



New American Farm Conference

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Time to Raise the Sustainable Bar For All U.S. Ag, Says 'Rock Star'

KANSAS CITY, MO – In 2000, Judy Gifford was awarded a SARE Farmer Grant to study the nutrient balance on her Maryland dairy farm – and so began her affair with SARE.

“SARE is one of the few groups where you walk in as a farmer and they treat you like a rock star,” said Gifford, who now serves on Northeast SARE’s Administrative Council and is co-chair of the National SARE Outreach Steering Committee.

Gifford told her story as a keynote speaker during SARE’s 20th anniversary New American Farm Conference March 25-27 in Kansas City.

Raised on small farm in northwest Connecticut, Gifford, who had long dreamed of operating a sustainable dairy, said her own farm in Maryland bears little resemblance to her dad’s.

“I wanted to graze as my fondest memories as a girl were herding cows,” she said.

Before she became a self-described “dairy maid,” Gifford served as a 4-H agent and spent seven years working on dairy issues, two for a Wisconsin congressman and five as a lobbyist for the National Milk Producers Federation.



Judy Gifford

Today, Gifford and her partner, veterinarian Bob Fry, own and operate St. Brigid’s Farm in Kennedyville, Maryland, near the headwaters of Chesapeake Bay, grazing dairy and beef cows rotationally on 62 acres.

“Our farm is a postage stamp in a sea of conventional farming,” said Gifford. “We turned a conventional dairy into a management-intensive grazing opportunity.” Grazing is the

key. “We had two Irish guys come and they didn’t want to look at anything but our grass,” she said.

Given her inclinations, it’s not surprising that Fry and Gifford’s original plan for the dairy mirrored SARE goals: profitability, environmental stewardship and community support, plus animal welfare.

The grazing scheme on St. Brigid’s Farm has helped them achieve those goals.

Take profitability. The farm grazes 70 registered Jersey milking cows and 85 heifers and steers on 62 acres that yield 6 tons of dry matter per acre. The dairy cows produce 1.2 million pounds of milk a year sold to Land O Lakes. And the grass-fed beef and veal is marketed locally to restaurants and individuals. “Direct marketing is a challenge, but we’re learning as we go,” she said. Bottom line: an annual profit over the last five years of \$1,280 per acre.

As for environmental stewardship, the 2000 SARE Farmer grant helped with monitoring the mass nutrient balance of phosphorus and nitrogen, allowing the farm to develop a nutrient management plan, which it continues to follow.

As a staunch advocate for SARE and sustainability, Gifford said she would like SARE to embrace as a goal for the next 20 years trying answer the question: How can SARE be an influencer?

“Our population is growing and agriculture is diminishing,” she said. “It’s time to back out of our comfort zone and find new partnerships and alliances to take sustainability to the whole of agriculture.”

And she envisions the SARE website as a go-to place for farmers and ranchers to find objective, cutting-edge information on agriculture.

“Our goal is to raise the bar for all of agriculture,” said Gifford. “I’d like to be able to go to the grocery and buy food that doesn’t need any label.”