

Sustainable Small-Acreage Farming from Field to Table

Final Report for EW04-015

Project Type: Professional Development Program

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Projected End Date: 12/31/2006

Region: Western

State: Washington

Principal Investigator:

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Project Information

Abstract:

This project provided an in-depth experience of the small farm “field to table cycle” for extension faculty and other agricultural professionals. Participants from Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington attended two weeklong retreats that featured farm tours, on-farm activities, discussions on issues of sustainability, and evening programs on small farm marketing opportunities. Taste education and learning to prepare local and seasonal foods was a central theme of the retreat and one that had a lasting and profound impact on the participants. A strong sense of community quickly emerged among the participants that tended to intensify and enliven the many discussions.

Project Objectives:

The goal of the Farm-to-Table Project is to provide an in-depth experience of the flow of product from the field to the table for agricultural professionals. This understanding will help these professionals initiate and support healthy community food systems in their respective regions.

Participants will know how to incorporate seasonal foods into a menu.

Participants will have a better understanding of nutritional benefits of eating local and seasonal foods.

Participants will be able to connect with local farmers in their communities.

Participants will be able to incorporate their experience and learning into their own educational programs.

Participants will have an understanding of sustainability issues faced by small farms.

Participants will have an understanding of how approaches to sustainable food production offer unique challenges and opportunities to small farms.

A network among university, agency and culinary personnel will be created.

Participants will have a well-developed model of the movement from a producer system to a community food system.

Show participants that a small farm with a sound business and marketing plan can be sustainable.

Introduction:

Production is the primary focus of agricultural professionals with little attention given to the nutritional, culinary or cultural phenomena associated with the community food system. Consequently, the production community's main concerns are economies of scale that reflect a "cheap food policy" and products that ship well and have a longer shelf life. This emphasis has resulted in a massive reduction in specie diversity used for plant production, impoverished soils and water quality issues. Although it would seem that the prosperity of farmers would be a natural result of this concern, most farmers are facing financial difficulty. The eater seems to share in this adversity as well. Typical supermarket and fast food fare that give the appearance of diversity are indeed very similar and contain sugars, fats and salt that appeal to a reduced sense of taste. This diet and its associated delivery methods are resulting in diet-related illnesses on an historic scale and have distanced the eater from the source of his or her food. We believe that these negative outcomes are in part the result of focusing on the parts of the system and ignoring the relationships within the system.

We might better focus on the goals of the system and the ways the relationships among these parts of the system need to be changed to achieve that goal. The "farm to table" perspective informs us that to effectively reach out to the larger community we must start with the end in view, that is, the finished product on the table and the relationship those seated at the table have with the source of their food. Our training of agricultural professionals must integrate this food system and begin to build healthy connections with eating. One approach to this training is to immerse agricultural professionals in an extended retreat where they are involved with the production, harvest and preparation of foods that meet high culinary standards. Integrating this experience with the onsite study of knowledgeable and successful small acreage farmers that direct market their products will give these professionals an in-depth understanding of the full food cycle.

Participants will then have a first-hand understanding of the challenges facing sustainable food production on small farms. They will be able to incorporate this farm experience and learning into their own educational programs. They will learn about new and expanding markets for small farm products and will have an informed sense on how to network with all segments of the farm to table cycle to more effectively work with small farms on improving profitability. They will have an informed sense of the nutritional benefits of fresh and seasonal foods and will learn how to incorporate these products into meals. This learning will help these professionals develop more effective programs for their home communities that will benefit small farms, improve the culinary quality of meals, and contribute to the nutritional health of their citizens.

References:

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Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2006.

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Education & Outreach Initiatives

Objective:

Description:

Methods

Learning Design.

The practice of relying on a single domain of instruction, e.g. only cognitive skills, may be efficient for certain topics and contexts, but in fact misses other dimensions that support learning. There is some consideration that standardized materials, instruction, and practices may actually diminish or inhibit learning. According to “brain based learning” the brain learns best when it processes cognitive, affective, and psychomotor information simultaneously. This learning environment more likely leads to participant involvement in social change than more traditional designs of instruction. In fact, this outcome seems to be the case for this project. Participant reports on the follow-up survey regarding their activity following the retreat suggest a great deal of effort in initiating and promoting social change regarding community food systems. (Instructional Technology, San Diego State University, “Brain Based Learning,” retrieved from <http://coe.sdsu.edu/eet/articles/brainbased/index.htm>, December 19, 2006.)

The Quillisascut program.

The Quillisascut Farm Training Program provides agricultural professionals an environment where they spend five days on the farm observing, asking questions and learning through a multidisciplinary hands-on approach. The Quillisascut model uses farmers as educators both onsite where the farm milks dairy goats and produces artisan cheese, and on other local farms through a series of farm tours. These farmers tell about their production systems, their different marketing strategies and their efforts at building community. The program includes regular sessions for reflection, discussion; after each dinner there is a presentation of information by university faculty and video related to a healthy community food

system.

Each morning around the breakfast table participants discuss the “word of the day.” This daily interaction creates an environment that sets the tone for the day’s activities. Each word brings different facets of sustainability to light. While the words may vary from session to session, the first word is always respect and the last discussion is on grateful. Each day is spent performing tasks around the farm that have to do with harvest, soil fertility, planting or taking care of animals.

Food preparation and serving is a part of everyday’s program and well as instructional sessions on food preparation. Some special culinary events include preparing and firing pizzas in the wood fired oven, cider making, herbal infusions, and knife skills. All meals are prepared from products raised at Quillisascut or from nearby farms.

This program works because all of the components of effective “brain based” learning are present. There is a cognitive challenge, the building of relationships among themselves and with the farmers they visit, and the psychomotor dimension of harvesting, preparing and eating foods. The program is varied and information rich allowing participants to individualize their learning giving their interests and backgrounds. Participants were sent a packet of articles before the retreat to read (See Appendix E) and additional materials recommended by participants or items that came up during discussions were added to this packet.

Next is the five-day schedule specifying farm activities, farm visits, daily discussion periods and evening presentations for the two retreats. (See Appendix F)

Outreach and Publications

Publications produced by this project include:

1. Farm to Table: The Culinary Connection DVD. This 25-minute DVD tells the story of Farm School graduates, Culinary Instructors from Seattle Central Community College and Washington State University regarding their experience at the Quillisascut program and how this program influenced their sourcing habits when they returned to their respective communities.

2. Farm to Table Sourcebook: Creating Connections between Eaters and Farmers. This 16-page artfully designed and beautiful source book summarizes the content and process of the Sustainable Small-Acreage Farming from Field to Table Retreat. This publication gives the retreat perspective in answering four questions:

1. Is it good for the eater?
2. Is it good for the farmer?
3. Is it good for the community?
4. Is it good for the earth?

The publication includes many pictures of the Quillisascut experience and gives a full page of resources and references. One-thousand copies were printed and has been sent to all participants in the Quillisascut Western SARE funded program and to other agricultural professions and interested agency representatives in the four state region.

3. A website has been created that summarizes the essential content of the Farm to Table Sourcebook and provides in PDF format the full publication. This website can be found at:

http://communityagcenter.org/SARE.Farm_To_Table/Introduction.htm

Outcomes and impacts:

I. Short Term Contributions: Post-Session Evaluation

On the final day of the retreat participants completed an onsite evaluation survey that included questions rating their educational experience and questions that required short qualitative answers. The responses for the first nine quantitative questions for the 2004 and 2005 retreats were combined for quantitative responses. There were a total of 20 completed forms.

Question 1: Please rate the impact of the retreat on your understanding of the following issues facing today's family farms.

A. Practices for Sustaining a Viable Enterprise in Today's Economic Environment.

All of the participants but one reported that the retreat had a moderate or significant impact on their understanding of sustainable practices.

B. The Purpose of this Retreat Was to Learn How Food Moves From the Ground to the Table. How Well Did We Do That?

All of the participants indicated that the program did a good or excellent job in helping them learn how food can move from the field to the table, especially in terms of local and seasonal foods.

C. How Small Farmers Can Work Together to Produce and Sell Their Product?

All of the participants indicated they had a much better understanding of how small farmers can work together to produce and sell their product.

D. How Family Farms Contribute to the Health of Their Communities (Nutrition and Vitality)?

All of the participants indicated that the retreat had a moderate impact (30%) or significant impact (70%) on their understanding on how the local family farm contributed to the local community and economy.

The retreat program and activities provided an excellent platform for addressing many of the issues facing small family farms. The responses on this question confirm that the participants gained a better understanding of what it takes to be successful as a small acreage farmer. This understanding included issues relating to production, marketing and distribution, and how family farmers can work together to improve their likelihood of success. The participants also came to appreciate the contribution of the small family farm to the local community and economy.

Question 2. Listed below are several topics addressed at this retreat. Please circle what you feel you may have learned about the topic.

A. Grass Fed Livestock and Poultry

B. Sustainability

C. Nutrition

D. Cooking with Local and Seasonal Food

E. Food Systems

Summary of responses: Participants were asked to indicate if they learned nothing new, some new knowledge, a lot, or a great deal with respect to each of these concepts. The percentages for each concept with learned a lot and learned a great deal combined are as follows: Grass Fed Livestock and Poultry (65%), Sustainability (80%), Nutrition (60%), Cooking with local and seasonal food (85%) and food systems (70%). No one indicated they learned nothing new on any of the concepts.

Several key concepts relating to the whole systems approach to learning about small acreage farming from the farm to the table were emphasized during the retreat. These concepts included pastured products, sustainability, nutrition local and

seasonal foods and food systems. All of the participants indicated they learned new knowledge, and a large majority indicated they learned a lot or a great deal. Two concepts were especially prominent in the program: sustainability and cooking with local and seasonal food. The responses on the questionnaire reflect this emphasis: 80% of the participants reported they learned a lot or a great deal about sustainability and 85% of the participants indicated they learned a lot or a great deal about cooking with local and seasonal foods.

B. Value of the Program in Learning How to Connect Producers and Consumers.

Participants were asked to list ways, if any, they learned to connect local foods and producers with the larger community.

Common themes found in these written comments include the importance of community, networking, direct marketing and taste.

Community takes on two different approaches. One is the working together of the producer community to help one another in the production and marketing of products. One participant wrote that "this experience reinforced the importance of people working together as a community to build marketing opportunities." A second sense of community was engaging the larger community, those who benefit from eating local and seasonal products. For example, [This retreat] "reaffirmed the need for public education and necessity of engaging community involvement." Again, "The establishment of farmers' markets and farm tours will help make local consumers more aware and appreciative. People with a common interest need to get connected."

Comments on networking focused on institutions and chefs. Comments representative of this theme included: "Individual contacts made to school district food service managers and restaurant owners/chefs."

References to direct marketing were found in many of the comments. For example, "Marketing programs that focus on 'Buy Local, Eat Fresh' and the value of Farmers' Markets to these growers."

Taste education and learning to prepare local foods was a central theme of the retreat. Participants were surprised at the excellent meals that could be prepared when food was locally and seasonally sourced and indicated that this taste would be important in educating the larger community. "If you can show that locally grown and seasonal foods can taste great, they will want to buy more of them." "Introduce consumers viscerally to the tastes and experiences associated with local foods and production.

C. Value of Program in Advancing Their Careers.

One of the short answer qualitative questions asked participants to specify at least one way this experience at the retreat would help them in their careers. The terms found repeatedly in these comments were "broadened my view point," "better enables me," "rejuvenated," and "makes me think."

Representative comments include:

"I've been rejuvenated and have recommitted myself to making change. There is a lot we can do to strengthen local food systems and I'm excited about it!"

"With my work with both farmers and eaters I feel I am now better prepared to link these two groups together. I have enhanced my ability to be an advocate for a sustainable local food system and community."

"Re-vitalized my enthusiasm for the small farm experience and the essential role these farms play in a sustainable future."

This has broadened my viewpoint of agriculture and the importance of promoting

locally grown food.”

“I will be able to develop targeted programming for both producers and consumers.”

D. Most Outstanding Experience or New Insight.

The final short answer qualitative question on their learning experience asked participants to identify the most outstanding experience or new insight they learned during the retreat. These comments tended to focus on the value of the farm visits and the importance of tasting and enjoyment of local foods.

Some of the farm visit comments included:

“The farmers we met sought creative solutions to earn a living and did so successfully! They developed what was available to them and were a great inspiration.”

“Farmers’ personal stories of resilience, resourcefulness and dignity/pride in their product.”

The experiences of taste are found in the following comments:

“How good locally grown foods can taste.”

“The quality and variety of meals that can be prepared from local/seasonal foods.”

“The idea that eating almost entirely locally is not only possible, but delicious and satisfying.”

II. Medium and Long Term Outcomes.

A follow-up questionnaire was mailed to participants 18 months (2004 retreat) and six months (2005 retreat) after their attendance at the Quilliscut program. These questionnaires were mailed May, 2006 to 22 of the 24 participants. We were unable to locate two of those attending the retreats. A total of 13 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 59%. The questions asking for information regarding five areas: impact on programming, development of new projects, creation of new partnerships, effect on their approach to using local and seasonal foods, and the one event, activity or concept that now stands out in their mind.

A. Impact on Programming.

Listed below are reports of how the Quilliscut training was used in local programming across the four states. There has been a broad range of application ranging from more traditional classroom instruction to answering questions on the Farm Aid Hotline.

The program provided excellent example/case studies to use when speaking to other farmers about sustainable small farms and community food systems.

One participant incorporated a “100 mile” meal assignment in their small farm curriculum.

The program provided material used in articles sent out by a local food coop.

A class was taught on unusual fruits and vegetables found at local markets and called “5-A-Day the Farmers Market Way.”

Canning and food preservation classes were held at a local health food store that markets local farmers’ produce.

The “Quilliscut” model was used in an agriculture entrepreneurship class.

The program helped in food policy and food planning comprehensive plans.

The workshop helped give more effective programming through the Farm Aid Hot Line.

B. Development of New Projects.

Participants reported the following projects that grew out of the Quillisascut retreat experience or were augmented by this experience. All of these projects directly impacted the participants' communities and one in Montana may result in significant long term changes in the local economy.

A participant promoted a local farmers' market by giving produce coupons to low-income seniors through a "5-A-Day" mini-grant.

I am working with a group to develop youth education in traditional food sources, specifically traditional sustainable agricultural practices no longer practiced by the tribe. We would like to encourage more people to gather and harvest traditional foods in a sustainable manner.

We are in the midst of forming a Farm-to-Table marketing cooperative that would encompass an area 300 miles in diameter around Glendive, MT. This area would include much of western ND also. This cooperative would allow producers to concentrate on producing by having their marketing needs met by the cooperative's marketing manager. A CREES grant has been written and submitted to pay for the coop's start-up. A grant has already been procured from the state of MT for a marketing study. The marketing cooperative includes a farm to table restaurant, microbrewery, shared-use commercial kitchen, and a regional cooking school in conjunction with the local community college.

A graduate course on the Rhetoric of Sustainability will be offered at a land grant university.

A participant worked with the "Friends of the Farmers' Market" in Spokane to link low-income kids to local agriculture via field trips and school programs.

I recently shared my experiences about the retreat during our Western MT Regional Meeting and suggest that we do some multi-county programs on small farm sustainability and suggested partnerships between agricultural agents and FCS agents.

The Washington/Idaho small farm educational program "Cultivating Success" is now collaborating with Quillisascut to offer an immersion course in sustainable small acreage farming.

C. Creation of New Partnerships.

The following reports were given on new partnerships that had emerged since attending the retreat. These partnerships including working with departments across state lines, working with tribes and linking with existing agencies and groups to move toward more sustainable practices of production.

We are meeting with the Commissioner of Agriculture in ND to talk about partnering with ND on the Farm-to-Table marketing cooperative (Glendive, MT).

I am working with the tribe's ethnobotanist about local food sources and traditional uses.

Created a partnership with a public health scientist at Emory University to study the sustainability of organic, IPM, and conventional farming systems for apples, cherries and grapes.

I have linked up our Extension Small Farms program to Zenger Farm-Center for Urban Agriculture and Immigrant Farm Programs.

Working with a group of organic growers and a representative of Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides.

I'm currently working with RC&D, NRCS and Lane County Conservation District on a producers meeting that will introduce sustainable practices including reducing farm inputs, marketing, clean air and water.

D. Approach on Using Local and Seasonal Foods.

The reports on using local and seasonal foods included how the retreat had influenced their personal choices and how they were working with the larger community to encourage the purchase and use of local and seasonal foods in their diets.

I am working on my knowledge of local and seasonal foods to incorporate in cooking techniques that I can share with interested groups.

The retreat impacted my entire outlook on where I purchase and what I purchase. I practice and advocate buying locally first. I work with local retail shops to tell them the kinds of items I need. Many times if I just ask the shopkeeper, they are more than willing to stock their shelves with items I request. I planted garlic, asparagus, potatoes and raspberries. I encourage people to raise chickens, offering to teach them how to butcher.

Once implemented, our Farm-to-Table project will have a cooking school that will key on using locally produced and seasonal foods.

I make the effort to buy local, organic, whole foods. I've challenged myself to only buy foods that I recognize the ingredients. I've convinced my sisters to participate in CSA's in their communities (Alaska and New York).

I now include information about our farmers' markets (we now have two) and what foods are in season when I teach.

I'm experimenting more and am committed to use of seasonal foods.

E. The One Activity, Experience or Concept that Created a Lasting Impression.

The lasting impressions of the retreat center on the preparation and eating of seasonal foods and participating in the sense of community that quickly developed among the participants. There were a few comments on the impact of the farm tours as well.

How simple and easy it is to use locally produced, seasonal foods to create a meal that is heads above any meal that could be produced using shipped-in, store bought "fresh" or canned foods.

How possible and beneficial it is to support locally grown produce.

The wonderful food, careful attention to preparation of fresh, local food. The idea that you can eat locally and sustainable without making compromises.

The common, community meal preparation and consumption.

The great, inspiring conversations we had around the meals and the "word of the day" concept.

Standing out in my mind are the conversations we had around the large dining table-conversations on sustainability and related issues. I loved the "word of the day" discussions.

The techniques used by the various sustainable orchards and farms we visited.

There isn't just one event or activity that stands out in my mind, there are many. It was an unbelievable experience. The images that come to mind are the incredible dinners, preparing the food, learning about hers, visiting orchards, chicken processing, making cheese, roasting coffee, butchering the goat, the discussions in the evening and an incredible number of hard-working, creative farmers and agriculturists.

III. Summary.

These responses and comments leave little doubt that the project achieved its

objectives. Participants learned how to incorporate local and seasonal foods into a menu, are doing so in their own lives, and are working with the larger community to buy local and seasonal foods. Participants visited farms during the retreat and were impressed with the skill and knowledge that these farmers displayed. They are now at home working on programs that will benefit similar farms in their area. Issues of sustainability were discussed throughout the retreat and now these individuals are addressing these same issues in various ways in their communities. Finally, new partnerships and networks have emerged in these communities as the participants work on programs to produce and eat local and seasonal foods in a sustainable manner. Based on the post-session questionnaire and follow-up survey reports, there is no doubt that the retreat had a significant impact on their personal choices regarding foods, on their educational programming and on the development of partnerships and networking with the larger community.

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

Two five-day retreats were conducted, the first October 11 to 15, 2004 and the second October 10-14, 2005. A total of 24 participants attended these retreats, 12 at each session. The 24 participants came from Idaho (4), Montana (4), Massachusetts (1), Oregon (2) and Washington (13). These 24 agricultural professionals were selected from a pool of 55 applications from these states. They represented a number of agencies and institutions including Oregon Tilth, the Oregon Food Innovation Center, Farm Aid, a CSA Program Manager for Pike Street Market in Seattle, Coordinator for Cultivating Success, partnership between University of Idaho and Washington State University to provide small farm education, a WSU faculty member, University of Idaho Director for a research and education center and a WSU Learning Center Coordinator. Extension specialties represented at the retreats including nutrition educators, county directors of extension, family and consumer science, viticulture, and small farm program leaders.

The retreat was held at the Quillisascut Farm School facility that includes rooms on the second floor that accommodate 15 people with two shared bathrooms. The main floor includes a larger commercial kitchen, a dining room, a large meeting room and storage areas including a walk-in cooler. Just outside the rear entrance is a large wood-fired oven used for cooking pizzas and baking breads.

A partnership among the Cultivating Success Program, The WSU Small Farm Program and Western Regional Risk Management Agency has been formed to host the Sustainable Small Farming and Ranching course in an intensive one-week format.

The learning design exemplified by the Quillisascut program may be one of its most significant contributions. The emphasis on combining cognitive, affective and psychomotor modalities of learning in the Quillisascut program and the varied environment supporting more individualized learning may be a powerful approach to enrich other extension and agricultural programming.

Recommendations:

Potential Contributions

The Quillisascut program embraces the full field-to-table cycle as an integrated holistic system with the goal of providing delicious local and seasonal foods that are nutritionally sound. This emphasis on the plate and examining the many relationships that build this plate opens the door for wider involvement among extension specialists in building markets for small farm products and educating eaters on community-farm connections.

Agricultural professionals that have participated in this program now have a much broader vision of marketing options for small farm products. Marketing to institutions such as farm to cafeteria programs, marketing to restaurants, unitizing farmers' markets in more diverse ways and involvement of nutrition educators and family and consumer science educators as well as small farm program leaders help satisfy citizen demand for local and seasonal foods, and expand markets for small family farms.

The emphasis on the plate also helps to direct our programming for local communities. Local citizens need to know that their buying habits have broad ranging impacts on their local economies, on their environment, on specie diversity and on their health. Engaging local citizens in these connections in the field-to-table cycle ultimately benefits our small farm communities. Taste and nutritional education become as important as horticultural and husbandary.

Future Recommendations

Based on the experiences in this project we believe that the learning design model can be extended more broadly in extension programming. We sense this model to be especially relevant when the objectives of the program involve connections between local citizens and farmers and changing the buying and eating habits of these citizens. We believe more attention should be given to the full farm-to-table cycle in extension programming. An integrated holistic approach to the vitality of small family farms will more effectively address production and marketing practices. We have learned from the SARE funded "Farm to Table" professional development project and the Quillisascut Farm School that impact on agricultural and culinary professionals was most effective when the full farm to table food cycle was at the heart of the program. We have come to realize that if we want to effectively reach out to the larger community that we must start with the end in view, that is, the table and those seated at the table.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or SARE.



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