

CCE Grants Program For Innovative Small Farm Education 2005-2006 Final Project Report Form

On completion of your project, please use this outline to prepare your final report. Limit 3-4 pages. Send completed reports to Anu Rangarajan (contact information below). Final reports are due by October 31, 2006. All reports will be posted to the Small Farms Web Site, www.smallfarms.cornell.edu. Thank you!

Title of project: Farmer to Farmer Forum (Two Tuesdays)

Project leader(s) and contact information:

Robert Hadad

Cornell Cooperative Extension

Cornell Vegetable Program Specialist

4487 Lake Ave.

Lockport, NY 14094

Partner organizations (on *this* project):

Background situation:

Briefly describe the context or justification for your project. Farmers are generally known as independent people. At several CCE sponsored meetings farmers were overheard saying that if it wasn't for CCE activities they would never see each other. It is important for farmers to not only see each other but it would be quite useful for them to really talk with each other. Through these interactive discussions useful information would be shared. As one farmer stated, "there aren't that many of us left, it would be great if we started to band together...".

By creating an educational program that has frequency and brings these people together face to face will allow for greater dialogue and communications, a chance to interact with others doing similar work, allows for the greater opportunity to create networking relationships, and allows Extension to play a role in getting educational material out to this specific and quite important audience.

Expected outcomes of project:

List the outcomes you were hoping to achieve (from your original project proposal.)

The bottom line is for small farmers to not just survive but to prosper. In order for this to happen they must become more profitable. Projects must be initiated to facilitate this. There are several roles for Extension to play. The first role for Extension will be to become more visible and directing assistance to where it is

needed while packaging this assistance to be more scale specific. Farmers themselves are a wealth of information and can be great mentors to each other. The key to this is getting them together regularly. Being the catalyst for getting farmers together is another role for Extension.

Project activities:*

Describe what you did.

Well, what I planned to do and what I actually had to do were two different things. I planned to have a meeting every other Tuesday that would attract farmers to the Niagara County Extension meeting facility. This did not happen. I tried everything to attract farmers out to this site without success. I used flyers, press releases, mailings, and phone calls. People were interested, thought it was a good idea but ended up being too busy.

Undaunted, I expanded the area of my search and decided to move the forum to where ever I could gather a group of farmers. I met with various farmers in Erie Co who thought meeting would be a good idea but wanted to meet every week. So we set up Tuesday mornings at 9am.

I would show up usually bringing with me some handouts of Cornell articles on vegetable management issues and hand them out to the people who showed up. Each week was different with respect to how many people dropped in. Weather and farm activities dictated their schedules. Most weeks there would be several people there. Some weeks had none. When we were together discussions were always about what problems they were seeing. Good exchanges of information took place. People were interested in hearing what the others were doing.

I met some farmers who regularly brought produce to the Orleans Co. produce auction. The auction ran every Friday morning at 10am starting in May. This group of farmers would get together after bringing in their produce and the sessions focused on quality of produce, pricing, and production issues. The number of farmers who came to this ranged widely.

Several more attempts were made in Niagara Co to attract farmers but with no luck. The same was true for Monroe Co. In Wayne/Ontario Co. there were some farmers interested in the concept but said they were too busy during the growing season. They thought it might be better to try something in early winter. There is a plan to find a date to meet after Thanksgiving.

Farmer participation:

How many farmers were involved in the project overall? Counting all those who showed up at least once there were probably 17 so far. With the other winter meetings that will hopefully happen, this number will increase. The Erie Co. sessions will also begin again next season. For the farmers who frequented the Orleans produce auction, we will be having a full day winter meeting. It will be discussed if they wish for me to continue the sessions for them next season.

Briefly describe *how* farmers were involved in initiating, planning, doing and evaluating the project.

Farmers weren't really involved with planning or doing anything except for showing up. This was to be informal get together and to let things just happen. No pressure. For the Erie Co. farmers, it was less of a social event as it was a serious attempt at getting questions answered. They came in, usually grabbed a cup of coffee, talked over their coffee, and quickly got back to the field. For the Orleans farmers, if they had time before the auction started, we would stand around in a small group and talk things over. After the auction was over, they left.

Because it was hard to get farmers together during the busy growing season, I was happy with letting the sessions be loose. Over the winter I will try to get evaluations from the farmers. Many of the Erie Co. farmers come to our CVP winter fresh produce meeting in Lockport. At that meeting I will hand out an evaluation for the Farmer to Farmer Forum project. Doing this in front of the other farmers who did not attend the sessions may get them thinking that this may be something they might wish to do for next season. I will have a question on the form for them to sign up if they are interested in starting a session in Niagara.

I will also be handing out evaluations at the Orleans produce auction meeting to be held this winter.

Please attach Participant Registration Forms (including contact information) for all participating farmers.

Other participants:

Number of non-farmers involved in the project? (And their affiliations, if possible)
Edelgard Pavel, CCE Fruit Team specialist assisted with the project in its early stages. Unfortunately, she left Cornell in the spring.

Outreach & media:

List outreach & media strategies you used to reach small farmers.

I used announcements in the Cornell *Veg Edge* monthly publication and press releases were sent to newspapers in Niagara, Erie, Genesee, Orleans, and Monroe counties. Direct mailings were made to farmers on the CVP enrollment lists in these counties. Flyers were also put up in several of the county CCE offices.

Farmer evaluation:

What worked well, what didn't work, according to farmers? How do you know? Feedback from participating farmers should be reported.

I will find out more from the evaluation forms that will be used at the winter meetings. Superficially it appeared that the farmers enjoyed the interactions with other farmers. To say that they have developed a network is too early to say. I have worked in other states where it was easy to get farmers to meet together on a regular basis, share experiences, and see them interact with each other. Here in western NY, farmers are very closed off. It may be the competitiveness in the marketplace or their fierce sense of independence.

Its like pulling teeth sometimes to get them to come to meetings. I was told by some of the older career Extension personnel in several of the offices that the farmers wouldn't come. The agents who were there before had a real hard time getting farmers to come to meetings. I guess they were partly right so far.

Right now, the only hard evidence I have that this project has been a good idea for some farmers was the response by the Erie. Co. farmers who asked for the meeting sessions to continue for next season.

Farmer impacts:

What, if anything, are farmers doing (or planning to do) differently as a result of your project? There are a couple of farmers I know of that tried some different practices based on experiences shared by others. One farmer is planning on growing some of their transplants using a different type of system based on the advice of another farmer for next spring.

Your evaluation:

How successful do you think you were in achieving your intended outcomes? What lessons can you share? Keys to success? Pitfalls?

Well, as I mentioned above, I think the project had definite mixed results. There a few successes but the number of farmers involved was smaller than expected. Appealing to the larger farming audience is not easy, especially during the growing season. Yet, it is precisely during the growing season that farmers need to be talking to each other and sharing information. Perhaps it is through example that having informal meeting sessions will become more widespread. If the Erie Co. forum remains viable and this is brought out at the winter meeting to other farmers, maybe they will be interested. The key to success does not necessarily mean having food. I tried this and it still didn't matter. A pitfall is being too structured. In the case of organizing meetings, the key is to be flexible, keep everything informal, and don't take the lack of participation personally.

Follow-up activities, spin-off effects:

Please describe any activities, plans, or possibilities (yours or others') that have resulted from your project.

As mentioned before, the forum session in Erie Co. will continue next spring. Hopefully through more exposure, more farmers will come. There will be a fresh market produce auction meeting this winter due to the discussions with farmers in Orleans. This may lead to creating forum sessions for next season. Hopefully, some sort of forum session will come out of meeting with a group of Wayne and Ontario county farmers later this year.

Other comments:

Supporting materials*

Suggestions: program agendas, participant lists, handouts, powerpoint presentations, newspaper articles, evaluation summaries, etc. Send one copy of each to: Cornell Small Farms Program, 135C Plant Science Building, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 14853. Email: ar47@cornell.edu. Appropriate materials will be posted on the Small Farms Web Site as links from your Project Report.