



Adding a new generation to Iowa's sustainable farms

Abstract: Making a graceful transition from one generation to the next is a challenge for any Iowa farm family. The Practical Farmers of Iowa organization looked for ways to smooth the path to farm operation for new farmers interested in sustainability.

Principal Investigator:

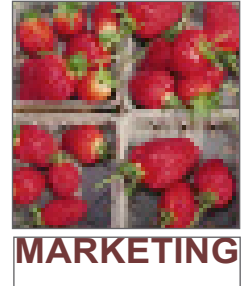
Teresa Opheim
Practical Farmers of Iowa
Ames

Budget:

\$25,000 for year one
\$25,000 for year two

Q How can we help Iowa farm families transition a new generation onto the farm more successfully?

A By providing programming that is welcoming and friendly and provides many opportunities for family members to work together on vision, goal setting, business planning and other skills.



Background

Many Iowa farm families, including founding members of Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI), have children who want to come back to farm the family homestead. Still others are transitioning their operations to non-family operators. Many conversations and negotiations need to happen to ensure that these transitions proceed successfully. In responding to a survey of PFI members who are transitioning their operations, the families reported that they needed:

1. Communication skills, including appreciative inquiry and conflict resolution training;
2. Vision clarification, unification and goal setting;
3. Business and financial planning;
4. Production expertise for those adding a new enterprise; and
5. Learning communities to come together and walk through the transition with other farm families.

Approach and methods

In 2008 and 2009, Practical Farmers of Iowa used Leopold Center support to increase communication among these transitioning Iowa farm families, especially on identified needs 1, 2 and 5 listed earlier. PFI held 12 Next Generation events for farm families or farmer/apprentice matches, including a retreat and workshops that reached 28 farm families. PFI also facilitated consultations with the Beginning Farmer Center (BFC) at Iowa State University for 55 families to discuss legal and succession planning issues. Finally, PFI secured widespread Iowa radio coverage on the needs of these transitioning farm families, held two field days on the subject, and also wrote and publicized 11 articles on topics surrounding adding another generation to the farm.

Results and discussion

Scheduling conflicts posed a major challenge for this project. The participants were very busy farm families with little down time in their farming operations, and frequently at least one of the family members participating had an off-farm job. In addition, a number of families did not have chore help they can trust, so a family member must always stay home.

Families consistently recognize that they need this kind of training, but getting families to commit to attend the training sessions is perhaps the biggest challenge. Many are nervous about communicating with each other about their dreams and financial issues, and easily find excuses for not attending the meetings. Helping families communicate with each other is a difficult job; there was no way around the hard organizing work of encouraging them to communicate with each other, scheduling sessions early to work around scheduling conflicts, and making it as easy as possible for them to participate.

At the beginning of the grant period, we thought participating families would take the initiative to arrange for individual sessions with the Beginning Farmer Center. That didn't happen, but families did seize the opportunity to meet with the BFC representatives at PFI events.

Conclusions

This project found that helping families communicate with each other requires ready and willing participants—some families are simply not at a point where they can comfortably share with each other at events provided to help facilitate that communication. Helping also requires a welcoming environment with good food that includes space for the families to talk with each other away from the farm atmosphere, limited formal presentations, some activities for family members and other activities where the older generation and younger generation talk separately. Finally, successful interaction requires significant upfront efforts to arrange meeting times that work best for the participants, who often have multiple jobs and limited time available to leave the farming operation for these activities.

Impact of results

The 28 farm families who participated in the PFI program for aspiring farmers were pleased with their experiences, and nearly all who attended would recommend the program to others.

Initial plans were to offer the program in central Iowa, but a highly motivated contingent of new generation farmers in northeast Iowa convinced PFI to also offer programming in their area. In the second year, programs were added in western Iowa with help from a number of longtime PFI members.

Working with new farmers showed that there is a critical need for more information on risk and financial considerations. More training in these areas was included in year two training sessions. Financial programming of this type became a central part of the 2010 launch of the PFI Savings Incentive Program. (As one consultant noted, sometimes younger people don't fully appreciate the risk they are imposing on their parents when they propose adding new enterprises.)

Particularly valuable to the participants was a discussion between the generations on the difference between “wants” and “needs” for the farming operation, and activities that lead the families from “pie in the sky” ideas, as one participant called it, to the concrete details of transitioning the farming operation.

Education and outreach

Next Generation training opportunities were offered at PFI field days and the annual conference. However, these were not optimal times for the new farmers, who wished to participate in the other programs on marketing and production offered at these events. Separate gatherings for beginning operators proved to be more valuable.

Leveraged funds

Practical Farmers of Iowa leveraged this funding by securing a grant from the Wallace Genetic Foundation for \$25,000. The Wallace grant supported a survey of PFI's beginning farmers to help define the areas where they particularly needed help or guidance. PFI raised another \$3,100 in unrestricted funding to apply to Next Generation programming, and continues to look for innovative ways to support beginning farmers.

***For more information,
contact:***

*Teresa Opheim,
Practical Farmers of
Iowa, 137 Lynn Avenue,
Suite 200, Ames, Iowa
50014; (515) 232-
5661, e-mail [teresa@
practicalfarmers.org](mailto:teresa@practicalfarmers.org)*