

Rationale and Background

Freedom to farm requires making choices. As old farm programs fade and new flexibility emerges, farmers and ranchers need to take advantage of innovative management and marketing options. Future opportunities for farmers will come from farming in ways that are different from the past and present. To consider change, farmers often need to break from past mental models. Any major change in behavior involves new paradigms of thinking. Often, farmers find other farmers to be the best reference and support for change. They learn most by watching what new ideas are being tried on their neighbor's land.

The Heartland Sustainable Agriculture Network was created based on this rationale. It was initially funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation in 1993 to organize more than a hundred families in local farmer-to-farmer clusters to explore and develop innovative approaches to their problems. The Heartland Network has worked with 16 clusters of producers exploring innovations.

The Heartland Network addresses the loss of local ownership of farms in rural communities, loss of farm profitability, and environmental degradation. The need for information sharing among agricultural stakeholders is particularly important because many current agricultural problems are human management challenges requiring more than technology for their resolution.

The Heartland Network responds to these challenges by providing guidance and resources that allow local leadership to create their own solutions. These clusters in the past have chosen to explore options such as management intensive grazing, beef pasture finishing, pasture farrowing, cover crops in crop rotations, organic farming, complementary on-farm and on-station research, relationship marketing, fresh produce subscription services, and cooperative marketing. In order to explore these options, clusters used their minigrant resources for libraries in the local extension offices, field trips, training, on-farm demonstrations, market research, consultation, and publications.

The formation of producer clusters within the Heartland Network has created a safe environment that

encourages change and experimentation. Farmers in the Heartland Network say that through their participation in a cluster, they feel much more able to try new farming practices than they would on their own. Members report that the most beneficial activities of the Network have been farm tours and field trips. These activities provide farmer interaction and the opportunity for participants to observe, make comparisons and judge innovative farming practices for themselves. Farmers who attend training events as a part of a cluster return home with colleagues who have shared their experiences and can continue to reinforce learning and application of information.

Cluster Management Tips

Organizing a Cluster

- Focus groups have been a useful method to bring producers together to explore cooperative learning and market development. One or more local farmers or ag educators help organize interested farmers for the focus group. A facilitator leads a group discussion through a series of questions. These questions may include:
 1. What drew you into farming?
 2. What are the goals of your farm?
 3. What are the barriers to your farm goals?
 4. How can you overcome these barriers?
 5. How could a farmer-to-farmer cluster help you?
 6. What are the next steps?
- The Heartland Network has considered it essential to provide seed money for these young clusters. In order to be eligible for a small grant, clusters give themselves a name, define their membership and method of decision making, set goals, identify actions to reach those goals, and establish their budget. Cluster goals and actions must serve the "bread and butter" and social interests of the cluster. Directing efforts to larger concerns outside their influence will likely wear out members' enthusiasm.

Leadership

- Clusters are built on personal interactions. Leadership is vital to the success of a cluster. Often outside leadership that provides an organizing structure, facilitative support and money is important to early cluster development. Local leadership who recruits a good mix of members is the next important step. Ultimately leadership must be assumed within the cluster and rotated within the membership. Shared leadership within the cluster that rotates the responsibilities of group functions is likely the most difficult transition but is critical to longer sustainability of the cluster. The earlier this leadership is shared among many members increases the likelihood this transition will occur. If the cluster becomes dependent on just one or two people, those people will eventually tire of their duties and other members may avoid filling in the vacuum.
- One way to encourage shared leadership is to form a formal schedule of members being responsible for meetings. These meetings can be rotated among the homes of members or members can be responsible for speakers and discussions held at a public location. Another helpful plan is to schedule meetings on a regular basis throughout the slower seasons of the farming year. Regular meetings and a schedule of individuals responsible for those meetings avoids the trap of no one responsible for gathering everyone together again. Clusters may also design a communication tree so that announcements can be quickly shared among everyone.
- The acknowledgment of leadership within the cluster must be larger than traditional views of leadership. There are many roles critical to cluster effectiveness that don't involve highly visible functions. Those include meeting logistics, record keeping, food preparation, networking members with additional resources, sharing practical expertise with other members, and team building communication.
- Good leaders know how to involve others and delegate. Cluster sustainability can be assisted through recruitment of new people who will bring new leadership into the local group.
- Farmer networks have found there can be a rural social barrier against exhibiting leadership. To help overcome this barrier, requiring a cluster to do some public outreach by the second year promotes

leadership development, and develops the larger network. This public outreach often happens through farm tours and workshops.

Goal Setting

- Farmers often have a tendency to talk about tools and practices. While this can be important, tools and practices only hold meaning if they make progress toward goals. Clusters should help members identify their farm goals first and only then focus on practices. In order for a cluster to be sustainable, collective goals and actions must meet the real needs of members. Those needs often relate to improved quality of life, profitability, and meaningful relationships. Even if the vision is large, set intermediate goals that can be achieved so everyone feels a sense of progress.

Cluster Development

- Clusters often begin with considerable enthusiasm and optimism. This is the best time to get clusters to agree to key program requirements such as public outreach and reporting requirements. Early on, clusters may be over-ambitious causing them later to be disappointed with unmet goals. Remind clusters to set some short term goals that can be realistically achieved to maintain a sense of momentum.
- Any group working together cycles through these four stages.

Forming: Members within a forming group will feel everything from excitement to anxiety. Discussions may be lofty and abstract with complaints about barriers. During this stage the group is determining membership and what are acceptable group behaviors.

Storming: Conflict within a group is a key to growth. Members may feel inadequate, impatient, or jealousy. Behaviors can be testy, erratic, defensive, and competitive. This is a stage where the group comes to terms with what are realistic and appropriate goals.

Norming: Members feel relief, acceptance, mutual respect, and team cohesion. Behaviors include listening, acceptance of differences, trust, fun in problem solving, and creativity.

Performing: Members feel satisfaction with progress and understand each other's strengths and weaknesses. Behaviors include constructive self-change, teamwork, and constructive action.

- Conflict can stress groups, but it can also lead to growth. Requiring the group early on to identify how they will make decisions can help these group manage their own changes. Personality profiles and training in group dynamics can help clusters understand that these growing pains are normal and success depends not on avoidance but rather on constructive management of their differences.
- Clusters must be built upon friendship and trust. Programs shouldn't focus solely on the technical at the expense of hindering social networking. Build in opportunity for social and personal connections.
- Clusters can effectively work with agency employees coordinating the group if this person takes on the role as a co-learner with the farmers. Farmers can positively shape this role.
- Groups with broad goals tend to have a larger and more fluctuating membership. These clusters can be caught up in continually grounding new members, likely hindering overall group progress.
- Group transitions brought about by funding changes, changes in membership, and completed goals create a critical stage in the life of a cluster. Clusters should consciously plan for these transitions.
- Program staff are important to group development. Often clusters feel honored and rewarded by a visit from staff. This visit can provide extra incentive for the group to deal with something that otherwise might be overlooked, such as dealing with an emotional issue. Staff should also be available upon request for assistance resolving special problems. Staff can provide background media work with a local cluster event. When members carry out their own events, it furthers their local leadership development and relevance to local interests.
- Clusters are energized through networking meetings that serve to connect clusters. Such networking facilitates feelings of common destiny that reduces the sense of isolation. A roster of farmer clusters can help build informal collaborations between groups. This helps clusters to realize their actions are a part of something bigger than themselves.

Getting the Small But Important Details Done

- To maintain momentum, clarify during each meeting what happens next, who does what, and when and where you will gather together again. The more these details are confirmed the less chance something important isn't communicated to each other. Make sure to inform those members absent. Reminder calls about duties or meetings always improve implementation and attendance.
- During your business meetings, separate problem solving from decision making. If necessary, assign problem solving to a committee commissioned to make a proposal to the cluster. Make sure someone within the committee is delegated to explain the proposal to the full cluster. The chair of the meeting then limits cluster discussion and brings the proposal to action--either implementation, tabled for more fact finding, or rejection.

Accountability

- The foremost accountability of the cluster budget is between the members. Secondly, clusters are accountable to the grant institution. Clusters should be encouraged to be good stewards of the understanding that the best return for an investment is measured progress toward cluster goals. Clusters always should keep their focus on their shared vision.
- Flexibility should be provided for clusters to accommodate the differences in group needs and interests in how they organize themselves.
- Clusters are best chosen by an oversight committee that reviews all applications. This oversight committee may represent farmers, consumers, government agencies, and universities. Including farmers who are not participants in the project can help overcome possible individual resistance to critiquing project peers. Project staff can provide background information to the oversight committee to facilitate decisions.
- Clusters often form around rotational grazing. Some reasons for this are that this transition is heavily dependent on experiential management that puts everyone in the role of a learner.

Lessons Learned about Use of Financial Support

- Funding clusters can serve as a catalyst to get people working together. The grant making process provides a structure to identify a group's shared aspirations on paper. Program staff can assist clusters with additional fund raising. A central role of program staff is to keep clusters focused on their shared vision.
- Requiring local clusters to apply each year for financial support requires each group to replan, builds in program accountability, and provides flexibility to respond to evolving opportunities.
- Coordination and communication within clusters is critical to survival. These tasks can be preformed by an agency support person or managed by the group itself. Paying a local person to perform record keeping and internal communications can be an effective use of program resources.
- Clusters need to be sensitive to gender issues and provide opportunities for inclusion of both genders. Including women may help elevate issues of quality of life, safety, and family within group activities.
- A special reserve fund available for training and mediation upon request can assist clusters. This forces clusters to acknowledge first that they have a need. These resources can help persuade the group to give special attention to their own growth.
- Financial assistance to clusters for education and training is an effective, long term investment. Support directed toward agricultural production expenditures should share the risk of experimentation and require some matching support from the local group.
- If a cluster member is hired as a cluster coordinator, choosing the right person with the right fit is important. It is important to choose self-starting individuals who are committed both to the local and larger organizational goals. These individuals need to be able to make sound judgements that keep the larger network's interest in mind. Hired cluster coordinators need to have the personal space and time to adequately keep focused on the group's development and also appeal to all the members to share responsibility in group tasks. This strategy can assist organizational outreach into new geographical

regions and develop new leadership. A potential downside to this strategy can be that rest of the cluster comes to expect the paid coordinator to do most everything, thereby undermining shared leadership.

Marketing

- There is a significant trend in the sustainable ag movement toward producers creating value-added ventures that recapture profitability. This requires new entrepreneurial and marketing skills. Projects can assist this development through seed money and networking producers with knowledge-based resources to develop new markets.
- In developing alternative markets, supply must be balanced with demand through incremental growth. Producers must respond to consumers preferences such as convenience and quantity. Producers must make a choice of direct marketing or going through conventional markets that may require high capitalization for marketing. Mass marketing will require attractive and meaningful labeling. Cooperatives require significant investment in developing constructive human relationships.
- Harvest festivals, farm tours with a recreational emphasis, farmers markets, CSA's, fresh-produce subscription services, newsletters, and media work are ways to connect the urban community back to farming. Success with urban/rural interaction is dependent upon convenient transportation.

CREDITS

The author of this publication is Jerry Jost with the Kansas Rural Center.

Funding for this management guide came from USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Additional funding is from the Clean Water Farms Project, a project of the Kansas Rural Center in cooperation with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE), and funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Section 319 Non-Point Source Funds.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Ave, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410, or call (202) 720-5964 (voice or TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

The Kansas Rural Center is a private, non-profit organization that promotes the long term health of the land and its people through education, research and advocacy. The Rural Center cultivates grassroots support for public policies that encourage family farming and stewardship of soil and water. The Rural Center is committed to economically viable, environmentally sound, and socially sustainable rural culture. For more information, contact the Kansas Rural Center at PO Box 133, Whiting, Kansas 66552 or (785) 873-3431.