Mushroom Grower Network Summary
10/24 & 10/25

Ken Mudge, Cornell University
Steve Gabriel, Cornell Small Farms Program
Julie Rockcastle, Green Heron Growers
Steve Sierigk, Hawk Meadow Farm
Rodney Webb, Salamander Springs Farm & Gardens
Nick Laskovski, Dana Forest Farm

Mission Statement
Our goal is to develop a Temperate Forest Mushroom Growers Network of North America (TFMGN-NA) that encourages grower ownership and initiative in order to advance production and marketing. The network includes growers who practice predominantly forest cultivation on woody substrates including logs, stumps, and woodchips. The network will be developed mainly for commercial growers at any scale, but hobby scale growers are welcome as well. The focus will be on commercial production of shiitake mushrooms, but cultivation of other species will also be promoted.

Organization
An advisory group will or has been established to oversee progress and assess priorities for TFMGN-NA. Issues of concern to the Mushroom Growers Network fall into either of three broad categories including

1) Grower communication
2) Public education
3) Product quality, marketing, and legal issues

Each category will address a number of specific issues, and working groups will be initiated to address these issues. All participants in the TFMGN-NA are encouraged to get involved with at least one of the working groups.

1) Grower Communication
Goal: To maintain communication among growers in order to support and improve forest mushroom cultivation.

a. Grower Survey. A comprehensive survey is being developed by Steve Gabriel of Cornell Small Farms to develop an updated directory of forest mushroom growers. This information will be shared via the existing network (website and listerv), which currently mostly focuses on the Northeast. Our intention is to broaden the range of participants to include Southern and Midwestern growers as well. An attempt will be made to reach out to current or prospective growers from all three regions. The survey of growers will include:

   o Contact information
- How many logs under cultivation (present and future plans)
- How and to whom mushrooms are marketed
- What portion of production is sold fresh and/or as value added products. What value added products are produced.
- Legal issues encountered as part of growing
- Extent of previous participation in the Forest Mushroom Growers Listserve and/or the NE Forest Mushroom Growers Network.
- Research questions or needs of growers

**b. Research:** Develop a list of research-related questions regarding improvement of cultivation practices as well as marketing issues. The network will help to formulate this list, develop an understanding of what research already exists, and seek support for research.

Some examples of research:
- Grower trials with other mushroom species including lion's mane, nameko, stropharia, etc.
- Marketing issues including evaluation of consumer demand for shiitake and other species.
- Local isolation of species for better breeding, adaptation, etc.

**c. Website and Listserv:** Update and manage the existing Northeast Forest Mushroom Growers Network website ([http://blogs.cornell.edu/mushrooms/factsheets/](http://blogs.cornell.edu/mushrooms/factsheets/)), and the Mushroom Growers List Serve (MUSHROOMS@LIST.UVM.EDU). Consistent with our intention to involve growers from the Southern and Midwestern regions, NEFMGN will be renamed *Temperate Forest Mushroom Growers Network of North America.* NEFMGN is currently housed on a Cornell Server. Consideration will be given to moving it to a non-Cornell server. Similar consideration will be given to the Mushroom Growers Listserv currently hosted by the University of Vermont.

**d. Newsletter:** An online and/or print newsletter will cover upcoming events, report on recent event, grower profiles, and grower classifieds.

**e. Membership coordinator/Board Members:** Depending on results of the survey, an advisory board of growers, and/or coordinators or staff may be developed

i. Eventual membership? ($50/year?)
2) Public Education

Activities related to public education are intended to increase public interest and access to markets by developing educational resources on how to use mushrooms, judge their value, and understand forest mushroom cultivation. The target audiences for public education include consumers, extension networks, other mushroom associations, and spawn producers.

a. Forest Grown Verification initiative: In the various markets where forest grown shiitake mushrooms are sold (farm stands, restaurants, farmers markets, etc.) consumers pay a considerable premium for forest grown mushrooms compared to the same species of mushrooms grown indoors on sawdust and sold primarily in grocery stores. Along with initiatives to convince more consumers that forest-grown mushrooms are superior and the price differential is justified, consumers need a way to distinguish forest grown from sawdust grown mushrooms.

A forest grown verification program could be modeled after or possibly become associated with the Certified Forest Grown Verification program recently initiated in Pennsylvania, which can cost growers $200+/year for verification. (http://www.paorganic.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2014/06/PCO-Forest-Grown-Verification-Program-Manual.pdf)

Another, slightly less expensive option is to mimic the “farmer pledge” offered by organic certifiers. This might be more like $50/year and require less paperwork, though may be seen as less stringent as there would not be site visits, required reporting, etc. Example: http://www.nofany.org/farmers-pledge

b. Consumer Information booklet on Food and Medicinal Uses of Forest Cultivated Mushrooms is intended to be one of the key products of the network. This booklet gives consumers a better understanding of the value and wide range of uses of forest-cultivated mushrooms. Distribution to consumers will occur primarily mushroom growers themselves. This booklet will include recipes, a comparison between forest grown and indoor/sawdust grown mushrooms, and grower profiles. The booklet is intended to educate consumers about forest grown mushrooms and convince them that the considerable premium for forest grown compared to sawdust grown mushrooms is justified. Steve Sierigk has agreed to be the editor for this project and several growers have offered to support and contribute. The booklet will be divided into 2 parts including Food and Medicinal Uses.

For the food section of the booklet (Cooking with forest cultivated mushrooms), 30 recipes will be chosen from recipes submitted via an online
Selection of the 30 finalists will be determined by a taste testing panel and by other related criteria. Other food-related topics will include cooking with fresh or dry mushrooms, methods for drying mushrooms, and food safety concerns about accidental ingestion of toxic mushrooms. Depending on length, medicinal uses of forest cultivated mushrooms may be included in this initial booklet or in a separate booklet. The booklet will include color photographs, line art. Editor, Steve Sierigk will be responsible for cover design, paper, binding and overall publishing. An initial run of 1000 copies at $3.50 each is anticipated. We expect it to be sold mainly to forest mushroom producers, at or near cost, for them to distribute it to customers and prospective customers. We estimate that funding on the order of $3500 will be necessary for the completion of this project. Crowd funding is one possible way to raise the necessary funds. Steve Gabriel will look into possible funding from Cornell’s Small Farms program, the Park Foundation, and other sources.

3) Quality, marketing, and legal issues

The best way to assure product quality and consumer confidence is to get ahead of the curve by setting agreed-upon standards for grading, pricing, labeling, and other related processes like sustainable harvesting of logs and working with spawn producers to develop quality standards. A guarantee of quality and source/type of production will benefit from the Forest Grown Verification described above. Marketing opportunities including direct farmer sales, farmer’s market sales, grocery or to restaurant sales.

a. Value Added Products include dried mushrooms, prepared foods such as a mushroom/hazelnut pate, and medicinal tinctures. These have high value and make use of “seconds” but several regulatory issues abound.
   i. Legal / regulatory aspects of value added products such as the use of a certified kitchen will be considered and lobbying efforts may occur
      1. First step: identify regulations for each state in network

b. Some growers have had issues/concern with regards to farm and product insurance
   i. First step: Ask Ben Waterman for results of survey
   ii. Work with Farm Bureau to secure Nationwide as a provider

c. In some states, for agriculture tax assessment mushroom cultivation may need to be included in farm legislation
   i. First step: identify regulations for each state in network