Wisconsin Organic Advisory Council Meeting
10 am to 3 pm
Wednesday, January 28, 2009
WI Department of Agriculture
Board Room, Room 106
2811 Agriculture Drive, Madison

MINUTES

Present.
Council members: Tricia Bross, Rich Lange, Mike Schulist, Jerry McGeorge, Bob Wills, Harriet Behar, Margaret Bert-Mittelstadt, David Engel, Steve Walker for Bonnie Wideman, Christine Mason

Interagency team: Pat Murphy, Russ Raeder, Kevin Shelley, Carla Wright, Irv Possin, Don Jaworski, Erin Silva, Laura Paine

Guests: Bob Stuchinski (WOMA member, guest of Mike Schulist) Randy Zogbaum (new director of ag programs for the Technical College System—he and Don will share the responsibility), Keith Foye and Coreen Fallatt (DATCP-ARM) and Vicky Elkin (American Farmland Trust), Heidi Zoerb (UW CALS).

Absent (excused): Chris Malek, Jim Munsch

Agenda review. The following items were added to the agenda: Approving Mike Schulist to replace Paulette, Interacting with other state Organic Advisory Councils. Partnering with other states to deliver programs, Bringing in Jim Slama from FamilyFarmed.org in Chicago for the next meeting to talk about the Chicago market for organic produce.

Minutes approval. Minutes from October 15 and December 3 reviewed. Bob moved to approve, Dave E. seconded. Motion passed.

Review meeting dates for next meetings. March 18th is the next meeting. April meeting is desired. NOSB meeting in May, this will be a good time for the council to review NOSB issues, and develop recommendations. April 15th is the date chosen.

Tentative plans were made for a summer meeting on July 22. Organic Valley and Cedar Grove Cheese were offered as locations. A question was asked about when Farm Technology Days is (goal would be not to schedule this meeting during that week). Laura has since learned that FTD is July 21-23, so a different date should be chosen.

The Council expressed interest in doing one of these meetings jointly with the Minnesota Organic Task Force. Laura and Meg Moynihan have discussed this and will work on organizing it.

Old business:
Update on Organic Cost Share program. Laura mailed out 1249 application packets for organic certification cost share. The materials are also on the DATCP website. Reimbursement is allowed on certification costs between 10/1/07 through 9/30/08 for now. Another announcement will be made for the 2009 fiscal year later in the spring.

Organic Pasture Rule. The Council’s recommendations were submitted on December 22. The comment period was not extended. We’re told that it may be 6 months to two years before the final rules are released.

Discussion was held regarding the open comment period on a federal provision on GMOs and whether the Council should make comments on it. It was decided that the National Organic issues committee will review the rule and determine whether the Council should develop some comments. Laura will find the federal register announcement and distribute it to council members. Harriet, the chair of that committee will review the issues with the committee, determine whether the council should comment and begin to draft comments.

Farm Bill update: Timeline for public comments on organic provisions. This discussion was delayed until afternoon during the agency reports.

Working Lands Initiative: opportunities for the organic farming community
Keith Foye and Coreen Fallatt from DATCP ARM and Vicki Elkin from American Farmland Trust/Gathering Waters Conservancy summarized DATCP’s Working Lands Initiative proposed programs for preserving farmland.

The Working Lands website: http://www.datcp.state.wi.us/workinglands/index.jsp
There is an electronic newsletter that the public can sign up for to receive additional information. There is also a listing of local Working Lands workshops that are planned for this winter and spring.

Following is a summary of the presentation:
History: In 2005 DATCP Secretary Rod Nilsestuen appointed a steering committee to address concerns related to the increasing loss of farm and forest land in the state. The committee, comprised of bipartisan representatives from key stakeholder sectors, took on this challenge that was named the Working Lands Initiative (WLI).

DATCP is currently holding listening sessions to gather input on the plan. Most of these initiatives will need statutory changes to be implemented. They will start by requesting proposals for about 10 pilot projects around the state to ‘road-test’ the program before it is approved for statewide participation.

The WLI Steering Committee issued recommendations in a July 2006 report. The major conclusion of the Steering Committee is that:

- Maintaining working lands is critical to ensure the health and success of Wisconsin
  - Preserves Wisconsin’s economic resource base
  - Maintains quality open spaces to promote the growing tourism industry
  - Provides a higher quality of life to draw in new businesses

The WLI Steering Committee proposals to maintain and optimize working lands are as follows:

- Expands and simplifies current farmland preservation tax credit.
  - Establishes an easy to understand flat tax credit
- $5 per acre for land covered by a farmland preservation agreement, but not located in a farmland preservation zoning district
- $7.50 per acre for land in a farmland preservation zoning district, but not covered by a farmland preservation agreement
- $10 per acre for land in a farmland preservation zoning district that is also covered by a farmland preservation agreement, and also located in an agricultural enterprise area

- Revitalizes the current farmland preservation program
  - Authorizes DATCP to approve “Agricultural Enterprise Areas” where farmers may receive tax credits under farmland preservation agreements
  - Eliminates farmland preservation agreements outside of agricultural enterprise areas (existing agreements will remain in effect until their scheduled termination date)
  - Establishes updated county farmland preservation plan standards
  - Establishes updated farmland preservation zoning ordinance standards
  - Replaces minimum residential lot size requirements with maximum residential density standards for farmland preservation zoned land
  - Streamlines procedures and approvals
  - Increases flexibility for local governments to ensure effective farmland protection

- Creates a program to award local planning grants
  - Establishes a statewide program to offset the costs of updating a farmland preservation plan

- Creates a program for the Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements (PACE)
  - Authorizes DATCP to award grants to local governments or other entities to acquire agricultural easements to preserve working land
  - PACE grants may reimburse up to 50 percent of the cost necessary to acquire an easement

- Upholds state soil and water conservation standards
  - Participation ensures compliance with the statewide agricultural performance standards
    - Appropriately manage nutrients, including manure
    - Achieve tolerable soil erosion (“T”)
    - Prevent impairment of water resources

Questions asked, and answers:
Q. Will the easement holder be able to resell development rights?
A. The easements can be extinguished but it has to go through the courts.

Q. How will they deal with local governments that have different ideas of how to do things, or conflicts between cities and local rural governments, such as annexation?
A. These kinds of issues will be worked through as the pilot projects begin.

Q. Will there be guidance to the local governments put out when the program is put into effect?
A. Yes, they’re planning to develop ‘model ordinances’ etc. and to work with local governments to provide technical assistance.

Keith and Vicki suggested that they’re interested in a wide variety of projects for the pilots and would be interested in working with the organic community on one.

New Business:
National Organic Summit, February 25 & 26 in LaCrosse. Harriet encouraged participants to attend the National Organic Action Plan Summit that is scheduled for just before the Organic Farming Conference. Registration is $200, but $50 scholarships are available. For more information, visit the following: http://www.nationalorganiccoalition.org/invite.html or contact Harriet.

OAC member terms ending in 2009
Terms expiring in 2009 include Jerry McGeorge/Organic Business, Bonnie Wideman/Certifier, Dave Engel/At-Large, Chris Malek/Farmer. Jerry, Bonnie, and Dave all agreed to serve an additional term. Chris took over Jeri Cook’s seat about a year ago with the understanding that he would serve the next three year term as well as complete her term.

Dave expressed concern about making sure we continue to bring in new, younger people to serve on the council and suggested that we formalize a process for selecting new members, consider term limits or other means of accomplishing this. Discussion was held regarding whether we should have by-laws and a process for selecting new council members. DATCP administration hasn’t encouraged adoption of by-laws, but the council can choose to do this. Or we could simply adopt an agreed-on process for rotating membership.

Harriet suggested that we advertise our meetings more, encourage people to attend as observers, and ‘groom’ some of these people to take over seats that open up. MOSES can put announcements of the advisory council meetings in their Broadcaster.

There was interest expressed in developing ways of getting the information out about what the council does, such as sending the newsletter out to the media or getting information into the certifier newsletters, developing an email distribution list. These things can all be done fairly easily and Laura made a note to discuss with DATCP administration and carry these suggestions out as appropriate.

The council agreed that the government affairs committee should work on developing rules for a formalized process for replacing members when their seats come up (Christine will take the lead as chair of that committee).

The council took up the question of approving having Mike Schulist, broker for WOMA, replace Paulette Bradley, Executive Director, as WOMA’s representative on the council. The consensus of the council is to approve Mike Schulist to replace Paulette. No formal vote was taken.

Laura will forward the five names (Jerry McGeorge, Dave Engel, Bonnie Wideman, Chris Malek, and Mike Schulist) to the Secretary’s office for approval by the Agriculture Board.

Interacting with other state Organic Advisory Councils. At a previous meeting, the Council expressed interest in interacting with other state Organic Advisory Councils. Laura and others did some research into which other states have advisory councils and how they function. There are probably at least 20 states that have them, but they have many different roles and functions. Laura stated that she had not had the time to get in contact with other councils as yet and suggested that we might want to start by interacting with councils in our neighboring states. Conversations with Meg Moynihan, Laura’s counterpart in Minnesota, suggest that the MN council would be interested in getting together. To that end, Laura will work on setting up a joint meeting for sometime within the next 6 months or so.
Erin Silva suggested that we could potentially obtain a mini-grant from USDA to fund a regional conference of Organic Advisory boards. Through the Integrated Organic Program (deadline is March 9): there are small conference or planning grants. We could use these funds to organize a regional advisory council/researcher meeting. We’re going to work on getting WI, IA, MN, IL together. Erin and Laura will be working on this. Erin and Laura will work on developing a proposal.

Can we think of any sharing that we can do with Minnesota in organic ag initiatives? Minnesota and Wisconsin governors have announced that they intend to explore ways that the two states can cooperate on programs to share resources and save money. Laura and Carla talked about what their respective agencies are doing on this. Carla has been involved in discussions in her department about collaboration with MN. Laura is aware of some activity within her department but there haven’t been any formal recommendations made that she’s aware of.

The Council discussed possible ways that the two states could work together on organic programs. Laura shared that she’d talked with Meg about this topic and one idea that they had was to expand Minnesota’s successful Organic and Specialty Crop Business Management program
(http://www.mda.state.mn.us/food/organic/bizmgmt.htm)

The council thought that was a worthwhile idea to explore. Wisconsin Technical College reps (Don Jaworski and Randy Zogbaum) will look into it.

Committee reports

Biennial Report Committee (Erin Silva (chair), Laura Paine, Tricia Bross, Bonnie Wideman, Jim Munsch):
Erin is soliciting input from Council members on the next organic status report, which is targeted to be completed by the 2010 Organic Farming Conference. It will cover 2008 and 2009. We’ll need to have it completed by December to have it printed. Copies of the 2007 report were handed out and council members were encouraged to send their comments to Erin.

The goal for the report is to make this document a useful summarization of data that will help promote organic agriculture in WI. A few thoughts from Council members included: making the ‘theme’ less prominent. Because ‘Organic Dairy’ was so prominent on the cover of the 2007 report, it looked like the report was only about dairy. The council likes the idea of highlighting one sector, but not making it so prominent on the cover.

The council would like their logo on it, and include a report on their activities. Add a section on organic research.

Erin plans to convene the report committee soon to begin work on the new report.

Supply Chain Infrastructure Committee (Erin Silva, Laura Paine (chair), Bonnie Wideman, Irv Possin, Margaret Bert-Mittlestadt, Jim Munsch, Jerry McGeorge, Bob Wills, Chris Malek).
The committee has two projects it’s been working on. One is the organic farmer directory. Laura has about 250 farms to include in a first draft of the directory. She’s working on getting the information into a booklet form. The Council liked the way the Minnesota director is set up with farmers listed by last name, by crop, and by county.
Laura added a question about being included in the directory on the organic certification cost share applications she sent out. This way we will get many more participants, as well as getting processors and handlers who wish to be included in the directory.

The second involves one of the issues first identified by the original organic task force, and further clarified by the committee—the need for distribution infrastructure. Jerry has been talking with Jim Slama from Sustain/Family Farmed.org about making connections between Wisconsin farmers and the Chicago market, also Lindy Banister/the Wedge Coop in Minnesota. Jim is interested in coming to our next meeting on March 18th to talk about the Chicago market and opportunities to collaborate. It was pointed out that Jim Slama is a representative of the Illinois Organic Council and this would be a means of making a contact with them.

Other possible contacts on this issue include: Dr. Will Winter: Traditional Foods Minnesota (warehouse and distribution center). Carla talked about the Thrive project and their efforts as another example of resources we should be thinking about.

Dave discussed the challenges involved in pooling and distributing locally grown foods. The Council should focus on gathering information, making recommendations, developing ideas, should avoid getting involved in doing projects. Discussion was held on whether it's the charge of the OAC to deal with this type of issue. Laura reminded the council that the structure that was set up was to allow networking to occur. The council itself may not be in a position to actually do these projects, but between the agencies and the groups that the council represents, we can perhaps foster, promote, or support development of such projects.

Government relations committee (Jerry McGeorge, Mike Schulist, Christine Mason (chair), Harriet Behar, Jenni Heaton, Molly Jahn, Dave Engel, Margaret Bert-Mittlestadt, Laura Paine)

Christine and Laura reported their work on the organic pasture rule, and their ongoing work on newsletters and other communication pieces.

Farmer Education committee (Kevin Shelley (chair), Harriet Behar, Erin Silva, Jed Colquhoun, Pat Murphy, Don Jaworski, and Rich Lange, Chris Malek)

Erin reported that the next Organic Field day will be next August. They’re considering an all day session from 10:30 to 4 pm. They’re planning to organize it similar to the Agronomy Field day, with three tracks. They’ll have two field tours, plus one indoor track. Fertility management, no-till organic and cover crops will be the topics for the two field tours. Themes being considered for the indoor track include food storage and safety/GAP certification, Crop diagnostics, livestock track (Pam Ruegg's work, ag econ work, pasture management, ration balancing with non-traditional grains). The committee welcomes other ideas for topics. They plan to do a poster session on projects not part of the tours.

Consumer ed committee (Margaret Bert Mittlestadt (chair), Bob Wills, Tricia Bross, Mike Schulist, Bonnie Wideman, and Linda Merriman Hitchman).

Margaret reported that discussion was held on November 20 about the role of the economic downturn in buying of organic foods. The committee talked about developing educational materials to point out the value of continuing to buy organic foods, and how to shop smart during this period. They also reiterated that the website will be very important to getting the message out to consumers. We need to develop some educational materials.
Harriet suggested that the consumer ed committee could develop materials on organics to send out to farmers markets. The consumer ed committee suggests that DATCP develop these materials.

Agency reports

UW CALS/Extension report.
Erin and Kevin reported on organic research proposals that are being developed including one on potato production and potato seed production, others are being worked on. They are working with Organic seed alliance to develop a proposal on organic seed variety trials. Additional proposals include one on methionine in organic poultry production (there is no approved source of this nutrient for organic production) and fertility/insect issues (Eileen Cullen’s project). One of the program’s themes this year is comparisons between conventional and organic systems, especially on carbon sequestration between organic and conventional.

Discussion was held on how to increase/encourage more involvement of livestock and dairy science departments in organic issues. Dave suggested that getting livestock and dairy faculty to the Organic Farming Conference would be worthwhile. Christine suggested that this is unlikely to happen and perhaps the council should work with the university to bring council members and interested farmers to Madison to talk to researchers.

Status of the UW Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems
Erin and CALS Administrator Heidi Zoerb shared a statement from Dean Molly Jahn regarding possible changes within CALS with regard to CIAS as a result of rethinking the best way to organize our research, extension, and outreach activities to leverage limited resources, secure grant funds, and best serve the sustainable and organic communities.

Heidi Zoerb stressed that that interdisciplinary approach will be maintained, in fact, USDA is requiring all their research projects have interdisciplinary teams. Internally the funds from CALS will have the same requirements. The College now has interdisciplinary teams on food, etc. but in the future there may not be a centralized place like CIAS. UW Madison as a whole is looking at a broader sustainability degree program that will include ‘learning community’ dorms, and a union that serves organic food.

The council expressed their concern with the changes and had the following comments about the value of CIAS to organics and sustainable agriculture:

-Extreme importance of providing a forum for producers to dialog with researchers so that the UW does not become isolated -- citizen advisory councils like CIAS's were given as examples of successful models for tapping into a grass roots base
-Getting research and information out to the public in an accessible, practical and useful fashion (this was noted as a strength of CIAS)
-CIAS specifically provides Web design and hosting, outreach assistance, and graphic and editorial publication assistance for Status of Organic Ag annual publication to this committee

Other ideas and suggestions:
-Creation of an organic agriculture degree
-Creation of an organic research dairy, next to a conventional dairy so research can be done
-Possible development of an organic agriculture cross-discipline team along the lines of the vegetable
Support for grazing and sustainable ag systems

FSA
Russ shared that many of their programs’ rules are on hold with the change in the administration. Many of the rules will be written in the next few months. Emergency loans and livestock indemnity programs are on-going. Farmers can look into FSA operating loans to help with the economic challenges we’re facing currently.

NRCS
Pat updated the council on the new EQIP rules. Currently, we’re still operating under the prior farm bill programs. The primary practice available to organic farmers is the Conservation crop rotation, which Wisconsin has set benefits for as follows: $50/acre for a maximum of 40 acres.

The new EQIP rule came out just before the inauguration and it is unclear whether there will be revisions by the new administration. Pat suggests that we go ahead and make comments on the rule as it was published. It is set up to cover cost share $$ for transition cost, plus a number of other related practices like buffer strips and native pollinator habitats. It is allowed by rule to fund multiple conservation practices on the same land, but this is currently not done under WI NRCS policy. Only one practice can be applied to any acre of land. There is also a provision for income loss protection that may apply to the organic transition period. Pat stated that the Organic certification reimbursement cost sharing cannot be combined (stacked) with conservation practice cost sharing.

Pat’s observation was that the rule is written to give states great latitude in setting cost-share levels and other program rules. He would like the council to work with him to come up with recommendations for state level cost-share for the Conservation Crop Rotation practice. He’d also like the council to develop some comments on the rule itself as published by USDA. We need to meet before March 16 to develop comments to the federal register rules on the EQIP program, then we need to continue meeting to develop recommendations to the state technical committee on how to implement the program at the state level. Laura will work with Pat to set up a conference call to start this work.

Harriet reminded OAC members to go to their local working groups and encourage them to incorporate organics into their ranking system so organic farmers are more likely to qualify for EQIP funding.

Wisconsin Technical College System
Don Jaworski reported that Val Adamski, NWTC new Organic and Sustainable Agriculture Educator, is continuing to work on curriculum development for professional development for Extension, LCD and NRCS staff as well as the college’s new Certificate in Organic & Sustainable Agriculture and Food program. He handed out a two page report on the project.

Randy Zogbaum, new Director of Agriculture Programs for the Technical College System, introduced himself and said that he’d be coordinating with Don and Val to represent the technical colleges on the Interagency Team.

Public comments: there were no public comments.

Adjournment. A motion to adjourn was made by Don Jaworski, seconded by Rich Lange. Motion passed. The meeting adjourned at 3:10 pm.