SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This document reports on a comprehensive evaluation of the NCR-SARE Producer grant Program covering the period 1992 to 1996. During this five-year period, 657 producers from the twelve-state region applied for a grant, of whom 157 were awarded one. A number of producers applied more than once, while a limited number were awarded more than one grant during the five-year period. The actual population for the study consisted of 574 ‘unique’ individuals, 137 of whom received a Producer Grant and 437 who did not. The 437 Non-recipients were divided into two groups of 213 and 224 for the purpose of this study. In addition to the survey, we conducted telephone interviews with a random sample of 10% of non-respondents, and visited 19 Grant recipients in the North Central Region for personal, more in-depth interviews about their experiences with the Producer Grant Program.

The mail survey had an overall response rate of 47%, ranging from 63% for Grant Recipients to 39% for the long version of the survey to half of the Non-recipients. The shorter Non-recipient survey had a response rate of 45%. The lower response rate for the group of Non-recipients can be explained by the fact that Non-recipients felt less obliged to participate in the evaluation as their proposals were not funded. In addition, comments made by respondents in this group revealed that there was a lot of bitterness among them because their proposals were rejected without any feedback about the reasons for rejection and ways they could improve their proposals for (a hopefully successful) re-application in future years. Grant Recipients, on the other hand, appreciated the program and felt they had to give back something to help it move forward. Overall, response rates were higher for the later years (1994-1996) than for the first 2 years of grant cycles (1992-1993). A telephone survey of a random sample of 10% of the non-respondents revealed that there were no significant differences between them and farmers who did respond to the survey, so that respondents can be considered representative of the entire population of grant applicants.

Demographic characteristics of Grant Recipients and Non-recipients - With one exception (level of education), there are no significant differences in the demographic characteristics of Grant Recipients and Non-recipients. Although there are some differences in the number of acres owned and farmed, value of annual gross sales, mix of crops and livestock, and age between Grant Recipients and Non-recipients, none of these differences are significant. The findings of the survey do show a weak but highly significant correlation between Grant Recipients and Non-recipients in the level of education. In other words, the higher the level of education, the more likely applicants were to receive a Producer Grant. This bias may be inherent in the nature of a grant program requiring written proposals. It does not mean that less-educated applicants do not have good ideas about innovative sustainable agricultural practices, but they may have more difficulty in describing these ideas well in a written document.

Another force, however, could be at work to explain the education bias: Nearly twice as many Grant Recipients than Non-recipients (60% vs. 35%) received assistance to complete their grant applications. This phenomena calls up an interesting question that would need further
investigation: Do better-educated producers write better proposals, or are better-educated producers more able to verbalize their ideas and interest ‘outsiders’ (extension agents and specialists, researchers and various government and non-government agencies) to help them write a good proposal and, upon grant award, help them implement it? As a majority of producers have used outside assistance to help them write their proposals, the education bias detected in the findings may be more related to the latter than the former. As the Producer Grant Program was conceived as a program that would fund producers to allow them to put their own ideas into practice to achieve their goals of sustainable agriculture, some soul searching will need to be done by the Advisory Council and the Technical Committee to determine whether NCR-SARE is actually meeting this program goal. Putting such a heavy emphasis on proposals that may not actually be written by producers may put the program at risk of becoming another (backdoor) channel for research and extension funding at the expense of producers with good, but unproven, ideas. In other words, the program may end up funding proposals for ideas that research and extension want to test on which the producer put his signature in order to qualify for the program. We therefore recommend that the Advisory Council and the Technical Committee of NCR-SARE study the possible alternatives to written proposals for grant applications. One question to be addressed is the nature and form of any alternatives (e.g., allowing supporting documentation on video or audio tape, or doing telephone interviews with applicants to have them explain their proposals better).

**Sustainability goals and barriers**

**Respondents views on sustainability** - Findings of the survey indicate that few respondents consider themselves to be conventional farm operators. Grant recipients considered themselves to be more sustainable (mean rating of 7.4 on a ten-point scale where 1=completely conventional and 10=completely sustainable) than Non-recipients (mean rating of 6.6). This may be an indication of a self-selection process among applicants, with only those farmers who are (on the road to becoming) sustainable farm operators applying for a grant.

Sustainable farm operators were also asked to provide a definition of what sustainability means to them and their farm operations. We classified these definitions using the SARE’s overlapping circle diagram where circles represent the criteria of socially just, environmentally responsible and economically viable. Most Non-recipients (45%) largely think of sustainability solely in environmental terms, with much smaller percentages thinking of the issue as solely an economic issue or as a combination of environmental/economic issues. Among Grant recipients, on the other hand, a shift was found towards greater attention to the economic aspects of sustainability, although concerns for environmental aspects remained high (29% each emphasized environmental or a combination of environmental/economic issues, while 18% focused solely on economic aspects in their definitions). Neither groups really addressed the social aspects of sustainability, either solely or in combination with economic and/or environmental concerns. Only about 7% of Grant recipients and 5% of Non-recipients presented a balanced view of sustainability that included aspects of all three concerns in their definition. This may be a reflection of the low priority accorded to social issues by SARE in general, and the emphasis on
technical-economic solutions as a way to reach sustainability. Of the 157 Producer Grants awarded in the 1992-96 period, only two projects dealt with ‘Quality of life’ issues and eight projects with ‘Networking and education’, topics that are of a more social nature. However, sustainable agriculture should also be concerned with family and community well-being and quality of life, the viability of rural communities, and the future of family farms. *We recommend that NCR-SARE study the possibilities of addressing the social aspects as well as the environmental and economic concerns through its Producer Grant Program. Perhaps this could be accomplished by requesting proposals on this topic, or requesting proposals with an emphasis on the social component, similar to the requirement of a marketing component in group proposals in the RFP’s for the Program.*

**Farm goals, problems and barriers to a wider adoption of sustainable agriculture** - Based on the self-perceived sustainability rating, respondents were classified into three groups of conventional, transitional and sustainable farm operators. This classification was then used to determine the differences in respondents’ goals, problems to reach those goals, and problems and bottlenecks that prevent other producers from adopting sustainable agricultural practices. Findings indicate that regardless of which group respondents belong to, preserving soil and water resources and improving personal and family quality of life are the most important goals. Each group, however, uses a different strategy to reach those goals. Conventional operators aim to maximize income by improving yields and cutting production costs. Transitional farmers like to make a comfortable living, and try to reach this goal by maximizing income through the cutting of production costs; they also expressed a concern for animal well-being. Sustainable farm operators also aim at making a comfortable living, but try to do so by cutting production costs; moreover, they enjoy working the land, and, although not a top-5 concern, want to be in control of their own land and farm.

Low prices for agricultural products, costs associated with making the switch to sustainable agriculture, and the lack of special markets for sustainable agricultural products were experienced as the main bottleneck to reaching the above farm goals by all three categories of farmers. However, low prices and switching costs were more of a concern for conventional farmers than for transitional and sustainable farmers, whereas the latter two groups experienced greater problems with the lack of markets for their sustainably produced products. Transitional and sustainable farmers also expressed a problem with government policies favoring conventional agriculture.

To differing degrees, the three groups of farmers mentioned low prices for agricultural products, fear of lower yields and costs associated with making the switch to sustainable agriculture as the main obstacles preventing other producers from adopting sustainable agricultural practices. Transitional and sustainable farmers felt that the lack of markets would be an obstacle, and both conventional and transitional producers mentioned the lack of awareness as being a bottleneck. Most sustainable farmers, though, were of the opinion that present government policies favoring conventional agriculture pose the biggest barrier to the wider adoption of sustainable agriculture.
Some of the problems and bottlenecks are a reflection of the time (for example, the present cycle low prices for agricultural products), others are structural phenomena (governmental policies still do favor conventional agriculture, there always is (and will be) a lot of bureaucracy and paperwork involved in applying for grants and cost-share) or are based on ignorance on the part of respondents (e.g., lack of information on suitable technologies, fear of lower yields) or the wider community (absence of community support, which may be due to ignorance of what sustainable agriculture is all about). Because of some changes in economic conditions and in government policies and farm support programs, the problems and bottlenecks mentioned by respondents to this study are already quite different from those mentioned in previous studies. In the late 1980’s. As sustainable agriculture becomes more accepted and mainstream (as one farmer during a field visit said, it took more than 20 years for no-till to become an acceptable production practice), and as economic and political conditions change, some problems experienced today will be solved tomorrow while new ones will undoubtedly arise.

Opinions about the Producer Grant Program procedures

Producer Grant Program: Grant application process - Grant Recipients were significantly more positive about the grant application and the grant review/award processes than Non-recipients. Among the ten statements related to the application process, there were no significant differences between the two groups of respondents on only two statements, namely (1) that assistance is a ‘must’ to complete the application, and (2) that the time between receiving the application materials and the application deadline is too short. Thus, in spite of the fact that three-fifth of the Grant Recipients had assistance to complete their grant applications, they felt that such assistance is not absolutely necessary (they slightly disagreed with the statement). Non-recipients were neutral on the issue, which brings up some interesting questions: Is it stubborn independence? Failure to recognize the necessity and value of outside assistance to write quality proposals? Lack of networking with other producers and/or researchers and extensionists? Or fear of being ridiculed for trying to get funding for perhaps strange, wacky ideas? Answers to these questions requires more detailed sociological studies.

Many open-ended comments related to the grant application dealt with the need for NCR-SARE to do a better job explaining the program, in particular its objectives, eligibility, criteria for grant selection, requirements, and start and end dates. As this was a program never tried before, it experienced many growing pains. Some of these issues have been addressed over time with each new grant cycle; however, improvements are always possible. We therefore recommend a continuous self-evaluation after each grant cycle to improve the application process in future grant cycles.

A number of comments of both groups of respondents related to the project areas and topics that were awarded Producer Grants. Several comments dealt with the fact that funded projects were nothing new but merely a re-introduction of ideas and technologies practiced by their fathers and grandfathers, or were repetitions of things already done and proven elsewhere. Other comments referred to the fact that many projects were more of the same, piece-meal approach of
conventional research and did not address sustainability in a holistic fashion. We recommend that NCR-SARE initiate a series of philosophical discussions (we do not expect that these issues can be solved in one meeting) about the future of the Producer Grant Program in order to determine its nature and direction. These discussions should focus on two major issues:

1. Should the program limit itself to funding proposals to test the local feasibility of ideas already proven elsewhere, or of ideas and technologies ‘recovered’ from the past? Or should the program be like a venture capital provider for farmers to test the feasibility, economics, etc. of completely new, as yet unproven ideas? Or should it be a combination of both?

2. Should the Producer Grant Program provide many small grants to many producers dispersed throughout the region, or should the Program provide fewer but larger grants to groups of farmers (either within one state or across multiple states) to test one idea/technology in a replicated fashion over space and/or time? While the former approach may validate many technologies that work for the grantee and perhaps a few other farmers, the latter approach would yield more, and more scientifically valid, data that could be acceptable to larger groups of farmers across the North Central Region and perhaps beyond.

**Producer Grant Program: Grant review and award process** - Grant Recipients were more positive in their opinions about the grant review and award process than Non-recipients. The latter somewhat agreed with the statements about receiving timely notification from NCR-SARE having received their complete application materials and about grant award or rejection, although not as strongly as Grant Recipients. However, they were neutral about the statements that the review process was carried out in a fair manner and that, when asked, NCR-SARE offered constructive comments on their proposals. The opinions of Non-recipients on these two statements may be related. The lack of providing feedback to unsuccessful grant applicants lead many of them to think that there may be ‘something fishy’ in the review and award process, as revealed in the negative feelings in written-in comments. Providing explanations and constructive comments would have shown transparency and openness about the process, and made applicants feel their proposals were considered seriously. NCR-SARE has put a system into place to provide feedback to Professional Development Grant and Research & Education Program proposals from their inception. This feedback consists of a list comparing the scores given to the proposals by their reviewers to the average scores of all proposals, and specific comments made by the reviewers. For the 1998 cycle, a feedback system patterned on the researcher grant program was tried unsuccessfully for the Producer Grant proposals. Although in the past feedback was provided by the Program Coordinator for Field Operations when producers called to learn more about why their proposals were rejected, the possibility for such feedback was not specifically made known to producers in the rejection letters until this year. Based on the many comments received from both Grant Recipients and Non-recipients about the lack of feedback and suggestions for improvement on rejected proposals, and using the 1998 experience on providing feedback on individual proposals, we recommend that NCR-SARE continues its efforts to put a feedback system into place. This may help improve the quality and quantity of future proposals, and enhance the standing of the program in the agricultural community.

A quite unexpected finding of the survey was that more than half the Non-recipients (55%) and
Grant Recipients who were not awarded a grant at the first try (60%) implemented their proposed projects in spite of not being awarded a grant. Most of these producers implemented their projects in the same manner as proposed in their grant application. Others reduced costs by limiting the scope of their projects, eliminating certain activities (often the outreach component), stretched out the time period in which to complete the project, or sought alternative funding sources. These high percentages are an indication of the interest among farmers in seeking alternatives to conventional production practices, and the willingness to try their ideas even though proposal reviewers expressed doubts about the goals, objectives and/or methods of these projects. While the award of a grant could have helped these producers to carry out their projects in a better way, a lot of information may nevertheless be generated from these projects that may be of interest to other producers. Although funds for the Producer Grant Program are limited, we are of the opinion that it may be fruitful for NCR-SARE to remain in touch with unsuccessful applicants, and to study the possibilities of tapping and publishing worthwhile results of these non-funded projects. We therefore recommend that NCR-SARE implement a regular, short survey of unsuccessful applicants (2-3 years after initial application) to learn if they implemented their projects even without SARE funding, in what fashion and scope, and to learn about outcomes and lessons learned. Within the means and possibilities of NCR-SARE, support should be provided to write and publish short articles or fact sheets of interesting projects and findings.

Producer Grant Program: Grant disbursement policies - Grant Recipients agreed with current grant disbursement policies, but were somewhat more guarded in their opinions about the amount of funding and the timing of funds release. Respondents slightly agreed (mean of 3.6) that reimbursement of expenses after the fact puts an extra financial burden on farmers, although they were more neutral (mean of 3.3) about the statement that reception of a portion of the grant money up-front should be automatic. These findings are an indication that the present disbursement policies may pose problems for selected farmers. It is suggested that, within reason, NCR-SARE should look into the possibilities of addressing potential financial difficulties on a case by case basis so that projects can be implemented and completed as planned.

The same is true for the level of funding and the number of months allowed to bring the project to conclusion. For the latter, NCR-SARE does allow some flexibility by providing no-cost extensions of the project. To solve the former, we suggest proposal reviewers look more carefully into grant applications to determine whether projects can be successfully implemented and brought to conclusion with the level of funding requested. However, in some cases NCR-SARE disallowed some expenses the farmer proposed to make, which at times led to farmers not accepting the award, or being unable to complete to project. We recommend that in similar, future cases, a careful analysis be made together with the applicants to determine whether or not this will jeopardize the overall project as conceived and its successful implementation. If reviewers are of the opinion that the project cannot be implemented with the proposed budget, or the project cannot be implemented with an amended budget, the grant award should not be awarded or withdrawn, and the producer given an opportunity (if the idea is worthwhile) to submit a new, revised proposal for reconsideration.
Producer Grant Program: Evaluation and reporting procedures - Grant recipients mostly agree with the present requirements for reporting and evaluating the results of their projects. Although they find the process time consuming, they agree that the requirements for reporting results and accounting for expenses are reasonable and necessary. The reporting requirements were clearly stated in their contracts, and they found the NCR-SARE brochure outlining the general format for the final report helpful. Respondents slightly agreed that a workshop on data collection and analysis, and report writing would be beneficial and helpful, but slightly disagreed that assistance to analyze project results and report writing is required. This finding seems to contradict the finding that the majority of farmers (58%) did receive assistance with data collection and analysis, while 10% stated that other persons or organization had done the data collection and analysis for them. Only one-fifth of the respondents had done data collection and analysis by themselves without assistance. Assistance for data collection and analysis was most often provided by, in order of importance, family members, university researchers, local extension agents and extension specialists.

Economic factors were the most important criterion to evaluate project results, closely followed by, in order of importance, production and environmental factors. Economic factors were, for most farmers, also determinative in the decision to adopt or reject the technology being tested. Social factors and animal health and well-being were mentioned by less than half the respondents. The lack of consideration of social issues in evaluating technologies being tested may be a reflection of the low priority given to these issues by the SARE program in general, which also reverberates in farmers own thinking about these issues as reflected in their definitions of what sustainability means to them and their farm operations. We recommend that SARE in general, and NCR-SARE in particular, increase their attention to the social factors related to sustainable agriculture, and look for ways to address these factors in the projects they fund.

A majority of Grant Recipients (78%) have submitted a final report of their project to NCR-SARE, while 12% submitted an interim report as they had not yet finalized their projects. In most cases, respondents wrote the report without assistance. About one-fifth received assistance from family members. As mentioned previously, they did find the report writing time-consuming, but the brochure with reporting guidelines greatly helped in getting the document done.

Experiences with the Producer Grant Program: Grant Recipients - The diversity of projects made it difficult to summarize what Grant Recipients learned from their projects. Some respondents were very specific as to the practice they learned about, while others talked about the larger impacts. In this concluding section, we like to focus on the latter. One of the biggest impacts of the projects was the creation of awareness that there are alternatives to conventional farming that are profitable, largely through a better use of on-farm resources (such as manure) and better management. The projects also made respondents aware that farmers possess a lot of useful knowledge, and that technologies developed through their own efforts are just as good and
useful (and sometimes even better) than those developed by the formal research/extension establishment. The projects helped respondents look at their operations more objectively, and provided them with the necessary data for decision-making on production and marketing strategies. Lastly, Grant recipients learned to work with other farmers, and have a better understanding of the value of networking with other farmers, government agencies, universities, and private companies not only for informational inputs and advice, but to disseminate their ideas and findings to a wider audience.

Did the Producer Grants make a difference to the Grant Recipients? Most respondents answered in the affirmative, and they appreciated the help it provided to carry their ideas to fruition. For some, the grants were an opportunity to pilot test their ideas on a small scale; for others, it was an opportunity to really find out what they always suspected, to prove their hunch right, but for which they did not have the time and the resources before. Several respondents remarked that the grants increased their credibility and confidence in their own abilities to do research and to make the switch to sustainable agriculture. The grants encouraged them to look for and reach higher goals, to not be satisfied with the status quo of conventional agriculture. Many respondents again emphasized that the networking and interactions with like-minded producers, researchers and other professionals, and the opportunities to publish the results of their work to a wider audience were key aspects of the program that really made a difference to them. The Producer Grant was considered a valuable tool enabling farmers to get involved, and be involved, in the learning process on sustainable agriculture, especially since the projects often called up many more questions than providing answers.

All but seven Grant Recipients mentioned that they do things differently on their farms upon completion of their projects, mostly by expanding the results of their research to a wider area of their operations. Four respondents stated they do not do anything differently, while three have not yet completed their projects. They grants enabled recipients to proceed with more confidence and fewer establishment problems to implement innovative practices that they would have delayed (or not even have considered) without the grant. The grants also encouraged farmers to look and think differently about phenomena on the farm which they took for granted before. This change in mentality (look and think before you act) may be the biggest difference that the Producer Grants have made in the lives of its participants.

Experiences with the Producer Grant Program: Non-recipients - A large number of Non-recipients declined to answer the questions asking about what they learned from the grant writing process, and what they do differently now on their farms. This is not unexpected giving the often negative experiences some applicants expressed toward the program in the question on the grant application and review/award processes. These negative feelings do reverberate as well in the statements of those who did answer these questions. However, many respondents did write that they learned something from the process, and, since more than half had implemented their projects in spite of being turned down for SARE funding, did make changes in farm operations.

Of those who did answer the first question (what was learned from the grant writing process),
only seven stated that they had learned nothing from the application process. Most respondents discovered that grant writing is time consuming and a lot of work; others felt it was a waste of time and not worth doing. Several Non-recipients realized their limitations and skills, and learned about the need for sufficient information and assistance to write good proposals. Seven respondents learned how to write grant proposals through the process, while fourteen persons learned more (a bit late, perhaps) about the criteria necessary for obtaining a grant.

Of the Non-recipients who responded to the question of what they do differently now based on their experience with the Producer Grant Program, 25 said ‘Nothing’ and seven would not apply for Producer Grant funding again. Others would try again in the future, try alternative funding sources, or implement the project using their own funds only. A fair number of Non-recipients felt that the experience completing the Producer Grant application materials was valuable. Six respondents realized that they need to put more time and effort into the proposal writing. Farmers who still went ahead with their projects without funding often scaled them down or stretched them out over a longer time period. The Non-recipients who implemented their projects gained skills with innovative farming practices, learned more about the environment and sustainable agriculture, and learned how to conduct experiments, solve problems, and document field histories. While these impacts are (and cannot expected to be) as extensive as the impacts realized by, and learning experiences of, Grant Recipients, they are an indication that farmers realize the need for change, and are willing to risk their own resources to help them make these changes.

**Impacts of the Producer Grant Program**

**Economic, environmental and social impacts of the Producer Grant Program** - The environmental and social impacts of the Program were determined by comparing the scores on a number of indicators of Grant Recipients and Non-recipients who had implemented their projects without SARE funding. This comparison was deemed useful to determine whether the grant makes any difference, or whether impacts are realized regardless of funding. Fifty-five percent of Non-recipients indicated on the survey that they had carried out their projects in spite of not obtaining a grant, but half the Non-recipients received a version of the survey without impact questions. In addition, those who did receive the version including the social and environmental impact questions, not every respondent who had implemented his or her project answered the impact questions.

Findings of our survey show very few statistically significant differences among the various social and environmental indicators between Grant Recipients and Non-recipients. As far as environmental indicators are concerned, soil erosion had declined and stream water quality had increased among the group of Grant Recipients compared to Non-recipients. Among the social factors, Grant Recipients experienced a decline in personal and family stress; this indicator remained unchanged for the group of Non-recipients.

Only Grant Recipients were asked for their perceptions of changes in a series of 21 economic
indicators, in addition to some questions about overall economic performance of their projects and any cost-savings realized. Grant Recipients reported decreases in cash costs (although seed costs remained the same) but higher costs for fencing and on-farm processing and marketing. There were no changes in labor and fixed costs (except for fencing). More importantly, though, respondents reported increases in yields per acre, total animal production, overall gross sales and net income. The increases in these performance indicators were realized by a majority of respondents who felt these indicators applied to them; the increase in net income was realized by 67% of the respondents.

Few respondents provided ‘hard’ data on the cost savings they obtained as a result of their projects; the figures that were provided largely corroborate the findings of the perceptual rating scales. Respondents to the cost-savings question reported savings of $182 per acre, $24.36 per head, and $4.16 per hundredweight. Most respondents appear to use their ‘gut feeling’ to assess the economic performance of their projects. Overall, the majority of Grant Recipients (79%) was satisfied with the economic performance of their projects, and a similar percentage would recommend the technology they tested to their friends and neighbors.

Within the group of Grant recipients, we found that changes in the various social, economic and environmental indicators were experienced differentially based on gross sales, farm size, farm type and sustainability rating. Mostly, these analysis did not yield any clear-cut trends across the various subgroups of these demographic variables. Observed differences may relate more to the nature of the projects undertaken than to differences in demographic characteristics of Grant Recipients. However, information about the nature of the project (e.g., keywords and granting areas) were not merged as variables in the database, so that further analysis using project characteristics was not possible. We therefore recommend that future Producer Grant evaluations take project characteristics into account to better determine if impacts occur differentially in various granting areas. Such information may be useful to determine which areas the Producer Grant Program should emphasize so it can realize the biggest bang for the buck.

A study of a sample of final reports by Grant Recipients to NCR-SARE revealed that few producers report on the social, economic and environmental impacts of their grant. Economic performance indicators were especially lacking in the report, in spite of the fact that are used by the majority of farmers to decide about adoption of rejection of the tested technology, and may help convince other farmers to adopt as well. The findings on the various impacts from our survey represent mostly ‘gut-feelings’ by the respondents, which, moreover, for many involved recalling what occurred as a result of their projects undertaken up to 5 years previously. We therefore recommend that NCR-SARE develop a system to report the impacts of Producer Grant-funded projects, and insert them in the final report guideline brochure as a required item or form to be completed by Grant Recipients. As much as possible, hard data (numbers) should be provided, especially for reporting economic impact. For social and environmental impacts, the Likert-scales used in the surveys for this study could be used or modified as an example.
Another way of measuring the impact of the Producer Grant Program is to look at how many additional people were reached through the outreach activities undertaken by the Grant Recipients. The numbers here are impressive: Around 21,000 people attended 803 ‘mass’ events (i.e., field days, demonstrations, farm tours, and talks and presentations), while 1,255 people were reached through individual consultations with Grant Recipients. The Producer Grant-funded projects in the 1992-1996 period also resulted in 233 articles in newspapers, farm magazines, and journals. Extrapolating data provided by 41 respondents, for each grant given out an average of 12 farmers have been inspired, followed the ideas, or outright adopted the technologies being tested in a Producer Grant-funded project. Thus, in spite of the relatively small amount of money invested in the Producer Grant Program, the program has a wide impact and spread-effect in the agricultural community.

Producers sources of general farm operation and sustainable agriculture information

Information sources used by respondents - The mean frequency of consultation of most persons and media for information on general farm operations and on sustainable agriculture ranges between ‘seldom’ and ‘sometimes.’ Some differences in consultation behavior of the two groups was noted. Grant Recipients consult more frequently with university researchers and fellow sustainable agriculture practitioners for general farm information, whereas Non-recipients rely more on buyers, contractors or processors, other conventional farmers, radio and TV, as well as farm newspapers and magazines. Grants Recipients also consult more frequently with university extension specialists and researchers for information on sustainable agriculture than Non-recipients. The latter rely more on sustainable agriculture information provided through radio and TV programs.

There are strong, highly significant correlations between the frequency of the persons and media respondents consulted for general farm information and consultation frequency of the same persons/media for information on sustainable agriculture. This indicates that farmers may not distinguish the type of information they obtain from the various persons and media, but obtain both kinds of information whenever a consultation is made. Fellow sustainable operators were consulted significantly more frequently for information on sustainable agriculture than for information on general farm operations by both Grant Recipients and Non-recipients. Both groups of respondents also consulted more frequently with fellow sustainable agriculture practitioners about sustainable agriculture than with more traditional information providers such as local extension agents, input suppliers, university-based extension specialists and researchers and extension bulletins. This may be an indication that there is still a paucity of information about sustainable agriculture from the mainstream research and extension establishment. It is more likely, though, that farmers feel more comfortable with sustainable agriculture information tried and tested by their colleagues. It points to the importance of networking to spread the word about sustainable agriculture and disseminate information about sustainable practices and technologies. Many respondents recognized this fact as well, as emphasized again and again that networking and meeting like-minded producers was one of the greatest benefits of the Producer Grant Program. We therefore recommend that SARE in general, and NCR-SARE in particular,
expands its support for state, multi-state, regional and national workshops and conferences to facilitate and enhance the networking among producers, researchers, extensionists, organizations and other interested parties. At the same time, SARE should increase its efforts to publish the results of Producer Grant-funded projects through written and mass communication media, including the Internet, to maximize access to, and the utilization of, these results.

Respondents were also asked to list by name the top three sources of their agricultural information. The intention of this question was to determine whether there are a few favored information sources that SARE could use for the dissemination of the results of projects it sponsors. The question resulted in a very long and diverse list of people, organizations and print media that was difficult to summarize. It is a reflection of the enormous amount of information and information sources that is out there, and the difficulty of reaching farmers through one or only a few selected media or organizations. The Internet is being touted as the way of the future to disseminate information, but it is still very little used by respondents; only 6% of Grant Recipients and 2% of Non-recipients used the Internet as a source of information.

A majority of Grant Recipients (67%) prefers written media (newsletters, magazine or journal articles and fact sheets) to disseminate the results of Producer Grant-funded research/demonstration projects. More than half would like to find out about these results through workshops, meetings, farm shows and field days. As written media are clearly favored, and as many farmers may not have the skills and time to write up the results of their projects in publishable form, we recommend that NCR-SARE supports and assists Grant Recipients with the writing and production of articles, fact sheets, newsletters or posters to facilitate and increase the dissemination of the results of their projects. Suggestions to do this include intensive reporting/article writing workshops cf. the proposal writing workshops for Producer Grant applicants in Michigan, or the paring of producers with graduate students in sustainable agriculture programs at the land grant universities in the north central region.

Overall opinions of the Producer Grant Program - According to the Grant Recipients, the ability to learn and try new farming practices, the financial and mental support provided to farmers to help them carry out their projects, and the interactions and networking for the sharing of information and ideas were the most valuable aspects of the Producer Grant Program. The Program is perceived to be useful to very useful by a majority of the Grant Recipients, many who cited the same reasons given in their answers to the question of ‘Most valuable aspects’ of the Program. Almost all Grant Recipients who responded to the question of whether the Producer Grant Program helps or hinders the promotion of sustainable agriculture are of the opinion that it helps, as the Program (1) enables farmers to demonstrate which practices and technologies work and which do not; (2) enables farmers to share the results of their research with other producers through field days, demonstrations and meetings; and (3) helps farmers make the transition from conventional to sustainable operations by learning and trying alternative farming practices.
Conclusion

A USDA program providing funds to farmers to carry out research and demonstration trials based on their own ideas leading to a more sustainable farm operation was never tried before NCR-SARE made the bold step of initiating just such a program in 1992. Because a program funding farmer-designed, farmer-managed and farmer-evaluated research had no history to draw upon, the program itself needed to learn its way forward to a legitimate existence. The many wrinkles, mistakes and uncertainties in the ‘who, what, how, when and where’ in the early years were necessary steps to build a solid Program that is clearly needed and appreciated by producers in the North Central Region. While many adjustments have been made in past years in the calls for proposals, the proposal review process and the management of the Program, continuous self-evaluation and monitoring needs to be done to continue to improve the Program. We hope that our suggestions and recommendations as well as those by producers who participated in the Program will help the Administrative Council of NCR-SARE make these improvements. To quote one respondent: ‘Keep it up!’