



GEMSAF Engages Wisconsin's Diverse Sustainable Agriculture Community



Figure 1: Mexican graduate students pack CSA boxes with Mexican employees at Harmony Valley Farm, near Viroqua, as part of their training for GEM/TIES project in Oaxaca.

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Summary: GEMSAF began 2006 by exploring Wisconsin based sustainable agriculture organizations and initiatives, including participation in several local, statewide, and regional conferences. Following up on this GEMSAF organized training events with multiple partners in Southern WI: Organic Valley, Harmony Valley Farm, Dane County Farmers Market, and Madison Area CSA Coalition during the summer months. GEMSAF also organized a local, sustainable food menu for the EMSU 2006 conference hosted by GEM in June. In the fall and end of the year, GEMSAF developed

new partnerships to enhance sustainable agriculture efforts in Central and Northern Wisconsin: FEAST, a local food council in Ashland; recruiting a GEMSAF graduate student; PriceDirect farmers' marketing group in Price County, and Central Wisconsin growers from the Central Wisconsin Farm Fresh Atlas. On campus, GEMSAF works with student organizations on campus garden and farm-to-school projects as well as a weekly sustainable agriculture campus radio show.

I. Exploration of Wisconsin's Sustainable Agriculture Initiatives

Across Wisconsin, but particularly in the southern half surrounding the urban centers of Milwaukee and Madison, and the rural southwest, are upwellings of sustainable agriculture activities. These come from a history of grassroots consumer endeavors like cooperative buying clubs as well as conservation minded farmers that have always led the nation, which have recently emerged into the mainstream in the way of organic food shops, CSA's, and neo-farmers markets. With the popularity of these activities, progressive groups are forming around the state to go even further into the mainstream. They include diversification of local, organic products by forming regional marketing groups; expansion of farm businesses from farmers markets into LLC structures; farm-to-school initiatives; on-farm energy production through biofuels; on-farm research and training activities for new and young farmers; and farmer support networks, particularly for growing number of women farmers. Below are examples of state and regional organizations working towards these sustainable agriculture initiatives.



The Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (www.moses.org) is a leading national organic agriculture organization



located in Wisconsin. The Upper Midwest Organic Farming Conference held annually in LaCrosse, organized by MOSES for 18 years, is the highlight of many farmers' year. It includes workshops, keynote speakers, networking, and agro-entertainment.



Wisconsin Homegrown Lunch is a farm to school program working with the school district in Madison, WI. It is organized by REAP Food Group (www.reapfoodgroup.org), a non-profit organization of community members, educators, and farmers working to enhance local food culture. Growing from the same roots, the Dane County Food Council (www.co.dane.wi.us/foodcouncil), works at the policy level to promote sustainable agriculture, for example revising public transportation routes to local food markets.



The Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition creates a space for CSA farms in southern Wisconsin to share resources (www.macsac.org). Their programs include a seasonal guide to cooking local food, atlas of CSA farms, providing nutritious food to low income residents, and health insurance rebates for CSA members.

Home Grown Wisconsin is a cooperative of 25 Wisconsin farms that direct market produce to high value urban markets in the Chicago and Milwaukee areas. This diversifies their market in addition to local farmers market, CSA, and restaurant sales.

There are also numerous farmer training and education organizations, notably including Growing Power (www.growingpower.org), Michael Fields Agricultural Institute (www.michaelfieldsagainst.org), University of Wisconsin Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS) (www.wisc.edu/cias/), as well as UW Extension.

II. Training Students and Resource Managers Through Farm Visits

In June, GEMSAF manager organized field trips to *Organic Valley (CROPP) Co-op* headquarters in LaFarge, WI for two GEM groups: a team of five graduate students from the GEM/TIES Health Watersheds program in Oaxaca, Mexico, and a group of twenty-five international resource managers participating the GEM Watershed Management Seminar. These groups learned about the history of how the cooperative began and how its market area, product line, and farmer member base have grown exponentially since then. What began in 1988 as a local organic cooperative, the Coulee Region Organic Producer Pool (CROPP), has since grown into the largest Organic Farmer Cooperative in the world with over 900 farmer members across the United States. Known initially for its organic milk, Organic Valley now produces everything imaginable, from vegetables, eggs, meats, and grains, to fruit juice (www.organicvalley.coop/our_story/index.html).

Following this experience, the graduate student team traveled just down the road to one of the dairy farmer members of Organic Valley. The farmer told his story about the difficulties of conventional dairy farming; rising property taxes and farm inputs, while milk prices fluctuated wildly, which nearly drove him out of farming. Then he and a small group of friends decided to join the Co-op. Now he says they are making a profit and enjoying farming again. He remembers his conventional farming neighbors laughing at him when he first transitioned to organic. He says they have now either joined the co-op or sold their farms. Perhaps most importantly to him, he can now see a way that his son and daughter can carry on the family farm tradition when he retires in a few years.

After their visit to Organic Valley, the Mexican students traveled to *Harmony Valley Farm*, one of the oldest and most successful Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms in Wisconsin. Farm owners Richard DeWilde and Annake Winkop gave the

students a pick-up truck tour of the 200 acre farm, a mosaic of vegetable and berry fields, pasture, and woodlots, divided by a trout stream and natural buffer zones. Then the students had the opportunity to work with some of the Mexican farm staff packing the weekly CSA boxes for the Minneapolis delivery. They lined up on the assembly line, each student responsible for inserting a different item into the box: romaine lettuce, bag of spinach, bunch of beets, purple and green kohlrabi, punnet of strawberries, sugar snap peas, and a garlic scape to top it all off (see photo on page 1). Over lunch Annake described how the delivery system and weekly correspondence goes. The farm supplies over 200 CSA members, Dane County Farmers Market, and Viroqua Food Co-op all on a weekly, year-round basis. This requires an incredible level of farm planning and marketing coordination (www.harmonyvalleyfarm.com).



Figure 2: Tulips and the Dane County Farmers Market in June (www.dcfm.org).

The GEM International Watersheds Management Seminar group visited the *Dane County Farmers Market* where the Market Manager, Larry Johnson, informed them about the history and management of the nationally renowned, producer only market (www.dcfm.org). The *Madison Area CSA Coalition* director, Laura Brown, also described the outreach efforts of her group to connect local farmers with restaurants and consumers. Following these presentations the international delegates toured the farmers market to sample edible project ideas from over 200 vendors selling thousands of varieties of fresh produce and value added farm products.

III. EMSU Local Sustainable Food Menu

From June 26-30th, 2006 GEM hosted the 4th Environmental Management for Sustainable Universities (EMSU) international conference in Stevens Point. With the mission of this conference, “Building Sustainable Communities Beyond University Campuses”, GEM

showcased how to make connections to the local community foodshed by serving a menu full of locally and sustainably grown products.

The menu included diverse, organically produced vegetables, meats, cheeses, breads, juices, cookies, coffees, teas, yogurt, milk, and fruits; the vast majority coming from small-scale, Central Wisconsin farms. Throughout the conference, GEM spotlighted the origin of the food, including a speech that described the farms that supplied the conference and importance of buying local, sustainable food.

GEM incurred greater cost to provide a sustainable menu. Not simply in terms of price per pound for organic meats, but in the costs of forging new relationships between the Country Springs Hotel and Convention Center and the local agriculture community. During the planning stages GEM sat down with the chef and food purchaser to rework the menu options to reflect foods in season during June. With a list of quantities from the chef, GEM contacted farmers to discuss supply, delivery, and prices. The outcome of this event was a network of fifteen regional suppliers (see EMSU food letter document).

The response from the delegates and conference participants was overwhelmingly positive. GEM hopes that they will take this model back to their campuses and conference events in their home countries. GEM also hopes to build upon this experience with Country Springs and other institutions, and farmers to enhance the local food market and distribution system, which is discussed more below.

IV. Initiating Central and Northern Wisconsin GEMSAF Partnerships

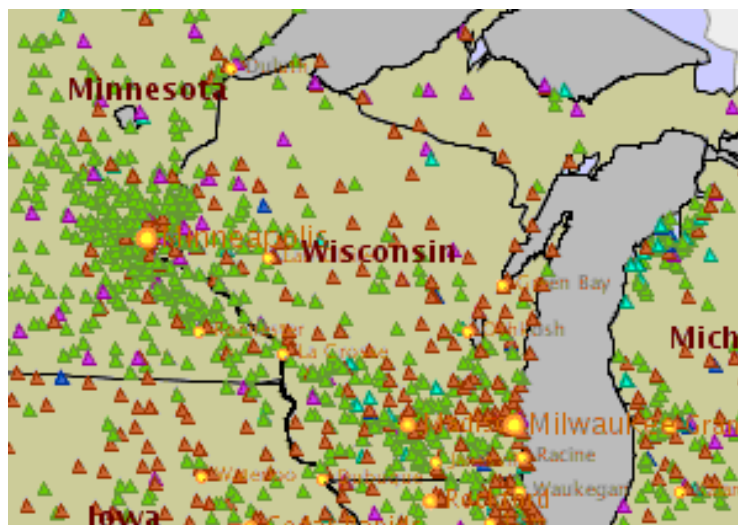


Figure 3: A significant void of CSA farms (green) and farmers markets (red) in the northern third of Wisconsin, in comparison to the south. Map from www.FoodRoutes.org, a free, nation-wide local food atlas and information resource.

A. *FEAST (Food Security, Education, Access, Sustainability, and Traditions) Council* is a non-profit organization based in Ashland, Wisconsin. Its members include farmers, UW Extension agents, NRCS agents, students, educators, tribal leaders, US Americorps Volunteers, and others. FEAST supports the Chequamegon Bay

Community with numerous progressive events, including: mobile farmers markets, summer garden tours, Slow Food harvest dinners, nutrition education, sustainability discussion groups, and cleverly themed monthly campaigns like “March for Food”. These activities are coordinated by volunteer time from FEAST members and Americorps VISTAs, and supported by different grants.

GEMSAF contacted FEAST through the strong ties GEM has established in Ashland and Bayfield with GEM Student Interns working on community gardens at both [Bad River and Red Cliff bands of the Lake Superior tribe of the Ojibwa \(Chippewa\) Nation](#), and GEM Graduate Student, Rhea Martinez’s research with the Three Sisters traditional gardening system. GEMSAF met with FEAST in February and March, 2006 during community events, like the Chequamegon Organic Conference and FEAST monthly meetings.

The similar goals of FEAST and GEMSAF, to promote sustainable agriculture production and regional food systems provided a strong spirit of collaboration. GEMSAF announced a graduate student opportunity with FEAST to study the strengthening and creation of marketing in the Chequamegon Bay Foodshed, which was filled by a FEAST Americorps VISTA, DeNae Dandridge, in September 2006 and solidified the GEM/FEAST partnership (See GEMSAF M.S. Opportunity document).

- B. *Price Direct* is a direct marketing cooperative of farmers in Price County, organized by UW Extension Agents Jane Hansen and Mark Kopecky. This group has published a local atlas for Price County, which severely lacks urban marketing opportunities, and created and rejuvenated several farmers markets. GEMSAF interacted with PriceDirect farmers and organizers during events in Ashland and Ladysmith (Heart of the Farm-Women in Farming Conference), and developed an interest in the particularly challenging obstacles to reclaiming their food system. Later in October, GEMSAF made a presentation at the PriceDirect Harvest Banquet, describing research activities with sustainable agriculture and forestry in Wisconsin, Kenya, and Mexico.
- C. In 2006 a group of community members, UWSP faculty and students, and Golden Sands RC&D published a *Central Wisconsin Farm Fresh Atlas* listing 36 local farms that practice sustainable agriculture. These farms include CSA, farmers markets, farm and truck stands, u-pick, and other direct marketing as their primary sales. The atlas was widely distributed as a resource for consumers to find sources of local food.

During fall 2006 GEMSAF engaged the atlas group regarding the possibility of a second addition or evaluation of its successfulness. Several producers in the 2006 atlas felt the atlas did not increase their sales, despite consumer demand for local products (a separate GEMSAF informal survey of Main Street Restaurants). This question inspired members of the atlas group and others to start meeting weekly for breakfast to discuss ways forward. Gradually this group became the *Farmshed*

(www.Farmshed.org), and has been working over the fall to design community events for 2007.



Speed Dating for Farmers
Food Networking for Restaurants,
Retailers, and Producers

Wednesday, March 14th, 6-8PM
Schmeckle Reserve Visitor Center
2419 North Point Drive, Stevens Point

Come meet local farmers, chefs, and retailers to discuss business opportunities in the local food economy.

Just in time before Spring planting, you'll get a chance to have numerous one-on-one conversations to coordinate local supply and demand.

For more information, visit www.farmshed.org

Figure 4: A flyer for an exciting upcoming Farmshed event.

V. UWSP Campus Movements

- A. In 2006 the *Sustainable Agriculture and Communities Society (SACS)* student organization grew a UWSP campus garden. The SACS group stems from a group of GEM Student Interns and GEM Student Ambassadors who formed the group upon returning from field projects in Ashland, WI and Kenya. SACS secured a vacant urban lot on campus to develop into the demonstration garden. Adjacent to a bank parking lot and heavy, brick fire department, the student-run garden is an oasis of flowering vegetables and colorful, young minds.

The 2006 garden included a three-sister's garden, a traditional method of intercropping heirloom corn, bean, and squash varieties, inspired by the research of GEM graduate student Rhea Martinez. Other activities in the garden include compost making, raised beds, and square meter gardening. To extend the growing season, SACS erected a hoophouse in November for growing winter greens! The group accepted donations for vegetables every Sunday at the garden, and planned other educational events.

In 2007, GEMSAF graduate students and staff are helping SACS plan the expansion of the garden to feed into campus dining services, particularly the College of Professional Studies café, a for profit dietetics kitchen lab teaching students seasonal cooking and eating with sustainable, local produce. The garden also plans to accept

and compost yard and food waste, and construct a roadside stand to increase sales. Although UWSP has no agriculture curriculum, SACS and GEM are leading the way for natural resource management and other disciplines to explore sustainable food systems and communities in action.

- B. The *University Center Dining Committee* was created by the UWSP Chancellor to elicit the strategic planning of students in the development of food policy for the remodeling of the University Center. The UC is funded entirely by student fees, thus the services provided by the center should be a direct reflection of student desires. This committee formed under the leadership of Student Body President, Ross Cohen, to tackle issues of menu, nutrition, food sourcing, availability, and preparation.

The UC Dining Committee met weekly throughout the fall semester of 2006 for breakfast at the Debot Dining Hall. The committee includes students from numerous academic programs, student body representatives, faculty (GEMSAF). Also present at the meetings were members of the dining services. By the end of the semester the committee had created guidelines for UWSP Dining Services provider (Chartwells), which include nutrition information and standards; vegetarian and vegan choices; organic, local, and fair trade options; and menu themes. The Committee plans to continue meeting in the spring semester to delve deeper into farm-to-campus opportunities.

- C. GEMSAF created the *Tuning Fork Radio Show*: the show that tunes you in to what's on your fork, during the fall semester of 2006. This was primarily a response to the popular support for local food and sustainable agriculture discussion on campus through the *Sustainable Agriculture and Communities Society (SACS)*, of which GEMSAF also participates as a faculty advisor. The show is hosted by the GEMSAF manager, John Sheffy, and GEMSAF Graduate Student, DeNae Dandridge. The format of the weekly program includes reports from Private Potato Eye, local food detective; seasonal recipes and growing tips; interviews with farmers and other local guests; and inspiring commentary on delicious issues.

VI. 2007 Priorities

- Participate in Wisconsin Local Foods Summit, Jan 4th 2007 and continue to collaborate with regional and statewide initiatives
- Implement GEMSAF graduate research project on Strengthening and Creating Markets in the Chequamegon Bay Foodshed, with FEAST and DeNae Dandridge
- Explore further collaboration opportunities with PriceDirect, including GEM Student Internships for diversifying direct marketing and production techniques
- Play a leadership and information resources role in the Farmshed organization
- Expand the UC Dining Committee and SACS into a campus-wide food policy council, including students, faculty, dining services, local farmers, and parents
- Continue entertaining and informative commentary on Tuning Fork radio show