

Dennis Johnson: 1940-2020

Back in the 1990s, while working as a Land Stewardship Project organizer, Audrey Arner was facilitating meetings of pasture-based livestock producers in western Minnesota when she noticed a new face popping up in the back of the room. It was Dr. Dennis Johnson, a dairy scientist from the local University of Minnesota experiment station who had done cutting edge research and traveled the world to see the latest innovations in agriculture. But he wasn't there to tell farmers how to produce livestock. He was there to listen.

"He was so discreet — he offered information only when he was asked for it," recalls Arner, who raises grass-fed beef cattle.

Dennis Johnson's ability to listen with an open mind, offer advice when asked for, and dig into the basic questions of what truly makes livestock farming viable for producers and the communities they support will be sorely missed. On Aug. 25, he passed away after a long battle with cancer. He was 79.

Johnson's passing is not only a loss to the larger agricultural community — he played a pivotal role in LSP's work to make sustainable farming systems a component of the U of M's research and outreach efforts. Paul Sobocinski, a southwestern Minnesota hog farmer who just wrapped up a 25-year career as an LSP organizer, recalls that Johnson served on LSP's State Policy Steering Committee while he was on the staff of the U of M; a brave choice, given that LSP is often at odds with the University over its reluctance to support sustainable agriculture.

"Dennis wasn't afraid to speak up," says Sobocinski. "He stood up so clearly on what he thought was right."

Dennis was also a member of LSP's board of directors, serving as chair at one point. "He was an empathetic, astute leader who would listen to farmers' and board members' concerns and ideas and who forged compromises while holding true to his values," says George Boody, who was LSP's executive director while Johnson served on the board.

Even before his involvement with LSP, Johnson did a bit of a pivot in mid-career. When he arrived at the U of M's West Central Research and Outreach Center in 1968, Johnson, like most dairy scientists, focused on developing and promoting methods that produced increasing amounts of milk at all costs. Pastures were replaced with cornfields; large free stall barns and manure lagoons popped up next to milking parlors.

"I concluded there was no future in grazing at the station," Johnson recalled in a 2010 *Land Stewardship Letter* article.

But in the 1980s, Johnson started noticing a troubling trend. Dairy farmers who had made major herd expansions and adopted the industrialized CAFO model, often as a result of the advice of experts like Johnson, were not necessarily making more money. In fact, many were going out of business, even though they were excellent managers.

In 1990, Johnson took a trip to New



Dennis Johnson in a grazing paddock at the West Central Research and Outreach Center in 2010. (LSP Photo)

Zealand and Australia to see firsthand an alternative system that had the reputation for producing milk without a heavy reliance on expensive inputs: managed rotational grazing. The scientist was impressed with what he saw Down Under, but found in this country it was difficult to get good research data on rotational grazing.

So what did he do? He went to the farmers who were leading the way on grass-based agriculture. That's what brought him to the meetings being led by Arner. It was also what prompted him to travel the state, visiting pioneers in pastured based production systems to learn their methods and what their research needs were.

By the mid-1990s, the West Central Research and Outreach Center's dairy herd was being managed via rotational grazing and the station was hosting regular pasture walks for farmers. Thanks to Johnson's work and lobbying efforts on the part of LSP members and staff, in 2007 the Minnesota Legislature designated over \$1 million for research into organics. Today, WCROC, as it's known, is the only U.S. land grant experiment station where an organic dairy herd is being

managed next to a conventional one. By the time Johnson retired in 2010, WCROC was known for the major strides it had taken in studying pasture mixes and herd improvement. His successor, Brad Heins, has continued innovative work in areas such as cover crops, milk quality, and integrating solar electrical generation into pastured systems.

"Dennis's deep roots on the land informed his research and academic career in profound ways," says Dan Guenther, a pioneering Community Supported Agriculture farmer who served on LSP's board with Johnson. "But equally important to Dennis was helping to share his passion with those with little or no farming background. He knew that broad support for publicly funded research required getting as many people as possible out on the land to see firsthand that animals on grass made ecological sense for the health of the land and the people."

After leaving the U of M, Dennis and his wife, Carole, volunteered frequently in their local community of Morris, Minn. They were deeply involved in efforts through the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America to alleviate world hunger. They also helped launch LSP's Land Legacy initiative through a generous gift of farmland.

"Dennis cared about the policies affecting people's food, and he worked at making our food fair, safe, and environmentally friendly for citizens worldwide," recalls southeastern Minnesota dairy farmer Bonnie Haugen, who also served with Johnson on LSP's board.

When one lives a life that has a positive impact on not only people, but the land they live and work on, signs of that impact are present long after they're gone. Arner recalls that when her farm was making a step-by-step transition to converting more row crops to perennials, Dennis would encourage her to just "plant the whole thing in grass."

"And I didn't think that was likely at the time. Well, of course, that's what came to pass," she says. "So often when I look out at the landscape so different from the cropland we are surrounded by, I think of Dennis." □

More on Johnson's Legacy

In episode 81 of the Land Stewardship Project's *Ear to the Ground* podcast, the late Dennis Johnson talks about how listening to farmers guided his approach to research into innovative farming systems: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/197.

For more on Johnson's impact on agricultural research, see the Summer 2010 *Land Stewardship Letter*: www.landstewardshipproject.org/about/landstewardshipletter.