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Improving in Style

For the past year, we have worked to let people, just like you, know what exciting programs and projects we have been working on. It is unique projects such as assisting a landowner plant a prairie of their dreams, or helping a farmer realize their dreams in farming that makes involvement in River Country so worth while.

In the last three months, we have closed out another great year, hired two more staff members, hosted the largest value added conference on record and joined the National RC&D in Washington. Yes! We have been busy!

All of these activities would not be possible without our supporters and volunteers. Today, I'd like to recognize two supporters that have helped us become more visible.

With the help of two great people we are able to hang our sign with our new logo in front of our office. Steve Stokke from WRR Environmental Services and Jay Bearson from Jay's Sign Service donated their time, talents and monies to develop our new sign. Featured in the picture below is the staff showing off our new logo and sign. Both Council and Staff truly appreciate this generous gift.

Sincerely,

Heather Flashinski
Executive Director



Standing: Pam Herdrich, Brian Brezinski, Heather Flashinski, Mary C. Anderson, Melanie Oetzman. Kneeling: Linda Lubarda and Marian Green. Missing from the photo is Lance Klessig and Nancy Bergman.

Midwest Value Added Hosts over 210

Every farm is a business and attendees of the 8th Annual Midwest Value Added Conference learned how to make steps towards developing a successful business. Features included developing a business plan, marketing to your customers and most importantly customer service. New products highlighted included goat milk soap, bottled milk, ice cream, honey products, maple syrup suckers, fish, wine, and grass fed meats.

The keynote speaker, Harold Lloyd, was enthusiastically received as he spoke about "Superior Customer Service". Mr. Lloyd stated, "Customer service is a vital component in the value equation customers expect from the businesses they patronize."

General Session speakers included Jerry DeWitt, Coordinator for agricultural programs for ISU Extension, speaking on *Value Added Sustainability*; Kathleen Schuler on *Farming, Food, Health and the Environment*, from the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy and Fred Kirschenmann, from the Aldo Leopold Center on *Are We Ready for the Market?*

New this year was the Farm Life Exhibit tour at the Chippewa Valley Museum. Attendees had the opportunity to jump a bus and see the museum. People exclaimed, as they came back, that the exhibit was wonderful and definitely tugged on their heartstrings.

All the food from the conference was sourced locally from value added producers. One attendee commented, "The food was absolutely delicious!!"



Tradeshow participants learn about ALL the opportunities

Calendar of Events

March 2, 2006
River Country Council Meeting

March 2, 2006
Coulee Graziers Meeting
Roger Kaufmann's and Jerry
Wagner's Farm

March 8, 2006
Red Cedar Meeting

March 13, 2006
St. Croix Graziers Meeting
Red Barn Café
Spring Valley, WI

March 14, 2006
NW WI Regional Food Network
6:00 pm
Old Depot
Menomonie, WI

March 15, 2006
Chippewa Grazing Meeting
11:00 am
Country Kitchen
Cadott, WI

March 16, 2006
Coulee Graziers Meeting
Bruce Anderson Farm

NW Wisconsin Food Network

The NW Wisconsin Food Network is a collaboration of value-added farmers and agency staff. The group is focusing in two areas: helping farmers market their products, and encouraging people to buy local. Pam Herdrich (NRCS Coordinator) has been participating in the group.

The group is currently working on publishing a farm fresh atlas. It will cover all of the counties within the River Country RC&D Area with the additions of Monroe and LaCrosse. The atlas is a tool which the group hopes to increase ag-tourism and direct marketing opportunities for participating farms.

Andrew Dane (UW Extension) was successful in obtaining a small grant from UW Extension to help cover the cost of publishing the atlas. They hope to publish at least 50,000 copies which will be distributed to tour companies, libraries, Chambers of Commerce, Tourism Councils, and area businesses.

The design of the atlas will loosely follow farm fresh atlases from other areas of the state. It will include a regional map, showing the locations of participating farms and related businesses. There will be corresponding information about each farm or business. It will include directions to find the farm/business, information about the products and services they provide and whether or not you need an appointment to visit the farm/business.

At the last meeting, the group identified the lack of USDA inspected/State of Wisconsin Inspected Meat processing and slaughter facilities in this area of the state as a barrier to marketing value-added meats. They are forming a subcommittee to work on this issue. Pam will be participating in this work.

The next meeting of the group will be on Tuesday, March 14th at 6:00 PM at the Old Depot in Menomonie. Anyone interested in participating in the group is welcome.

For more information about the NW Wisconsin Regional Food Network or the Farm Fresh Atlas contact Pam Herdrich at 715-834-9672 or pam.herdrich@wi.usda.gov

Bugle Lake Restoration Update

The Bugle Lake Project continues to move forward, despite the federal budget eliminating allocations towards it. This winter has brought a flurry of activities and Nancy Bergman has been coordinating an educational effort with the local civic groups on what's happening with the design of the lake. NRCS representatives as well as our own staff have met with the DNR fisheries Biologists to determine the bottom contours of the lake. This will assist in NRCS designing the bottom for recreation as well as fisheries habitat.

Coulee Graziers Education Update

The Coulee Graziers have planned a fantastic winter schedule with on-farm meetings based on detailed discussion meetings held last winter. Several of the host farms are expanding their livestock out-wintering practices and are showcasing their stock handling techniques, animal cleanliness, and location and placement for critical weather periods. These meetings are being held in Jackson, Buffalo, Trempealeau and Eau Claire Counties—please call Mary C. Anderson at the Whitehall Office if you plan to attend.

Grazing Technical Assistance Update

Normally this time of the year is spent working on reports and educational programming for the winter and summer seasons. This year a different trend is taking shape. Farmers are calling, coming into the office, and emailing for grazing assistance. Our Goals for the 2007 for planning acres is off to a great start and will only get busier the closer we get to the 50 degree nights and the fresh smell of green grass for the cows to harvest!!!

Proposed in President Bush's 2007 Budget is elimination of the Wisconsin Grazing Initiative Funds. These are the funds that we apply for to fund our grazing specialists. Please write your representatives and stress the importance of maintaining this funding!

St. Croix Valley Grazing Network

For the 2006 calendar year the River Country Grazing initiative will take another step forward in providing a well balanced service to the local grass farmer and the River Country area by carrying on the tradition of farmer driven networks into the western counties of the River Country area, including St. Croix, Pierce, Dunn, and Pepin. The St. Croix Valley Grazing Network will use the same framework that has been laid down by the farmers of the Coulee and Chippewa grazing networks, that of being a farmer driven network with aid and facilitation in coordination from River Country Grazing staff.

After some research, talking with both with grass farmers and resource professionals in the area about the St. Croix Valley Grazing Network, it was decided to hold an introductory meeting with the hopes of jump starting a farmer driven network in that area.

This meeting will be held at the Red Barn Café in Spring Valley, WI, March 13th, 2006 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The meeting will include a formal introduction from River Country RC&D Grazing Staff, Mary C. Anderson and Brian John Brezinski, discussing what the River Country Grazing Initiative has to offer to farmers practicing grazing. Keynote speaker, Andy Hager, will provide his knowledge and experience of

over 20 years of working with grass farmers in North Central Wisconsin. To conclude the meeting, a farmer panel comprised of grass farmers from the Coulee and Chippewa Grazing Networks out of West Central Wisconsin will discuss the benefits of farmer driven networks and grass farming. This panel will include farmers from Dairy, Beef, and Sheep grass farms.

A pre-registration fee of \$15.00 is due by March 10th covering the meeting, materials, and lunch. The day of the meeting, walk-ins will be charged \$20.00. For more information in relation to registration, please contact Brian John Brezinski, Grazing Lands Technician - River Country RC&D, (715) 834-9672.

[Directions: From Hwy 94, take the US-63 exit- EXIT 19- toward BALDWIN / ELLSWORTH, turn LEFT onto US-63, turn LEFT onto WI-29, end at W4890 State Road 29, 8 miles west of Spring Valley, WI]



Polk County Waste to Energy

The County is interested in developing and implementing a bio-energy project. Pam Herdrich is helping them research information about converting waste to energy. They may be requesting additional assistance from River Country in the future.

Special thanks goes to the following donors:

Co-op Credit Union
Dunn Electric Cooperative
LaVonne Amundson
1st National Bank
Eau Claire Energy Coop
University of Illinois
Jay's Sign Service

AgStar Financial Service
Kmart of Menomonie
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MN Fruit and Veg. Assoc.
The Cooperative Foundation
LaVonne Amundson
US Fish and Wildlife Service
MN Inst. For Sust. Agriculture
City of Independence

CHS, Inc.
Laura Slowiak
Xcel Energy
FC Wisconsin
MN NCR SARE
WRR

Pay it Forward

After a short break, Tracey Mofle (River Country Volunteer) and Pam Herdrich started to work again on funding our Pay it Forward project. When funded, the project will connect Rice Lake youth with area value-added farmers through internships and class projects. There is a strong community service component which includes the kids growing food (vegetables or meat) and donating a portion of what they grow to local food pantries.

Tracey and Pam are expanding the partnership and involving local community groups with the project. As a part of this effort, they set up a meeting with the Barron County Food Pantries, UW-EXT Food and Nutrition Specialist, Barron County office on Aging and West CAP to talk with them about the proposed project and find out what their needs are.

During the course of the meetings, the group decided that the area needed a planning effort to identify area needs for food, problems and barriers that need to be addressed, possible ways to tackle them. Establishing a plan for the area would also help with Tracey's and Pam's effort to fund the Pay It Forward project.

West CAP submitted a letter of intent to USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES) for a Community Food Planning Grant with assistance from Pam Herdrich. If accepted, the grant would pay for the establishment of a Food Council addressing the issue listed in the above paragraph. The Food Council will be in the River Country Area.

Driftless Area Initiative awards River Country Dollars to support Project

The Driftless Area Initiative has granted \$20,000 to help implement conservation practices on the uplands in the WI portion of the Lake Pepin Watershed. This money is part of a grant that the Driftless Area Initiative received from the WI State Office of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Pam Herdrich is working with David Sander (Pierce County Land Conservationist), Mark Biel (NRCS District Conservationist, Pierce County), representatives from DNR and Trout Unlimited to identify matching dollars and location of the project. We hope to finalize and start work on the project this spring.

Building Leadership

Vice President Ed Weber and Executive Director Heather Flashinski attended the National Association of RC&D's Leadership Forum in early February. They attended sessions on speaking with legislators, hiring the right people, basin programs and coordinating the most beneficial state association.

On the third day in Washington DC, Ed and Heather were joined by Don Bina from Southwest Badger RC&D to visit with Congressman and their staff on the hill. They had the pleasure to meet face to face with Senator Herb Kohl. Topics of discussion included RC&D programming, Managed Grazing, Bugle Lake and the Driftless Area Initiative. They also met with staff from Senator Feingold, Representative Obey and Representative Kind's Offices.

RC&D's in the Nation have been put on the hot seat with President Bush's FY2007 proposed budget. Even though River Country is a non profit organization, we receive a portion of funding from the Government in the form of one staff Coordinator and office space. In FY2007, the President is proposing to eliminate over half the coordinator positions. This would negatively affect our abilities to assist people like you. Please contact your local federal senators and representatives and let them know that reinstating the RC&D into the federal budget will benefit your community.

Con't Calendar of Events

March 17, 2006
Plant a Dream Event

March 28, 2006
Coulee Graziers Meeting
Gary Olson Farm

March 30, 2006
DAI Lake Pepin Meeting
10:00 to 2:30
Coffee Mill Golf Course
Wabasha, MN

April 3, 2006
Prairie Seed Arrives
Volunteer opportunity

April 5, 2006
Board of Directors Meeting

April 22, 2006
Earth Day
Celebration in Owen Park
Eau Claire

May 24, 2006
River Country Annual Meeting
and Elections

*Chippewa Graziers network is
planning spring and summer
events. Watch for these events!*

New Employees

Joining our team of knowledgeable staff includes, Melanie Oetzman and Lance Klessig, both part time staff.

- Melanie is a prairie specialist by trade. She will be coordinating our conservation projects including prairie seed bulk order, prairie partnership, and the conservation cooperation project. Check out our website for more information from her.
- Lance joins our grazing staff. His background in beef cattle and environmental education gives him the knowledge for working with those interested in managed grazing. He will be writing grazing plans, organizing educational events and helping with the research that is going on in the Coulee region.

Connecting is the Key

Each of us in our own special way affects our community and environment. Wouldn't you like to say that you have positively influenced that around you? We have many opportunities for you to do just that. You can get involved with a current program or let us know what issue you want to address in your community. Some options for involvement include volunteering, becoming a member or providing program ideas. Here's how to get involved...

- ❖ **Volunteering** – Check out our website or come and visit with our staff. We have projects that will fit anyone's interest areas. Our staff will help you find the project that interests you and let you know how you can get involved from there.
- ❖ **Membership** – Membership allows you to actively influence the organization's activities. There are 4 membership levels. Our staff will assist you in explaining the benefits of membership as well as the logistics.
- ❖ **Program Ideas** – In order to effectively meet our mission, we ask that program ideas be applied to an application and sent to the River Country office. It will be reviewed within two months by the Board of Directors and results delivered to the applicant.

With all of these opportunities for involvement, we ask that you call the office. We would be very happy to help you out and look forward to the opportunity to help you connect to your community and environment.

I would like to make a significant investment in our community by making a gift to the River Country RC&D Giving Circle.

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| _____ River and Country Society (\$5000 or more) | _____ Silver Circle (\$500-\$999) |
| _____ Diamond Circle (\$2500 - \$4999) | _____ Bronze Circle (\$150-\$499) |
| _____ Platinum Circle (\$1500-\$2499) | _____ Associate Circle (\$35-\$149) |
| _____ Gold Circle (\$1000-\$1499) | |

_____ For three years, I pledge the above amount. Total Gift: _____

My Gift will be Paid by:

_____ Payment Enclosed (check # _____)
_____ Direct Billing_ Once (date) _____ or _____ Quarterly
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Name: _____

Spouse: _____

Home Address: _____

Home Phone: _____ Email: _____

_____ I/We wish to remain anonymous.

River Country RC&D Council, Inc.
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The Council

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Staff

Heather Flashinski
Executive Director

Mary C. Anderson
Grazing Specialist

Brian Brezinski
Grazing Technician

Melanie Oetzman
Conservation Project Specialist

Lance Klessig
Grazing Lands Technician

Nancy Bergman
Bugle Lake Assistant

Linda Lubarda
Accountant

Marian Green
Administrative Assistant

NRCS
Pam Herdrich
RC&D Coordinator

Photo by Lesley Zuehls