

SRI: COLLEGE SHARPENS FOCUS ON SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

While a safe, plentiful food supply will always be a priority, agricultural scientists recognize that today's consumers increasingly seek foods that are produced ethically, humanely, and without adversely affecting the environment.

That's where the Social Responsibility Initiative (SRI) comes in. Initiated in April 2005 in Ohio State University's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences, SRI is a coordinated, interdisciplinary effort focusing on the most pressing food, agricultural, and environmental issues.

"For more than a decade, the college has been putting more emphasis on social responsibility, and this initiative is taking us to the next level," said Bill Flinn, director of SRI and OARDC rural sociologist.

Social responsibility was a key concept in the college's innovative Ecological Pyramid developed in the early 1990s. The four-sided pyramid depicts the college's commitment to four priority areas: production efficiency, economic viability, environmental compatibility, and social responsibility.

One SRI project aims to understand Ohioans' concerns. The biennial Ohio Survey of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Issues (<http://ohiosurvey.osu.edu>) conducted by rural sociologist Jeff Sharp, explores Ohioans' views of food, agricultural, and environmental issues and tracks changes in attitudes over time. The latest survey

found high levels of concern over obesity rates and water quality, high levels of interest in purchasing locally grown foods, and high levels of trust of farmers.

In addition, Flinn and Robert Birkenholz, chair of Human and Community Resource Development, are studying the state's dairy industry, which is undergoing a process of industrialization—shifting from small to very large production units. The first phase of the study found that as of April 2005, 22 Ohio dairy operations had more than 700 head of cattle—requiring a permit under the Ohio Department of Agriculture's Livestock Environmental Permitting Program rules—and 27 additional operations had more than 400 head. Large dairy farms in Ohio are located an average of 23 miles from major urban areas. Next, SRI plans to examine responses from five Ohio communities where large dairy farms have recently located. Understanding community response to dairy development is an important public issue for future agricultural development in Ohio.



The most recent Ohio Survey showed Ohioans are highly concerned about water quality and have a high level of interest in purchasing locally grown foods.

Other projects under the SRI umbrella include a Rural Ohio Summit in January 2006, focused on boosting local food systems; the Sugar Creek (Wayne and Holmes counties) Watershed Project, aimed at reducing sedimentation and fecal-coliform levels; the Exurban Change Project, which helps policy-makers understand economic, social, agricultural, and land-use changes at the urban-rural interface; a study of watershed groups, which examines their effectiveness in addressing non-point sources of water pollution; and a study of landowner perceptions of conservation programs to understand the role of trust in interactions between landowners and conservation program agents.

For more information, visit <http://sri.osu.edu>.