

LSP



News

MISA's future in doubt

Link between university, public damaged by recent ag college actions

On April 7, Don Wyse was forced to resign as executive director of the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) by Charles Muscoplat, dean of the University of Minnesota's College of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences. This event has set off a storm of controversy over the future of MISA, whether sustainable agriculture research and education will become a more significant presence at a land grant university and the role the public plays in determining the future path of public institutions.

MISA was started in 1992 by a group of organizations called the Sustainers Coalition as a unique experiment in creating links between a land grant university and the public. The Minnesota Food Association's then Executive Director, Ken Taylor, led the efforts to form the Sustainers Coalition and develop the process that resulted in MISA.

The Land Stewardship Project was among the founding members of the Sustainers Coalition. LSP Executive Director George Boody says MISA was created out of a feeling that farmers utilizing sustainable and organic practices were being denied access to their own land grant university. Farmers seeking alternatives to the industrial model of agriculture in particular felt shut out of an institution that has increasingly become more dominated by agribusiness-funded research. MISA has served as a door through which farmers and others network with scientists who were doing work that could benefit them.

"Through MISA, scientists have gotten in contact with farmers they may never have met before," says Boody.

As a result, although it has operated on a shoestring budget of just a few hundred thousand dollars annually, MISA has notched some impressive accomplishments in a relatively short amount of time (see sidebar on page 5).

But all of that has been put in jeopardy

by recent events, say members of the Sustainers Coalition and the MISA board of directors. The turmoil began when Muscoplat announced earlier this year that he was going to review all centers in the agriculture college to see where significant cuts could be made. Muscoplat maintains that he supports sustainable agriculture research and that



his hands are tied: budget cuts throughout the agriculture college are forcing him to take a chunk out of everyone's pie.

"One real constraint to our goal for sustainable agriculture—and to the range of efforts across our college—is the budgetary belt-tightening required at the University of Minnesota," wrote the dean in a letter dated April 27.

However, as early as Jan. 24, Muscoplat called for a review of the future of MISA and other centers.

"...we are continually faced with important new opportunities that we are unable to act upon for lack of new resources," he wrote. "These realities mean that we have no option but to make some hard choices, to be creative in looking at the use of available resources, and in seeking new ones."

It is becoming increasingly clear that the "new opportunities" the university, under Muscoplat's leadership, would like to act upon center on genetic engineering. This spring, the university successfully sought funds from the Minnesota Legislature for a new \$10 million plant genomics center. That will match \$10 million Cargill has already put into the

center. This, coupled with the agriculture college's already overwhelming emphasis on research related to industrial agriculture, raises concerns about the balance of research and education activities taking place at the institution, says Boody.

Muscoplat is also ignoring the fact that MISA had a review three years ago (and is due for another one in two years). This review was done by farmers, researchers and outside evaluators. They concluded that the institute was doing an excellent job of fulfilling its mission, says Boody.

Nevertheless, a 25-page summary of MISA's accomplishments and future goals has been submitted to the dean, who is slated to make a decision on the center's future by fall.

Sister Mary Tacheny, chair of the MISA board, says perhaps the most troubling aspect of all this is that it undermines the whole idea of the public partnering with their university, and having a say in how it is run.

"That's what really MISA was built on. It was just another model of how the research person out in the field can partner with the farmer," she says. "Those researchers really serve at the behest of all citizenry, not just industrial agriculture. This partnership is basic to the whole founding of the land grant. There are people who would like to forget about the land grant's mission to the public, but it's the law."

Wyse, a respected weed scientist, had been director of MISA since its inception. Neither he nor Muscoplat will comment publicly on the reason for the scientist's departure from MISA, other than to say it was for "philosophical" differences.

But according to MISA bylaws, only the institute's board has the power to accept the director's resignation. Muscoplat has said that Wyse is his employee and the bylaws don't apply to the office of the dean. Since mid-April, several meetings have been held between MISA Board members and university officials, including Muscoplat and Vice President and Provost Robert Bruininks and Vice President Sandra Gardebring. Recently, the Sustainers Coalition met with central administration officials. The coalition is seeking additional meetings in an attempt to rebuild the trust and garner commitments on the specifics necessary for the MISA partnership to function. Rebecca Knittle, a Minnesota Food Association board member and a partici-

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nant in the Sustainers Coalition, notes that "the efforts that are underway, both by university administrators and the sustainer organizations, to try to salvage the unique partnership that is MISA may succeed if the university is willing to continue sharing power as it has for the past 10 years."

The threat of losing MISA has raised the ire of people representing many aspects of Minnesota agriculture. The president of the university, Mark Yudof, has been deluged with hundreds of letters and e-mails from farmers and others concerned about the center's future.

Austin, Minn., farmer and Land Stewardship Project member Dwight Ault serves on the Alternative Swine Task Force that was created with the help of MISA. He says the way this issue has been dealt with has reinforced his belief that the agriculture college sees sustainable agriculture as "merely a nuisance."

Carol Ekarius farmed for 10 years in Minnesota before moving to Colorado. She says she was able to contact an entomologist through MISA to get help on alternative fly control methods in their dairy operation. Her family also used MISA to network with other farmers.

"One thing that has been disappointing to me is that [Colorado State University] has no comparable program for farmers," she says.

Boody says members of the university's central administration have told the Sustainers Coalition they are committed to sustainable agriculture, and have shown a desire to see MISA continue to exist. The next step is to translate such verbal support into the kind

What has MISA developed in 8 years?

✓ **Information exchange.** This initiative is devoted to developing sustainable agriculture information to the public, via printed and electronic means. Electronically, the MISA Web site (<http://www.misa@tc.umn.edu>) has proven to be an invaluable resource for farmers and others interested in sustainable agriculture. It includes an interactive, "Ask MISA" section. MISA has developed five printed publications on subjects like direct marketing and assessing soil quality. Four more are due out by the end of the year.

✓ **Graduate minor in sustainable agriculture.** This is available to any masters or doctoral student enrolled at the University of Minnesota.

✓ **Alternative Swine Systems Program.** This program has brought farmers and researchers together to develop a research and educational system that supports sustainable pork production. Some of the results of this have been the Swine Source Book, the Alternative Swine Task Force and a research center at the West Central Research and Outreach Center in Morris, Minn.

✓ **Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships.** These partnerships bring together diverse groups to discuss complex issues and identify research needs. The program is now established in five regions across the state.

✓ **Enhanced Landscape, Food Systems, Human and Animal Health Initiative.** This was developed to facilitate interdisciplinary work within the university.

✓ **Farmer Summit.** A farmer-led network designed to create long-term solutions that support healthy food and farming systems and thriving rural communities.

✓ **Sustainable Farming Systems Team.** This consists of on-farm and experiment station research, demonstration and educational activities to examine the economic and environmental impacts of sustainable farming systems.

✓ **MISA Competitive Grants Program.** This program has helped fund such Land Stewardship Project initiatives as the Monitoring Team and the Beginning Farmer research team.

✓ **Theodora and Arnold Johnson Undergraduate Research Fellowship.** This endowment is designed to provide undergraduate students with the opportunity to do research on a topic related to sustainable agriculture.

✓ **School of Agriculture Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems.** This provides the unique opportunity to bring in expertise for a period of time ranging from two weeks to one year. Farmers, rural sociologists and activists have filled this chair thus far.

of action that will give sustainable agriculture the support it deserves at public institutions, he says.

"Rather than reduce our focus on

sustainable agriculture, it's time for land grants across the country to increase their emphasis on this ten-fold. The need is getting greater all the time." □

Help MISA now

The next few months are critical ones as the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) fights to stay in existence. Are you a farmer, student or anyone else who feels MISA is a valuable link between the public and the University of Minnesota?

Write a letter and send it to some key decision makers now. Letters that describe how MISA has helped you are particularly valuable. For tips on what to include in such a letters, contact any of the Land Stewardship Project's offices for a MISA action alert.

These are the key people who need to hear from the public:

• **Charles Muscoplat**
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• **Board of Regents**
The 12-member Board of Regents is the governing body of the University of Minnesota. The legislature elects one regent from each of Minnesota's eight congressional districts and four from the state at large. For information on who your regent is and how to contact them, call 612-625-6300.