



Newsletter of the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service: A project of the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT)

Managing Personal Stress on Sustainable Farms and Ranches

This issue of ATTRAnews presents ideas on how to cope with stress. These suggestions are gleaned from ag producers and the experts who help them get through hard times. What are the best ways to sustain the sustainable farmers and ranchers who may be facing burnout?

Markristo Farm—Still Growing after 18 Years Hard-earned advice on how to manage stress on a hectic family farm

By Tammy Hinman, NCAT Agriculture Program Specialist

Markristo Farm in Hillsdale, New York, is a certified organic, family-owned market garden. Over the past 18 years, Martin and Christa Stosiek have grown the farm from a couple of acres to over 15 acres, producing diverse crops of vegetables, cut flowers, and bedding plants. They market all their products locally through restaurants, farm stands, resorts, conference centers, an organic wholesaler, and a farmers' market. Believing that sustainability depends on economic success, they have developed the experience, equipment, and farm systems to achieve this.

With Diversification, Every Year is a Good Year

After 18 years of farming, Martin and Christa do not worry about the little things as much as they used to. As Martin says, "Every year there is one disaster, be it with labor, crops, or weather, but it always turns out to be a good year in the end." This is partially because their crops are diversified. Christa affirms that the farm's diversification has helped avert big losses, be it with poor bedding plant sales this year, or farm labor shortages other years.

The Stosieks' marketing philosophy has developed along with their crops. For example, they used to provide a long list of diversified vegetables to restaurants, but they now

sell only lettuce and greens to the restaurants. They save their diverse vegetables for retail sale at their farmers' market booth, which Christa coordinates.

"We are no longer trying to grow every kind of vegetable and going crazy doing it," Christa says. This decision came about when they started having kids. "We wanted to simplify the farming operation a bit to accommodate our children," she explains. This management decision has helped them maintain a simpler and more manageable lifestyle, providing more time with the family during the hectic growing season.

Working Out the Labor

As many farmers can attest, labor can be a stressful aspect of any farm business. With the addition of the children to



Martin and Christa Stosiek and family
Photo from www.markristofarm.com

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Mechanization—Evaluate Your Purchases

Mechanizing certain operations has eased family stress on Markristo Farm. Martin Stosiek describes the evolution of the farm's increasing mechanization: "As we decided to focus on growing certain crops on a larger scale, we became more mechanized to grow these crops efficiently." While purchasing equipment can be very stressful for many farmers, the Stosieks have developed an evaluation process to assure the equipment is paid for within three years. The system worked well with the purchase of a stainless steel washing system for lettuce greens.

Christa describes the decision as an essential addition to their farm. "Lettuce greens are our main business, and with competition from larger growers in California, we needed to produce a cheaper product more efficiently. The washer fit exactly into our goals. Within three months of purchasing the washer, we were asking ourselves why we had not done this sooner!" Martin added that they evaluated how much it would cost to hire someone full time to manage their existing washing station and realized that the new system would pay for itself in a few years.

Christa encourages farmers to evaluate the risk and the stress associated with that risk when considering big purchases, such as the washing equipment. She adds that if you know how much you are selling and how much the product is worth, it makes the decision easy.

For every big purchase they make, the Stosieks evaluate:

- The projected yield
- The markets for the product
- How much they can sell of that product

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www.attra.ncat.org

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Resources to Help Farmers and Ranchers Overcome the Stress of Farming

Organizations

Annie's Project works in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, and Oklahoma to empower farm women to be good business partners through networks and by managing critical information.
www.extension.iastate.edu/annie

Farmers Legal Action Group (FLAG) is a nonprofit law center that provides legal services to family farmers and rural communities to keep family farmers on the land.
360 North Robert St. #500, St. Paul, MN 55101
651-223-5400, www.flaginc.org

Farm Crisis Resources List from the Center for Rural Affairs, www.cfra.org/resources/Farm_Crisis_Resources.htm

National Farm Transition Network unites beginning and retiring farmers. Farm Link, Land Link, and similar programs are active in Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, Maine, Mississippi, Nebraska, Maryland, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Virginia, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin. 515-331-8900,
www.farmtransition.org

Printed and Online Publications

Building a Sustainable Business: A Guide to Developing a Business Plan for Farms and Rural Businesses is one of the best goal-setting and financial planning guides. It follows a real family through the whole process of transforming

farm-grown inspiration into profitable enterprises. Part of relieving stress is sharing goals and expectations from the farm, and keeping the goals in mind during hard times. From Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) in book form and online. 301-374-9696, www.sare.org

Resources for Beginning Farmers: Building a Sustainable Future by Beth Nelson et al., University of Minnesota, 2004. Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Ag, 612-625-8235,
www.misa.umn.edu/od/bfarmers.html

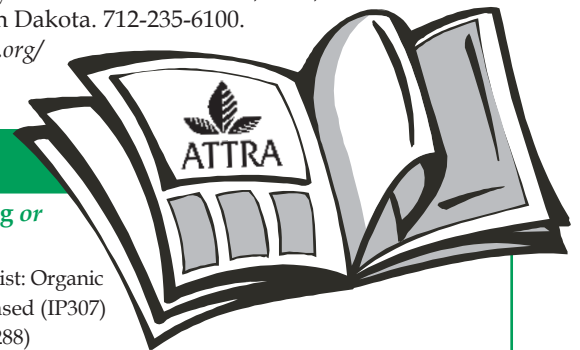
Land Stewardship Project, 651-653-0618, www.landstewardshipproject.org. **Getting a Handle on the Barriers to Financing Sustainable Agriculture.** The Land Stewardship Project, 2003.
www.landstewardshipproject.org/pdf/edsurvey.pdf

Rural Stress Survival Guide by Val Farmer, 1994. 800-456-0839, http://ffsn.wsu.edu/documents/rural_stress_survival_guide.pdf

Conferences

27th Annual Farming Together Workshop. Jan. 26-27, 2007, Purdue Univ., Indiana. 765-494-4203. An opportunity for you, your child, or future farm partner to begin making decisions together about the future of the farm business.
www.agecon.purdue.edu/extension/programs/farm_together.asp

The Clock is Ticking for Rural America: A Behavioral Health and Safety Conference. Feb. 12-14, 2007, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. 712-235-6100.
www.agriwellness.org/ConfInfo.htm



A Roundup of ATTRA's 2006 Publications

These new or updated publications can be downloaded from www.attra.ncat.org or call 800-346-9140 for a printed copy. * Updated in 2006

Crops

- Cole Crops and other Brassicas: Organic Production (IP275)
- Edamame (Vegetable Soybean) (IP286)
- * Grapes: Organic Production (IP031)
- * Lavender Production, Products, Markets, and Entertainment Farms (IP243)
- * Organic Allium Production (IP138)
- * Specialty Cut Flower Production and Marketing (IP025)
- Transgenic Crops (IP189)

Energy

- * Anaerobic Digestion of Animal Wastes: Factors to Consider (IP219)
- Biodiesel: The Sustainability Dimensions (IP281)
- Energy Saving Tips for Irrigators (IP278)
- Ethanol Opportunities and Questions (IP292)
- Maintaining Irrigation Pumps, Motors, and Engines (IP299)
- Measuring and Conserving Irrigation Water (IP280)
- * Oilseed Processing for Small-Scale Producers (IP134)
- Renewable Energy Opportunities on the Farm (IP304)
- Soil Moisture Monitoring: Low-Cost Tools and Methods (IP277)
- Switchgrass as a Bioenergy Crop (IP302)

Livestock

- Alternative Poultry Production Systems and Outdoor Access (IP300)
- * Aquaculture Enterprises: Considerations and Strategies (CT142)
- * Aquaponics: Integration of Hydroponics with Aquaculture (IP163)
- * Beef Marketing Alternatives (IP290)
- Cattle Production: Considerations for Pasture-Based Beef and Dairy Producers (IP305)

- Dairy Resource List: Organic and Pasture-Based (IP307)
- Dairy Sheep (IP288)
- Managing Internal Parasites in Sheep and Goats (IP293)
- Meat Goats: Sustainable Production (IP200)
- Parasite Management for Natural and Organic Poultry: Coccidiosis (IP245)
- Pastures: Going Organic (IP297)
- * Pastures: Sustainable Management (IP284)
- Poultry: Equipment for Alternative Production (IP295)
- Small Poultry Processing Plants and Services (online only)

Marketing

- * Adding Value to Farm Products: An Overview (IP141)
- * Community-Supported Agriculture (IP289)
- Organic Market Farm Documentation Forms (IP285)

Pest Management

- * Nematodes: Alternative Controls (IP287)
- * Squash Bug and Squash Vine Borer: Organic Controls (IP298)
- Symphylans: Soil Pest Management Options (IP283)

2006 ATTRA Publications in Spanish

- Como Prepararse para la Inspección Orgánica (SP261)
- El Proceso de la Certificación Orgánica (SP262)

Leaving the Farm for that Well-Earned Vacation

By Karma Glos, Kingbird Farm, Berkshire, NY, www.kingbirdfarm.com

One of the most difficult aspects of running a livestock farm is actually leaving it. Vacations can be few and far between for farmers in general, but leaving livestock can be particularly complicated. In our early years it wasn't terribly hard to find a friend or family member to feed the chickens or throw some hay to the horses. Now, however, farm sitting our place is a full-time job.

The diversity of our farm is our economic viability, but it is also our liability when it comes to passing all the tasks on to someone else. We have developed a fairly smooth rhythm to our vast and varied chores, but only after years of doing them. To the uninitiated our farm is a chaos of animal species, feed types, and far flung locations. Therefore, finding – let alone training – farm sitters has become increasingly difficult for us.

In addition to walking through chores several times, a new or experienced farm sitter is provided with an exhaustive farm chore list. This is critical on our farm so that the sitter can find and feed all of our animals. Forgetting to water the broiler chickens even just once can be a disaster if it's hot.

One way to avoid such disasters and to help things run smoother is to set up as many automatic feeders and drinkers as possible. Even if you don't normally run things this way, it can really help a sitter. Sows may eat a little more feed for the weekend or the horses might use a bit more hay, but it might ensure they are regularly fed.

The chore list that explains all these details should give as much information as possible without being too confusing. I like to make sure they know where all the animals are, how many there should be, and what their water and food system involves. It also helps to include a map of the farm that includes all key locations. The farm sitter should know where to locate all the supplies, medications, and emergency numbers they might need.

Only you can care for your animals exactly how you want, but the more you communicate to the farm sitter, the better the experience will be for everyone (especially the livestock).

Excerpted and reprinted with permission from Organic Farms, Food & Folks, newsletter of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York. Fall 2005.

Sample Chore List for Farm Sitter						
Animal	# of Animals	Location	Morning Chores	Noon Chores	Evening Chores	Notes
Horses	5	Paddock behind barn	Feed 1 bale hay, water is automatic		Repeat morning chores	Be sure automatic drinker is working
Cows	8	North pasture	Feed 2 bales hay, water is automatic		Check water	Note any observed heats in heifers
Sows	10	Dry lot with shed	Feed 1 bucket of moist feed in separate tubs		Repeat morning chores	Check nipple drinker daily - be sure it's not clogged
Layers	500	Hoop house on pasture	Feed 2 buckets in troughs, water is automatic	Collect eggs	Repeat morning and collect eggs	Be sure to turn on charger each night

Markristo Farm, *continued from pg. 1*

their family and farm, the Stosieks have hired workers to help in Christa's absence. This decision has also helped to take pressure away from managing the farm interns. "Our laborers do a consistently great job," says Martin. "They ease pressure on us, and provide a solid labor force."

Martin and Christa will always have interns on their farm, because they want to share their expertise with individuals who are interested in becoming farmers one day. By hiring workers, the Stosieks are able to focus more on educating the interns, without totally relying on them for their labor needs.

The Stosieks are constantly evaluat-

ing their markets. "You become more profitable by researching your markets and developing more efficient methods of working with them," says Christa. They are currently negotiating with their wholesale markets to help alleviate stress during next year's growing season.

For example, this year their bedding plant sales were poor due to weather conditions that kept nursery sales down. "We are now beginning to evaluate how to avert a similar situation in the future," says Christa.

To keep their family strong through stressful times on the farm, they have taken "the road divided." Says Martin, "We each have our

own paths on the farm, but have the complementary goal of seeing our farm and family prosper." Christa adds, "you have to respect each other and each other's role on the farm to make it work."

Christa advises to learn more about the activities that may be causing you stress. "By educating yourself and networking at farmer conferences and farmers' markets," she says, "you can become more successful at what you do. Farming is a profession where you take a deep breath in a yearly cycle. For us the busy summer months are stressful, but we always have the winter to catch our breaths again."



Farmer Help Lines Offer Good Counsel *By Tammy Hinman, NCAT Agriculture Program Specialist*

Farming is stressful. It's true that farmers enjoy the freedom and control of owning their own business. But the low profit margins, frenetic pace, and weather-dependent nature of the business can cause stress that takes its toll on farm families and individuals' well being.

Experts say it is important during stressful times to get enough sleep, eat well, take regular breaks, avoid alcohol and other drugs, and to talk honestly with others – particularly your family – about your concerns (1).

A few states have toll-free telephone help lines for farmers and rural families to call when stress starts to affect them. Such programs can help farmers with immediate crises, as well as with plans to transition to a different enterprise, transfer the farm to family members, or achieve family goals.

If your state does not have a help line, many of these organizations have web sites that provide written materials to help deal with change in your farm or family.

New York FarmNet is a free confidential information, referral, and consulting program for New York state farmers and service providers. Because the consultants address both personal and financial issues, they have a proven history of achieving measurable results. They can help clarify the

situation or problem, brainstorm solutions, and develop a plan of action. 800-547-FARM (3276)
www.nyfarmnet.org

Washington Farm Family Support Network is a confidential free service available to farm families in Washington state. Network consultants help families understand their current financial and personal situation, and develop a decision-making framework for the future. 800-469-2981,
<http://ffsn.wsu.edu>

Sowing Seeds of Hope Project is a seven-state, federally funded project, formed in 1999 to help farm families and agricultural workers respond to stress. The program is administered by Agriwellness, an organization that is involved with many similar worthy projects. www.agriwellness.org

- **Iowa Concern:** 800-447-1985, www.extension.iastate.edu/iowaconcern
- **Kansas Rural Family Helpline:** 866-327-6578, www.k-state.edu/farmksu
- **Minnesota Crisis Connection:** 866-379-6363, www.crisis.org
- **Nebraska Rural Response Hotline:** 800-464-0258, www.uccnebraska.org/mission/RuralLife.html
- **North Dakota 2-1-1 helpline,** also 800-472-2911, www.mhand.org
- **Wisconsin Farm Center Hotline:** 800-942-2474, www.uwex.edu/ces/ag/issues/stress-safety/Sowing_Hope.pdf

- **South Dakota Rural Help Line:** 800-664-1349, www.catholic-social-services.net/new.htm

References

- (1) Sheils, Cathy, 2002. *Stress Management: Make It Part of Your Personal and Business Management Plan*. New York FarmNet, Cornell University, www.nyfarmnet.org/docs/stress.doc

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