

AGNOTES

Spring Is Perfect Time To Test Garden Soil

BROOKINGS—Now is the perfect time to get the soils in your garden or lawn tested.

That's according to South Dakota State University Soils Testing Lab manager Ron Gelderman, who said many people are anxious to start working in the dirt now that winter has ended.

"Most garden soils are fairly dry, but still cool," said Gelderman. "So taking a sample now before fertilizing, tilling, and planting makes a lot of sense." Gelderman said that gardens and lawns, for the most part, are usually well fertilized and already contain most of the nutrients they need. But a soil test is the only surefire way to find out if nutrients are lacking or if other problems may be limiting growth.

"High levels of salt and pH levels that are too high or too low can limit your garden's potential," Gelderman said. "It's better to have a soil sample test done now, because if you do, you can avoid some growing headaches later."

The method for sampling is simple, Gelderman said.

"For a garden, take a trowel or spade and dig a 6-inch hole, then take a slice of soil along one side of the hole and put into a clean plastic bucket," said Gelderman. "You'll want to do this in about 10 spots in the garden or in the area you want sampled. Once you have the samples, mix them in the bucket, then take out about one pint and label it."

Soil sampling for a lawn follows the same procedure, but Gelderman said the holes should be dug to a depth of 3 inches.

"You may not want to make holes all over your yard, so we recommend using a soil probe," Gelderman said. "You can borrow a soil probe from your county Extension office, from the offices of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, or at a nursery, greenhouse, or fertilizer dealer."

Your county Extension office also can supply sample submission sheets and detailed sampling instructions along with sampling bags.

This information also is available on the SDSU Soil Testing Lab Web site at this link: <http://plantsci.sdstate.edu/soil-test/>. Click on the Lawn and Garden Information sheet on the left side of the page. You can then print out the submission sheet and sampling instructions and submit along with a paper bag that is boxed for mailing to the address given on the submission sheet.

People can also bring their soil samples directly to the lab. It is located on the SDSU campus in Agricultural Hall, third floor, room 304.

Gelderman said that once the sample is received at the SDSU laboratory, results will be sent out within two days. The result sheet will show the relative levels of nutrients in your soil and recommendations for amending the soil.

"The results also will give you suggestions for applying the suggested nutrients, and we usually include a pamphlet, 'Fertilizing Gardens in South Dakota, For Gardeners,'" Gelderman said. "We will also send details on fertilizer use, including many organic fertilizers such as manures and composts." The pamphlet has information on modifying soil pH and correcting salt problems.

The pamphlet is also available on the Web site. For other soil testing questions, call Gelderman at (605) 688-4766.

Gov. Heineman Signs Bill Promoting Wind

Gov. Dave Heineman recently signed LB 1048 into law. The bill is designed to encourage the development, ownership and operation of renewable energy facilities for the export of wind energy from Nebraska.

LB 1048 preserves the benefits Nebraskans receive as a result of the state's unique public power system by allowing the Nebraska Power Review Board to approve wind energy operations designed to export energy.

The bill was introduced by the Legislature's Natural Resources Committee, chaired by Sen. Chris Langemeier of Schuyler.

According to the American Wind Energy Association states that Nebraska is fourth for potential wind energy development and 24th for actual production.

Humane Society 'Ready For A Fight'

Group Releases Video Of Brutality And Unsanitary Conditions At Chicken Farms

BY P.J. HUFFSTUTTER
McClatchy News Service

LOS ANGELES — The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) has released undercover video footage shot at two of the nation's largest egg farms showing workers slamming chickens into metal bins and dead birds littering cages — the latest salvo in an escalating war between the food sector and the country's leading animal-rights organizations.

At stake, both sides said, is regulating how livestock are treated and how Americans' food is produced.

Since California voters passed Proposition 2 in 2008, HSUS officials have ramped up their political campaigns to alter state laws regarding animal welfare. They're reaching out to young people, including a presentation at last month's National 4-H Conference in Washington, where they encouraged teenage future farmers to treat livestock with respect.

The organization has also been buying chunks of stock in publicly traded food companies, in part to be able to introduce shareholder resolutions and pressure company executives to alter their purchasing decisions.

The strategy has worked. Companies including Wendy's, Sonic Corp. and the parent company of the IHOP and Applebee's restaurant chains have all started shifting to using cage-free eggs, according to HSUS officials. Wal-Mart Stores Inc., the nation's largest grocer, said in February that the eggs sold under its store label were now cage-free.

"Companies generally don't want graphic information about how their suppliers abuse animals for their products sent to every investor and the media," said Paul Shapiro, head of the

group's Factory Farming campaign.

But the farmers are fighting back. In recent months, agribusiness lobbyists and farm groups have bombarded companies sympathetic to the Humane Society with letters asking them to halt donations to the group.

"HSUS seeks to remove meat from our dinner tables, leather goods from our closets, animals from zoos and circuses and eventually — pets from our families," Kansas Farm Bureau President Steve Baccus wrote in a letter to Bank of America Corp. posted on the bureau's website. The Humane Society, he wrote, is "a powerful, well-funded activist organization pursuing what most reasonable observers would consider an extreme anti-animal agenda."

In Missouri, livestock farmers are worried that a Humane Society-backed ballot initiative to curtail so-called puppy mills could lead to attacks on livestock interests. They have spurred a bid for a constitutional amendment that would ensure the public's right "to raise animals in a humane manner ... without the state imposing an undue economic burden on their owners."

And in Ohio, a state animal welfare standards board was created in an effort by farm interest groups and lawmakers to block future ballot measures that might affect livestock operations. But that hasn't deterred the Humane Society. The group is collecting signatures to put a bill before voters this November that's similar to the one passed in California.

"They are huge. They are influential, and they are our biggest concern on the impact of our ability to domestically produce food," said Kay Johnson Smith, executive vice

president of the Animal Agriculture Alliance, a trade group that represents livestock farmers and ranchers.

The egg-farm footage released Wednesday was shot surreptitiously over the past two months inside Iowa plants owned by Rose Acre Farms and Rembrandt Enterprises. It was taken by a Humane Society volunteer, who landed work at hen operations in four Iowa cities.

Among other things, the video footage showed chickens crammed into cages so crowded that the animals couldn't move and their talons couldn't touch the floor; chickens held in battery cages above manure pits that allegedly hadn't been regularly cleaned; and a worker stuffing birds into a euthanizing chamber with such force that the "thunk" of the animals' heads hitting the metal exterior could be heard.

One worker, whose face has been blacked out on the footage, told the undercover videographer that disease had killed many birds at one location: "It was nothing to pull 5,000 out of there a day," the worker is filmed as saying. "And that's all we did for about two weeks straight, is just pull dead birds."

Tony Wesner, executive vice president of Rose Acre Farms in Seymour, Ind., said Wednesday morning that the company "does not condone inhumane treatment" of its livestock. "Anyone violating our standards would be immediately terminated," Wesner said.

Representatives of Rembrandt Enterprises, based in Rembrandt, Iowa, could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Similar clandestine videos of farm operations have led to national changes in food-safety policy. An undercover video of a Chino slaughterhouse, where workers were shown using chains and forklifts to drag cows too injured or ill to stand, led to the largest beef recall in the

country's history and prompted the federal government — eager to prevent mad cow disease and other contaminants from entering the nation's food supply — to permanently ban the slaughter of such cattle.

"We're not asking for an end to the confinements of animals in buildings. We're asking they not be crammed into cages and crates barely larger than their bodies," said Humane Society President Wayne Pacelle at a news conference in Des Moines, Iowa, on Wednesday.

That's a message that Pacelle has been pushing far more aggressively since California's Prevention of Farm Animal Cruelty Act was signed into law. The measure, which passed by more than 63 percent of the vote, banned small, confining crates or cages for veal calves, egg-laying hens and pregnant sows. Farmers have until January 2015 to phase out their existing structures and build new facilities.

The bill's success created a ripple effect, putting pressure on other states to pass similar reforms.

Pacelle said the Humane Society and Farm Sanctuary — the biggest farm-animal-rights groups in the U.S., which co-sponsored Proposition 2 — first started introducing ballot measures for farm animals in 2000. Their first shot: pig farmers in Florida. They won in November 2002, when the first ban on gestation crates was passed. After that, Pacelle and the Humane Society moved onward. To date, seven states have passed laws banning various animal confinement systems.

"People know what happened in California, and they know it can happen again and again," Pacelle said. "They know that no group has passed more ballot measures than we have. They know we have a focused strategy. They know we have a budget of \$150 million a year. And they know we're ready for a fight."

CHEESE

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cheesemaking facility. They then moved to a stationary facility on-site at Branched Oak Farm, producing their first cheese there in the fall of 2006. They have also educated themselves by visiting nearly 30 small-scale dairies and cheesepants in five states and two countries, and taking the nation's only formal farmstead cheesemaking course from Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, Calif.

"SARE was a really important part of the project when we got started. SARE was pivotal," Dittman said. "It helped fund 40 percent cost-share on some of the equipment."

A UNIQUE BUSINESS SET-UP

Farmstead First's schedule is now so full that it can be difficult for Loth and Dittman to get the cheesemaking time they need for their own businesses.

"We have to work out some creative scheduling," Dittman said. "One thing that's changed from the beginning is that both Charuth and I had so few animals."

They can't just muscle their way into the schedule, as Farmstead First was set up as a separate entity from both farms. In fact, Farmstead First leases space from Branched Oak Farm and both Branched Oak and Shadowbrook are charged to make cheese there.

"It creates fair business practices," Dittman said.

MORE THAN A BUSINESS

Farmstead First was developed to allow Dittman and Loth to be able to afford to start their own artisan cheese businesses, but it has evolved to also take on the role of educating other farmstead dairy producers both in the art and science of cheesemaking as well as business management and marketing of their products. Because Farmstead First is a Grade A, licensed cheesepant, it only accepts Grade A dairies to use it — after they have taken a sanitation and handling procedures class from Dittman and Loth. Farmstead dairying is on the rise, and once a producer masters using the fluid milk for home use, it's tempting to turn it into a business. The problem is, farmstead cheesemaking is still a new area of dairy technology and there is an information gap for new

dairy operators. This is where Farmstead First comes in — two women experienced in the business who are willing to share their lessons and tips with others. They offer free initial consultations and a connection to resources.

"The best information we had when starting was from other farmstead cheesemakers. They were so eager to come out and talk to us and share. I think that was really good role modeling for us," Dittman said.

Since its establishment, Farmstead First has assisted nearly 30 small-scale dairies and cheesepants in five states and two countries.

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THE CHALLENGE OF A COOPERATIVE

Many people praise cooperatives as the perfect business model — one based on an equal partnership founded in a shared passion. But there are two sides to every coin, and cooperatives are no exception.

"It's another relationship to manage. Sometimes I joke that it's my other husband," Dittman said. "It's not always easy. You have to trust each other that both of you are on the same page. It's kind of like a marriage: It doesn't always seem fair, but in the end, it's fine."

If she had to do the process of starting Farmstead First again, Dittman said she'd first learn dairy production management before leaping into cheesemaking and marketing, as well. "If you already know the skills, I think it'd be easier," she added.

Dittman would've also built

all of the Farmstead First facility at once. As it was, their first facility was only a 10-by-15-foot room. "We were on top of each other," Loth said. They eventually built on an addition and then had to renovate the entire facility again to keep Grade A regulations.

Dittman said she would've also "coughed up the money and found a top-notch consultant."

Loth agrees that it's been sometimes a bumpy road to get to where they are today: "It's so grueling. It's easy to get run down and overwhelmed. The work involved is so intense that you can get bogged down so easily. It costs so much money."

Thinking back, Loth said she would've listened more to the details of what other dairy operators and cheesemakers were telling them — about the challenges and how to avoid the pitfalls of the business — rather than pushing ahead and thinking they could easily jump the hurdles they would encounter.

WHAT NEXT?

Dittman is continually striving to find joy in her life, which she is convinced rests in a balance between work, play, and relaxation.

"I want to own my business and not have it own me," she said. "I want to get to the place where I'm doing enough to provide that economic leg of what we're doing."

Sustainable agriculture is driven by the philosophy that a farm must be environmentally friendly, socially responsible, and economically sound.

Dittman sees sustainable farming as a three-legged stool with each of these three ingredients — environment, society, and economy — as the legs.

"I think we got that environmental and social down, but the economic is what still needs work," she said.

"Because the start-up costs are so high, I grew into this." What Dittman and Loth are discovering is how much further they still need to go. Their small scale is holding them back from being economically sound.

"When you're small scale, you're so inefficient," Loth said.

Loth did eventually talk with a consultant, who said she needs to get bigger if she wants to make money in cheesemaking.

"This was hard to hear, because I want to be small," Loth said. "I need to find a happy medium."

As she analyzes her business, Loth has found that she makes a lot more money selling her products direct, but she has also found a lot of hidden costs and overestimations on how much milk she gets on average from her goats: "When you crunch the numbers, you use the smallest denominator. For example, I was estimating that my goats gave an average of one gallon of milk a day. What I found was that a couple of my goats gave an average of one gallon, but most of them give an average of half a gallon."

The biggest lesson learned here, Loth said, is that while producers usually focus on the best profit potential of a new business venture — how much money they can make by direct-marketing cheese, for example — it's more important to be realistic.

Her advice: Beginning producers need to do their research before getting into a new business venture. "Talk to other producers and see how long it took them to make money," she said.

The average small business, across industries, takes two to three years to break even. But in agricultural production, this average increases substantially, Loth said. It's just the nature of the industry — there is so much infrastructure that everything moves slower, inputs cost more, and high-paying marketing opportunities are fewer and harder to get into.

"Other goat producers told me that it takes seven years to break even. Mine took 10 years," Loth said.

The consultant she's talked with said that Shadowbrook Farm needs to increase their dairy goat herd to 200 head to be profitable.

"One friend, who lives in Vermont and is doing about the same thing — thought that they could do it with 80 goats but has realized recently that they will need twice as many goats and then will still have to buy extra milk at times to keep up with the cheese supply that they need to be profitable," Loth said.

OPINION

DOMINANCE OF FARM SEED MARKET IS DANGEROUS

The market for soybean and corn seed is increasingly dominated by Monsanto.

Market dominance is dangerous. It enables a company to engage in aggressive pricing and potentially dictate the terms of production. A company with sole control of superior genetics could force farmers give up ownership of the crop, in return for access to the seeds, and offer only contracts for planting, spraying and harvesting the company's crop on farmers' land.

Monsanto dominance was strengthened by the University of Nebraska's decision to sell it an exclusive license for soybeans tolerant to the herbicide dicamba (marketed under the brand names Banvel, Oracle and Vanquish). In our view, dominant companies should not be granted exclusive control of technologies developed with public funds. Public universities should provide what they develop to the public.

The issue will soon face every major wheat producing state. Monsanto is reportedly talking with 10 public universities to gain access to their wheat lines to develop genetically engineered varieties. Each university must decide whether its wheat should remain available to the public — so any farmer can use it and any seed company can market it — or placed under the exclusive control of the highest bidder.

Tax funded research universities should do research that is available to and benefits the public, including farmers. It is a critical time to speak out to your agricultural university to ensure that it is working for farmers and other citizens — rather than the corporation that can write the biggest check.

— Chuck Hassebrook
Center for Rural Affairs

said. "I don't want to discourage anyone, but people need to know what they're getting into. Otherwise, they get into it and get derailed."

Simple farmstead cheesepants cost \$25,000 to \$30,000 on the low end — and that's if the farm already has a suitable facility, such as a stable building with a concrete floor, Loth said. Farmstead First cost upwards of \$100,000 to establish.

This is why it's important for producers to do their research, especially in marketing, before they start a business, Loth said. There have been some small dairies that have gone through the investment of making a farmstead cheesepant and are now sitting in the middle of a very rural area with a bunch of cheese and wondering why no one is rushing to buy it.

"Never start to produce something unless you have a market set up," Loth said. "Definitely do your research before."

Loth sells her cheese mostly through direct-marketing but also some retail stores as far away as Chicago and Denver, and wholesale outlets including restaurants, caterers, and wineries. Dittman sells mainly through farmers markets.

"It depends on where you're located," Loth said. "If you're rural, it's best to sell to a distributor instead. Having a metropolitan is good for this type of cheese — we're not making block cheddar, we're making gourmet French cheese. Think of the type of cheese you want to make and match it to the market."

Pricing is also important for dairy operators: It has to be competitive but it also has to cover the cost of production.

"It costs \$4 to \$5 per gallon to produce just the milk," Loth said. "I know that large dairies can produce milk for less than that, but I can't."

And that doesn't include the cost of making it into cheese, which varies depending on the type of cheese. It takes two pounds of cheese per gallon to make soft cheese, more for feta cheese, and the yield really drops off for hard cheeses. "So then we're selling our cheese for \$10 to \$11 per pound," Loth said.

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