

From Worms To Llamas

Alternative Center Helps Producers Find Niche Markets

COLUMBIA, MO.

If you want to raise anything from worms to llamas, Debi Kelly can point you in the right direction.

As project manager of University of Missouri Extension's Missouri Alternatives Center, Kelly answers thousands of questions and provides information each year to people looking for a special niche market.

"I consider myself a clearinghouse or broker of information on alternative forms of agriculture," Kelly said.

"A lot of people are looking for ways to diversify their operation," she said. "A majority of people who call want to grow or raise something. They are looking for ideas."

Kelly received 718 telephone inquiries in 2007. The MAC Web site (<http://agebb.missouri.ed.mac/>) received almost 2 million hits in 2007.

Based on these inquiries, certain trends seem to be emerging from Missouri producers, she said.

Information requests for livestock production, marketing/agribusiness decision-making and organic/natural products are the most frequent inquiries.

Top requests for information in the last two years have included rabbits, meat goats, smoke-houses/smokers, worms, medical herbs, organic farming, alternative field crops and root cellars.

Other requests included agritourism, dairy goats, bed and breakfasts, nursery production,

ducks, chickens, game birds, ostriches, llamas, elk, bison, wind farming and catfish.

"Today, people want information at a time that is convenient to them," she said. The MAC Web site links users with extension guide sheets from many university research centers.

Ag Opportunities, a monthly electronic newsletter, includes updates on alternative opportunities, resources that users may not normally find and a calendar of events. You can subscribe to the newsletter and access back issues at <http://agebb.missouri.edu/mac/agopp/>.

People who want to talk to someone directly can call Kelly at 573-882-1905 or 800-433-3704 from within Missouri, she said.

"Networking is the key. You never know who has an answer to what you might be looking for. Sometimes it's simply a matter of getting two people together," she said.

"One of the best things I can do is to advise the person not to go ahead with an alternative business venture," she said.

"The thing that people don't realize is that when going into an alternative enterprise, generally the market is not readily available. Producers should take a hard look at what it would take to market their product. Successful alternative agricultural enterprise producers take to heart their farm goals and how they can utilize their assets and skills in running a business," she said. Δ