



Beth Emerson/Daily Nebraskan

## Professor promotes alternative agriculture

By Kent Endacott  
Senior Reporter

Perennial grain crops that do not require costly annual planting and replanting are part of Nebraska's agriculture future, says UNL agronomy professor Charles Francis. But, he admits, it's a distant future.

"It's viable within the next 50 to 100 years," Francis said. "It's already been done in Colorado with wild rye. They've produced up to 150 pounds per acre, and we could do even better in Nebraska because we have more rainfall per year on the average."

Francis is among the first professors in the country to bring a movement known in agricultural circles as "alternative agriculture" into state land

the Wall Street Journal his aim is to "put chemical companies out of business."

"Nebraska farmers use too much nitrogen, which causes groundwater contamination. They're generally applying more fertilizers than are needed," Francis said.

"We (American farmers) broke up a bunch of the sandhills in the (19)20s," he said. "We're a little shortsighted sometimes."

Francis urges Nebraska's farmers to diversify into crops such as potatoes and onions and to use soil conservation techniques.

"It helps farmers reduce their input costs and get more out of each acre," he said. "By making fewer passes over a field you are reducing equipment costs

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—Francis

grant agricultural schools. Last year Francis took a sabbatical from UNL to work as a researcher at the Rodale Research Institute of Pennsylvania, which is known for its work in the area of organic farming.

Alternative agriculture is an environmental movement that traces its roots back to the 1920s Soil Conservation Act. The movement stresses organic farming and seeks to couple agriculture with ecology.

Fundamental to the movement is the belief that farmers have an ethical obligation to preserve the environment, Francis said. The belief runs contrary to many of the traditional teachings in agricultural schools.

Nevertheless, Francis said, his teachings generally have been well received among his UNL colleagues.

"It's caused a lot less controversy (at UNL) than one might think," he said. "There is a fairly strong coming together between the mainstreamers and those who favor organic techniques."

Leaders of the alternative agriculture movement encourage farmers to practice soil conservation techniques and to use organic fertilizers such as sewage sludge and manure, according to an article in the Wall Street Journal. They blame conventional farming techniques which emphasize production through the use of heavy machinery and inorganic fertilizers, for the present condition of agriculture.

Plant geneticist Wes Jackson of the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, told

and cutting down on erosion. Most Nebraska farmers are overequipped."

UNL agricultural economist Glenn Helmers said UNL research in Mead has shown that organic farming is competitive with conventional farming techniques in terms of productivity.

"It was somewhat surprising to find that organic farming was competitive with conventional techniques," Helmers said. "Production does not go down nearly as much as one might think."

He said a recent decline in the energy prices may further reduce interest in organic farming.

"The main impetus behind it is reducing the input costs through lower equipment costs. The decline in oil prices makes it less expensive to run a tractor and gives farmers less reason to switch," Helmer said.

Richard Wiese, UNL agronomy professor and extension services soil specialist, said very few farmers have switched to organic farming because it is not practical.

Less than 1 percent of Nebraska's farmers have switched to non-chemical agriculture, he said.

"Let me use this analogy," he said. "How many people wash their cars and rinse their soap, which contains organic phosphates, down the storm sewer? The biggest single pollution element in groundwater contamination occurs downstream from towns and cities. Should everyone stop washing their cars? Let's be honest and use chemicals only when needed."

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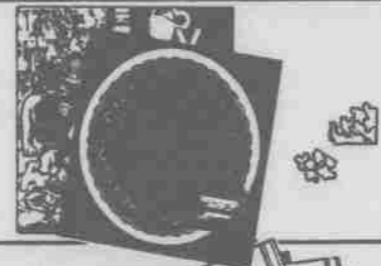
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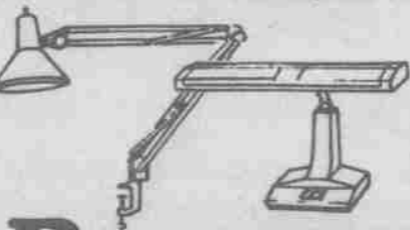
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