

# 'A Farm Advocate'

By Karen Cernich, Features Editor | Posted: Wednesday, June 8, 2011 12:15 am

*Note: The phone number for Fischer's farm has been corrected from an earlier version. The Missourian regrets the error.*

On Rhonda Fischer's farm, Lost Spur Ranch, in Leslie, signs out front read "Farm Fresh Eggs... Asparagus... Free Range Chickens... More Coming Soon!"

That last part is an understatement. Fischer is in the midst of expanding her farm in numerous ways — from offering spectator events like horse soccer to opening her property to "agritourism," that is, making her farm a kind of B&B for people interested in seeing what a working farm is like, even getting their own hands dirty by pitching in to work, and paying for the accommodations as well as the experience.

Ranch manager Serena Cochrane is in the process of fixing up an old outbuilding to serve as a bunkhouse. It will have three "rooms" each with a full-size bed and dresser.

"We'll teach people how to get back to what their great-grandparents and even their grandparents did," Fischer remarked.

Fischer, who grew up on a crop farm in Labadie, isn't alone in her business planning. She's getting one-on-one assistance from Janet Hurst, a farm outreach worker for Lincoln University's Innovative Small Farmers' Outreach Program (ISFOP).

Hurst, who many may know for her homemade cheese-making classes that she offers at L&F Foods in Washington and other venues in the area, works with about 30 small farmers in her region of Franklin and Warren counties.

She meets with farmers on their property to assist them with planning, setting goals, learning new practical skills and techniques, among other things. She also leads workshops and group meetings, like the Farm Education Group that she leads twice a month in St. Clair.

"We get together to discuss things related to agriculture," said Hurst, "composting, beekeeping, cheesemaking, fruit tree trimming..."

The meetings are free, held on Thursday evenings at 400 N. Commercial in the lower level, and "you don't have to be a farmer to come," stressed Hurst, noting that's a big part of what the ISFOP is about.

"The face of farming is changing. A lot of women are coming into agriculture," she remarked.

The program focuses primarily on underserved and socially disadvantaged populations, particularly women and minorities, said Hurst.

“The trend is moving away from large-scale agriculture to people growing their own food again with gardens or small-scale businesses,” she commented.

Hurst says people call her for help with everything from how to use growing technologies to pest control to how to get a farm started. She visits the property where the farmer (or would-be farmer) is operating so she can address specific concerns and tailor the program to meet their needs.

Fischer said meeting Hurst at the Farm Education Group meeting in St. Clair late last year has made a huge difference in the direction of her farm business.

“She comes to the ranch and helps with goals and making decisions... it’s a lot of one-on-one help,” said Fischer.

Cochrane describes her as “a farm advocate.”

Hurst noted that she also is able to help her clients research funding sources, such as grants or cost-share programs, that may be available to them.

“I can link them to the proper agencies or help them find a market for their goods,” she said.

Other topics Hurst can help her clients with include:

Adopting sustainable farming practices;

Lowering input costs;

Improving farming skills;

Increasing yields;

Improving record keeping systems;

Trying a new farm enterprise;

Finding niche markets; and

Adding value to your product.

Farmers who are eligible for the ISFOP include families who live on a farm (rural or urban) where farm products or income from the farm are necessary for you to live where you do, your family provides the management and most of the labor for the farm, and your annual family income is less than \$50,000.

The program and all of the one-on-one services provided by Farm Outreach Workers like Hurst are free. It is part of the Lincoln University Cooperative Extension.

Because Lincoln University, located in Jefferson City, was founded as a Land Grant University, extension is required as a part of the programming, Hurst explained.

The purpose of the program is to raise the level of efficiency on these farms while taking good care of the soil, water and the environment, the University's Web site noted.

“A vast body of resources is available from universities, government agencies and all sorts of organizations for small farmers,” it reads. “Unfortunately, many of the small farmers and ranchers are unaware of the information on opportunities. ISFOP will make farmers aware and assist them to access these resources so that they may improve their farms and farming operations, which in turn will improve their overall well-being.

“The information provided by ISFOP to small farmers will help them adapt to a rapidly changing economy.”

The ISFOP works in partnership with University of Missouri Extension (UME), other USDA and state agencies, and nongovernmental organizations.

### **At Lost Spur Ranch**

The night Fischer met Hurst at the Farm Education Group meeting, Hurst offered her services. Fischer purchased her 54-acre farm four years ago primarily to grow asparagus and some other crops like lettuce, radishes, snow peas..., and also raise free-range chickens, which she butchers and sells fresh or frozen.

Since working with Hurst, Fischer has expanded her asparagus field from 1,000 plants to 3,500 and now has plans to add 2,500 strawberries for a pick-your-own field next year. She also has plans to add some cattle, as well as meat and dairy goats.

Around the farmhouse, Fischer has a number of container gardens, plants and herbs for sale.

“I want to have the farm up and running so we will have something to do any time of the year,” said Fischer, noting that's important if she wants to establish and maintain the “agritourism” side of her farm.

“My main goal is to have sustainable agriculture,” she commented, “to grow things in a natural way so that one thing feeds another, to work with Mother Nature, not against her.”

Fischer sits down with Hurst once a week to go over progress on reaching her short- and long-term goals, to make sure she's striking the right balance between diversity and spreading the farm too thin.

“Janet has really helped me with having a business plan and with direction,” said Fischer.

“When there's a need we get together, and we keep in touch through e-mails and at workshops.”

Fischer got a boost to her plans at the beginning of the year when Cochrane joined her on the ranch through WWOOF — World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms. The WWOOF Web site, [www.woof.org](http://www.woof.org), describes itself as a “network of organizations” that link volunteers with organic

farmers. It's an exchange, the site notes.

“In return for volunteer help, WWOOF hosts offer food, accommodation and opportunities to learn about organic lifestyles.”

Cochrane moved to Missouri from Texas and Fischer eventually hired her as ranch manager. But many WWOOFers are just people who want to travel, said Fischer, or people who are driving through an area and want to stay for a few days.

Hurst said Cochrane has been a major force in moving Fischer's farm forward.

“They are a dynamic duo,” she remarked. “They are really on the same page and complement each other with the skill sets and personalities.”

Cochrane, who has strong carpentry skills, is putting the finishing touches on the bunkhouse where the “B&B” guests/workers will stay. She expects it will be ready in a couple of months.

For more information on the ISFOP, people can contact Hurst at 660-216-1749 or send her an e-mail at [hurstj@lincolnu.edu](mailto:hurstj@lincolnu.edu).

For information on any of Fischer's farm products, or to order fresh butchered chickens, people can contact her at 573-764-3771.

You also can find information about her products and other local farmers' products available for purchase and where at [www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org). All you need to do is type in your ZIP code.