Michael Fields Agricultural Institute
2015 Board of Directors

Brent McCown, President
UW-Madison Department of Horticulture

Eloisa Gomez, Vice President
Director, Milwaukee County UW Extension

Jamshed Patel, Secretary/Treasurer
Attorney, Foley & Lardner Law Firm

Robert “Bob” Bower
Hawthorne Valley Farm Corner Garden Manager

Birl Lowery
Emeritus Professor of Soil Sciences, UW-Madison

Brian Wickert
Biodynamic Practitioner

Carrie Edgar
Director, Dane County UW Extension

Laura Paine
Program Director
Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship

Mark Finser
Board Chair
RSF Social Finance

Emeritus Board Members
Christopher Mann, Founder
Bill Liebhardt
Wayne Lueders
Beth Bovis

2015 Staff

David Andrews, Executive Director
Jim Stute, Research Program Director
Smaranda Andrews, Education Program Director
Margaret Krome, Public Policy Program Director
Christine Welcher, Gardens Manager
George Reistad, Assistant Policy Director
Allison Pratt-Szeliga, Program Manager, Crop and Soil Research
Molly Roamer, Marketing and Communications Coordinator
Shannah Schmitt, Office Manager
Shirley Fox, Grounds and Maintenance Specialist
Brayden Pozorski, Lawn care

2015 Apprentices

Julie Battaile, Brussels, Belgium
Tyler Delsart, Green Bay, WI
Rebecca Wasserman-Olin, Minneapolis, MN

2015 Interns

Monica Hanson, Waukesha, WI
Hoà Đào, Vietnam
David Mroch, East Troy, WI
Nguyen Nguyen, “Wind,” Vietnam
Message from the Executive Director

There are certain times in your life when you just have the feeling that change is in the air. Five and one-half years ago was one of those times. It was the summer of 2010, when I made a series of decisions that changed my life, although I’m not sure I realized at the time where those decisions would lead me. Having rejected the seemingly normal path of working for Extension and slipping into retirement in a “comfortable pair of slippers,” I chose to move the family from a university town in Central Iowa to a small southeast Wisconsin community to take over the management of a small nonprofit called Michael Fields Agricultural Institute. In short, I decided I was in need of a new challenge. Little did I realize, I was taking over the leadership of a great organization at precisely the time when consumers really began to take notice of the connection between what they eat and the overall health of their families.

In the last five and one-half years, I learned a lot about the importance of healthy soil from MFAI’s Research Program, the value of having new, young farmers on the landscape and the importance of training those farmers. I learned even more, about how to develop the kind of relationships and collaborations, which would help move Michael Fields forward as a recognized leader in the field of sustainable agriculture. One of those relationships was with the Wisconsin USDA office of the Natural Resource and Conservation Service. With the support NRCS, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute, had the opportunity to host two statewide conferences on the importance of cover crops. And in May 2015, Michael Fields helped NRCS host a meeting with the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, Thomas Vilsack, at the Institute. The meeting offered the staff time to meet the Secretary, provide him with a tour of The Gardens at Michael Fields, and talk about the Institute’s programs: Research, Education, Policy and Market Development. I think I have learned a little more about myself and the importance of “widening the circle” of relationships. As Secretary Vilsack said, it will take all kinds of farmers engaged in all kinds of farming to feed nine billion people on the planet in 2050. It is important to realize, the work of the Institute must go beyond organic and biodynamic forms of agriculture. The staff at Michael Fields must reach across the fence and encourage conventional farmers to take small steps to become more sustainable. I also learned, it’s nice to have other people around, people who come to attend a Farm to Table Dinner, like the Institute hosted on a beautiful summer evening last August. With over one hundred in attendance, it provided us another opportunity to spread the message of eating healthy foods, grown locally. The list goes on and on. It’s really all about relationships, both old and new, and how to go beyond our comfort zone to instill a culture of agriculture in who ever we are working with.

Recently, I increasingly find myself thinking about the challenges facing new beginning farmers. How can they afford the land to get started, the financing necessary to put in that first crop, and where and how would they market that first crop, as well as, subsequent crops? My lifelong habit of reading has expanded to include books on self-sufficiency, homesteading, and energy self-sufficiency. Sometimes it takes awhile to see the forest amongst the trees. Perhaps, the most important thing I have learned, is a greater appreciation of the organizations we partner with. Over the next few years, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute will help to support the newest generation of farmers.

Maybe you’re a little like me, maybe you’re a person who gets impatient and wants things to move just a little faster; maybe you’re looking for what’s important and maybe I can save you a few steps in the process. Just remember, it all starts with healthy soil and that results in healthy crops. This moves all of us on to healthy families and eventually this leads to healthy communities. Choosing to live a certain life style is important, but it is just as important at the same time, to learn how to get along and develop healthy relationships with someone or some organization that can help carry the load.

David Andrews, Executive Director
Michael Fields Agricultural Institute

The mission of Michael Fields Agricultural Institute is to nurture the ecological, social, and economic resiliency of food and farming systems through education, research, policy, and market development.
RESEARCH

Innovating Sustainable Farming Systems- Starting from Seed

Michael Fields is exploring and developing a new model for agriculture. 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 seek to engage all types of farmers, whether they practice conventional, organic or biodynamic agriculture. The program is in the process of fully integrating with the education program to ensure research-based knowledge reaches the public in an expedient manner.

Cover Crop Promotion
Interest in cover crops continues to grow despite our current era of low commodity prices. 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. To that end we initiated work in 2015 with funding from the National Wildlife Federation and the SARE Professional Development Program to document the positive impact cover crops have on the crops which follow.

In 2015 we continued work in cover crop strategies for organic transition and reinvigoration, organic quack grass control 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-tilling the second into the residue of the first. In addition to improving soil quality through residue returns to the soil and reduced tillage, we were learning that we may be inadvertently creating pollinator habitat because many of the species need to flower for successful termination with the roller crimper.

Corn Research
The goal of Michael Field’s long-standing organic breeding program is to restore genetic diversity to this important crop. We are making progress in developing new, high quality corn varieties not duplicated in the private sector, but needed by the organic sector. We emphasize grain quality including overall protein content and better amino acid profiles combined with sound agronomic traits. With our partners at USDA-ARS, we have ramped up 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. Contamination can be detected at market in which case grain is rejected as organic and must be sold as conventional.

Cropping Systems Research
We continue our work to establish a meaningful long-term research trial comparing conventional, organic and biodynamic farming systems. 2015 represented the third year of transition to organic certification. The trial will be initiated as soon as we’ve secured enough funding.
EDUCATE

Training the Next Generation of Sustainable Farmers

Michael Fields’ education program is fostering the next generation of local food champions—sustainable farmers, gardener innovators, consumers and advocates. We believe the culture in agriculture needs revitalizing, creating a place for lively discussions, learning, feeding both the soul and the imagination, and cultivating community.

Whole Farm Workshops

The Michael Fields Whole Farm Workshops teach new and experienced farmers and gardeners the skills they need to take their agricultural passions and careers to the next level. In 2015, we scheduled 11 Whole Farm Workshops, Field Days and Conferences for which we registered 273 participants.

For the professional farmer, topics included farm management, financial literacy, permaculture, organic agriculture, tractor safety, market development and cover crop systems. We also have offerings for anyone who seeks to explore the links between good food and healthy living, including beekeeping, homesteading, pollinator habitats, pruning and grafting trees and growing fruits.

Wisconsin Cover Crop Conference

The Institute held the second annual conference in August at the Institute’s Campus in East Troy with the theme “Cover Crops and Agricultural Resiliency”. In addition to the keynote presentation by Daniel DeSutter, a long-time cover crop/ soil health proponent from Indiana, participants had the opportunity to tour one of three local farms. This included the Institute’s research farm where we conduct organic cover crop trials. 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 the Michael Fields Institute and Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service.

These workshops are made possible by a grant from the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program in collaboration with Angelic Organics and Prairie Crossing. The UW-Extension also provides workshop presenters.

The Gardens @ Michael Fields

The Gardens were designed as a place to teach new farmers the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in agriculture today. For the last 18 years students have come from all over the US and the world to learn, grow and experience all Michael Fields has to offer. The students learn skills such as transplanting, cultivation, greenhouse management, organic standards, and the importance of good records.

One of our on-going goals is to expose more people to the benefits of a local food system. We are constantly reaching out to the surrounding communities with events such as our Customer Appreciation Night, Reading in the Gardens and our Farm to Table Dinner. Our Worker Share and Volunteer programs have been a great success. New people are able to join us in the fields, learn first-hand from our students and get answers to questions they might have about local foods and organic farming. As we look for ways to extend the growing season and make it possible to “eat local” 12 months a year we are continually expanding our Value-Added Program with our students. In 2015, students received first-hand experience preserving their harvest into jams, jellies, pickled items and even pepper jelly!

The Gardens work regularly with community groups bringing farm experiences to people with special needs. Again this year The Gardens sponsored 2 students from Shepherds College in Union Grove, WI. They worked on the farm every Wednesday from May through October helping to plant, weed and harvest for our markets.

With such an abundance of produce this year, we wanted to share the harvest with our neighbors. In 2015 The Gardens reached out to local food pantries and shelters to provide fresh, local, organic produce to our neighbors in need. We worked with the Mukwonago Food Pantry, Twin Oaks in Darien and Chapel on the Hill in Lake Geneva. Developing these relationships was such a rewarding experience for everyone. We are looking forward to continuing these relationships in 2016.
EMPOWER
Activating Grassroots Support for Profitable, Environmentally Sound, Socially Responsible Agriculture

Michael Field’s public policy program works at the state and national levels to engage grassroots support for sustainable agriculture and build capacity for the sustainable agriculture movement. Working with many diverse coalitions of stakeholders, we empower people to use, shape and advocate for programs that benefit farmers, consumers, communities and the land.

Impacting Public Policy

Despite difficult political terrain in Wisconsin and nationally, in 2015 we advanced our sustainable agriculture policy agenda in multiple areas.

At the Federal level, we continued our decades of collaboration with the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, including work on national appropriations for Fiscal Year 2016 (for which we achieved many of our priority goals) and implementing several programs that we supported in the 2014 Farm Bill. For one of them, the Conservation Stewardship Program, we researched and published a report about Wisconsin farmers’ use of the program. We also received funding from USDA’s Risk Management Agency to educate Wisconsin farmers about RMA’s new Whole Farm Revenue Protection program, which supports and even incentivizes diversification on farms, conducting a webinar, workshops, publishing articles and other written materials.

At the State level, we advanced Wisconsin policies that increase market access, conservation, funding capacity for managed grazing, research and outreach, farmland preservation, and community food security. Despite the state’s extreme political and budget climate, we laid groundwork to protect funding in the 2017-2018 budget process for the Buy Local Buy Wisconsin and Farm to School programs, which MFAI helped establish, and funding for local conservation staff to help farmers develop and implement conservation practices. Funding for all three program areas may be at risk in the upcoming budget. We also continued our policy leadership policy role with the Wisconsin Local Food Network, providing advocacy opportunities for good, local food supporters in the state. We launched a farmer innovation network in SW Wisconsin, including helping a large diversified farm host a cover crops field day.

Building the Sustainable Agriculture Movement

Michael Fields plays a key role in building the movement for sustainable agriculture, including increasing diversity and growing the next generation of advocates.

In this last year of the Community and Regional Food Systems Project, MFAI created opportunities for community partners nationwide to engage in community food systems-focused conversations around policy strategies, social and racial equity issues in the nation’s food system, and youth engagement. And we began developing a Growing Urban Leaders in Food Systems (GULFS) project, to work with schools and partners groups in cultivating young urban activists.

We helped the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition become specific about steps to increase its diversity and build relationships with multi-cultural farming organizations and communities to create change on a grand scale.

Federal Funding Guide

We continued to help sustainable agriculture groups and individuals use federal programs to support their work. With our new Guide to Federal Programs for Sustainable Agriculture, Forestry, Entrepreneurship, Conservation, Food Systems, and Community Development, we held one national grant writing training webinar and six workshops around Wisconsin.

Our free grants advising helped over 450 underserved farmers in the Midwest or young nonprofit groups working directly with such 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.
We are grateful to the foundations, institutions and organizations who provided financial support for our work in 2015:

Albert Lea Seed House, Inc.
Blooming Prairie Foundation
BMO Financial Group
The Brico Fund
Century Fence Company
CROPP Cooperative, Inc.
Farm Aid
Farmers Union Enterprise, Inc.
Fidelity Charitable
Frieda & William Hunt Memorial Trust
Geneva Lakes Kitchen Walk III
Grant Abert Foundation
John W. Pope Foundation
McKnight Foundation
Mid-America Insurance Center, Inc.
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
National Wildlife Federation
Panta Rhea Foundation
RSF Social Finance
USDA Agriculture and Food Research Initiative
USDA Agriculture Research Service
USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program
USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service
USDA Risk Management Agency
USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)
Yggdrasil Land Foundation