

Inaugural North Dakota State University Organic Farming Field Day a Hit

Patrick Carr

In spite of inclement weather, Over 200 people convened in Dickinson, North Dakota, for the first-ever North Dakota State University Organic Farming Field Day on July 14. The turnout indicates not only the enthusiasm being generated by organic farming in North and South Dakota, but across the region and country. Many individuals traveled hundreds of miles to attend the event, with a few even traveling greater distances. This is the first time in recent memory that a field day audience at Dickinson included attendees from as far away as Vermont within the USA, and from Mexico outside of the country. There also were several Canadians in attendance, including Brenda Frick, the Canadian research representative on the OCIA R & E board.

An outstanding line-up of speakers presented during the event. Following opening comments by administrators at North Dakota State University, long-time extension educator and organic farming supporter Brad Brummond summarized for the audience the status of organic farming in North Dakota. Dr. Pat Carr followed with additional detail on the organic farming research project underway at North Dakota State University. Dr. Kathleen Delate provided an overview of no-till organic efforts underway in the U.S., followed by Dr. Erin Silva who discussed the selection of crop varieties for organic production, with particular focus on vegetable crops. Dr. Frank Kutka and local organic farmer Pat Frank ended the morning session with a discussion about the farmer grant program funded through USDA-SARE, and a recent grant which Pat received to evaluate the effectiveness of killing sweetclover using a roller-crimper as an alternative to disking.

Dr. Bill Wilke, SARE coordinator for the north central region, gave an overview of the USDA-SARE program following an excellent noon meal that featured food grown organically and prepared locally by Kathy Kiedrowski and several of her high school students. Dr. Kathleen Delate returned to the podium to describe what has been learned from long-term organic farming research studies, in particular from the Neely-Kinyon Long-Term Agroecological Research (LTAR) study which she directs at Iowa State University. Dr. Cindy Cambardella, a well-respected USDA-ARS soil scientist, also is heavily involved in the study. Jeff Moyer followed Kathleen by returning to the no-till organic concept discussed earlier in the day, providing his perspective based on several years of work exploring no-till organic systems. Following a short break, Dr. Paul Porter and Carmen Fernholz combined to give an interesting perspective on organic farming from their experiences in Minnesota, while long-time dryland farmer Dr. Bob Quinn offered his perspective from north central Montana. The final two speakers included Dr. Mark Renz, who spoke about weed management strategies and challenges faced by organic farmers, and Steve Zwinger, who discussed his experience along with others in developing and selecting for crop varieties that are adapted to farms managed organically.

Many groups and individuals worked diligently to ensure that nothing was overlooked leading up to and during the event. Personnel with the Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society (NPSAS) deserve considerable credit for making the event a success; they worked for months with North Dakota State University employees located at Dickinson leading up to and throughout the field day. Among many other things, NPSAS also held their summer meeting in conjunction with the field day, as did OCIA North Dakota Chapter #1.