

Creating Sustainable Agriculture Farmer-to-Farmer Networks through Professional Trainings and an Agricultural Educator Toolkit

Final Report for EW11-015

Project Type: Professional Development Program

Funds awarded in 2011: \$99,590.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2014

Region: Western

State: Oregon

Principal Investigator:

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Oregon State University Extension

Project Information

Abstract:

The creation of farmer-to-farmer networks is an important tool for agricultural professionals to reach sustainable agriculture producers. This project aimed to accomplish a number of objectives related to farmer networks. The first objective was to design a toolkit for developing farmer-to-farmer networks. The toolkit, now complete and available for download, contains information on the relevance and impacts of farmer networks, a facilitation manual, and corresponding outreach materials including sample fliers, a list of potential activities and class offerings, possible organizational structures, and an explanation of on-line social networking opportunities. Second, we designed and conducted four half-day trainings in Washington, Idaho, Oregon and Montana for agricultural professionals on the nuts and bolts of starting a farmer network. In addition, we designed and conducted four half-day meetings with pilot women farmer networks in WA, OR, ID and MT. All of these objectives were accomplished. Evaluation and impact data has been collected over the last year and referenced in this final report as a way to measure success of the project.

Project Objectives:

1. Train a total of 40 agricultural professionals on the nuts-and-bolts of developing successful farmer networks in Washington, Idaho, Oregon and Montana. Trainings will occur in 4 locations, with an average participation of 10 individuals per site.
2. Hold four half-day meetings with pilot women farmer networks in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana.
3. Hold 16 consulting sessions (four with each state partner) with leaders of the

pilot women farmers' network. There will be additional consulting sessions as needed with a minimum of 10 during the second and third years of the project.

4. Produce an on-line and paper toolkit for developing farmer-to-farmer networks. The toolkit will include information on the relevance and impact of farmer networks, facilitation manual, and outreach materials including sample fliers and brochures, a list of potential activities for farmer networks, sample list of class offerings, a list of options for organizational structure of the network, an explanation of on-line social networking opportunities and other resources available to farmer networks.

Introduction:

There has been an increase in small farmers in the western States over the past few years, many of whom are interested in developing sustainable operations. Agricultural professionals and Extension educators must meet this new trend by facilitating or creating projects that directly educate and assist these farmers. Since 2002, many of the new small farms that have started have focused on diversified production and marketing. The 2007 agricultural census also indicates a significant increase in direct sales and CSAs, and organic sales and production (2007 Ag Census, USDA). This data underscores the importance of reaching this target audience through increased education and outreach in sustainable agriculture.

One important outreach and educational tool that agricultural professionals, farmers and extension educators can use to facilitate sustainable agriculture projects is the creation of farmer-to-farmer networks (sometimes known as communities of practice). Communities of practice approach learning as social participation. Their function as an enhancement to learning is well known (Wenger, 1999; Wenger et. al 2002). While there are beginning farmer programs emerging in most western states, there is a lack of organized farmer-to-farmer social networking and training in this region. In OR, WA, ID & MT, there are several organizations working on sustainable agriculture education and training with accompanying farm tours and on-farm classes, but there are few organized farmer networks that exist in these states.

Two existing farmer networks run by Oregon State University Extension faculty focus specifically on women producers: the League of Women Farmers (LOWF) is located in southern Oregon and the Willamette Women Farm Network (WWFN) is based in Corvallis. Both are organized around women farmers. LOWF's mission is to provide women farmers with opportunities for business networking, expanding knowledge, and socializing in a supportive, open environment. WWFN is a community of women from the central and southern Willamette Valley of Oregon that are actively engaged in farm and ranch activities. They have joined together to further their knowledge of farm and ranch related issues both in the market place and in agricultural practices. They are working together to enhance their economic self-sufficiency through shared experiences, resources, and visions of how farm work will impact ourselves and our community. Both networks have fostered peer mentorship and facilitated educational opportunities on topics including cooperative marketing, pest management, farm labor dilemmas, balancing farm & family, recordkeeping and diversifying farm income.

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Education & Outreach Initiatives

Objective:

Description:

Methods

We used a variety of methods to successfully implement this project. We did extensive outreach to partners in Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and Montana helping to build new relationships between university extension and nonprofit professionals. We conducted research for the toolkit, which incorporated many sources of information including our own experience in conducting farmer networks. We spent a large portion of time writing, compiling and editing the toolkit until the publication date. We conducted outreach to encourage agricultural professionals to attend workshops in all four states. We conducted four workshops that were dynamic in that encouraged participation and interaction between attendees. We distributed toolkits for free to all agricultural professionals in the four states. It is also available on our website. We conducted online surveys of women farmers and agricultural professionals to assess impact of the project.

Outreach and Publications

We published a PNW publication titled "Creating Farmer Networks: A Toolkit for Promoting Vibrant Farm Communities," which is available on Oregon State University Extension's website as a PDF document.

On July 9th, 2014, Melissa Fery and Maud Powell conducted a webinar for agricultural professionals titled, "Farmer Networks: Getting Started and How Can They Help?" The webinar was based off the toolkit and was part of an Oregon Food Bank project.

Outcomes and impacts:

We conducted an assessment of all agricultural professionals who participated one year after the workshops. We sent the agricultural professionals an online survey with questions that could earn both qualitative and quantitative data for use in assessing impact.

The data is summarized here and corresponding charts and information are available as an attachment.

Agricultural Professional Impacts

22% of respondents (agricultural professionals who took the network training) are currently involved with a network and 41% said this was after the SARE training. 33% of respondents plan on still beginning a network in the future. Some examples of networks that are currently in formation include: a peer-to-peer network for information sharing and on-farm workshop series; a network for Palouse area producers centered on conservation and precision farming; new farmers and farmers in priority watersheds; small producers for a local institutional market. 17% of respondents have used the toolkit after the trainings. Uses included: a guide for initial meeting topics; as a resource guide; and as a guide for revamping an existing network. 81% of respondents said they intend to use the toolkit in the future.

Women Farmer Impacts

According to respondents, benefits of participating in a network include: networking (26%), Education (24%), Mentoring (14%), Socializing (13%). 92% of respondents plan to stay involved with their network. 87% have an increased knowledge after participating in a network. 83% have increased networking. 80% feel more connected with the farming community. All of these are important aspects of farmer networks.

*Please refer to attached documents for more in-depth details of evaluation/impact data.

- [Impact Statements](#)
- [Workshop Evaluation Data](#)
- [Evaluation Data Table](#)
- [Ag Professional Data](#)
- [Women Network Impact Data](#)

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

There were many accomplishments associated with this project.

The toolkit, "Creating Farmer Networks: A Toolkit for Promoting Vibrant Farm Communities" was published in February of 2013 by Oregon State University's Extension and Experiment Station Communications department and is now available for download through the OSU Extension Catalog. The publication is a 54-page Pacific Northwest Extension publication, which ensures its wide distribution throughout the Northwest. The toolkit includes topics like planning your network, recruitment, network development including structure, communication, programming, evaluation, tips for success, common problems and facilitation resources. We also included many examples of surveys, outreach materials and links to more resources. The toolkit was distributed for free at all workshops in Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon.

We also held a 75-minute session at the OSU's Small Farms Conference in Corvallis in February of 2013. 61 people attended the workshop. It was titled: Starting a Farmer to Farmer Network. Melissa Matthewson, Maud Powell, and Melissa Fery all led the session and it was evaluated by participants. This was an additional/extra

workshop we added after being funded by SARE for the project.

We traveled to Montana, Idaho, Washington and northern Oregon to hold our workshops in March and April of 2013. The first workshop was for agricultural professionals in which we presented on the toolkit that had been created. 62 combined agricultural professionals representing various sectors of agriculture participated in the workshops in WA, OR, MT & ID. All participants received a copy of the toolkit. We have uploaded a copy of the agenda as well as PPT presentations from the workshops. Much of the workshop was interactive with role playing and small group exercises. Groups were diverse and the setting was intimate creating a nice workshop for agricultural professionals.

We also facilitated a half-day steering committee meeting with regional women farmers to begin their launch of the local women farmer network in all four states. We worked closely with partners in each state to narrow in on a region and a target audience so that we reached our intended outcomes and audience. There were 84 combined participants in MT, OR, ID & WA.

In addition, OSU Extension Service faculty (Maud Powell and Melissa Fery) were invited to teach a workshop, Finding Support through Farmer-to-Farmer Networking at the 4th National Conference for Women in Sustainable Agriculture in Des Moines, Iowa in November 2013. This venue provided an opportunity to extend the reach of the network toolkit to a national level. The workshop was well received by agriculture professionals, primarily Extension educators attending the conference. This was also an additional accomplishment not written into the grant.

Recommendations:

Future Recommendations

Facilitate a network of agricultural professionals engaged in creating or maintaining farm networks. This network could meet infrequently, perhaps twice a year, over the phone, but would provide agricultural professionals an opportunity to share tips for maintaining and beginning successful farmer networks. While the trainings for agricultural professionals were rated highly and resulted in the formation of new networks, an on-going system of support and information-sharing would be useful.

Information Products

- [Creating Farmer Networks: A Toolkit for Promoting Vibrant Farm Communities](#)
(Bulletin)

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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