November 9, 1998

Dr. Steve Waller  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
13 A CAB  
Lincoln, NE 68583-0840

Dear Steve:

Thank you for your letter of September 30, 1998 asking us to submit a proposal to develop an evaluation system for North Central Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program. Enclosed is our response to this request. Please note that we have proposed a participatory approach to develop the evaluation framework and we plan to involve several scholars and practitioners in this process.

Please feel free to call us at 517-432-2210 or 517-355-6580 ext 214 if you have questions or need further information.

Sincerely,

Murari Suvedi, Ph.D.  
Coordinator

cc: Dr. Kirk Heinze, Chair, Ag & Extension Education, MSU  
Dr. Ben Bartlett, District Extension Dairy/Livestock Agent, MSU
Sustainable Agriculture Evaluation Framework Proposal

from
Murari Suvedi
Christoffel den Biggelaar
Susan Smalley

This proposal is a response to the September 30, 1998 “Request for Qualifications” sent to Dr. Murari Suvedi by the North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program.

Sustainable Agriculture

Since its inception, the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program has been unique among federal programs in its decentralization of decision-making and its meaningful collaboration among researchers, extensionists and farmers. In addition, the nature of sustainable agricultural systems — integrated, holistic, site-specific, balancing environmental, economic and social objectives — has called for approaches that differ from many more conventional agricultural efforts. One result of these differences is that many evaluation approaches used elsewhere in agriculture have not always been appropriate for use within sustainable agriculture.

Although there is no single definition of sustainable agriculture upon which everyone agrees, a general consensus seems to exist for three dimensions of sustainability — environmental, economic and social. Examining progress along these three dimensions, as well as the interaction and balance among them, provides a framework within which to identify and situate indicators of sustainability to evaluate the three program areas of NCR-SARE (Research and Education Grant Program, Professional Development Program and the Producer Grant Program).

Proposed Approach

Our approach will combine a literature review, focus groups and Delphi technique to identify and organize sustainable agriculture indicators and to develop a matrix of indicators and data collection methodologies to guide future NCR SARE evaluation efforts. Although the precise content of the matrix will be developed during the course of the proposed project, we anticipate that it will include indicators and methodologies for evaluation at the project, cluster and policy levels.

A review of literature will be conducted to study evaluation frameworks utilized by various programs and agencies related to (sustainable) agriculture. Based on the findings from the literature review and our knowledge and experience of evaluation and sustainable agriculture, a list of questions/issues pertaining to the evaluation of the NCR-SARE program will be developed as the basis for a focus group interview to solicit input from stakeholders.
The focus group is a data collection technique which came originally from marketing research. It consists of organized group discussions around a particular theme. Its purpose is not to come to consensus, but to gather and explore perceptions, thoughts, opinions and feelings about the issue or program of interest. We will draw from the list of present and past NCR-SARE AC and TC members to invite at least one person from each NCR state to participate in an initial focus group. These participants are involved in and knowledgeable about sustainable agriculture and SARE, and will represent a balance of farmers, researchers, extensionists, and others. The purpose of the focus group will be to seek the group’s input into the development of a list of potential indicators to evaluate future activities and programs of NCR-SARE.

The findings of the literature review and the inputs from the focus group interview will be synthesized to develop an initial list of evaluation indicators and corresponding data collection methods. This list will then be refined (using the Delphi technique) with sustainable agriculture professionals and practitioners in the North Central Region. The Delphi technique, first developed by the RAND Corporation as a means to determine directions of long-term trends, fits this process well. The technique consists of a series of questionnaires, each one more structured and requiring more focus than the previous one, to be sent to a group of people with exceptional knowledge about the subject being explored. It is future-oriented and allows establishing evaluation priorities for future SARE work. It is a technique appropriate in situations that benefit from collective subjective judgements. It allows for broad participation and some interaction with lower time and money costs than bringing people together face-to-face. It also minimizes the influence of strong personalities in face-to-face interactions.

Based on the findings of the literature review, focus group and Delphi technique, we will propose a forward based evaluation system that is built into NCR-SARE programs and activities starting with the request for proposal up to and including the reporting of results. The aim of this evaluation system is to collect information to measure the performance and progress of future activities and programs as they are being implemented, not to evaluate past projects and programs. Our team will share a draft evaluation framework with NCR-SARE AC and TC members during their Spring 1999 meeting for discussion and feedback. Based on the feedback, the evaluation framework will be modified and updated. A final evaluation framework will be presented to the NCR-SARE Administrative Council in June, 1999.

Response to Specific Information Requests

Below is a brief description of the expertise of project team members in the areas of (sustainable) agriculture and evaluation as requested in the “Request for Qualifications.” More detailed information about each project team member can be found in the attached curricula vitae.
1. Familiarity with agriculture, sustainable agriculture, SARE:

Dr. Murari Suvedi and Dr. Christoffel den Biggelaar recently completed “An Evaluation of the North-Central Region SARE Producer Grant Program.” Results will be presented at the November 1998 NCR SARE Administrative Council meeting. Dr. Suvedi has a strong agriculture background. He taught agricultural extension in Nepal for over 10 years before coming to MSU. Dr. den Biggelaar is an agronomist/agroforester with 18 years of experience in teaching, research and extension in agriculture and agroforestry in the Netherlands, US and Africa; he is presently a lecturer in sustainable agriculture and food systems at California State Polytechnic University at Pomona, California. He has served on the advisory panel of the MSU Sustainable Agriculture Network. Susan Smalley served on the NCR SARE Technical Committee and is a past co-chair of that group. She also serves as Michigan’s sustainable agriculture state coordinator and is deeply involved with Michigan Integrated Food and Farming Systems.

In addition, the project team has developed a process to draw upon sustainable agriculture expertise throughout the region. They will also call on expertise of colleagues at Michigan State University with significant SARE experience including Dr. Richard Harwood, Mr. Tom Guthrie, Dr. Bernie Knezek, Dr. George Bird, Dr. Rich Leep, and others.

2. Experience with evaluation:

Dr. Suvedi is the Program Evaluation Coordinator for Michigan State University Extension and coordinates the activities of the AEE Center for Evaluative Studies at Michigan State University. In this capacity, he has developed evaluation frameworks for and conducted evaluations of numerous projects and programs in the United States and abroad. Some of the recent studies include: The evaluation of the NCR-SARE Producer Grant Program; farmers’ perspectives of Michigan State University Extension; evaluation of the Great Lakes Sea Grant Network’s zebra mussel outreach activities for industrial and municipal water users; an evaluation of ABC in Science, an agriculturally-based curriculum in Sanilac, Michigan; evaluation of the Groundwater Education Teams providing Groundwater Education in Michigan, (GET-GEM); evaluation of the Water Quality Awareness Program of the Cooperative Extension System; W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s International Study Grants Program; an assessment of the utilization of Michigan Extension pesticide educational materials and programs; and the provision of leadership for the evaluation component of the Michigan Groundwater Stewardship Program as well as the implementation of baseline and formative evaluation studies for this program. Dr. Suvedi and Ms. Smalley conducted an evaluation study on selected portions of the long-term USAID-funded Agricultural Biotechnology for Sustainable Development project.

As a graduate assistant at the Center for evaluative Studies, Dr. den Biggelaar was the principal investigator for a feasibility study for a voluntary soil conservation credit program in the Saginaw Bay area of Michigan for the Saginaw Bay RC&D, and assisted with the studies on the zebra mussel outreach activities of the Great Lakes Sea Grant Network and a community needs
assessment for the Jackson County United Way. As a research assistant assigned to the USAID/DAI/MSU Rwanda Agricultural Statistics and Policy Analysis Project, he helped develop a survey instrument for a national agroforestry survey in Rwanda. During 1997-98, Dr. den Biggelaar was the coordinator of the evaluation component of the Michigan Groundwater Stewardship Program, and was a co-PI on the NCR-SARE Producer Grant Program evaluation. Dr. den Biggelaar has extensive experience with survey research, participatory research methods, and quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

3. Ability and experience to work across technical to quality of life range:

Members of the project team collectively deal with content that ranges across and beyond agriculture. Their collective academic work and experience includes both natural science and social science.

4. Capacity & experience to work with broad range of people and organizations:

Project team members have individual and collective experience working in a wide range of domestic and international settings, with adults of varying ages and means, both rural and urban. Team members have conducted evaluation studies for, or targeted at, various state and federal agencies and programs (USAID, Michigan Departments of Agriculture and Health, NCR-SARE, Michigan Soil Conservation Service, Great Lakes Sea Grant Program), universities (various departments and programs at Michigan State University), non-profit organizations (United Way, WK Kellogg Foundation, Michigan Association of Conservation Districts), schools and school districts, (agri)businesses as well as individual producers. Ms. Smalley is currently part of a Michigan State University Extension facilitator team that conducts multicultural self-awareness workshops for Extension staff across the state. Drs. Suvedi and den Biggelaar have worked extensively in cross-cultural settings and with broad range of people and organizations.

5. Examples of previous projects:

Drs. Suvedi and den Biggelaar designed and conducted “An Evaluation of the North Central Region SARE Producer Grant Program.” They also designed and have conducted evaluation studies for Michigan’s Groundwater Stewardship Program (MGSP), a large, long-term, multifaceted effort that includes some of the challenges we anticipate for this project. The MGSP evaluation activities include a baseline survey, formative and summative evaluations to measure progress and outcomes over time to help guide the Program and determine policies and future direction. The results of these evaluations is fed back to MGSP on a regular basis (in quarterly reports, monthly meetings, and reports issued on special studies). Among others, the evaluation results led to an increased effort to better promote and profile the program, helped determine priority areas for cost-share items, and created greater awareness of the importance and necessity of education and technical assistance among MGSP partners (MDA, Michigan Agribusiness Association, Farm Bureau, Association of Conservation Districts and NRCS).
6. Estimation of time and funds:

Anticipated Time-line

Early December 1998
Receive notification of NCR SARE decision. Finalize list of 12-15 experts representing the diversity of NCR sustainable agriculture and invite them to participate in a focus group. Review literature to identify potentially relevant indicators for sustainable agriculture.

Early January 1999
Conduct focus group in central location. Use group to determine most critical aspects of agricultural sustainability for this project; decide what information would be most useful for this project; and identify additional NCR SARE stakeholders to be involved in future design phases of project.

Late January 1999
Finalize list and invite about 75 stakeholders to participate in Delphi technique to identify evaluation indicators for project. Use results of literature review and focus group to prepare initial list of indicators which will include economic, environmental and social aspects.

February & March 1999
Conduct three rounds of Delphi process
Round 1: Provide a long list of potential indicators and ask participants to rate each for its importance and to add indicators that may be missing.
Round 2: Provide a revised and shortened list based on Round 1 results.
Round 3: Provide a final list based on first two rounds and request approval or specific change suggestions.

April 1999
Provide indicator list and progress report to NCR SARE Administrative Council and to Delphi participants.

May & June 1999
Investigate past and current use of indicators. Identify and/or develop data collection methods for each indicator. Create matrix of indicators and methods as framework for NCR SARE evaluation system. Review matrix with initial focus group participants. Provide final report to NCR SARE Administrative Council.
Tentative Budget

(If selected as contractor, we will refine budget and submit through Michigan State University Contract and Grant Administration)

Personnel

Salary for 2.5 months of time from project team members 9500

Fringes ($9500*0.318) 3021

Undergraduate student assistance (prepare mailings, enter data, etc.). 2 students @20 hours/week for 13 weeks @ $7/hour; 2*20*13*7= $3640 3640

Travel:

15 people travel to Chicago for focus group 15*$600=$7500 9000

PI travel for follow-up, validation, reporting 3000

Room rental & refreshments for focus group (based on costs for room, lunch, coffee at O’Hare airport Skyway meeting room) 600

Mail packets to 75 Delphi participants @ $5 = $375 375

Telephone 6 months @ $50 = $300 300

Total 29436

7. Other:

Curricula vitae for proposed project team members are attached.