



## On-line learning: Using webinars to teach about succession and enterprise development issues

**Abstract:** Iowa State University's Beginning Farmer Center and Practical Farmers of Iowa teamed up to broadcast eight webinars to assist current and beginning farmers in devising strategies for successful farm enterprises.

### Principal Investigator:

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**Co-investigator:**  
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**Budget:**  
\$26,500 for year one

**Q** Will farmers utilize webinar technology to reduce long drives for face-to-face meetings, breaking their isolation to learn how to make their farms more profitable, and their businesses transfer to the next generation?

**A** Yes, farmers are enthusiastic about learning from people who are farming successfully, love the freedom to access the information from their home whenever they are free, and can log-in live to ask questions that directly impact their businesses and lives.

### Background

Farmers are busy people, and unlike the state's urban residents, they tend to be geographically isolated. Despite this, they still need easy access to resources on the legal implications of farming, and planning the transfer of the family business. The aim of this project managed by Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) and the Beginning Farmer Center (BFC) was to provide opportunities for communal learning without requiring the participants to make lengthy drives to be part of face-to-face programs. The result was the production of a series of web-based educational presentations dubbed Farminars.

The project objectives were to present Farminars that generated these impacts for participants:

1. Sixty beginning farmers would improve profitability,
2. Half of the participants would take further steps to improve their operation (enroll in a business planning class or add an enterprise), and
3. Twenty families would receive help to create succession plans for the next generation on their farms.

### Approach and methods

Eight Farminars were scheduled for farmers; four on succession planning and four on enterprise development. Topics were determined with input from the Beginning Farmer Center, Practical Farmers of Iowa staff, and PFI beginning farmer members. Farminars were presented mainly by non-farmer "experts" sharing information and answering questions from farmers. Farminar advertisements were targeted to the BFC and PFI networks, Iowa media outlets and regional beginning farmer email listserves.

PFI's Next Generation Coordinator Luke Gran coordinated the series and trained presenters on best practices for presentations. Practical Farmers of Iowa and the Beginning Farmer Center promoted the series to farmers and delivered content with the Adobe Connect® technology licensed for use at Iowa State University.



*Rick Hartman and farm worker Brian Hayward at a 2010 field day at Small Potatoes Farm in Minburn, Iowa. Photo credit: Sally Worley.*

## Results and discussion

Data on participation were collected during the fall Farminar series. The highest attendance was for the first session, the lowest was for the final session, with 30 live participants per week on average. Participant learning in the fall series was noted with increases in each learning outcome surveyed. Only 40 percent of participants were members of PFI, and an estimated 10 to 20 percent of Farminar participants were not from Iowa—a reminder that these issues and organizations cross state lines.

Computers are often seen as the tools of the young. While it is true that many young people were enthusiastic participants in the Farminars, data suggest that as many farmers in the decade before retirement participated in the Farminar series as did technology-savvy youth aged 18-25.

Practical Farmers of Iowa continued the online seminars with eight new Farminars in Winter/Spring 2010. The success of the winter and spring series was evident, with increases in average live viewings of 70 and 50, respectively.

## Conclusions

Many farmers would like to use the off-season to learn how to improve their farm business profits, to be networked together and to hear the encouragement and wisdom of experienced farmers. Distance between farmers and the time constraints of a busy farm life (often including at least one off-farm job) demands careful program scheduling and flexibility of access to information. This grant from the Leopold Center helped test Farminar technology, and this test validated that it can be used successfully to deliver knowledge on topics valuable to farmers.

## Impact of results

It is likely that learning about enterprise budgets and how to use them to price products will increase farm profits. The December 2009 PFI member survey indicated that PFI programs helped 49 of 180 respondents (40 percent) increase profitability on their farms.

The list of beginning farmers working with PFI has doubled to more than 290 farmers since May 2009. Many of these were identified from registration contacts for the Farminar Series. Beginners come to PFI for networking, assistance writing their business plans and connecting with farmers who are engaged in an enterprise they are considering. In the fall series alone, more than 80 of the 150 registrants (53 percent) were new to Practical Farmers of Iowa.

Farm succession continues to be a major concern and it shows in the well-attended and frequently viewed recordings of the Farminars. Thirty farm families attended a conference held in conjunction with the Farminar effort to get help from Dave Baker of the Beginning Farmer Center for their family business succession issues.



*Wade Dooley at his farm near Albion, Iowa. Photo credit: Dooley Family photo.*

Assisting the next generation of farm businesses is a pressing need. Land transfer is expected to escalate as the older farmers retire. According to a 2009 Rural Life Poll administered by Iowa State University, 42 percent of Iowa farmers will retire in the next five years. The average age of today's Iowa farmer is 57. By increasing the success rate of beginning farm enterprises and helping farm families transfer their farms to the next generation, Iowa agriculture (and its rural communities) can become stronger, more diverse, and increase understanding among all of Iowa's citizens.

## **Education and outreach**

PFI sent out one statewide press release about the fall Farminar Series. This story was covered by Wallaces Farmer and other farm publications.

## **Leveraged funds**

Practical Farmers of Iowa leveraged this funding by securing a grant from the Wallace Genetic Foundation for \$25,000. The Wallace grant supplemented the main work on this project and provided support for a survey of beginning farmers to determine what topics they thought would be most worthwhile in future Farminars.

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