

# Women, Food, and Agriculture Network

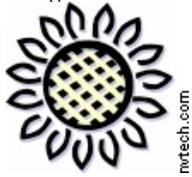
*Linking and empowering women to build food systems and communities that are healthy, just, sustainable and that promote environmental integrity.*

A Quarterly Newsletter

Winter 2006

## Voices Project Premiere

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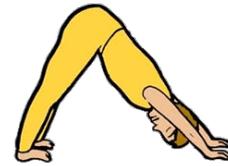
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## Shepherds at Last

*When children's author Catherine Friend agreed to help her partner Melissa start a sustainable farm raising chickens, grazing sheep, and growing wine grapes, she quickly found herself in over her head as she struggled to transform herself into a farmer. The result is her forthcoming book, *Hit By a Farm*, to be published by Marlowe & Co. in May, 2006.*

It was July, and we now had a house, a perimeter fence, two metal buildings, two goats, and no more money. The time had finally come to get up close and personal with ram testicles, so we drove down to Lanesboro in our newly purchased farm truck, a 1987 grey Ford F-150 pickup with a really bad skin problem. Melissa was so proud of this ugly thing she practically

puffed up as she drove. We had to sell my beloved Red Isuzu Trooper to pay for the pickup, so I was still pouting a little. We borrowed a friend's plywood racks to raise the sides of our pickup high enough to contain animals.

We were buying 50 ewe lambs from Lee, and two ram lambs. She raised hundreds of breeding lambs every year, and we were lucky to be able to buy from her. She had an old barn, one of those fascinating fading red structures I'd always seen from the highway but had rarely entered. Once inside the musty barn, I wrinkled my nose at the sharp smell of manure. Lee stood in the midst of forty ram lambs, born early that year, each lamb now weighing about 60 pounds.

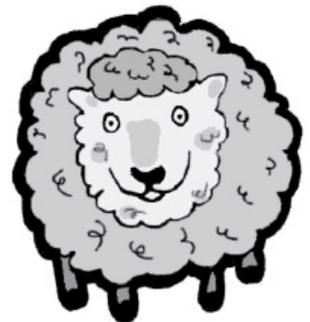
"Take your pick," she said proudly, waving her arms toward the ram lambs. As we waded into the bunch, they bleated and ran for the corners of the pen. Melissa and I looked at each other and

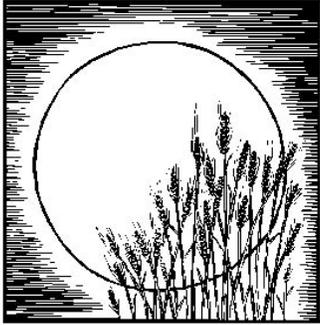
shrugged, so she dove into the pack of lambs and came up with a squirming, kicking ram lamb. I stepped back, wondering if there was some way to choose two ram lambs without actually touching them.

Melissa tipped the small animal back on his rump, and we bent over him to examine his testicles, just as we were taught in the sheep class.

"Not exactly sixteen inches, are they?" I whispered. Only six months old, this little guy's scrotum was the size of a squashed tangerine.

(Shepherds at last, continued on page 7)





## Voices Project to Premiere at WFAN Annual Meeting

The Voices Project, a series of dramatic theatre scripts developed from the actual experiences and voices of American farmers, will make its Iowa debut at WFAN's first annual meeting on the evening of Friday February 3rd.

The event will be staged as a readers' theatre, an accessible and informal participatory presentation method in which people come together for informal, out-loud readings. The performance of the script will require 13 actors and a stage with a table and two chairs. Scriptwriter Barbara Carlisle believes that anyone can act and in any place and at any time. The performance will be followed by facilitated conversation/dialogue exploring the issues and feelings and impacts of the characters – farmers - voices.

This is certainly an evening not to be missed! Come and take part in this innovative presentation aimed at: changing perceptions about farmers and farming in the 21st century; rediscovering the pleasure of locally produced food; and empowering individuals to make healthy and purposeful choices about food.

Join us at Walnut Hills United Methodist Church, 12321 Hickman Road at 6 pm for WFAN's annual meeting. Register your voice as we solicit feedback from members and friends of the organization. Then, stay for the "Voices Project" at 7 pm. Both events are held in conjunction with INCA's annual meeting.

## Women, Food, and Agriculture Network

This newsletter is published by the **Women, Food, and Agriculture Network**, a Tides Center Project. We welcome suggestions, stories, and news from your part of the world. Our emphasis is on women's lives, their relationships, communities and families. We welcome first person articles, analyses, book or video reviews, original poetry and art, and letters to the editor. Deadlines for upcoming issues:

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Address: 59624 Chicago Rd

Atlantic, IA 50022

712-243-3264

Newsletter Production:

Denise O'Brien

[Denise@wfan.org](mailto:Denise@wfan.org)

Cassi Johnson

[Cassi@wfan.org](mailto:Cassi@wfan.org)

Katy Hansen

[kwhansen@ia.net](mailto:kwhansen@ia.net)

Stacey Brown

[staceyleighbrown@yahoo.com](mailto:staceyleighbrown@yahoo.com)

WFAN website: [www.wfan.org](http://www.wfan.org)

## Calendar

### January 13-14th, 2006

Practical Farmers of Iowa Annual Conference  
Des Moines, Iowa

See [www.practicalfarmers.org](http://www.practicalfarmers.org) for more details.

### January 20-21st, 2006

Minnesota Organic Conference and Trade Show

St. Cloud, Minnesota

Call MDA at 651-296-7686 for more details.

### January 25-28th, 2006

Eco-Farm 2006

Pacific Grove, California

See [www.eco-farm.org](http://www.eco-farm.org) for more details.

### January 27-28th, 2006

Midwest Value-Added Conference

Eau Claire, Wisconsin

See [www.rivercountryrccd.org/valad.htm](http://www.rivercountryrccd.org/valad.htm)

for more details.

### February 3rd, 2006

WFAN Annual Meeting

Urbandale, Iowa

See this page for more details.

### February 3-4th, 2006

Iowa Network for Community Agriculture  
11th Annual Local Foods Conference

Urbandale, Iowa

See [www.growinca.org](http://www.growinca.org) for more details.

### February 10-11th, 2006

Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society  
Winter Conference

Fargo, North Dakota

See [www.npsas.org](http://www.npsas.org) for more details.

### February 24th, 2006

Upper Midwest Organic Farming Conference  
La Crosse, Wisconsin

See [www.mosesorganic.org](http://www.mosesorganic.org) for more details.

### April 6-7th, 2006

National Extension Women in Agriculture  
Education Conference

St. Louis, Missouri

See [www.agrisk.umn.edu](http://www.agrisk.umn.edu) for more details.

# Women, Food, and Agriculture Network Adopts New Giving Structure

--Stacey Brown, Coordinating Council Chair

If you are like me, each year you receive letter after letter in your mailbox from various organizations asking you to renew your membership or make a donation (including your annual fund letter from WFAN). I enjoy getting these letters and reading about what organizations are doing to support issues I care about, but I find it fairly difficult to decipher the differences between becoming a member or just giving money. What is the benefit to me as a member or donor of these organizations and is there a difference? For some of them it is clearer than for others.

The Coordinating Council of Women, Food & Agriculture Network has been asking these questions of our own organization of late and has decided to change how we have operated in the past as a membership based organization. Until now, WFAN has been a "paid" membership organization. This system has encouraged that for a fee you could participate with WFAN and be considered a member. However, hypothetically if you don't pay the fee, you wouldn't be able to participate with WFAN. This practice has not exactly been enforced and started us thinking about what being a member of WFAN really means. We think that this system is not positively encouraging people to become involved in the activities, issues, and programs that WFAN supports.

The Coordinating Council thinks that if someone makes a gift, volunteers important time or supports an activity, that they should be considered a supporter of WFAN, rather than basing it all on if they paid their membership dues for the year. In order to be a viable organization, we need people like you to support our work and activities. We want to be able to send

you the newsletter each quarter, offer you our listserv, and host meetings and speakers for you around the state. To do that and encourage your giving, we send out our Annual Fund letter each fall.

Then in the past we have sent out our membership renewal letter at the beginning of each year. It is confusing to you, our supporters, what we are asking for in each letter.

We want to make this easier for you so that you can have a more positive experience in your support of and involvement with Women, Food & Agriculture Network. So, what does it mean exactly, making this change and opening up our membership? The Coordinating Council believes it will mean that WFAN will be able to help you feel more comfortable as a supporter, expand its' base of interested persons, and help get the word out about WFAN.

In the short run, it will also mean that our membership fees will be transferred to asking for an Annual Fund gift. Both of these processes encourage people to invest in the organization and provide important and valuable operating monies. By opening up the definition of membership, we will be recognizing everyone who gives any size of gift, monetary or time, and it will allow WFAN to encourage a larger investment in the organization. As a supporter of WFAN, you will continue to receive the benefits of the newsletter and the listserv, and receive invitations to important events, activities, and the Annual Meeting.

In the long run, WFAN will be a stronger organization because we will be able to more efficiently and effectively communicate with you, our supporters. You will be able to give to our Annual Fund each year without having it be on top of your

membership dues and you will have more opportunities to support the programs and projects of WFAN that you care about most.

This is the time of year when you are expecting your membership renewal letter in the mail. We know that many of you wait each year for this letter to continue your support of WFAN. In place of this letter and to start 2006 under our new system, we are inserting an envelope into this edition of the newsletter for you to send in your gift in place of your membership dues. We know and understand that this transition may be a little confusing and may take some time to figure out so we want to make it as smooth as possible. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or concerns that you may have.

We hope that you have noticed that the Coordinating Council has been hard at work trying to strengthen the roots of WFAN so we can become a strong voice for women in agriculture across the United States. This is just another step in working to better serve you, our supporters. Please consider giving this year to help us continue working on our mission, and so you can stay informed and involved in the important work of Women, Food & Agriculture Network through our newsletter and listserv throughout this year and the years to come. We hope to see you at the Annual Meeting in February!



# National Women in Sustainable Agriculture Conference

*Burlington, Vermont October 21-23, 2005.*

Conference attendees in a workshop entitled "The Right Tool for the Job"

Photo courtesy of [www.farm-garden.com](http://www.farm-garden.com)

*WFAN member Kelsey Heeringa reflects on her experience at the conference.*

I look back on my notes from the Women in Sustainable Agriculture Conference in Vermont last October, and I see in the middle of a session, my handwriting scrawled "why do we live in Iowa?"

It was an exciting and overwhelming conference, often a peek at a day in the life of sustainable agriculture on the East Coast. And... it is not exactly the same as my experience in the Midwest. I learned about the support that sustainability increasingly finds with the residents of those small states, and the amazing programs that have been developed as the cause and result of it. Resources and networks surrounded us, struggles and cele-

brations were discussed in the context of constantly moving forward.

It made education work in Iowa seem extra hard, as though we were somehow so far behind. I imagined the miles of monoculture waiting back home, and reasoned maybe we should just move to Vermont. There seems to be a welcome home out east for our passions.

Of course, this logic did not last long.

What Vermont ultimately made me realize is there are great things happening on the cutting edge, and others with us in our work of sustainability. But I also suddenly saw how desperately Iowa needs all of us to stay, tilling soil and growing beans right in the belly of the beast. We need to stay where and when it is hard,

because sustainable progress desperately needs to happen here too. Besides, I already tried to leave Iowa twice, and something keeps bringing me back.

I believe in the women I have met around the place I call home, standing strong and beautiful in their space between the stretches of cornfields. All of us in the Midwest are essential because we are in the heart of agriculture, and the heart is what needs to change the most.

I suppose I ended up answering my own questions then: I think we live in Iowa because we need to.

Kelsey coordinates educational programming on ZJ Farm in Solon, Iowa.



## Vandana Shiva in Ames

--by Kathleen Lane

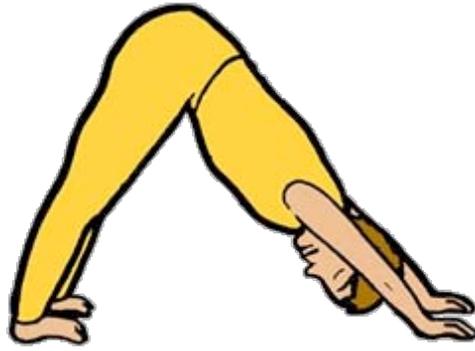
"Not until diversity is made the logic of production will there be a chance for sustainability, justice and peace. Cultivating and conserving diversity is no luxury in our times; it is a survival imperative."

The World Affairs Department at Iowa's land-grant university (ISU) brought Vandana Shiva on Halloween and what a treat it was. The brief lecture allowed time to merely touch on important themes but she was inspiring. She spoke of IPR's (Intellectual Property Rights) being extended to life forms; and food aid being exploited as "dumping" for profit. She spoke of "commons versus commodities" and illustrated this by the inherent right to save seed being criminalized.

A physicist by training, Vandana's introduction into issues of food and agriculture was in 1982 when she learned of an attempt to patent an herb indigenous to India. She became involved and one could say that she never looked back....but that wouldn't be quite accurate. She tracks a time-line from Columbus being granted privileges of discovery and conquest over "empty land". The empty land mentality holds that any land that is not being "improved" (read exploited) is vacant and basically up for grabs. Vandana maintains that today we are experiencing "the second coming of Columbus" though, "The primary threat to nature and people today comes from centralizing and monopolizing power and control". This mentality perpetuates the idea that we inhabit a world without limits where unchecked profit-motivation results in decreased food security, increased hunger, disappearance of indigenous knowledge and destruction of the earth.

This recipient of a Right Livelihood Award, in a calm yet resolute manner, invited the audience to examine our values and to consider a worldview quite different from what we may have been trained and taught. I think she makes her case that "it is a survival imperative".

Kathleen Lane works in advocacy and consumer education on issues of food safety, local food systems and sustainable agriculture. She is a nutritionist in private practice in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.



## Upside Down

The world looks different upside down

The blood rushing to my head

"Hold it there," the yoga instructor coaches

New thoughts that can slip in and old ones, gripped by gravity, are released when I'm upside down.

The music, gently swirling like galaxy gases, invites my upside downness to linger longer than this particular yoga move.

Upside right again and I feel the rearranging of energy, closing with namaste

Even upside right I'll carry some upside down.

-- Jan Libbey



## Coordinator's Corner

The beginning of a new year gives me a fresh sense of starting anew. Never mind that there is carry over from the previous year. For some reason, those seem to have a new face as well.

WFAN is growing and becoming the organization that women envisioned in 1997. Through hard work and diligence, the Coordinating Council is moving the organization to the next level. In August Cassi Johnson was hired to fill the position of Program Assistant. Cassi hit the ground running and has done an incredible job. As Executive Director and the only staff person since the beginning, I appreciate Cassi's energy and willingness to help define Women, Food and Agriculture Network. She has worked hard on the strategic plan, program development and fundraising. Through her efforts WFAN received a small grant to gather information and data on women's perspective of the 2007 Farm Bill. This work will place WFAN as a major player in the formation of the Farm Bill. Cassi has also been elected to the Coordinating Council of the Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (MSAWG) where she will represent the interests of WFAN.

WFAN will hold its first ever annual meeting in February. After the business meeting there will be a premier showing of Cynthia Vagnetti's WHAT WILL BE IN THE FIELDS TOMORROW? A Performance for Thirteen People Exploring the Voices of Sustainable Agriculture.

The core of the Voices Project are dramatic theatre scripts developed from the experience and actual voices of American farmers taken from a unique research base of oral history interviews. In 1991 documentary photographer and video producer Cynthia Vagnetti set out to document the experiences and actual voices of American farmers and ranchers; men, women and children. Over the past 15 years Vagnetti has collaborated with community-based organizations, state humanities councils, private foundations and USDA agencies resulting in over 100 farmer interviews in 25 states. More than 2,000 documentary photographs and nearly 200 hours of videotaped oral history interviews and contextual footage are what we draw from.

# Are we feeding the world or slowly killing it?

-by Kristin Corey

“You are what you eat” is a phrase common to most of us, but what does it really mean? If we are what we eat, and what we eat is full of preservatives, genetically-modified organisms, high fructose corn syrup, trans-fatty acids and artificial chemicals, then I guess that makes us synthetic as well (or at least obese and disease-ridden). In a world full of cheap, fast, chemically-laced food, how do we define what it is that we actually label “food”? Better yet, what does this “food” do to our bodies?

In his book, “Fat Land” Greg Critser points to the linkages between what Americans eat and how these types of foods affect our bodies. He documents that over the past several decades, due to our diets, we have seen a tremendous increase in type II (adult-onset) diabetes (especially among children), coronary artery disease, gallstones, fatty liver disease, steatohepatitis, cirrhosis of the liver, cancer, and obesity (Critser, 142). In many cases, these diseases could be otherwise prevented; in others, such as certain types of cancers and heart disease (to a certain extent) heredity plays a major factor. But heredity cannot account for the enormous increases that we have seen over the past several decades in the number of type II diabetes and obesity cases reported among children. Critser points out that “between 1966 and 1994, the obesity prevalence among children jumped from 7 percent to 22 percent” (Critser, 74). Furthermore, he adds that between 1992 and 1999, type II diabetes cases among children spiked from 2 to 4 percent of all diabetes cases in 1992 to nearly 45 percent of diabetes cases reported among children in 1999. The tremendous increases in these two diseases have caused many in the health community to wonder what exactly lies behind the nation’s newest and some would argue, some of the most alarming, health issues plaguing our nation? What exactly is making our children so unhealthy?

The answers to these questions are not simple ones, but to a certain extent, common-sense linkages can be made by looking at the facts. Since I grew up in Iowa and currently live here, I will use two of the products that have major origins in Iowa and end up in most of the foods produced in the United States – high fructose corn syrup and partially-hydrogenated soybean oil, which are pro-

duced from (respectively) corn and soybeans, Iowa’s two main crops.

High fructose corn syrup, a common ingredient in many of the foods that end up on our shelves, is popular in many foods because of its ability to make foods taste sweet. Unlike sugar, high fructose corn syrup is made – you guessed it, from corn, making it a very cheap commodity; whereas sugar is much more expensive. Therefore, high fructose corn syrup has replaced sugar in most of the products that end up in our grocery stores. In addition, high fructose corn syrup has another quality that sugar does not – it does not go through the same breakdown process that sugar does when it enters the body. Instead, high fructose corn syrup, when consumed, goes directly to the liver, completely intact (Critser, 136-137). This gives many of us the temporary “high” that we feel when drinking a bottle of pop (or soda, if you prefer). According to Bill Sanda of the Weston A. Price Foundation, the ingestion of large amounts of high fructose corn syrup can also lead to some nasty bodily effects, such as eventual cirrhosis of the liver (which has historically been linked to continual alcohol consumption); diarrhea; it has been documented to raise insulin levels of women who are ‘on the pill’; it can lead to losses of minerals (such as calcium, iron, magnesium, and zinc) in the body; induced aging (changes in the collagen of the skin); rising triglycerides; and rises in the levels of insulin in normal adults (Sanda, 1). Furthermore, the high levels of fructose (otherwise known as “empty calories”) can make us fat, and in the end, diabetic. With “pouring contracts” ending up in elementary, middle and high schools all over the country; increasing amounts of vending machines serving highly processed foods and soda scattered all over the landscape; and foods containing high fructose corn syrup dominating almost all grocery shelf space (if you do not believe me, look at your food labels), it is hard to argue that this simple ingredient does not play at least some role in the increasing rates of obesity and type II diabetes that we are seeing in this country.

Now, I will turn my attention to partially-hydrogenated soybean oil, otherwise known as the infamous “trans fat” that nutritionists have been warning us to avoid over the past several years. Partially-hydrogenated soybean oil, like high fructose corn syrup, ends up in many of the foods that Americans commonly eat – such as frostings, cakes, cookies, crackers, many types of peanut butter (such as Jiffy and other cheaper brands), most prepared frozen meats and fish, margarine, microwave popcorn, French fries, and whipped toppings to name a few (Bi-Medica, 1). Furthermore, partially-hydrogenated soybean oil is similar to high fructose corn syrup in an-

other way – it is used in processed foods in order for food companies to increase profitability because it is cheap to make. In addition, using this type of oil allows products to have longer shelf-lives and produce a nice, smooth “mouth feel.” On the darker side, this type of oil is known to have some very detrimental and dangerous health effects. According to the Bi-Medica web-site, [www.recoverymedicine.com](http://www.recoverymedicine.com), there are several studies that directly link the consumption of trans-fatty oils to the “development of diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular disease” (Bi-Medica, 1). The processes involved in making partially-hydrogenated oils allows these types of oils to have a different consistency than other fats, often having more artery-clogging and other detrimental properties than saturated fats (Bi-Medica, 1). These findings should make evident some very scary truths for a majority of the population of the United States – by eating trans-fats, we are slowly adding to many of the health epidemics that are taking over our nation...but more importantly, we are slowly (but indeed surely) killing ourselves.

So when food companies and manufacturers (as well as corporate farming businesses in the state of Iowa and elsewhere) claim that they are feeding the world, the general public has a right to be just a little bit cynical. Are we really feeding the world, or killing it? I will leave the answers for you to decide.

For more information on this topic, please feel free to visit the Bi-Medica web-site at [www.recoverymedicine.com](http://www.recoverymedicine.com) or the Weston Price Foundation’s web-site at [www.westonprice.org](http://www.westonprice.org).

Kristin is currently a graduate student in sociology and sustainable agriculture at Iowa State University. Her master’s work includes working on the Heartland Water Quality Initiative for ISU Sociology Extension under the direction of Lois Wright Morton. She worked as a Life in Iowa intern for WFAN during the summer of 2002.

## Bibliography

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Bi-Medica Web-Page. “Hydrogenated and Partially-Hydrogenated Oils – Killer Trans-fatty Acids.” 7 November, 2005. [http://www.recoverymedicine.com/hydrogenated\\_oils.htm](http://www.recoverymedicine.com/hydrogenated_oils.htm)

## 6th Annual Fall Harvest Gathering

*First-time Fall Harvest Gathering participant Hannah Lewis shares her thoughts on the weekend:*

The women's harvest gathering was about fellowship. It began after sunset around a fire at a log lodge like a cathedral overlooking a wooded south-east Minnesota valley. Around a circle, we warmed up to each other (strangers and old friends) by telling our stories—some spanning the course of decades, others just a few years—of how we arrived here, as women in sustainable agriculture. Every story hinged on choices made—to buy land or not, to form a particular partnership, to end a partnership, to keep a job with a hefty paycheck or to branch off toward somewhere unknown but somehow more like home.

On Saturday, we learned chainsaw safety—or how to confidently trim your own overgrown branches without having to ask the burly neighbor, and other topics of importance: grazing, the Farm Bill, the Slow Foods Movement international gathering, more stories of women farmers. We ate mostly locally produced food, graciously prepared by our hosts at the Good Earth Village in Spring Valley, Minnesota.

Hannah Lewis is a master's student in the Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture. She lives in Ames.



Angie Reinhart and Virginia Moser chat by the fire at the Fall Harvest Gathering

(Shepherds at last, continued from page 1)

We proceeded to choose two ram lambs, using scientific criteria like who had the cutest faces, and who Melissa could catch. Soon we had as many of the lambs, ewe and ram, as we could fit into the back of our pickup. We couldn't fit everyone, so Melissa would have to come back later for the rest of the ewe lambs.

"Are you sure those ram lambs won't mate with the ewe lambs?" I asked Lee. We had heard horror stories of rams jumping fences, rams mating through fences, causing all sorts of breeding havoc for shepherds. Some farmers had just given up and let the rams live with their ewes, which meant the farmer never knew when the lambs would be born.

"No, they're too young to breed," Lee assured me. "Around September, though, when the weather starts to cool, that's when you'll need to be careful."

Even so, I spent the entire drive home peering through the back window of the cab, ready to leap through and cause coitus interruptus if those ram lambs got any romantic notions. There would be none of that hanky-panky on our farm. There would be absolutely no unauthorized sheep sex until December. None. Ever. Never. But the lambs just huddled together, scared and adorable. Our Columbia-Corriedale-Targhee-Dorset-Finn lambs were small, with sweet white faces, a few with topknots of shaggy wool, a few with speckled Koala bear faces. My pride took me by surprise, closing off my throat. Holy smokes. We were shepherds at last.

We backed the pick-up to our new sheep pen, and opened the tail gate. Free, the animals leapt from the truck, ran thirty feet, then stopped to graze. We stood outside the pen, enchanted. We shooed the two ram lambs into their own paddock, where their sperm would be safely behind an eight-wire fence charged with 8,000 volts.

The ewe lambs grazed placidly, their stubby tails wagging now and then, their

round bellies swaying as they walked. Serene pastoral scenes filled my mind. This was going to be a piece of cake.

Catherine Friend farms with her partner in southeastern Minnesota, writes, edits, and can be reached at [crfriend@hcinet.net](mailto:crfriend@hcinet.net).

### Newsletter gets new look!

You may have noticed that this newsletter looks a little different. We've changed the look so we can communicate better with you. If you have any comments or suggestions, please email Cassi Johnson, [cassi@wfan.org](mailto:cassi@wfan.org).

If you are interested in receiving this newsletter electronically, please send an email to [Denise@wfan.org](mailto:Denise@wfan.org). You'll conserve natural resources, allow WFAN to shift precious financial resources to programming and advocacy work, and you'll see the newsletter in full color.

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