Bush Foundation grant to further winter greenhouse work in west central Minnesota

Willmar, MN (January 9, 2014) - With a two-year, $76,000 grant from the Bush Foundation, the Southwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership (SW RSDP) will create a winter greenhouse growers association. The project is in memory of winter greenhouse pioneer Chuck Waibel, who had received a Bush Fellowship for his work several months before he passed away from cancer on August 16, 2013. Under the grant, Carol Ford, Waibel’s widow and partner in winter greenhouse work, will help establish the grower’s network beginning this month.

The grant’s purpose is to develop a mutual assistance network of small-scale, sustainable-food entrepreneurs using high-efficiency winter greenhouses in west central Minnesota, and potentially across the state. Some of the benefits envisioned for such a network include more producers bridging the cold climate season by growing fresh food during winter months, building a model distribution system for greenhouse users that will allow for increased sales to institutions, and price discounts for bulk supplies bought across the network.

“Through the generosity of the Bush Foundation, we are able to continue Chuck’s work and spread his enthusiasm for local foods and winter greenhouses in Western Minnesota,” said Kathryn Draeger, statewide director of RSDP and a principal investigator on the grant. “The Partnerships helped him and Carol to publish ‘The Northlands Winter Greenhouse Manual’ in 2009 and he served on an advisory panel for a recent grant we received from the US Department of Agriculture. We are pleased to continue Chuck’s legacy.”

“With this grant we seek to promote and develop the Deep Winter Producers Association (DWPA) and to hold a conference later on to share the association’s progress,” according to David Fluegel, Executive Director of SW RSDP and the other principle investigator on the grant. “While the project is based in west central Minnesota, we believe it will create knowledge that is applicable statewide and region-wide.”

Ford said she envisioned the conference highlighting three components of a successful local food model: the efficient, resilient passive solar greenhouse structure; the association’s ability to encourage new farmers; and the economic advantages of a local food hub distribution system.
Carol Ford will have an office at the West Central Research and Outreach Center/Extension Regional Office in Morris. In addition to co-authoring the "Northlands Winter Greenhouse Manual", she has presented at numerous conferences in the upper Midwest about winter produce production and has provided workshops for beginning producers. She has hosted many tours and talks in her greenhouse in Milan, MN and continues to consult with and support winter growers. She will also continue to work part-time as an Executive Office and Administrative Specialist for the Division of Science and Math at the University of Minnesota, Morris.

A recent RSDP publication on cold climate greenhouses dedicated to Chuck Waibel is available on the RSDP Community and Local Food Resources page: http://www.extension.umn.edu/rsdp/community-and-local-food/

The Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships bring together local talent and resources with University of Minnesota knowledge and seed funding to drive sustainability in agriculture and food systems, tourism and resilient communities, natural resources, and clean energy. The organization is composed of a statewide office and five partnerships, including Southwest RSDP, working in greater Minnesota, and is part of University of Minnesota Extension.

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