

SARE National Continuing Education Program in Sustainable Agriculture for Cooperative Extension and other Ag Professionals

Curriculum Framework Review Regional Focus Group Results and Design Team Assessment

- Regional Focus Groups held March, April 2005 (details below)
- Design team conf. call April 27, 2005. Participants: David Chaney, Kim Kroll, Valerie Berton, Vern Grubinger, Deborah Cavanaugh-Grant, Andy McGuire, Deborah Young, Julie Sexton, Brian McCann.

Four regional focus groups were held in March and April 2005 to review the curriculum framework. Participants included state SARE coordinators, regional PDP coordinators, and regional SARE AC representatives. Each group met by conference call. Prior to the meeting, participants were asked to review the framework and a set of sample, mock-up pages from the first module of the online course in order to get a sense of how the national course will look, the writing style, and the types of interactive elements that will be incorporated. Focus group participants were asked to consider four questions:

- 1. Does the framework cover all the essential content areas in which Extension service providers should be proficient in order to be able to develop effective research and education programs in sustainable agriculture?*
- 2. How would you see using the list/outline of essential topics? Is this a useful planning tool? Do you see using this to help prioritize training needs in your state / region?*
- 3. How do you see plugging into this overall program? Would you see the opportunity to expand on the national course to develop in-depth, hands-on training?*
- 4. Assuming the content is appropriate and covers all essential topics, how can a Web format and presentation of the framework be made most appropriate and user-friendly?*

Summary

The focus groups provided excellent feedback on the curriculum framework. We appreciate the time and energy that focus group participants were able to invest in this process. The most significant finding from the focus groups is that the framework IS a useful planning tool, and can serve multiple purposes for state coordinators as they plan and implement training programs in their state or region. This was a major goal of the curriculum project and the design team is gratified at having achieved that. Some of the specific ways in which focus group participants suggested or anticipated using the framework include:

- to assess staffing and identify where organizational capacity could be strengthened
- as a personal checklist for assessing strengths and weaknesses and areas where professional development may be needed
- as a guide for developing projects
- to help organizations in developing a common vision of sustainable agriculture
- as a guide for planning local in-depth training that builds on the national course

It was also suggested that we provide some real life examples of how state/regional coordinators actually use the program to connect to the national course.

The other major objective of the framework was to outline the essential content areas in which extension service providers should be proficient in order to be able to develop effective research and education programs in sustainable agriculture. Feedback from the focus groups also confirmed that the framework fulfilled our objectives in this area. Overall, feedback was very positive and indicated that the framework is comprehensive in its coverage and description of the many topics and issues that go into addressing sustainability in agriculture.

The curriculum design team went through the detailed focus group notes in a conference call held April 27, 2005 and considered each comment. A summary of the major points of revision are summarized here. Some of the feedback has already been addressed by the design team in other phases of developing the framework, and we feel is handled in the organization and structure of the framework, or in the detailed learning outcomes that will be provided as a link at the end of each Major Topic page.

Major revisions as a result of focus group feedback:

- last sub-topic of Module 4 (Participatory Research and Education Skills) on Strengthening Local and Regional Food Systems will be moved to Module 1 (Basic Principles and Concept Overview) as a new sub-topic there. Woven into that sub-topic will be importance of consumer connections with (and public support for) agriculture along with general society/community aspects of sustainable agriculture.
- language and phrasing of the framework will be edited and revised to be more inclusive and not so specific to Cooperative Extension personnel. In terms of course development, NRCS programs and examples will be included where appropriate.
- ornamentals will be added to the Agroecology section as a new sub-topic under Applying Ecological Principles to Crop Production—Horticulture/Landscape issues--ecology of controlled environments (greenhouses, etc..)
- drought will be more specifically indicated as a sub-topic under water quality in the Agroecology Module.
- organic will remain as a separate sub-topic in the Agroecology module. There is significant enough interest in this and the considerations are complex enough that it justifies being addressed distinctly.
- holistic management will not be covered per se in this course. There are already complete courses available on that particular approach. HM will be included (and resource links provided) as one of a number of whole farm planning programs. These are referenced in Module 3 as part of the detailed learning outcomes.
- monitoring will be incorporated more prominently as a sub-topic in the agroecology section (it's currently embedded in detailed learning outcomes for the module).
- producer cooperatives will be incorporated as an aspect of alternative marketing

More detailed notes from each focus group follow.

Detailed Focus Group Notes

Northeast Region—April 1, 2005. Participants: Bill Curran (PA), Bob Muth (NJ), Tom McConnell (WVA), Seth Wilner (NH), Vern Grubinger (VT-facilitator).

North Central Region—March 3. Participants: Jana Beckman (KS), Brad Brummond (ND and NCR SARE AC Member), Paula Ford (KS-PDP Regional Coordinator), Kim Kroll (National SARE), Diane Mayerfeld (WI), and Deborah Cavanaugh-Grant (IL-facilitator).

Southern Region—March 23/April 4. Participants: Julia Gaskin (GA), Paul Mueller (NC), Andy Hankins (VA), Keith Dix (AC member, VA), David Redhage (S PDP management team), and Kim Kroll (National SARE-facilitator).

Western Region— March 25th, 2005. Participants: Jim Freeburn (WY-PDP regional coordinator), Gus Hughbanks (WA-NRCS and AC member), Andy McGuire (WA), David Chaney (CA-facilitator) with follow-up comments from Cinda Williams (ID).

Overall Comments

Northeast

- need to add a module that covers societal/community aspects of sustainability.
- need more specific emphasis on educating consumers about the importance of agriculture and why that is an important role for Extension.
- need reference to education of other non-ag groups such as planners, politicians, and other decision-makers about how and why they should support agriculture.
- is there a need to more specifically address 'green industries' in agriculture:
- more discussion issues related to ornamentals, turf, etc?
- why not use 'USDA' along with 'SARE' throughout?

Southern

- What will insure the curriculum's use by ag agents?
- There is a need for training on transitioning farmers to sustainable agriculture and that our farm examples are too focused on organic systems.
- Technologies and regulations that have an impact on marketing is an important topic to include in the curriculum. From our last call there was a comment that local food systems needs to be emphasized.

Western

- The language of the framework should be changed to address all field professionals, and not just extension.
- The framework is comprehensive and will be useful for planning educational activities, evaluating and monitoring ag professional's development needs.
- In-depth training will probably be regional or sub-regional to reach a larger number of ag professionals.
- The online modules should minimize the need for browser add-on software downloads.

- The language in the framework is perceived as specific to an extension audience, while the goal of the program was to reach professionals in the field, including NRCS. This extension specific information should be revised to be more inclusive of field professionals in other organizations.
- Downloads necessary to properly view the online module (Shockwave) are prohibited from some computer systems, specifically NRCS in Washington. Some County extension offices might have the same problem. This problem would probably have to be solved state by state.

Would NRCS be interested in topics 3 and 4?

- Yes, using them to get an overview on these issues, but not for further in-depth training. Web and face-to-face access to this would be good, along with the ability to delve deeper into subjects as needed.

Is the NRCS interested in topic 5?

- Yes. NRCS has programs which are not fully utilized by the sustainable farming community (i.e. CSP). These programs could be included in this topic.

How do we make this available and useful to busy agricultural professionals?

- Make the modules brief, self-guided, and available all the time.
- Overall a great job - an incredible amount of thought and expertise went in putting this all together.
- Where do concepts like permaculture and biodynamics fit in? Possible in the first module, first subtopic, after the definition when discussing other related farming/living approaches and how they related to SA – even IPM and Organics need to be explained in that sense.
- What about policy issues? What about farmland preservation? I guess that will be covered with Agroecology. (??)
- This brings up other questions I have about competency levels –possibly towards a certificate or identified proficiency program (similar to Certified Crop Advisors) It seems we need an incentive for them to get involved...

1. Does the framework cover all the essential content areas in which Extension service providers should be proficient in order to be able to develop effective research and education programs in sustainable agriculture? (topics that should be dropped, other essential topics that should be added, applicability)

Module 1

Northeast

- why are organic and IPM listed in definitions along with sustainable agriculture?
- Is it implied these are part of sustainable ag? It needs to be clear that this section defines overlapping and oft-confused terms, doesn't decide what is sustainable.
- 'How the food system got to where it is today' needs to be addressed.

- Explain the importance of connections between consumption and production
- Combine #5 and #7 into one sub-topic.
- #10 'participatory nature of sust ag' need not be there – applies to all agriculture.
- Partners: include farmer groups, farmer educators, vo-ag teachers.
- on the social leg of sustainable agriculture, which as you note should be a module onto itself, goal setting, whole farm planning, labor relations/issues, monitoring, quality of life, and community infrastructure should be component parts.

North Central

- under partners and resources add local partners as a reminder to user, e.g. NGO, farmer groups, Univ. personnel, state agencies, small business specialists, human health services. Could make this an interactive component.
- food systems addressed in Module 4, should be put in Module 1.

Southern

- There is very little mention (not any?) of local food systems in module 1 and it seems to me that it should be a major focus.
- In the Background section. I think you should add a specific section on challenges or impediments. From my perspective this should talk about baby steps. I think we should emphasize transitioning to make sure our audience is as broad as possible. You need to avoid the perception that organics is the only route for sustainability. The examples are critical here and you definitely need examples of more traditional producers that are taking steps to become more sustainable.

Western

- The participants thought that the framework was comprehensive and did not suggest that any specific items be added, deleted, or modified.
- Does drought need to be included more explicitly?
- I liked being able to see the Course Developers – Detailed Learning Objectives because I got a better feel for what was included in the various subtopic areas. As these are developed for all the modules I think it will clarify what specific things will be covered.
- Under the section partners and resources – it lists NRCS. I would really like to highlight the programs that NRCS has that are related to sustainable ag and possibly in module 4 some innovative examples of how Extension and NRCS are working together to deal with issues of sustainability.

Module 2

Northeast

- Discussed whether 'organic' subtopic should be removed – is the implication that it is
- Sustainable? Could it be it woven in under the ecology topics? Group seems to have decided OK to keep organic as a separate subtopic so as to enhance specific skills needed to be able to advise on organically allowed production practices under national standards.
- need to include economic impacts of greater diversity (e.g. change in production costs vs. monoculture; how to quantify non-production benefits like wildlife habitat.
- including sub-topic on 'non-productive land' is good.

- In the agroecology module have the focus be on the impacts of actions on the ecosystem functions/ecological processes no matter what genre these actions fall under (i.e. organic, IPM, low input, traditional, etc).
- I feel the emphasis on organic should not be in a core curriculum on sustainable ag. I know everyone else did, and I agree with folks that it would be helpful for someone in Extension to know the ins and out. but I argue that you could be proficient in sustainable ag without knowing the rules and regs and practices of organic ag, especially the specific applications of the national certified organic standards. So I feel it should be removed from a stand alone topic in sustainable ag. Since this is a minority opinion, go with the majority, but at least we need to acknowledge overtly that not all organic practices are sustainable where ever and however they are used. Lathering the banks of the CT river with manure as an organic fertilizer is not a practice that farmers who seek to implement sustainable ag should be doing. You get my drift...
- Monitoring I also think needs to be added to the Module 2-Agroecology. There are specific techniques one can use to monitor the ecosystem processes over time to see if practices are improving or degrading. Monitoring has to be part of a sustainable ag curriculum. If one kept financial record but never looked at them, then they would serve limited good. The same holds true with environmental monitoring and also the quality of life/social aspects of monitoring.

North Central

- Module 2, Incorporate sections 2, 3 and 4 into sections above. [in NC notes Module 3 and Module 1 comments were above this one—so not clear on what this comment means—incorporate these sections into Module 3, or into 3 and 1???

Southern

- Agroecology - This section will also need examples or case studies. You also need to make sure the curriculum discusses nutrient cycling and other principles on a variety of scales from the pedon to field to farm to watershed and then global. The curriculum should show how these scales are linked. This section also needs some discussion on the economic benefits of diversity with specific examples. On-farm fertility practices should be discussed. In the assessing sustainability section, profitability should be included. You need a section on Applying Principles to Row Crop Production, Applying Principles to Horticultural Production. The Livestock section needs to discuss multi-species approaches and the benefits and disadvantages of integrating livestock and row crop production.

Western

- Seems this might be a place to introduce holistic management (particularly under livestock section) and whole farm planning concepts. It appears later in the business and planning module but both these concepts relate to Agroecology also.

Module 3

Northeast

- some subtopics (#9) seem aimed at meeting lender's interests – appropriate?

- under market strategies need to include cooperatives and other ways of producers working together to develop markets.
- access to capital, access to land need to be emphasized under business planning.
- ‘managing the farm/ranch’ - good comprehensive list.

North Central

- Module 3, Whole farm planning needs to be added, River Friendly Farms is a good example. Includes thought process and goal setting with farm family. Begin with the broader farm view (e.g. HM), goal setting. Need more emphasis on the farm ecology in this part.
- Pet peeves – personality traits should be termed as key skills.

Western

- Good, but with the following additions—
- Whole farm planning and holistic management need to be brought in as approaches to business planning that relate to sustainable agriculture.
- Monitoring and Assessing concepts need to be included under management – monitoring is a big part of holistic management and assessment must be done when annual planning is done – in all systems. This includes assessment of marketing strategies (we may eventually have some publications to link in here). Not that this should be approached in too much depth but the fact that farmers should be looking at costs and returns related to marketing strategies can be included.
- Despite the fact that it is the common approach- I am not sure marketing has to go with business planning. In a way it is like production (and equally important) in that it has its own set of skills, different options and needs to be planned for and considered with production. The connection to business is mainly that it is the way you make money.

Module 4

Northeast

- remove ‘sust ag’ where participatory activities apply to all kinds of agriculture.
- do all extension personnel need to know about on-farm research? Could this be removed or de-emphasized?
- ‘Strengthening local and regional food systems’ does not seem to fit in this module – it could be moved into module #3, or added to the suggested new module on societal and community aspects of sustainability.

North Central

- Module 4, emphasis concern about participatory sustainable ag principles – not top down. Should also be in Module 1.

Western

- I liked this module and am very glad you are including it
- My question is about the inclusion of “strengthening local and regional food systems” in this module. It seems different and could almost be its own module... In fact, it ties into direct marketing more than this topic. What about a new module on – “Understanding food systems and consumers” (or similar title?) – Sub topics could be what you have for

strengthening local and regional food systems, then adding a subtopic on farm direct marketing and cooperatives. Then I could see a section to include consumer trends, branding, etc. That may seem too detailed...???

- Anyway think about reconfiguring ...

Module 5

Northeast

no suggestions, looks good.

2. How would you see using the list/outline of essential topics? Is this a useful planning tool? Do you see using this to help prioritize training needs in your state / region?

Northeast

- all state ag administrators should use the framework to assess their staffing and identify areas where capacity is lacking and develop a plan to cover those topics.
- framework could be used as a personal checklist – make sure I have knowledge in all areas of personal interest and/or identify topics where I need professional development.
- useful overview for all agents to assess their skill strengths and weaknesses.
- framework could help guide me to specific areas to do projects in.

Southern

I think the idea of linking the national course to availability of SARE funds is a very important incentive, a must. I think there is a need in our region for getting everyone on more or less the same page. Otherwise people just use the definitions and philosophical points that are convenient to their agendas. There needs to be a common vision at some fundamental level.

Western

- The framework is an excellent tool that could be used to as a guide when planning local in-depth training. It has good depth and they like the way it was built.
 - The framework could be used as a checklist for evaluating/monitoring personnel and determining what knowledge they have and what they need to learn.
 - The use of the framework does not have to be linear, although the on-line course will be.
 - Yes, I think it could be used for that but I think you might have to lay out some possible examples of how coordinators might connect their programs with this curriculum.
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3. How do you see plugging into this overall program? Would you see the opportunity to expand on the national course to develop in-depth, hands-on training?

Northeast

- Several said they would respond to a request for proposals to develop more in-depth information on subtopics that are in their area of expertise.

- Possibly on their own, or with SARE funds, create products to be used and linked to national course.
- the regional SARE programs need to actively promote the use of the framework and national on-line course.
- could provide incentives for participation in the course: require completion/passing grade to be eligible to access state PDP implementation funds or require passing grade in an appropriate sub topic are before being able to apply for SARE grants.

North Central

- Would take this to people who provide new agent training to determine how to incorporate. Make faculty aware of information, broad structure and how curriculum fits into ecoregions of state. Incorporate into undergraduate curriculum.
- Could take this to administrators and curriculum developers to see if any of this information important to students, especially the agroecology section.
- Module 1 will help structure new trainings. Struggling with others in how to bring it to specific state and how they apply to a production system.
- Can't focus on all, but take a few and then come back to see what additional training is needed.
- Apply to one or two systems in each state
- Will be important who drives this program.
- For big meetings on some topic could capitalize on the opportunity that this would be an Overview before attending the meeting. Make them aware of all the resources.
- Concern about the learning capabilities of the curriculum because it is so broad.

Southern

There will most surely be such opportunities. It will be up to the states to come up with the relevant training topics.

Western

- It could be used to guide the planning of regional or sub-regional training programs, perhaps a week long, where participants hit the broad areas lightly, and then select topics of interest for in-depth training. These might be based on Ecotype subregions to address the lack of large numbers of professionals working in any specific field in any one state, at least in the West.
- It could be used to target training for non-extension field professionals including NRCS and organic inspectors.
- It could be used as a template and planning tool to guide training.
- It could be used to guide the process of developing projects around the educational adaptation of research results.
- It should be used in conjunction with eXtension efforts (Dan Cotton)

4. Assuming the content is appropriate and covers all essential topics, how can a Web format and presentation of the framework be made most appropriate and user-friendly?

Northeast

- credits of one sort or another nice but won't drive interest among target audience – that will come from a quality program
- provide comprehensive, up-to-date links to credible, specific information in subtopics areas that can be used to develop programs for clientele.
- include links to research, essays, grants funded.
- supervisors giving incentive or at least valuing the course will help.
- make it both an educational tool for the target audience and have material that they can use directly with their audiences: downloadable PowerPoint presentations, videos, etc.
- primary focus should be to get good educational materials into the hands of extension educators – thus the web site will have to be constantly reviewed and updated.

North Central

- Did not like that needed to download software before using.
- One hour should be maximum for whole thing.
- Should give time estimates for each module.

Southern

- The frame with the thermometer that refers to Society Journals may be ok for Extension Specialists or Researchers, but not too important for most extension agents. Modify this to included organizations that are relevant for extension agents and NRCS staff.
- The next frame with the three circles shows sustainable development in the overlap area of social, environmental and economic. Where is sustainable agriculture? I realize that the concept of sustainable AG is an offshoot of sustainable development, but the focus of this course is sustainable agriculture not sustainable development.

Western

- Change extension-specific language, especially in 4.1.
- NRCS personnel need to further develop their skills in adult education methods.
- Web format is OK, although it should be open for changes as we gain experience in using it.