

Background & Introduction

Illinois farmers who had received SARE grants and agricultural researchers and educators, many employed by the University of Illinois Extension Service, gathered on Monday December 8, 2008 in Springfield to discuss how they partner together now and how they might partner more in the future. They were led through a “fishbowl” facilitation process by Julia Kleinschmit Rembert, MSW. This process enhances the ability of one group to listen to the views of another. Kleinschmit Rembert ran two fishbowls, one with agricultural researchers and educators talking and farmers listening, and then a second with roles reversed. After each fishbowl, the full group responded to the conversation they heard. Later, small groups answered specific questions about concrete ways farmers and agricultural researchers and educators can work together, upcoming opportunities to do that, possible other partners/funders for the work, and what was learned from the one-time Illinois Sustainable Agriculture Network. Finally, the group was asked who should help the farmer-Extension partnership grow further, and how that might happen.

During the process, Kleinschmit Rembert emphasized and explained facilitation techniques she was using, bringing in a “train the trainer” approach regarding tools and skills participants could use in their later work. She often referred to the NCR SARE *Fishbowls in the Field* manual on group work, which all participants received. Stacey Thomas, a University of Illinois at Springfield graduate student, took thorough notes throughout the day. Those notes were analyzed, with data organized into seven themes:

1. Partnership seen as a plus,
2. Examples of prior and current Extension projects involving and/or benefiting farmers,
3. Benefits of partnership for Extension,
4. Benefits of partnership for farmers,
5. Ways farmers want to receive information and assistance,
6. Continuing and upcoming challenges for both groups, and
7. Concrete ideas for increasing the partnership between farmers and agricultural researchers and educators.

1. Partnership as a Plus

Participants clearly expressed partnering between farmers and agricultural researchers and educators as a positive experience that has assisted individual and groups of farmers and enhanced the work of Extension. As one Extension worker put it, “It makes work worth going to each day.” Participants looked forward to future ways to work together, ranging from Extension educators answering particular questions to assisting with direct marketing and consumer education initiatives. The overriding concern for the group, also evident throughout the day, was that Extension would become extremely limited in what they can do because of extensive funding cutbacks, especially travel funds.

2. Examples of prior and current Extension projects involving and/or benefiting farmers

In both fishbowls, participants easily developed long lists of projects that involved farmers and were beneficial to them. In fact, a few participants chided the full group for being too modest about their accomplishments. Projects mentioned include:

- Agriculture & Tourism Partners of Illinois Association
- AM Radio agriculture programs.
- Bridging awareness and understanding gap between sustainable (especially

- small-scale, more alternative) farmers and commodity farmers
- Central Illinois Local Foods project
- Community Supported Agriculture operations in Central Illinois
- Consumer education and awareness development, leading to increased profit for farmers
- Developing a holistic management approach through a watershed/soil quality initiative
- Extension providing media access for farmers, farmers providing content for media spots
- Farm Beginnings
- Farm Direct
- Farm Doc
- Keeping data record of on-farm projects implemented; providing opportunity to replicate research with several farmers in a geographic area
- Market Maker
- Pest Calculator
- Research projects with growers' associations
- Retailers increasing their purchasing of local products
- Small Farm Conference in Columbia, MO
- Sustainable Agriculture tours
- Tri-State farmer group (IL, MO, IL)

3. Benefits of partnership for Extension

Agricultural researchers and educators felt there were many benefits of partnering with sustainable farmers. Farmers can inform and assist with every aspect of research and education from identifying problems they face in production and marketing to providing a real-world setting for lab and other research to then hosting field days and using their peer networks to disseminate knowledge. Further, researchers found farmers helpful as a sounding board for their research ideas, applying what one participant called “the real reality test.” Farmers can also access some funds, such as grants available through NCR-SARE to conduct on-farm research and education, not directly available to Extension. In marketing work, farmers can host school children and other consumer groups at their farms, assisting in educating the community about local foods and sustainable farming in general. Farmers were also seen as teachers in a variety of circumstances including community college classes, 4-H clinics, study circles, and education for beginning farmers.

4. Benefits of partnership for farmers

By partnering with Extension, farmers received potential individual and group benefits. Farmers, especially those engaged in non-traditional enterprises, can access expertise and resources through Extension networks and connections that they might not find on their own. To emphasize that point, farmers in their fishbowl, listed 22 questions that they have about their own current or future operations. After the session ended, Extension agents, listening to the conversation, said they had answers for all of those questions.

Extension can assist farmers to identify their needs and wants and reduce risk by engaging them in systematic planning regarding on-farm research and/or new enterprise development. One participant said he felt he was doing a good job because he asked farmers difficult questions about how they were going to raise, market, and distribute new products. He joked that he specialized in “keeping people from making bad decisions.” Non-biased, non-product based consulting services were highly valued, especially face-to-face visits. In regards to research, farmers also benefit from assistance with research protocol, possible expansion of the research to include other farmers, both

from a data and social network perspective, the researcher maintaining the records, and the cache of being associated with University of Illinois Extension.

On a community level, farmers benefit from Extension's engagement with the community to increase local foods consumption, clarify and sometimes mediate rules concerning the production, distribution, and marketing of local food, and create a voice for small farmers to reach the public. As for other benefits, Extension can sometimes access payment for farmers as teachers, network farmers of like interests, and provide public speaking on various topics.

5. Ways farmers want to receive information and assistance

To find information, farmers in the group went to a variety of sources, including Extension, searchable farm databases and other web-based research, state agencies such as the Illinois Department of Public Health (re: food processing, etc.), Soil and Water Conservation Districts, monitored listservs, specialty organizations and conferences, and trial and error. They were very much in favor of the use of email, websites, and distribution lists to disseminate information, though half the group felt receiving hard copies of information and announcements via traditional mail was still valuable, especially for people who were not computer-inclined. Overwhelmingly, the group felt face-to-face visits with Extension personnel were essential to getting good information tailored for their enterprise. In discussion, farmers were willing to pay a fee for this previously free service, noting that covering travel costs for a visit by an Extension agent would be a bargain compared to the cost of a private consultant. They were also willing to pay workshop fees, with some noting that charging for events/services can increase their perceived value and possibly increase turnout at some workshops.

6. Continuing and upcoming challenges for both groups

Mentioned above, extreme cutbacks in Extension funding were seen as a barrier for current and future partnership efforts. In this, farmers discussed how they might assist, advocating for Extension in various ways, from participating in the *Extension Partners* group to getting involved in county government to influence local-level decisions on Extension programming. Getting out the message of what Extension does and has to offer, to farmers and non-farmers was seen as important. Farmers were interested in having a comprehensive list of Extension projects and their outcomes, similar in content, if not delivery to the recent publication about Illinois NCR SARE grant recipients.

Using resources wisely and effectively to meet farmer and Extension needs was mentioned frequently. Programs and information needs to be delivered at a local level because farmers can't travel across the state for meetings. Yet, educators can't travel across the state to meet with a handful of farmers.

Educating consumers about farming, local foods, and Extension's roles surfaced in the conversation, but the importance of engaging farmers of all stripes to work together was a stronger theme. The group felt that divisiveness between conventional commodity farmers, small-scale organic food producers and everything in-between was detrimental to the advancement of sustainable agriculture, rural community cohesion, and the

building of a positive image for agriculture that consumers, legislators, and potential beginning farmers could embrace.

7. Concrete ideas for increasing the partnership between farmers and agricultural researchers and educators.

Participants had several ideas for concrete ways to work together based on prior, current, and future projects and opportunities. They include:

- Connecting with other funders such as local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Extension departments other than agriculture, local foods groups, local, state, and regional tourism and promotion groups, etc.
- Coordinating food rules and regulation knowledge expansion
- Creating more workshops with Extension and farmers acting as partners
- Developing a website that would serve as a matchmaking service to link farmers and researchers/educators with like interests
- Disseminating the *Illinois Reaping the Rewards of our SARE Investment* book to legislators, other farmers interested in these projects, and others
- Getting more involved politically on agricultural issues
- Improving communication between Extension and farmers by using email lists and listservs
- Including farmers and Extension in grant-funded projects that involve outreach – and compensating all parties for involvement
- Recording Extension workshops and making them available to others (e.g. making DVDs of workshops available)
- Undertaking the defining of “agriculture” especially as a tool to bring various types of farmers together

Final Thoughts

At the end of the meeting several participants committed to investigating concrete ideas generated by the group, especially increased advocacy for Extension services, and the concept of an interest-oriented, web-based matchmaking service for farmers and Extension personnel. All participants said they had at least one new idea they could use after participating in the meeting, and many indicated they had two or more ideas they could integrate into their work. As a group, they also provided extensive thought and guidance for future sustainable agriculture education and programming, including noting that the Illinois Sustainable Agriculture Network, while not sustainable without state funding had been effective in sharing resources, eliminating duplicate efforts, developing new leadership, and increasing University interest in and funding for sustainable agriculture. It was also a pathway for grassroots concerns to be brought to a legislature in a state that sometimes has difficulty focusing on issues of importance to people who live outside of the Chicago area. These lessons learned can also inform future research, education, and advocacy work to advance sustainable agriculture.