



Sustainable Agriculture & Food Systems

Michigan State University

Early Fall Newsletter
August 2026

SAFS Welcome Reception & Author Talk!



We are kicking off our SAFS Fall activities this year with an event hosted by the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems: **Growing Resilience: How Food Policy Councils Build Civic Engagement and Community Well-Being**

In this book talk, discover how local Food Policy Councils drive public health, economic vitality, and community well-being! Author [Nessa Richman](#) will share practical strategies and actionable, research-based tools for building equitable, resilient local food systems from her new book, *Food Policy Councils: Building Civic Engagement and Community Well-Being* (Routledge, 2026).

Come meet new SAFS students and say hello to friends at the reception following the talk.

DATE: Friday, September 25, 2026

TIME: 2:00-3:30pm book talk

JOIN US for the light reception to follow from 3:30-4:30 pm ET

LOCATION: Erickson Hall Kiva, Michigan State University, 620 Farm Lane, East Lansing, MI 48824

This in-person event is free to attend, but please [register](#) so we can scale food appropriately

Course Reminders

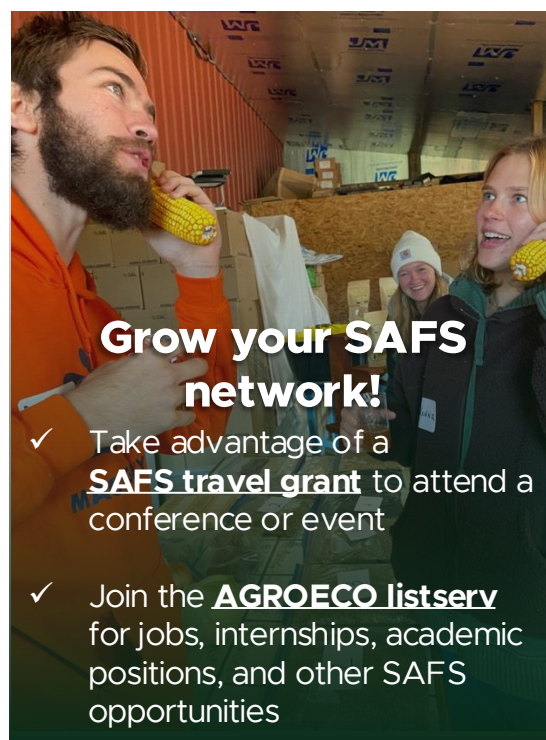
SAFS Farm and Food System Field Course Students – 224 or 824 – please make sure that you save these dates! ***There's still room if you want to join this required course!***

Field Trips

Friday, Sept. 11 2:30-6:30 pm

Sat, Sept. 19th 8 am-6 pm

Sat, Oct. 3rd 8 am-6 pm



Grow your SAFS network!

- ✓ Take advantage of a **SAFS travel grant** to attend a conference or event
- ✓ Join the **AGROECO listserv** for jobs, internships, academic positions, and other SAFS opportunities

Check out KBS Research in person!

Contact Julie Cotton, cottonj@msu.edu, if you would like to carpool to the event. RSVP by Aug 21st; event is Sept 3!



KBS LTAR FIELD DAY

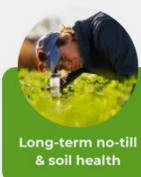
Kellogg Biological Station Long-Term Agroecosystem Research

Thursday, September 3 from 9:30 - 1:30 PM
9693 N 40th St., Hickory Corners, MI 49060

HIGHLIGHTING FIVE YEARS OF REGENERATIVE AG RESEARCH



Perennial forages & prairie strips



Long-term no-till & soil health



Profitability of regenerative ag



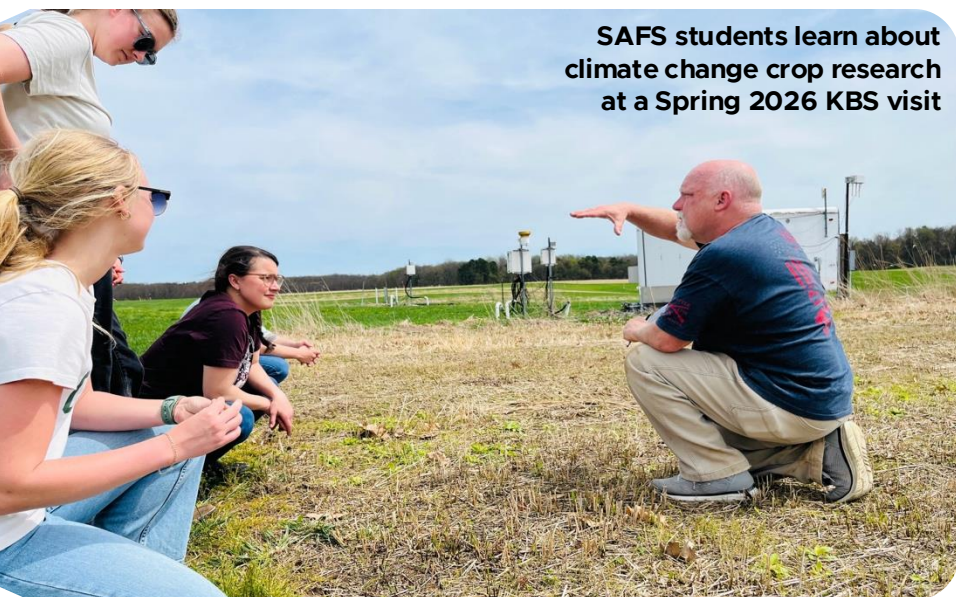
Revising the aspirational system



Register by August 21!

Lunch included!
Event is free, but registration required
Credits requested: 1 RUP, 2.5 CCA, Phase 1 MAEAP
<https://events.anr.msu.edu/KBSLTARFieldDay2026/>

Contact Rachel Drobnak with questions: drobnakr@msu.edu



SAFS students learn about climate change crop research at a Spring 2026 KBS visit



SAFS supports interdisciplinary learning. Cross-pollinate with other disciplines and expertise!

Upcoming Events

underlined text links to event

Sept. 3, 2026 9:30 AM- 1:30 PM

MSU Kellogg Biological Station Long-Term Agricultural Research Field Day. Register by August 21st! (more details to your left)

Sept. 25, 2026 2-4:30PM

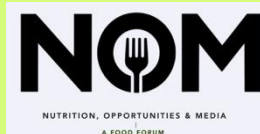
Author Nessa Richman talk:

Growing Resilience: & SAFS welcome reception

Erickson Hall Kiva (more details first page)

Oct. 1, 2026 10 AM – 7PM

Nutrition, Opportunities & Media [NOM]: A Food Forum



NOM is a community forum where the universal love of—and need for—food sparks the conversations that

matter most. Campus and community are welcome to register and join the audience in this series of conversations with influential journalists, creators, chefs, and media makers. SAFS's Julie Cotton is participating the "third course" at 1PM! *WKAR Studios on MSU campus*

Visit these event lists for additional opportunities!

Center for Regional Food Systems Events

Current food system and sustainable agriculture research and education community events

MSU Sustainability Events

Public calendar highlighting events at MSU

Departmental Seminars are TBA – look for announcements on **AGROECO** listserv!

Featured Article

The Hidden Power of Connection: Lessons from French Wine Cooperatives for American Farmers

Featured articles are written by SAFS students highlighting sustainable agriculture and food systems in current science, events, and popular media

by Marcos Granados-Flores

SAFS PhD Student
Department of Fisheries and Wildlife
Michigan State University



Image: Hunt's Hillside Farm, SAFS Field tour, 2025

In the sunbaked hills of southern France, a group of winegrowers discovered that their most valuable crop wasn't grapes—it was ideas! The cooperatives of Languedoc-Roussillon, long known for bulk table wines, were trying to reinvent themselves as producers of quality vintages. As they experimented with new varieties and marketing approaches, one question emerged:

What makes some cooperatives thrive while others stall?

Researchers Yuna Chiffolleau and Jean-Marc Touzard from the French National Institute for Agriculture suspected that the answer wasn't found in the vineyard, but in the relationships among the people running them.

Mapping the Advice Network

To answer their research question, the researchers conducted structured interviews with 31 cooperative managers across the Biterrois region. Managers were asked a series of questions about whom they consulted over the previous two years on topics such as technical production, grape grading and payment, marketing, human resources, alliances, and landscape planning. Among these, the deceptively simple question, "Who do you turn to for advice?" stood out as central for mapping the flow of knowledge across the community.

Next, they created a map of the managers' responses creating a visual picture of how knowledge flowed through the community—a living network showing who trusted whom, where information circulated, and where it stopped.

The resulting web was dense and revealing. Nearly three-quarters of all advice exchanges stayed local, highlighting the power of neighbor-to-neighbor communication. Technical topics like grape quality and production methods dominated the conversations, while marketing and human resource issues received far less attention. In short, these managers knew how to make good wine—but they didn't always know how to sell it together.

Interestingly, the most innovative cooperatives weren't necessarily the most connected. The “steady improvers”, those in the middle of the innovation spectrum, had the broadest and most diverse networks. The least innovative cooperatives, on the other hand, tended to be isolated—seeking advice only when a problem became urgent.

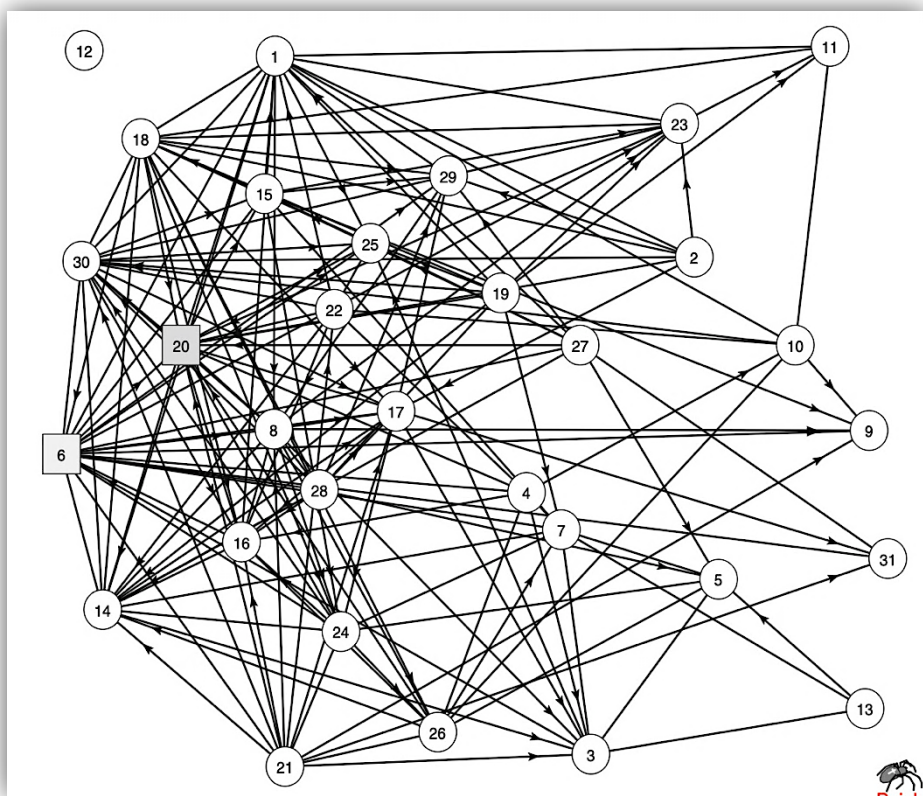


Figure 1. Advice network among wine cooperative managers in southern France. Squares (Cooperatives 6 and 20) mark domain experts, the most sought-after advisors on grape grading and payment, while circles represent other cooperatives. Cooperative 12 stands alone—an isolated node revealing the limits of local information flow.

Cooperation and Competition on the Same Vine

Chiffolleau and Touzard found that cooperation and competition often grew from the same root. Proximity encouraged collaboration on shared technical challenges, but it also created rivalries when cooperatives chased the same markets. Beyond geography, social bonds mattered deeply. Managers connected through family, politics, and even local rugby clubs—proof that in rural economies, friendship and trust are as much resources as soil and sun.

Advice, it turned out, was never free. It carried obligations, expectations, and a quiet economy of respect. To seek someone's counsel was to acknowledge their experience and status; to offer it was to reinforce one's place in the community. Innovation, then, wasn't just technical—it was social, built on webs of reciprocity and reputation.

From Research to Resilience

The next phase of the research was sharing the results with the cooperative managers. When the researchers presented their “spider web” diagrams back to the managers, the reaction was immediate. Some were surprised to see themselves at the edges of the network; others, at the center. What had been invisible became visible—who connected whom, and where the gaps lay. The images sparked new conversations, new collaborations, and even friendly competition to strengthen weak ties.

In that moment, research stopped being an abstract exercise and became a tool for collective change. The cooperatives realized that they didn't just share a market—they shared a destiny. Strengthening one link could make the entire system more resilient.

Images Left: SAFS Undergraduate and Graduate students take a tractor tour of Hunt's Hillside farm, a vineyard in Southwest Michigan (2025)



Lessons for American Farmers

For farmers and cooperative leaders in the United States, this French case study offers powerful insights. First, information itself is infrastructure. Just as we invest in roads and irrigation, we need to invest in the relationships that carry knowledge—through local co-ops, farmer networks, and field days where ideas can flow freely.

Second, local doesn't mean closed. The French managers who made the boldest innovations reached slightly beyond their usual circles—to researchers, institutions, or even competitors in other regions. The same holds true for U.S. farmers navigating regenerative practices, direct marketing, or climate resilience: growth often happens at the edges of familiarity.

Finally, trust takes time. The study showed that credibility wasn't earned by one breakthrough but through steady collaboration and consistency. Building that trust—by showing up, sharing results, and learning together—may be the most strategic investment any cooperative can make.



The Roots of Farm Growth – Not Only Underground

This study reveals that every agricultural system is rooted not only in soil, but in social networks. The strength of those invisible roots can determine how well farms adapt to change.

Whether you're managing a vineyard or a dairy, the message is universal: innovation starts in conversation. By working with, not just alongside, our peers, we cultivate something more enduring than a good harvest—we cultivate community.

Because in the end, the richest terroir isn't just the land beneath our feet. It's the human connection that nourishes every field.

Article Source: Chiffolleau & Touzard (2014), *Understanding local agri-food systems through advice network analysis* Agriculture and Human Values 31(1): 19–32.



Image Left: SAFS students listen to second-generation owner of Hunt's Hillside farm (2025); **Right:** Students explore wine grapes at Shultz's Fruitridge farm (2017); **Below:** a view of Hunt's Hillside Rows

