Our mission is to nurture the ecological, social, and economic resiliency of food and farming systems through education, research, policy, and market development.
I officially started my position as Executive Director at Michael Fields Agriculture Institute (MFAI) on January 3rd of 2017. Much of what you read in this annual report happened prior to my joining the organization, so like many of you I read this information without any direct involvement in these events or activities. As you read this report and find you would like further information, please do not hesitate to contact a member of the MFAI team about the subjects that hold your interest.

In 2016, Michael Fields Agriculture Institute, expanded our land base which increased our ability to conduct field scale crop research. Our 220-acre farm located outside Amboy, Indiana became certified organic in August, and a crop of 3rd cutting organic hay was harvested from the land. The 3.5-acre pollinator habit on this farm became fully established and a local beekeeper harvested honey on the property during the 2016 growing season. Then in September of 2016 thanks to the support of several generous benefactors, we purchased 204 acres of Southern Wisconsin farmland from The Nature Conservancy. This farmland is a key component in keeping the Mukwonago River Watershed one of the cleanest tributaries in the State of Wisconsin. In partnership with The Nature Conservancy, an agriculture easement has been established and we will be utilizing Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) cost-share funds to establish new waterways and buffer zones on the property that better control soil and nutrient loss. In October 2016, we started the 3-year transition process to establish the property as certified organic and will further decrease watershed run-off by implementing cover crop and no-till farming practices.

Our core research in increasing cover crop adaption and the positive economic impact it brings to both organic and conventional agriculture production was front and center during the 2016 growing season. MFAI’s cover crop research involves long-term studies that will expand in the 2017 growing season. We continue to develop our corn breeding research emphasizing grain quality and sound agronomic traits. MFAI continues our partnership with USDA’s Agriculture Research Service (ARS) in selecting and breeding corn lines that show gametophytic incompatibility and not accept pollen-drift from conventional hybrids.

Our educational programs are all designed around teaching farmers about sustainable agriculture. The primary goal is helping new and experienced farmers increase their agricultural knowledge through MFAI sponsored workshops, field days and conferences. Please take the time to read about our new Growing Urban Leaders in Food Systems (GULFS) program and how we are working with inner-city youth to educate and develop the next generation of urban food system leaders.

MFAI’s policy work continues at both the state and national levels, and we need your grassroots voice and support to continue building the sustainable agriculture movement. Collaboration continues with the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition as we promote their FY 2017 priority goals. We also continue to partner with USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA) and NRCS, promoting their on-going farm programs in crop insurance and conservation farming practices and we hope, you were able to take advantage of MFAI’s grant writing and advising workshops during 2016.

Above all, as you read this annual report I hope it inspires you to become involved in the sustainable agriculture movement and be a good steward of the land for future generations.

Perry Brown, Executive Director
Michael Fields Agricultural Institute
Seed to Soil - Innovating Sustainable Farming Systems

With over 240 acres, research is a key component of our work, and something that makes us different from many nonprofits in the field of sustainable agriculture. We are investigating cropping systems, cover crop strategies and corn variety development. As we design and implement our research program, we engage all types of farmers and are fully integrated with the education program to ensure research-based knowledge reaches the public in an expedient manor.

Our New Farm

Thanks to a generous donation, we purchased a local farm, the first land that the Institute owns in Wisconsin. Our vision is to create a research and demonstration center which seeks to protect the surrounding watershed while answering questions critical to agricultural sustainability. This is a tremendous opportunity to establish long-term agroecological research to measure the impact of agricultural practices on soil health and productivity. In 2016 we initiated the transition to organic and planned conservation practices (waterways and buffers) which will be installed in 2017. In total, 50 acres of practices will protect the Mukwonago River watershed.

Cover Crops

Our goal is to increase cover crop adoption across the broad landscape so we work to develop best management practices that are practical and profitable while providing the ecosystem benefits that go far beyond the farm. In 2016 we published a study which documents the positive impact that cover cropping can have on production economics while providing conservation and soil health benefits for free. In 2016 we continued work in cover crop strategies for organic transition and reinvigoration, as well as cultural studies of Sunn hemp. Much of this work involves growing various species in succession, terminating the first with a roller crimper and no-till planting the second into the residue of the first. In addition to improving soil quality through residue returns to the soil and reduced tillage, we’re learning that we may be inadvertently creating pollinator habitat because many of the species need to flower for successful termination. Many of these species also flower late in the fall, long after native species are through.

Corn Research

Recognizing the needs of organic farmers, Michael Fields along with our partners at USDA-ARS, have been selecting for gametophytic incompatibility, a trait which will protect organic hybrids from GMO (genetically modified) contamination to maintain the integrity of the organic market. This trait is important for organic agriculture, as it protects hybrids with an ability to reject pollen, including pollen drift from conventional fields containing transgenes. Michael Fields’ long-standing breeding program, uses classical breeding methods to restore genetic diversity to this important crop. We are developing high quality corn varieties not duplicated in the private sector, but needed in the organic sector, emphasizing grain quality including overall protein content and better amino acid profiles combined with sound agronomic traits.
Michael Fields teaches new and experienced farmers and gardeners the skills they need to take their agricultural passions and careers to the next level through Workshops, Field Days and Conferences.

The Gardens at Michael Fields

For the last 18 years, students have come from all over the US and the world to learn and grow at the Institute. In 2016, both Apprentice and Intern programs were offered, and the students gained critical professional skills and sustainable agriculture food systems growing skills.

The Gardens held community events and programs such as Reading in the Garden, A Farm Experience, Farm to Table Dinners, school group visits, and Worker Share and Volunteer programs. These events and programs joined people in the gardens and fields, and provided answers to questions about local organic foods and sustainability. Many truly inspiring connections were made in the Gardens — both relationships created and ideas shared.

The Gardens work regularly with groups bringing farm experiences to people with special needs, and also provide fresh, local, organic produce to our neighbors in need, local food pantries and shelters.

Growing Urban Leaders in Food Systems (GULFS)

Working with our national educational consultant, Nicodemus Ford, MFAI spent much of 2016 developing an interactive and engaging youth-centered curriculum that aims to cultivate leaders in constructive food systems change. Used both in classrooms and community-based programming, a food systems lens helps socially disadvantaged students learn skills that create tangible change to support their families’ and communities’ well-being.

MFAI’s GULFS curriculum is aligned with Common Core State Standards and so can be adapted for multiple purposes and across content areas. We work closely with school leadership and community program leaders to tailor it to each school or community group’s mission and vision. Skills taught in the project-based learning curriculum include problem-identification and problem-solving, research, presentation skills, conflict-resolution, teamwork, communication, and critical thinking.

Early tests of our change-making curriculum in July received enthusiastic student evaluations. We have continued to test and refine existing lessons, develop additional ones. Ultimately, we aim to work with the most engaged youth participants to develop a cohort that engages in special out-of-school projects, offers internships, and cultivates job skills and job opportunities with collaborating non-profits, agencies, and businesses.

Conservation agency staff (USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and County Land Conservation Departments) frequently cite a lack of knowledge and experience as an impediment to helping clients implement this conservation practice. Recognizing this need, we launched a 3-year professional development project targeting this audience, providing them with the latest research-based and farmer experience best management practice information. We use an outdoor “learning event” format, held on practitioner farms where participants see cover crops in various cropping systems as well as their impact on the crop that follows. This joint effort of the Institute and Dane County UW-Extension partners with County UW-Extension offices around Wisconsin and is funded by the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) professional development grant program.

The Institute held its third annual conference in August near Lancaster, WI with the theme “Coupling Soil Health and Economics.” Long-time covercropper Jeff Endres, President of Yahaha Pride, a farmer-led watershed group in Dane County and National Wildlife Federation “Cover Crop Champion” provided the keynote, arguing for farmer-to-farmer cover crop promotion. Afterwards, the 110 participants boarded buses, touring cover crop research at the UW Lancaster Agricultural Research Station and visiting the farms of Gary Stelpflug and Steve Adrian. Both began cover cropping in the 1980s, recognizing soil health benefits but motivated to improve their bottom lines. They shared their experiences and demonstrated successful practices in several fields.

This annual conference brings together farmers, agency personnel, industry professionals and researchers to share the latest cover crop information and ideas. This conference is a joint effort of Michael Fields Agricultural Institute, UW-Extension and the Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Wisconsin Farm Technology Days

Walworth County hosted this annual event in 2016. MFAI served on the Education Committee (a two-year commitment) and planted a cover crop demonstration plot in the heart of “Tent City”. Over 30,000 people attended the 3-day event and innumerable participants learned of the benefits of cover crop use, interacting with Institute staff and other state-wide cover crop experts at the demonstration.

Cover Crop Professional Development Training

This joint effort of the Institute and Dane County UW-Extension partners with County UW-Extension offices around Wisconsin is funded by the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) professional development grant program.

We held four events in 2016 and have scheduled four more for 2017.

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In 2016, we continued many longstanding sustainable agriculture policy initiatives and started new ones. Federal - Collaborating with the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition on national appropriations, we achieved many Fiscal Year 2017 priority goals, pending further congressional action in April, 2017. We participated in a March summit for the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, were pleased to be presented an award by the National Resources Conservation Service in March, recognizing our years of promoting the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and provided feedback on NRCS’s plan to “reinvent” CSP, including speaking at a September ceremony to celebrate over a million Wisconsin acres enrolled in CSP! We also served on three national grant review panels. Wisconsin - We advocated for funding for conservation and for the Buy Local Buy Wisconsin and Farm to School programs, which MFAI helped establish, and facilitated meetings about the future of working lands preservation as part of a year-plus statewide conversation overseen by Wisconsin Land and Water.

Building the Sustainable Agriculture Movement
Our new Assistant Policy Director, Devon Hamilton, joined in September and continued Michael Fields’ efforts to increase diversity and the next generation of sustainable agriculture advocates.

Grant-Writing Workshops and Grants Advising
We continued to help farmers and sustainable agriculture groups access state and federal programs to support their work, conducting seven grant-writing workshops and serving over 500 people in the Midwest with our free grants advising. Our grants adviser of many years, Deirdre Birmingham, passed the baton to our new grants adviser, Kitt Healy. We began working with southern partners to create a similar grants-advising function in the South.

Farmer-led watershed
In May, MFAI helped a diverse group of Iowa County farmers form a Producer-Led Watershed Protection group; five more farmers joined by January, and the group met six times in 2016, sharing results from trying new conservation practices. In September, we were pleased to host a group of fishermen who fish in the Gulf of Mexico and deal first-hand with impacts of nutrients from Upper Midwest farms that travel down the Mississippi River and form a Dead Zone in the Gulf. At a Gulf seafood Dinner and a farm tour, the fishermen celebrated our Conservation farmers, and a cultural connection was formed. From these events, MFAI produced two videos – one on the fisherman-farmer connection and another on conservation planning.

Teaching About Crop Insurance for Diversified Farms
Diversification is key to a farm’s economic sustainability and resilience. Crop insurance options have long been offered for a limited number of major crops, creating a disincentive for farmers to diversify. Michael Fields collaborated with the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Services (MOSES) to educate farmers about a new USDA program that offers crop insurance for a farm’s entire revenue stream – the Whole Farm Revenue Program. We conducted a nationwide webinar which received over 560 views by year’s end, published news articles, conducted workshops at four conferences, offered brief trainings at seven field days and seminars, and conducted additional tabling, articles, websites materials development throughout the year. We also participated in a research project with our partner National Center for Appropriate Technology exploring crop insurance and organic and specialty crop farmers.
Michael Fields Agricultural Institute wishes to thank all the individuals and partners who make our work possible through their generous support. From financial gifts to in-kind support and the gift of your time and energy, we could not do this work without you.

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

December 31, 2016 and 2015

ASSETS

CURRENT ASSETS

Cash $268,260 $236,838
Unconditional promises to give 102,600
Receivables 84,184 73,503
Prepaid Expenses 35,949 30,841
Total Current Assets 490,993 341,182

Property and Equipment - Net 4,805,057 3,213,425
Cash held for endowment 83,282

Total Assets $5,379,332 $3,554,607

LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS

CURRENT LIABILITIES

Current Portion of Notes Payable $311,289 $52,680
Accounts Payable 19,144 18,835
Accrued Payroll and Taxes 17,305 4,594
Deferred Revenue 10,844
Total Current Liabilities 358,582 76,109

LONG-TERM LIABILITIES

Long-Term Debt net of Current Portion 296,562
Total Liabilities 358,582 372,671

NET ASSETS

Unrestricted
Undesignated 4,695,897 3,088,052
Designed for endowment 82,982
Designed for State Policy Work 5,524 10,000
Total unrestricted 4,784,403 3,098,052
Temporarily restricted 236,047 83,884
Permanently restricted 300
Total Net Assets $5,020,750 $3,181,936

TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS $5,379,332 $3,554,607
We are grateful to the foundations, institutions and organizations who provided financial support for our work in 2016:

AmazonSmile Foundation  
Benefit Concepts, Inc.  
Biodynamic Farming & Gardening Association  
Blooming Prairie Foundation  
Century Fence Company  
CROPP Cooperative, Inc. - Organic Valley  
DATCP-Watershed Protection  
EZ Farming LLC  
Farm Aid  
Farmers Union Enterprises, Inc.  
Fidelity Charitable  
Grant Abert Foundation  
Holly B. Rothschild Family Gift Trust  
Hurtgeniea Holsteins LTD  
John W. Pope Foundation  
John Master Enterprises LLC  
McKnight Foundation  
National Center for Appropriations Technology—OREI  
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition—SIG  
National Wildlife Federation  
North Central Region—Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)  
Paul Risen III Estate  
Rohrer Family Farm LLC  
RSF Global Comm-Lievegoed Fund  
RSF Social Finance  
Schenck Business Solutions  
Skylark Inc  
Strathmore Farms/Barrington Hills Farm  
The WaterWheel Foundation  
USDA Agriculture and Food Research Initiative  
USDA Agriculture Research Service  
USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service  
USDA Risk Management Agency  
UW-Cooperative Extension-WI Sustainable Agriculture & Education  
UW Extension—State Office  
Wegner LLP