

# The Des Moines Register

## COLLEGE FOOTBALL: **A FAMILY AFFAIR**

Hawkeye will face off against nephew;  
Cyclone will battle his cousin **SPORTS**



## FOUR SEASONS. **ONE NIGHT.**

**FRANKIE VALLI IN IOWALIFE**

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### Organic Farming

## AGAINST *the* GRAINS



Harn Soper of Emmetsburg is in the second year of a three-year transition to organic farming. Here he is seen in the poultry processing barn under construction on his farm's livestock site. RODNEY WHITE/REGISTER PHOTOS

## Obama tweaks student loan terms

Easier payments, option  
for consolidation added  
to current federal program

By JENS MANUEL KROGSTAD  
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## WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

The terms "organic" and "sustainable" have come into widespread and interconnected use in recent years. While they are related, they have different meaning.

**Organic:** U.S. Department of Agriculture certifies organic producers only after a three-year transition period during which the vestiges of chemicals or biotechnology are cleansed from land and operations.

**Natural:** Not a specifically regulated term and is open to varying interpretations. Not necessarily organic.

**Sustainable:** Practices that includes goals such as environmental health, social equity, rural development, natural resource uses and consumer protection. Unregulated.

## Native Iowan returns to buck trend in organic farming by going big

By **DAN PILLER**

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Emmetsburg, Ia. — Harn Soper understands why the vast majority of Iowa farmers focus on producing grain for biofuels and livestock feed.

"It's hard to walk away from a model that lets you grow corn and soybeans in the summer, harvest in the fall and head for Florida in winter," Soper quipped.

Soper, 63, has returned to his native Iowa after a three-decade career in the music business in California. He's midway through the three-year process of converting most of his family's 100-year-old, 1,000-acre farm to production of organic corn and vegetables, grass-fed cattle and chickens raised outside of confinements.

"Iowa has never been a huge vegetable producer," said Neil Hamilton, director of the Agricultural Law Center at Drake University. "He is changing the scale of sustainable agriculture."

Weather, labor, higher costs and other barriers have kept organic farming tiny. About 1,000 of

See **ORGANIC**, Page 7A



Organic popcorn and spice is already being produced and sold by Soper's "New Shoots" farm.

Harn Soper "is changing the scale of sustainable agriculture."

**NEIL HAMILTON**

Director, Agricultural Law Center, Drake University



Harn Soper says leftover waste from his organic farm's animals and recycled cooking oil from customers could help power and heat a building under construction and soil in vegetable greenhouses. RODNEY WHITE/REGISTER PHOTOS

## ORGANIC

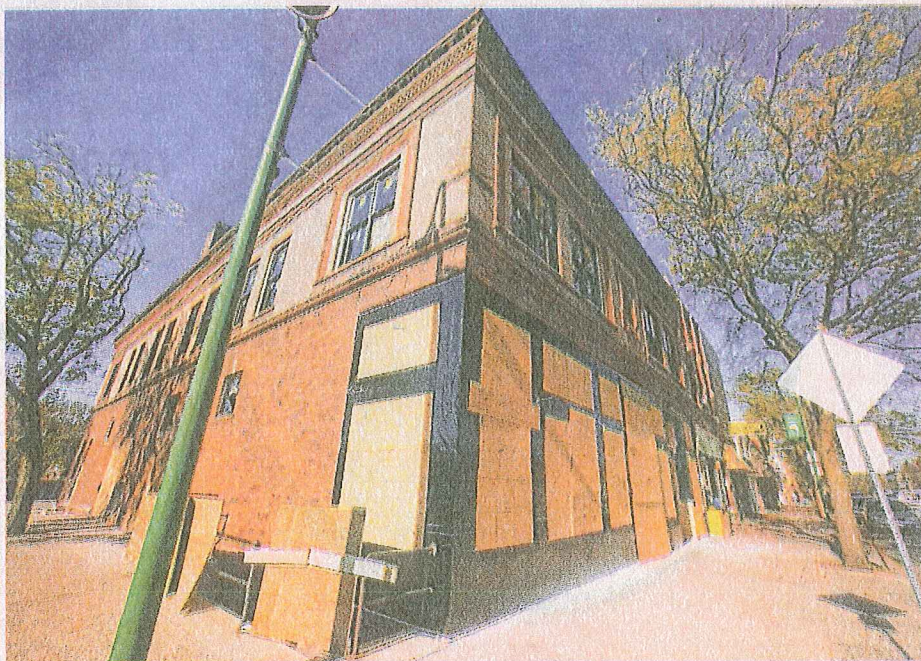
Continued from Page 1A

Iowa's 92,000 farm operations are organic.

The search for markets can be the toughest hurdle. Soper is rebuilding the former McNally's Bakery, in a 107-year-old building in Emmetsburg's square, into a combination restaurant, bakery and organic foods store to sell the produce from his "New Shoots" farm.

The produce from a 100-acre vegetable plot can't all be sold in Emmetsburg or at farmers markets. Soper is knocking on doors at Iowa State University and office buildings in Des Moines, looking for buyers for the potatoes, squash, garlic and other vegetables that will be washed and packaged on his farm.

"In regular agriculture, all you do is drive the truck to the elevator and unload," Soper said. "With organics, you have to hit the road. I understand why everybody doesn't want to do it."



Soper is refurbishing an old bakery in Emmetsburg into what will be a restaurant, bakery and organic foods store to sell "New Shoots" farm produce.

Soper wants to do it. He was imbued with the "sustainable ethic" while living in California. The native Iowan grew up in Muscatine and Sioux City and received a master's degree at the University of Iowa before heading west.

His cousins ran the farm until 2007, when he was asked to run it.

Funding for his plan came from a surprising place. Early in the last decade, the Soper family sold about 40 acres, at about \$18,000 per acre, for the Wild Rose Casino near Emmetsburg.

"It's ironic that proceeds from a sale for a casino now will fund an organic and sustainable farm venture," Soper said.

Organic and sustainable agriculture isn't new in Iowa. But ventures such as Soper's, aimed at vegetable production and with its own built-in market, are rare.

Iowa's unforgiving winters and erratic rainfall patterns have been long considered antithetical to vegetable production bigger than backyard gardens. Most producers have sold at the multitude of farmers markets that have popped up around the state in the last decade.

"This will be one of the larger types of organic operations that I've heard of in Iowa, particularly vegetable production on that scale," said Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey.

Organics are a small but growing niche in America's food chain. The latest figure from organic trade associations show that in 2009, organics made up 3.7 percent of total U.S. food sales.

Organics are slowly moving up past the farmers markets. More than half of organics now are sold in mainstream supermarkets. Wal-Mart last year announced a new initiative to put organics in its retail grocery outlets.

Corporate agriculture is coming to terms with small-scale agriculture. Deere & Co. chairman Samuel Allen said in an interview last summer that the

## SOPER'S 'NEW SHOOT'S' FARM

Elements of his plan:

» Devoting roughly one-third of his land to organic corn, rotated with alfalfa and oats; one third to conventional corn and soybeans; and a third to livestock grazing and 100 acres of vegetable production.

» Raising 100 head of grass-fed cattle.

» Raising 300 broiler chickens.

» Using cow manure to power vegetable packaging building, if details can be worked out.

» Opening a restaurant, bakery and organic foods store in Emmetsburg.

implement giant was eager to manufacture and market its midget-sized equipment to smaller producers.

At the same time, the "buy fresh, buy local" movement has gained momentum, as critics decry the health and environmental costs of industrial agriculture.

"We pour nitrogen on fields to grow corn like pumping steroids into a prizefighter," Soper said.

"The concept that Iowa agriculture feeds the world is false," he said. "We produce grains for livestock feed for countries that can afford it. Some of those countries use our grain to

## PHOTO GALLERY

See this story for more photos at [DesMoinesRegister.com](http://DesMoinesRegister.com).

feed livestock to sell for export to pay off their World Bank loans, rather than feed their own people."

Critics of the organic and sustainable agriculture movement have fired back.

Last summer Republicans attacked the fresh food movement in the first round of U.S. Department of Agriculture appropriations hearings.

Iowa farmer Tim Burrack of Arlington took to the floor at the USDA's annual review last winter in Washington to criticize U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack's "know your farmer, know your food" grants to small farmers.

"The USDA has shifted on me," said Burrack. The promotion of small-scale agriculture will drive up food costs because larger farms are more efficient, he said.

Northey, a fourth-generation farmer, withstood the attacks on big-scale agriculture by Democrat Francis Thicke, an organic dairy farmer, to win reelection by a 2-to-1 margin.

"There's room for everybody in agriculture," said Northey. "We can have more vegetable production

in Iowa. But I don't see millions of acres converted from corn and soybeans to vegetables."

Cost is an issue. Northey said the recent economic squeeze has slowed what had been sharp increases in sales of organic produce.

"Some folks just aren't willing to pay extra for organic vegetables," said Northey.

Another issue for vegetable production will be labor. The 600-horsepower tractors, eight-head combines and 24-row planters that make massive corn and soybean production so efficient are relatively useless in vegetable production that still is largely done by hand.

Soper said he will need up to a dozen seasonal workers in vegetable production. Such workers tend to be migrants, whose nomadic lifestyles and cultural and language differences can increase passions over immigration.

"Labor is a problem," said Northey, who notes that even big production agriculture suffers from labor shortages in Iowa.

Soper said he is aware of programs that offer voluntary labor for vegetable production but is reluctant to use them.

"A farming model built on free labor isn't a good model," Soper said.