



Increasing Iowa farmers' resiliency through the Practical Farmers of Iowa Cooperators' Program

Abstract: Practical Farmers of Iowa uses their Cooperators Program to engage farmers in answering their research questions with demonstrations on their own farms. They share what they learn at field days, and through publications and webinars.

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Budget:

\$50,000 for year one

\$50,000 for year two

\$50,000 for year three

Q Can farmers learn answers to on-farm challenges through on-farm research? Is a farmer field school model a successful strategy for farmers to share results of on-farm research and make change on their farms?

A The farmer field school model of information distribution used for this project proved to be an effective means of increasing the adoption of new practices at the farm scale and empowering farmers with each other's knowledge.

Background

Using funding from this grant, Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) supported farmers' development of innovative, practical solutions to their most pressing on-farm research and demonstration questions. PFI farmers are leaders in extensive outreach to bring those practical research and demonstration results to all Iowa farmers.

Objectives for this three-year effort were:

- Seventy farmers each year will undertake projects that will make them more resilient when faced with higher oil prices, climate instability and economic fluctuations;
- Thirty of those farmers each year will undertake projects that will help transition them from highly specialized one- or two-product systems to more resilient working farms and landscapes, resulting in more living roots in the ground, management for multiple benefits, and enhanced profitability;
- More than 1,500 other farmers each year will learn from the 70 participating farmers through PFI field days, meetings, publications, website, and print and radio media offerings.

Approach and methods

The PFI team used the farmer field school model of information dissemination. Farmer field schools are a form of learning that builds on farmers' expertise and has proved to increase the adoption of new practices at the farm scale and empower farmers with each other's knowledge. This enables farmers to make their own locally specific decisions about crop management practices. This project used farmers' experiences with on-farm research, demonstration and record-keeping projects as the key to disseminating their information and to actively invite and encourage partnering with researchers, extension and other resource professionals to enhance the transfer of this information.

Results and discussion

Between 2011 and 2013, LC funding supported a total of 390 PFI farmers who were given a venue through which they could report results from on-farm research, share

experiences of changes they made on their farms, report observations and discuss new ways of improving their farming systems. Through field days, PFI Annual Conference and Cooperators' Program, these farmers communicated with 12,647 farmers and friends of farmers. Between 40 and 60 percent of those individuals reached across the project timeline were not PFI members.

Following up on the questions set at the Cooperators' Meeting in February of each year during the grant period, PFI members conducted on-farm research and demonstration projects through PFI's Cooperators' Program. A total of 219 PFI members were involved in PFI research projects (an average of 73 members per year) covering 90 different research topics between 2011 and 2013. Some farmers conducted up to four projects on their farms.

In fall 2011, PFI created a Cooperators Program Advisory Committee to further refine the program strategies to ensure that the program met the needs of current and new PFI Cooperators. Recommendations from that group included: creation of a Master Researcher Award to recognize PFI Cooperators' dedication to on-farm research, and an increase in the number of trials that are bigger in scope and number of locations while still continuing to respond to individual farmers' requests for trials specific to their on-farm challenges. These recommendations were implemented in 2012. The Committee's role has helped improve staff's facilitation of project development at the Cooperators' Meeting to ensure that the new recommendations are carried out.

Conclusions

The farmer field school model of information distribution used for this project proved to be an effective means of increasing the adoption of new practices at the farm scale and empowering farmers with each other's knowledge. Results from Cooperators Program evaluations indicate approximately 87 percent of the respondents report they have changed farming practices as a result of participation in a Practical Farmers project. In addition, 63 percent of field day evaluation form respondents indicated they intend to change one or more practices (production, marketing, in-field, conservation, or food purchasing practices) as a result of attending PFI's field day. Of those, 27 percent report they already have changed one or more practices (in these same categories) as a result of previous Practical Farmers field days.

Championing farmers as the experts and leaders in their field is the most effective way to change the current narrative about agriculture. Other groups that have tried this method also found it beneficial to their programming. Pre- and post-test reporting remains important to shaping the future of the program.

Impact of results

The three project objectives were achieved. Outcomes obtained from these on-farm research projects can affect Iowa agriculture by prompting farmers or non-farmer land owners to consider some farming practices that will help them become more resilient when faced with higher oil prices, climate instability and economic fluctuations. All the results and information from the on-farm research projects are available online, and will be showcased at future events to facilitate farmer-to-farmer information exchanges. In addition, the findings have been shared in farm publications, in the

farmers' voice, to reach out to Iowans beyond PFI members. Without the PFI Cooperators' Program and its method of research and outreach, fewer farmers would have the confidence to make a change on their farms. This is shown in the annual member survey where farmers report that they have improved their stewardship, efficiency and profitability.

Education and outreach

- Published research reports: 43 since the beginning of the grant
- Popular press coverage: 12 articles in outside farm publications
- Blog: reports on events for those who can't attend
- Farminars: Between January 2011 and December 2013, there were 53 online seminars presented and 89 farmers led these online seminars as speakers. Between 2011 and 2013, there were 11,790 archive viewers and 2,229 live participants for these Farminars.
- Field days and pasture walks: During the field day seasons in 2011, 2012 and 2013, 243 farmers were given opportunities to be leaders in disseminating information about their farming systems and engage in discussion with other farmers and non-farmers who attended their field days. A total of 8,287 people attended the field days and pasture walks during the three years of this grant period.

Leveraged funds

Funding for PFI's Cooperators' Program included the following sources, along with Leopold Center funding:

- Ceres Foundation, "Fruit and Vegetable Clusters Project" (\$175,907)
- Iowa State University On-Farm Research, "Soybean Aphid Project" (\$7,000)
- McKnight Foundation, "Promoting Sustainable Livestock Production Systems" (\$189,999)

***For more information,
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