

New American Farm Conference

Advancing the Frontiers
of Sustainable Agriculture
Kansas City, March 25-27



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Sustainable Agriculture Movement Affects Land Grant Universities

KANSAS CITY, MO – Jerry Dewitt, long-time sustainable agriculture advocate and leader, offered a snapshot of how far we've come with sustainable agriculture and the impacts the movement has had on the nation's land-grant universities.



But he alerted the 800 attendees at SARE's 20th anniversary New American Farm Conference in Kansas City March 25-27 that "the journey's not done."

Dewitt, director of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture in Ames, Iowa, a member of the North Central Administrative Council and a former interim director of the National SARE program, offered these signposts on the sustainable journey so far:

1. We have added to the vocabulary surrounding food and agriculture, with terms like community supported agriculture, free range, organic, locavore, food miles, composting, grass-fed beef, carbon footprint. "When we change our vocabulary it changes our thinking," said Dewitt.
2. We have invested in new centers for sustainable agriculture, at least a dozen, at our land-grant and other universities.
3. We have added to the curricula at many universities. "But we've only started," said Dewitt. "We have so much more to do."
4. We've brought new voices to the table.
5. We have embraced "organic" agriculture.
6. We have learned to acknowledge the value of on-farm research. "This has been a real change at the land-grant universities."
7. We have recognized the need for community in our mission.
8. We have instituted a sustainable agriculture program at more than 100 land grants in the country through the Professional Development Program.

9. We have learned that farmers and ranchers are great teachers.

“It’s not so much what we did,” said Dewitt, “but how we did it. We listened. We invested. And we have begun to put the culture back in agriculture.”

But there’s more work ahead, he said, listing nine challenges for the future:

1. We need to redefine what we mean by agriculture.
2. We need to focus on the commonality of significant issues, not on the perceived fringe differences.
3. We need to continue to bring new voices to the table.
4. We need to research and document the economic components of sustainable agriculture.
5. We need to investigate the multi-functionality of sustainable agriculture. “We still think in single components.”
6. We must immediately concentrate on the food, health and agriculture relationship.
7. We need to develop new models of a profitable, sustainable agriculture without petroleum.
8. We need to increase our documentation of the impacts of sustainable agriculture.
9. And, finally, said Dewitt, we need to partner widely, listen more and assume less.