soil quality and soil ecology changes over time, and methods for measuring quality of life along with more conventional data such as yield. While technical reports on specific nutrient loads and other specialized, reductionist research are helpful, studies that link biophysical data to the social and economic context in which specific components matter are even more useful.

Most frustrating in specialized research articles is a tendency for the author to assume that the reader knows *why* the reductionist research is important and *how* the study could help people think about the contextual issues. Introductions that describe the relevance of research to a whole farm context, and conclusions that address the importance of findings to managing a whole farm system make reports more useful on our end.

SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES

For social science research, issues are accessibility and language. Most steering committee members rarely used social science research of any type, and the superficial contact they have had in the past keeps them away: they avoid an impenetrable jargon with which they are unfamiliar. Yet issues about quality of life, for example, are an essential part of whole farm planning, and are clearly in the realm of social science, so we want more research of this type. Information from social science research must be made more accessible to us as readers.

OTHER CHARACTERISTICS

We found studies useful for whole farm planning when they included state-by-state comparisons; comparative research on the same farm; and experiential and applied information, such as that contained in case studies. Both academic journal articles and more popular journalistic

pieces can be helpful in whole farm planning; a challenge may be to choose the appropriate format for each piece of research. Studies with genuine farmer participation and explicit farmer-driven research agendas are highly valued by steering committee members.

Members valued articles that discussed mistakes and other process dimensions. When an article featured on-farm agronomic or animal experiments, for example, readers would like to have seen qualitative discussion of the history of cooperation, what motivated the research from the farmer's point of view, and the process of documenting the research. (A few members who conducted research said that their reports sometimes omitted this “good stuff” because qualitative information was generally considered inappropriate.) Other missing pieces in studies are considerations of women's roles, as farmers and as farm family members, and of conservation concerns. Inclusion and integration of these aspects will make the findings of published research more applicable to whole farm planning.

CURRENT RESEARCH

The discussion closed with a consideration of current whole farm planning research projects. Most such projects, members noted, had several researchers and used an array of methods. Some projects even boasted farmer-negotiated or farmer-initiated agendas. We wondered which aspects of these complex projects would be published, and why? What role would farmers have in writing or deciding which aspects would be documented? Steering committee members want to influence the publishing future of these ongoing projects by providing a publishing “wish list.”

We also need a compilation of research on whole farm planning. We have a good collection of descriptive case studies so far—many of them analytic and thought-provoking—but need bibliographies of systematically tested and documented research contributions as well.

—Dr. Nancy Grudens-Schuck
Nancy is on the teaching staff of the Department of Education at Cornell University, and a member of the steering committee and of the New York working group. She and Dr. Barbara Bellows, also of Cornell, facilitated this discussion of research needs.

USDA Sabotages Conservation Farm Option

While the U. S. Department of Agriculture engaged in footdragging and in-fighting, the clock ran out on fiscal year 1998 and all Conservation Farm Option funds were forfeited. The 120 proposals currently in hand have no funds budgeted. In the 2 ½ years since the program was authorized, \$47.5 million in mandatory CFO funding has been lost because of USDA failure to carry out the program.

Meanwhile, the Administration acquiesced with notable silence to the decision of Congress to zero out 1999 appropriations for CFO. And, in a near fatal blow to the infant program, the final rule was recently issued with numerous changes which thwart the intent of the program.

In an urgent attempt to save CFO, the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture and the Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Working Group have asked Secretary of Agriculture Glickman to rescind the final rule, and reissue it as a final rule without the damaging language. Furthermore, Secretary Glickman is being asked to find the funds in the next few months to award to the first round of CFO pilot projects, which are already ranked and ready to go.

WHY?

Why was CFO, the top conservation priority of the sustainable agriculture community and the only program in the 1996 farm bill to take a whole farm planning approach, relegated to the bottom of the heap? It languished while all other farm bill conservation programs were implemented.

Readiness to implement CFO was never the issue, because a dedicated interagency staff group, once appointed, worked diligently to provide the needed guidance and materials. Agency turf battles about who would manage the program surely played a role. Bureaucratic games and red tape delays vastly exceeded their normal influence. Indeed, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition repeatedly suggested alternative strategies to speed up the process and avoid delays, all of which were ignored. For some reason, USDA leaders do not embrace the premise and potential of CFO.

Why would the leadership of the Department of Agriculture and its Natural Resources Conservation Service want to undermine a such unique and important program? CFO at its heart is a whole farm approach to conservation that cuts through the red tape of government programs. Participating farmers will implement a ten-year whole farm plan and get one easy check. Instead of grappling with complex rules and deadlines for different programs for cost-share, easements, wildlife habitat, and so on, the farmer instead integrates all resource solutions into one plan. Innovations, risk management, creative strategies, on-farm research and demonstrations, and sustainable farming systems can for the first time be en-

couraged.

CFO's sponsors and supporters also want the CFO pilot projects to fulfill another extremely important function: to model an approach that could be the basis for future farm policy. Many policy proposals for the future revolve around two critical concepts: first, to integrate incentives for conservation practices on farmed land with incentives that take land out of production. And second, to integrate general subsidies with conservation benefits. CFO is a model for the future.

One would think an agency like USDA, often bewailing its workload of complex programs, would welcome a program like CFO which reinvents government and eases their job. Instead, USDA seems to view it as one more burden, a program to be shoe-horned into their business-as-usual bureaucracy. Even aside from the unique aspects of CFO, why would USDA squander nearly \$50 million at a time when farmers need all the help they can get?

The demand from farmers is clearly high. When the request for proposals finally came out, responses flooded in from every corner of the country, requesting over \$52 million. This occurred despite the extremely short timeline, a deadline during farmers' critical planting season, and almost no available guidance. Indeed, many applicants found their local conservation office completely unaware of the program, and actually provided them the fact sheets prepared by the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. Nevertheless, 42 individual farmers and 78 groups completed the application to participate this year.

One inclined to believe conspiracy theories might wonder if fear of whole farm planning is at work blocking the CFO. But even without evidence of such a conspiracy, sheer bureaucratic ineptitude and interagency turf battles cannot be totally blamed either. If USDA leadership cared about the CFO, they would hold their staff accountable and demand that the program be implemented.

PROBLEMS WITH THE FINAL RULE

These major problems were introduced after the draft rule was proposed:

- **Regulatory Straightjacket**—Contrary to the key purpose of CFO, the final rule incorporates by reference all rules for the Conservation Reserve Program, Wetlands Reserve Program and Environmental Quality Incentives Program. In other words, CFO participants would have to meet every rule, eligibility criteria, payment rate, payment limitation and practice of these other programs. The very purpose of CFO is to clear up red tape and encourage innovation and flexibility to try sustainable practices and systems. This provision subverts that purpose. Furthermore, by forcing the use of EQIP rules, the emphasis on CFO as a whole farm

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CFO, continued from page 5.

planning program loses its foundation, since EQIP implementation chose to allow a “one field, one problem” traditional approach to conservation funding. The addition of this rule is contrary to legislative history, the statute itself, and the proposed rule.

- **No Freedom to Farm**—The final rule not only requires participants to be enrolled in the Agricultural Market Transition Act, known as freedom to farm payments, as the law required, it also adds a whole new requirement that participants be currently producing wheat, feed grains, cotton, or rice. Thus, while freedom to farm gives all farmers the choice of what to grow, CFO absurdly would force them to keep planting row crops. A farmer would be prohibited by this conservation program from converting to pasture or other resource-conserving crops. This illogical requirement was never subject to public comment.
- **No Easements**—A new invention in the final rule prohibits CFO payments for long term easements, despite the fact the statute clearly intended CFO to combine easements that take land out of production with cost-share for active farming practices. Most existing participants in the Wetlands Reserve Program would be prohibited from participating in CFO. Participants also could not consider new easements, such as with a local land trust.
- **Top Down Selection**—New provisions for farmer selection in group pilot projects make no mention of the role of the pilot project awardee. Instead, the NRCS decides which farmers get to participate. A whole new list of selection criteria is given, quite different from the list of selection criteria for choosing the pilot projects. This process means individual farmer applicants have different criteria from those who come in through a group, and leaves the group itself out of the selection process.
- **No Funding for Groups**—Even though groups awarded pilot projects are responsible for undertaking the required planning, outreach, education monitoring, evaluation, and partnership coordination to implement the proposal, the final rule does not allow any funding to the groups. The rule says, “Farmers are not precluded from making a payment to a third

party,” but such payments would come far too late for a sponsoring group. It is incongruous to establish a program based on competitively-awarded projects submitted by public or private organizations, and yet have no funding for the many tasks required of them. In fact, while Congress did direct that farmers receive payments equivalent to other conservation programs they roll into CFO, it never intended that payments *only* go to producers. Furthermore, it was USDA, not Congress, who decided to go with group projects rather than all individual farmer contracts. The agency should either allow funding of sponsoring groups, or fund only individual farmer applications.

Action Alert!

Contact Secretary Dan Glickman.

1. Ask that he rescind the final rule and quickly reissue a final rule in accord with the law, his own implementation team, and common sense.
2. Request that he find the funds immediately and announce the first round of CFO awards.

Send your letter to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC 20250, or fax (202) 720-2166.

—Loni Kemp, Senior Policy Analyst, The Minnesota Project

Oops! Correction

In the last issue of this newsletter, we provided incorrect information for ordering *Whole Farm Planning: Combining Family, Profit, and Environment*, the new publication from the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. If you haven't already ordered it, please note the following information.

Combining Family, Profit, and Environment (BU-6985-S) is available for \$2.50 (MN residents add 7%

sales tax) plus \$2.00 shipping, from Extension Distribution Center, 1420 Eckles Ave., St. Paul MN 55108-6069. Call 800-876-8636 or 612-624-4900, or fax 612-625-6281 to order by credit card. Minnesotans can get a copy at Extension offices.