
Creating a More-Sustainable Food and Farming System:

Lessons Learned from the Integrated Farming Systems Initiatives



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*Lessons Learned from the
Integrated Farming Systems Initiative*

Prepared for

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As conventional agricultural systems are increasingly seen to be linked to problems such as soil erosion, water contamination, health risks from chemical use, declining profitability for family-scale farmers, and deteriorating rural communities, there's growing interest in farming systems that are more sustainable ecologically, economically, and socially. Many people, in many places, are innovating with production and marketing practices, building new groups and organizations, and working to change mainstream agricultural institutions and policy to be more helpful to sustainable farmers.

One network active in this work in recent years has been the people and organizations assisted by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, of Battle Creek, MI, through its Integrated Farming Systems initiative. This initiative has supported 18 projects around the U.S. that are all working to help farmers find and adopt more-sustainable farming practices and systems, and to help people and their communities overcome the barriers to adopting more-sustainable farming systems.

Rainbow Research, based in Minneapolis, has been the "cluster evaluator" for the IFS initiative. Our job is to report on the patterns of progress (and difficulty) across the 18 projects and lift up the major lessons being learned about how to develop a more-sustainable food and farming system. We recently drafted our initial report, based on evaluation information from all the projects plus interviews with over 150 participants -- farmers; university administrators, researchers and Extension staff; and leaders of nongovernmental sustainable agriculture and environmental organizations.

We found that these projects are making progress in shifting American agriculture toward systems that (a) preserve the environment and non-renewable resources, (b) protect the health of farmers and their families and neighbors, (c) provide opportunity for a decent standard of living and high quality of life for farm families, (d) sustain vibrant rural communities, and (e) produce plentiful, nutritious, affordable food and fiber.

Thousands of farmers are exploring and adopting more resource-efficient farming systems that feature different crops and longer rotations, reduced chemicals and tillage practices, improved utilization of farm-produced nutrients, and more-profitable marketing strategies. Holistic, whole-farm, whole-family decisionmaking is on the increase. So is collaborative research and education drawing on the expertise of both university scientists and sustainable farmers. The body of knowledge about more-sustainable practices and systems is growing, and sustainable farmers are becoming more visible and credible as agricultural leaders. Support for sustainable approaches is increasing at most land grant universities involved in the projects.

What is contributing to this progress? We identified four key strategies:

- *Building groups and networks among sustainable farmers and voices.* Grazing clubs, sustainable farming organizations, and participatory research projects reduce the isolation that sustainable pioneers often feel, and stimulate information exchange and mutual encouragement. As people discover they are not alone (as it sometimes seems in their own neighborhood or department) but valued members of a community dedicated to more-sustainable approaches, they become more active and effective as innovators and leaders.
- *Building relationships across diversity.* Projects are building new bridges across many of the divides that fragment the agricultural community and separate farmers from non-farmers: bringing together farmers, consumers, environmentalists, university and agency staff; farmers who use synthetic chemicals and those who don't, small- and large-scale farmers, younger and older farmers, women and men who farm; and in some cases, bridging racial and cultural differences. Most project leaders realize that sustainable farmers are still a minority within agriculture, and that farmers are an ever-smaller minority in American society -- and that to transform the food and farming system they must expand the circle to include other people and institutions.

This is some of the most difficult work involved in these projects. Dealing with differences is not easy! And past experiences often give reasons to be wary of or

pessimistic about prospective partners. Nonetheless, project participants are discovering that reaching out to diverse partners increases their credibility, connects them to new allies and resources, and helps them understand the real barriers and opportunities around them.

- *Keeping farmers at the center, at the forefront.* These are farmer-driven projects. They realize that farmers often learn the most from other farmers; that farmers are often the most knowledgeable experts about farming questions; and that many land grant universities and public policy makers are more responsive to farmers than to paid advocates working for nonprofit organizations or other institutions. Therefore farmers are engaged in all levels and facets of these projects, from design and governance, through implementation and innovation, to public speaking and representation.
- *Investing in alternative institutions, not just mainstream agriculture institutions.* The food system will change not just through efforts to reform longstanding institutions such as land grant universities, but through the emergence of new institutions more clearly dedicated to environmentally-friendly, community-friendly agriculture. These emerging institutions, of which Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota and Arkansas Land and Farm Development Corporation are good examples, are important both for what they accomplish on their own terms and for their influence on others historically oriented toward industrial-model agriculture.

Progress toward food systems change has not been smooth or easy, however. Two challenges in particular have faced these 18 projects:

- *This takes time!* Building a community base, allowing participants to generate the guiding vision, trying new farming practices, developing new relationships, and achieving policy change each takes time. And when a project includes all of these strands it takes even longer -- yet all of these strands are relevant parts of building the new food system.
- *Some collaboratives may be too broad.* Some projects have struggled with partners who seem more interested in protecting individual interests than in pursuing common interests; these projects are grinding gears more than generating movement. And the effort to work together has constrained some organizations from using their talents at innovation or confrontation. We still have much to learn about using conflict creatively and constructively.

Looking ahead, the IFS cluster evaluation has identified six priorities to help accelerate momentum toward a more-sustainable food and farming system:

1. *Build “people skills” and group capacities, not merely energized individuals.* Leadership development that pushes people to be more outspoken isn’t enough; “leaders” are those that can listen well, encourage others, resolve conflicts, and maintain accountability. Farmers, university staff, nonprofit organizations, and consumers all need to increase their skills at working with other people -- including people different from themselves. Extension agents and other professionals who aren’t farmers need to learn better how to “be a guide on the side, not a sage on the stage,” so that they stimulate rather than undercut local initiative. Informal groups such as grazing clubs and holistic resource management networks need to grow stronger and more numerous.
2. *Increase the resources accessible to community-based sustainable agriculture organizations.* These organizations, such as Alternative Energy Resources Organization in Montana and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in several southern states, are breathing life and strength into American agriculture. Yet most of these organizations -- and there are many of them springing up across the country -- are fragile. It is important for them to build their capacity, and for government, foundations, corporations, the media and others to recognize their value and partner with them respectfully.

As these organizations dedicated to sustainable food systems and to the talents of communities emerge, it’s crucial that they work together both in-state and across state lines rather than compete or fight with one another. Working together will increase their ability to grow the resource pool available to all of them.

3. *Continue efforts to change land grant universities and other mainstream institutions; and increase efforts to change public and private policies.* Land grants have not been leaders in developing sustainable systems, for sure; neither have most commodity groups and other mainstream ag institutions. But these institutions control enormous resources. If these big ships can be turned in a new direction, they can have enormous beneficial impact.

In addition to educating and influencing institutional leadership, it’s important to become more active and effective in shaping public and corporate policies. Legislation and regulation -- at local, state and federal levels -- are key factors defining the options available to farmers and consumers; and policies by banks, packers and other agribusinesses will become more important in the years ahead.

4. *Continue to strengthen regional and national networks active on behalf of sustainable food and farming systems.* People and organizations learn and draw inspiration from one another; and people must work together to influence institutions and policy. Those involved in Integrated Farming Systems projects, Sustainable Agriculture Working Groups, Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education councils, wildlife habitat preservation and other environmental networks, community-supported agriculture, local food policy councils, sustainable community development and related visions should continue to build relationships and pursue common interests.
5. *Increase documentation and communication of more-sustainable practices and systems.* People must be honest and clear-headed in describing the rewards and the difficulties of the transition to alternative farming and marketing systems. Many scientists and policymakers will demand numbers -- yields, profits, nitrate levels, etc. -- before they are persuaded that family-scale, low-external input farming can equal or improve upon conventional approaches for profitability, productivity, environmental stewardship and community benefit. The economic analyses done by the Wisconsin Integrated Cropping Systems Trial on different rotation/input strategies, and the whole-farm case studies developed by Land Stewardship Project in Minnesota, are excellent examples of documentation that can persuade data-driven decision-makers.

Effective education and communication depends on real-life stories about learning and change, and about farmers, farms and communities, even more than on numbers. Sustainable advocates should continue their field days, pasture walks, winter workshops, and their media outreach and participation in others' forums and hearings -- so that real sustainable farming stories can be shared with more and more people.

6. *Clarify core systems change vision and strategies.* What will the sustainable food and farming system look like? Sustainable pioneers require a clear picture of where they're heading to know if they're moving in the right direction. As well as a vision of the future they're pursuing, sustainable pioneers need to deepen their understanding of the current global food and farming system -- in its technical, policy, and community dimensions -- so that they can recognize assets and opportunities, dangers and barriers, and identify most-effective strategies given that context.

We will continue to follow the progress of the 18 Integrated Farming Systems projects, and their successors and spinoffs, over the next year. We look forward to sharing the further lessons that emerge as their experience accumulates.

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Persons interested in more information are welcome to contact David Scheie, Betty Mosley, or Tom Devar at Rainbow Research, 621 West Lake Street, Minneapolis, MN 55408, 612-824-0724, e-mail RainbowResearch@MTN.org. Information on the IFS initiative can be obtained from Oran Hesterman, Program Director in Food Systems and Rural Development, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 1 Michigan Avenue East, Battle Creek, MI 49017, 616-968-1611, e-mail obb@WKKF.sprint.com.

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Improve management of resources to achieve program purposes.

Improve the fit between your organization's activities and your community's needs and opportunities.

Improve commitment of staff and Board to your organization's mission.

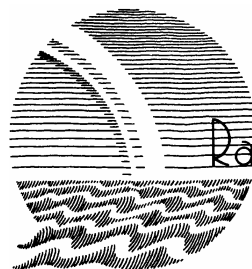
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Improve linkages between your organization and other like-minded organizations.

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Related Rainbow Research Publications:

- **Rethinking "Leadership": Notes on Community, Collaboration and Strategies for Systemic Change;** By David Scheie; 8 *pages* (1996); #165C – \$5.00
- **The Importance of Community Collaboration to Support Sustainable Agriculture;** By Oran Hesterman, David Scheie and Betty Mosley; 13 (1996); #165B – \$6.00
- **How Can Universities and Colleges Become More Useful to Rural Communities Pursuing Development;** By David Scheie and Steven E. Mayer; 16 (1990); #085 – \$5.00



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