

More about Fred Kirschenmann

Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture
Summer 2000



Background and education

On July 1, 2000, Fred Kirschenmann assumed duties as director of the Leopold Center. He is president of Kirschenmann Family Farms, a 3,500-acre certified organic farm in Windsor, North Dakota, where he also was president (1990-1999) of Farm Verified Organic, a private organic certification agency.

He is a leader of the organic/sustainable agriculture movement, and has served on many boards and advisory committees of such organizations. He has completed a five-year term on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Standards Board, and has chaired the administrative council for the USDA's North Central Region's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program. He recently completed work for the North Dakota Commission on the Future of Agriculture, and was a charter member of the Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society in 1979.

He has been a member of the board of directors for the Henry A. Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture since 1994, and was president in 1997.

He earned degrees from Yankton College in South Dakota, Hartford Theological Seminary in Connecticut, and a Ph.D. degree from the University of Chicago, where he earned numerous awards including a Rockefeller Fellowship. He was the first chair of the Department of Religion at Yankton College, and was Dean of the College at Curry College in Boston. He has authored or co-authored numerous articles and book chapters dealing with ethics and agriculture.



About his farm operation

Kirschenmann is a third-generation farmer. His German grandfather farmed the Volga River area in Russia and immigrated to Lincoln, Nebraska, in the late 1800s. His family has been farming at the current location since 1930.

Although his operation is slightly larger than the average 1,500-acre North Dakota farm, Kirschenmann tends fields at several locations, as do his neighbors, within a 22-mile area in Stutsman County in the south central part of the state. About 1,000 acres are native prairie, used for grazing livestock, and the rest is managed in a diversified operation. Kirschenmann raises eight to nine crops each year in three different rotations. This year he planted durum and hard red spring wheat, rye, buckwheat, millet, flax, canola, also alfalfa and sweet clover for forage and green manure crops. They have 113 brood cows, and raise calves until they're yearlings so they may have 200 animals on the farm at any given time.

A part-time appointment July 1, going to full-time by November, will allow him time to harvest this year's crop and transition management of the farm. He said he already has identified two people who will take over day-to-day operation of the farm.

Comments about the Leopold Center

"This is an opportunity to think about where we want to go with agriculture in the future, and for many farmers, we don't have a lot of time left. The principles of sustainability must become actualized in a way that will really work for farms and farm families. There are no easy answers."

"[Former Center director Dennis Keeney] always used the metaphor of a journey toward sustainable agriculture practices. I see myself as becoming part of that journey."

"The Center has a strong background in science and I want to build on that, but also recognize the challenges ahead of us. I am very grateful for the excellent leadership that Dennis provided for the Center during its first ten years, and look forward to building on that foundation."

Comments about sustainable agriculture

"One of my passionate interests is making things work on the land. Just to give you an example, we talk about exports as being the answer to the farm crisis, but that has never worked on the land and farmers recognize this. It doesn't mean that exports are not important, but they're not, by themselves, the solution."

"My academic background in philosophical studies has trained me to always ask the questions behind the questions. This discipline has been very useful to me on the farm, too, and my involvement in national organic agriculture organizations. We make assumptions about things but we don't look at what those assumptions are based on. I will question assumptions and make

sure that the fundamental ideas that we may be trying to adopt and operate by are sound and valid. I don't think we do enough of that in sustainable agriculture."

"I hope that my experience of 25 years will bring to the Leopold Center this kind of reality check."

Comments about Aldo Leopold

"Leopold has been a hero of mine for a long time. His notion that we really need to solve our problems ecologically is at the heart of his thinking and I couldn't agree more."

"Leopold's thinking is so relevant to where we are today. We're still living very much in an industrialized society, although we're moving into the information age and then to a biological age, which will change our entire way of thinking. We need to think about how the emergence of the biological era affects agriculture. I think the current application of genetic engineering is still a machine application. Instead of using our knowledge of biology and how our systems work, we are applying one solution to a very specific problem, which upsets something else in that system. How can we better manage the dynamics of agriculture to keep everything in balance?"

Thoughts from his writing

- From an essay, "On Becoming Lovers of the Soil," in the 1997 book, "For All Generations: Making World Agriculture More Sustainable" (Patrick Madden, editor)

Now I realize that an invitation to become lovers of the soil is an alien request. It is not something that one can take to one's national government or the United Nations as part of the sustainable agriculture debate. It is not something that you can put on the agenda of national environmental organizations. It is not an issue that food activists can take to their members. It will not appeal to university researchers. It isn't even an invitation that one can readily take to organic farmers . . . But I would submit that it is absolutely fundamental to all the work that all of us are doing. Soil is the connection to ourselves. . . To be at home with the soil is truly the only way to be at home with ourselves, and therefore the only way we can be at peace with the environment and all of the earth species that are part of it. It is, literally, the common ground on which we all stand.

- From an essay, "Expanding the Vision of Sustainable Agriculture," in the 1997 book, "For All Generations: Making World Agriculture More Sustainable" (Patrick Madden, editor)

If we redesign agriculture to make us more aware of the "most basic details of our own food production," then agriculture might help us become more aware of our dependence on local ecosystems and thereby motivate us to restore and maintain them. . . . [and] evolve a new production ethic that would combine the need to produce with the need to sustain the means of

production. Such an ethic would likely modify the goals of agriculture and end our tendency to reduce agriculture to a production system driven solely by economic forces.

- From an essay, "A Transcendent Vision," in the 1991 book, "Caretakers of Creation" (Patrick Slattery, editor; Augsburg Press, Minneapolis)

I appreciated the personal space provided during my years growing up on the farm. I always enjoyed the solitude of getting on a tractor and being close to the earth. The richness of the soil, especially when worked in the spring, had a profound influence on me. My dad's near obsession to prevent our land from blowing away was ingrained into me as a child. As I grew older, he passed on to me his sense of wonder for the miracle of the soil's productivity, as well as a profound sense of responsibility to care for it.

- From a position paper on the global economy, "Feeding the Village First," issued by the Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society [<http://www.npsas.org/>], January 1999.

Feeding the village first is a concept which suggests that local community economies are healthiest when they are as self-reliant as possible, especially where food and agriculture are concerned. Self-reliant communities are healthiest because they are free to pursue their own course, shaped by cultural norms which evolved in those communities to maintain the local public good...

More important for agriculture is our failure to recognize that farms are not factories and that the effort to impose these principles on farms has created an agriculture that is headed for collapse. These principles create huge monocultures that have numerous adverse effects. They make farmers vulnerable to the economic fortunes of a very narrow band of commodities. Farmers who have specialized in the production of hogs or wheat, for example, are currently being forced out of business due to the record low prices of these commodities. Farmers who have diversified farms, on the other hand, have also diversified their risks.