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Veteran farmers serve as leaders, mentors to next generation through Practical Farmers of Iowa's Savings Incentive Program

AMES, Iowa — The hurdles beginning farmers face are many, from prohibitive land prices to hefty start-up costs and the inevitable learning curve. For several starting Iowa farmers, that curve will be less steep, thanks to help from Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) and 31 seasoned farmers from across Iowa and surrounding states.

Through PFI's Savings Incentive Program (SIP), the veteran farmers are serving as leaders and mentors to the next generation, sharing a lifetime of knowledge and offering the guidance and support they will need to succeed.

Greg Koether raises grass-fed beef near McGregor. He is mentoring Karla and Todd Hanson of Monona, and says he understands the difficulties new farmers face because he experienced the same challenges at different points throughout his farming career as he sought to find the farm enterprise that was right for him.

"Back then, though, there was nobody nearby to mentor me," he says. "Several people were going through the same process, so we kind of mentored each other. If you've got someone experienced to talk to, it's mentally comforting to be able to talk to them about what you're going through."

Besides matching mentors with starting farmers, SIP requires participants to make regular deposits into a farm savings account each month for two years, at which point PFI matches each farm's savings dollar-for-dollar up to \$2,400. Upon completing the program, participants could have up to \$4,800 to use towards a business purchase. Enrollees are also required to complete a business plan, attend at least four PFI events each year of the program, live or farm in Iowa, and be Practical Farmers of Iowa members.

Michael Von Weihe, one of this year's SIP recipients, is starting his third year growing fruits and vegetables near Carson, in southwest Iowa. He is working to increase production on his farm, and is in the process of obtaining organic certification. He says he's excited that his mentor – Rebecca Bloom, of Omaha – raises certified organic vegetables too and can help guide him through the complexities of that process.

"She's great to bounce ideas off of. We've already met at her home and compared our organic applications with each other – and that's really where she's a great resource for me," Von Weihe says. "She'll help me know what they're looking for in an organic application, saving me time and money. "

"Having someone come to your place of work and inspect what you're doing makes me really nervous," he adds. "I haven't been inspected yet by the organic certifier, but I know I'll be contacting Rebecca and asking her what I need to know."

Many participants also say they appreciate how the Savings Incentive Program forces them to adopt better saving habits, and provides vital assistance in developing a strong business plan.

While the 2011 inaugural class comprised just 10 beginning farms, SIP expanded this year to admit 25 additional farms into the program. The new enrollees are diverse in farm location and enterprise. Of the 25 farms admitted, 14 produce fruits and vegetables, eight raise row crops, six raise beef cattle, four raise poultry, four raise sheep, two are growing herbs, one has meat goats, two operate a dairy and one raises niche pork.

To view profiles and photos of this year's SIP class, visit www.practicalfarmers.org, click "Next Generation," then "Savings Incentive Program" and "2012 SIP recipients."

The Savings Incentive Program is part of PFI's Next Generation Program, which offers a group of more than 700 beginning farmers opportunities to network with each other and experienced farmers through field days, Farminars, workshops, retreats and other events.

Here are the 2012 Savings Incentive Program mentors, listed first, with mentees listed second:

- Jay Hansen – Hudson (BLACK HAWK) – (Brian Bagge, Worthington);
- Rick and Stacy Hartmann – Minburn (DALLAS) – (Thomas Burkhead, Rockwell City);
- Larry Cleverley – Mingo (JASPER) – (Jordan Clasen, Des Moines);
- Eric Franzenburg – Van Horne (BENTON) – (Chris Corbin, Nevada);
- David and Norma Williams – Storm Lake (BUENA VISTA) – (Betsy Dahl, Rolfe);
- Martin Kramer – Algona (KOSSUTH) – (Luke Dahl, Rolfe);
- Susan Jutz – Solon (JOHNSON) – (Kate Edwards, Solon);
- Mike Lind – Soldiers Grove, Wis. – (Glen Elsbernd, Cresco);
- Greg Koether – McGregor (CLAYTON) – (Karla and Todd Hanson, Monona);
- Kathy Hohl – Donnellson (LEE) – (Morgan Hoenig, Mt. Pleasant);
- Jim and Elly Fink – Vinton (BENTON) – (Cheryl and Mike Hopkins, Walker);
- Tim and Maureen Daley – New Hartford (BUTLER) – (Jay Jung, Colwell);
- Jerry Peckumn – Jefferson (GREENE) – (Drew Lietz, Pocahontas);
- Sean Skeehan and Jill Beebout – Chariton (LUCAS) – (Brian and Cheryl Ness, Newton);
- Lois Reichert – Knoxville (MARION) – (Jacob Petersen, Knoxville);
- Russel Sheeder – Guthrie Center (GUTHRIE) – (Ellen and Daniel Rosmann, Harlan);

- Jason Jones – Des Moines (POLK) – (Mike Salama, Boone);
- Gary Guthrie – Nevada (STORY) – (Jordan Scheibel, Grinnell);
- Nick Wallace – Keystone (BENTON) – (Dave Schmidt, Garwin);
- Fred Abels – Holland (GRUNDY) – (Luke and Linsey Schuldt, Tripoli);
- Derek Roller – Iowa City (JOHNSON) – (Grant and Adam Schultz, Eldridge);
- Rebecca Bloom – Omaha, Neb. – (Michael von Weihe, Carson);
- Tai Johnson-Spratt – Elkhart (POLK) – (Jake and Amber Wheeler, Monroe);
- Tim Eisenbeis – Marion, S.D. – (Erin Wilson, Paullina); and
- Scott and Julie Wilber – Boone (BOONE) – (Ben Wise, Lytton).

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Practical Farmers of Iowa includes a diverse group of farmers and friends of farmers. Corn, soybeans, beef cattle and hay are the top enterprises for PFI farmers, although many have a variety of other operations, including fruits and vegetables. PFI's programming stresses farmer-to-farmer networking through research and demonstration, field days, conferences and more. For more information, call 515.232.5661 or visit www.practicalfarmers.org.

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