

US delegates feed their senses in Norway



Following is a series of accounts written by members of the American Agricultural Editors' Association (AAEA) about their experiences at the 2006 IFAJ Congress in Norway.

In these reports, you'll see Norway through the eyes of the AAEA members who received stipends to attend the meeting.

Sights and Sounds of IFAJ

By Edith Chenault, news editor and communications specialist, Texas Cooperative Extension

"Feed Your Senses" was the theme of the 50th Congress of the International Federation of Agricultural Journalists in Hamar, Norway. And the meeting was five days of a feeding frenzy of sights, sounds, smells, taste and touch.

All of the senses were filled: the breathtaking scenery; sounds of music from "Peer Gynt," smells of the food and earth of farms, tastes of cheeses, reindeer steak, elk sausage, lamb, potatoes and bread. Oh yes, the bread. Touch came from actually snuggling under cotton blankets with wool mittens on your hands while attending the lakeside performance of the classic play, "Peer Gynt" (that was pretty important for someone who had just come from triple-digit temperatures in Texas).

Seven things that stood out for me at the meeting:

- The welcome: After almost 24 hours getting from my home in Texas to Hamar, Norway, any welcome would have been great. But our hosts reached out to really welcome us. Someone was sent to the train station to take new arrivals to the hotel. That relieved me of having to find out where I was going and haul my luggage to get there. Folks at the registration desk made sure I got checked in fine and had everything I needed.
- The networking: First, it was reassuring to be around people who do what I do for a living and don't find agricultural reporting an oddity. Also, I've been to many meetings where participants either keep to themselves or cluster into groups of known colleagues. It was not so at this meeting. Most people were willing to meet strangers and spend time with them.
- The tours: The mountain farming and dairy tour of the Geno breeding and artificial insemination association and cattle and goat dairies was educational. For the first time in my reporting career, I suited up for biosecurity when I went to a farm. Geno is a cooperative association of cattle dairy farms that are trying to improve genetics of the herds. The cattle and goat dairies were on top of the world it seemed (900 meters

above sea level in one case). Our hosts were gracious and willing to talk about their operations in spite of the rain. Lunch was served at the Cultural Cottage at Ro, a cluster of homes and outbuildings that were part of an old farm.

- The resilience of the Norwegian farmers: If something doesn't work, they'll try something else, such as the Cultural Cottage at the Ruud Farm in Ro and the Rudi Farm that we had visited earlier. Of course the countryside has a natural beauty that draws tourists, but the farmers have the eco-tourism and the hospitality down pat.
- The best experience: We were told that to have the best experience at the meeting, we needed to try all of the food. So I made an attempt. I had never tried elk or reindeer before, and I found it wasn't bad. As an avid cheese lover, I appreciated the cheese served at nearly every meal. And have I mentioned the bread? I hadn't eaten good lamb in quite a while, so that was a delight. Some of my colleagues found some things like the fish and Aqua Vite a little more pleasing than I did.
- The encouragement: The interest in my dissertation startled but also pleased me. I am also a doctoral student at Texas A&M University. My interest lies in training agricultural journalists and how to better equip them for the world marketplace. People seemed truly interested and ready to give their opinions. (The survey can be found at http://www.ifaj.org/news/agcomm_study.htm)
- The windup: During the closing banquet, I saw colleagues from all over the globe. People of all nationalities were sitting at our table, from Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Japan, Italy and America. And we were all communicating. We were able to set aside any political differences, have a good time and learn more about how to better agricultural journalism.

Tours to Tempt the Senses

***By Karen Simon, Communications
Director,
Iowa Soybean Association***

Our trip to Norway began on August 12 with a visit to the Rudi Farm. Owned by Nina and Oystein Rudi, this farm is a traditional farm that grows grain and hay, though the term “farm” is used somewhat loosely. The family has just three pigs and three cows, but during the past 12 months they have hosted over 8,000 visitors.



Above: Crowds gather for the outdoor performance of Peer Gynt.

The primary income is now derived from cultural events held on site from May to September. Visitors enjoy music, art, poetry and food experiences at the Rudi Farm, and the location is stunning. In fact, the area surrounding the Rudi Farm was awarded official status as one of the richest and most important cultural landscapes of the valley. While at the farm we were treated to sheep herding demonstrations, tastes of traditional food, a sampling of traditional music and dance and time to soak in the lovely Norwegian landscape.

Following the farm visit, we boarded the bus for a special treat – a performance of the poetic drama Peer Gynt written by Henrik Ibsen in 1867. Mountains and a lake served as the backdrop, adding to the beauty and mystery as the drama and the sunset unfolded. The play's action, flavor,

atmosphere and characters are lifted from Norwegian folklore to function as shadows and types for Ibsen's satirical view of the human condition. Even though we couldn't understand Norwegian, we were able to follow the basic story line and enjoy Edvard Grieg's hauntingly beautiful opera music, which accompanies the play.

The conference included several tours, which gave us the opportunity to get a sense for Norway's agricultural industry.

Our group toured Moelven Industrier ASA, which produces wood-based building goods. The main products are timber and laminated timber for load-bearing construction, interior products and modular building systems. The massive, arching wood supports of the "Viking Ship," the venue for the speed skating events during the winter Olympics in Norway are an example of this company's work.

In the afternoon, we visited the Nordre Rudstad farm. The present owner is the fourteenth since 1600. Due to a fall in agricultural and timber prices, the farm has explored alternative sources of income and now offers moose hunting and courses for hunters and nature lovers. In addition, a water business was started in 1996 and is now one of the farm's most important sources of income.

The following day, we made a stop at the community of Lucky Naerose. The community has developed creative ways of attracting visitors. Some of its attractions include the world's only underground airport, the Norwegian Christmas tree museum and the lucky troll park.

In the afternoon we visited the Molstad farm, where we were able to see black currants harvested. The farmer, Stine Moldstad, works with designers and photographers to brand black currants, create worldwide exposure for their freshness and taste.

Norwegian Highlights and Hospitality

**By JoAnn Alumbaugh,
Director of
Communication,
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About 15 Americans traveled to the beautiful land of Norway for the International Federation of Agricultural Journalists' meeting. The contingency was larger than normal, since the U.S. group will be hosting the international meeting in three years.



Above: AAEA members at the Norwegian congress, pictured from left Diane Johnson, JoAnn Alumbaugh and Karen Simon.

"We always find out how many things we have in common when we get together with our colleagues from around the world," says Mike Wilson, AAEA member and vice president of IFAJ. "This really gives each of us a chance to broaden our perspective on our profession, establish new sources for our readers and listeners, and make new friends who we can bounce ideas off of. I always come away from a Congress with a positive outlook."

Fortunately, most of our group was relatively unaffected by the terrorist alert in London, though we heard of nightmares from people who did travel through Heathrow. In fact, I was detained an

extra day in London on my way home. Security had been stepped up in both Des Moines and Chicago, but the general feeling from everyone is that we prefer too much protection as opposed to not enough. It does make you think twice, however, when you're so far from home.

The weather was beautiful on Saturday, our first day, as we traveled to the northern part of the country (did you know Norway is approximately 1100 miles long, from end to end?). We stopped at a 'farm,' described in Karen's account above. It was an absolutely beautiful location.

Preserving History

Norway is making a concerted effort to maintain and support traditional agriculture. As a result, farm subsidies are very high, and much of its food is imported. Yet the tourist industry is huge and visitors want to experience typical Norwegian life as it was hundreds of years ago.

As Esther mentioned above, the Ruud farm is a working mountain farm, with log houses, dairy cattle and very steep hills. The primary home consists of two continuous old houses with open fires, and this is where most of the food for visitors is prepared and served. The old barn has been converted into a serving area for guests, and seats 80 people.

An old mountain farm barn has been reconstructed into an open-hearth house. This original 'grandmother's' cottage is over 300 years old and was moved piece by piece from higher ground to its present location. The open hearth is an enclosed square in the middle of the room, with cooking utensils suspended from above. The medieval atmosphere is further enhanced by the rustic wooden chairs and benches covered with animal skins. In the open-hearth room, dishes dating from the middle ages are prepared over an open flame; meat and fish, soups and stews, soft and hard breads.

Called 'The Cultural Cottage at Ro', our hosts Lina Dybdal and Tor Jacobsen treated the journalists and guests to a traditional Norwegian feast, including outstanding fresh salmon caught from the river just below the farm.

World Class Genetics

We visited the test station for Geno, a nationwide genetics and cattle-breeding service company with 18,000 members. Geno carries out research and development aimed at further improving animal quality. The focus on the dairy side is on the Norwegian Red breed (NRF), known for health and prolificacy.

For beef cattle, Geno uses Charolais, Limousin, Hereford, Angus and Simmental. The company works closely with the Norwegian Beef Breeding Association to produce and distribute beef cattle semen. It also cooperates with the Norwegian Museum of Agriculture to preserve the genetic material from the old cattle breeds, and this applies to both the storage and distribution of semen.

About 90% of all the cows in Norway are bred by artificial insemination. About 700 AI technicians and veterinarians are active in Norway, visiting farms and working with producers. Geno runs its cattle breeding program with the highest standards and a heavy emphasis on research. The test facility we visited was exceptionally clean and well-managed. Young bulls are housed in open pens of 10 bulls each.

Our next stop was to a traditional mountain farm. Every summer, about 550 cattle and 8,000 sheep are moved to the mountains for summer grazing. The mountains are a great feed resource and have been utilized for hundreds of years. The cattle stay in the mountains from the middle of June to the middle of September, depending on the weather. Shepherds and stockmen stay in the mountains in small cottages to care for the animals, which thrive in the mountain environment.

This is great ski country, as you can imagine. Norwegians are, in general, a very fit and athletic people. Hiking and skiing are national pastimes. The 1994 Olympics were held at Lillehammer and we drove through the area several times, noticing the runs for the giant slalom and the downhill events. We drove by the bobsled track as well. Evidently the track is open to amateurs

who want to give the challenging course a try, but it is quite expensive, not to mention dangerous - definitely not for the faint of heart.

How About Some Mares' Milk?

One of our lunch menus featured traditional Norwegian foods, among which was mare's milk. Yes, it really is milk from horses. Evidently, traditional use of mares' milk for health purposes is documented all over the world. The Vikings considered mares' milk a gift from the Nordic Gods, while the Arabians saw it as a gift from Allah. More recently, mares' milk has returned as a health product in Europe.

The product we sampled was milk from Nordic and Icelandic horse breeds that graze in one big herd on free-range Norwegian pasture. According to information from Equi Libre As (the company distributing the product), mares' milk is exceptionally well suited for an organism under strain, because the horse is a flight animal and the foal must be able to follow the herd. Mares' milk strengthens the body, increases resistance and boosts energy. It is easily digested and its unique composition offers "special relief during a period of convalescence."

As we moved to the lunch area, we were offered an aperitif. It was light green and frothy on the top. I tried it and didn't particularly care for the taste. It wasn't until later that I found out it was mares' milk. That's how it is in a foreign country - sample lots of different things and ask later what they are - otherwise you might not try them!

Minister of Agriculture Promotes Tourism

Terje Riis-Johansen, the Norwegian Minister of Agriculture believes future trends in agriculture include tourism, Green Care and bioenergy. He spoke to IFAJ members during one of the sessions. Agriculture in his country is changing rapidly, he believes.

Riis-Johansen says Norwegian agriculture is going through considerable modernization, even though it will never be like "the American prairie or Tuscany in Italy.

"Norway is river deep and mountain high, with steep valley sides and narrow fjords. Winter is long and summer is short," he continues. "The level of costs in Norway is among the highest in the world. Consequently, Norwegian farms must have different economic conditions compared with their fellow farmers in more favorable climatic conditions."

Norway depends on the importation of many goods and services, notes Riis-Johansen, and this fact has much to do with Norway's stand on world trade.

"Countries like Norway need a rules-based, stable and predictable trading system which is provided by the WTO. Both developed and developing countries need predictable and updated rules to govern international trade. For me, it is important to support and underline the development dimension of the Doha round."

He believes, however, that every country should retain a certain amount of wiggle room, because "implicitly, a multilateral system is not based on free trade principles alone."

Riis-Johansen listed three non-trade concerns and explained why the Norwegian government is seeking to safeguard them in the context of world trade. First, he says, food security for all Norwegians now and in the future is an important objective of the government. "Our self-sufficiency for agricultural products is around 45%," he says. "Consequently, we import a lot of agricultural products and have one of the highest amounts imported per capita in the world. Maintenance of a certain level of agricultural production is therefore an important goal for us."

Continued viability of rural communities is another important issue for Norway. "Viable rural areas and maintenance of human settlement in sparsely populated areas represent important qualities in this country," points out the Minister. "It is an asset both for us and also for the people of the countries visiting us."

The third point he made was the number of environmental benefits relating to multifunctional agriculture. Agriculture's aesthetic, historic, cultural and recreational values are closely contingent upon the landscape's authenticity as a food producer with its own economic life, says Riis-Johansen. "To the extent that agricultural landscape is scarce, measures to ensure its protection, involving both general policies and specific measures, are applied," he emphasizes.

Multifunctional Agriculture

The agriculture in Norway is quite different from what we see in North America. While there are some commercial farms, many of the smaller farms supplement their income with tourism, and family farms are heavily subsidized by the government. It's somewhat disappointing that smaller farms aren't sustainable by agriculture alone, but perhaps tourism is a good way to give the urban public a better appreciation of agriculture. Norwegian farmers have discovered a way to maximize agriculture by sharing their history, landscape, people and buildings with the many visitors who come to this beautiful country to enjoy the pristine environment.

It's easy to see why the government has chosen to support farmers in this cultural endeavor. Political statements either for or against this philosophy will be withheld for the time being. Instead, I'll remember this cultural and educational experience with pleasure, and sincerely thank the AAEA Professional Improvement Foundation for making this opportunity possible.