Creating Farmer Networks

A Toolkit for Promoting Vibrant Farm Communities

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Welcome! This toolkit gives you the information and resources you need to create a successful farmer network in your county, region, or state. It is intended for farmers, Extension agents, community organizers, and other agricultural professionals.

Introduction

A farmer network—sometimes called a discussion group, gathering, or conference—is a way for farmers to exchange information, socialize, learn, and connect with peers on a regular, ongoing basis. What is most important about a farmer network and sets it apart from, for example, traditional Extension-based classes, is that the farmers decide what they want to learn and create together. Through the network, farmers can also organize subgroups based on their interests, such as organic farming, women farmers, or specific commodities.

Examples of farmer networks, page 23

Case study: North Country Farming Network, page 24

Case study: Practical Farmers of Iowa, page 25

Case study: Northwest Farmer-to-Farmer Exchange, page 27

Why is a farmer network important?

A farmer network is important because it:

- builds community by creating new friendships and business partnerships and by deepening existing ones;
- provides education and mentoring opportunities;
- can target specific audiences with shared interests and concerns;
- gives farmers a venue for peer-to-peer discussion, which often results in innovative production and marketing strategies; and
- provides an effective way for agricultural professionals to reach and increase the success of sustainable agriculture producers.

Data suggest that when farmers convene, new opportunities arise for increased economic viability, improved quality of life, and greater community interaction.

What is the history of this toolkit?

In 2007, the authors of this toolkit spearheaded a women's agricultural network in Oregon called the League of Women Farmers (LOWF). LOWF currently has 52 members in Jackson, Josephine, and Douglas counties in southwestern Oregon. LOWF members participate in monthly events, which include farm tours, book club meetings, film screenings, skill-building sessions, potlucks, and

production and business classes. An Oregon State University Small Farms program assistant coordinates the network. This toolkit is based on the experience of the LOWF and highlights specific examples of its formation and management.

How is this toolkit organized?

This toolkit is divided into two parts: an *instruction guide* and a *toolbox*.

The *instruction guide* is organized around seven topics, designed to help you establish, promote, and manage a successful farmer network:

- Getting Your Network Started
- Planning Your Program
- Surveying Farmers
- Choosing an Organizational Structure
- Communicating with Your Network
- Facilitating Network Meetings
- Maintaining Your Network

The toolbox includes resources—tips, examples, and worksheets—to support your efforts. Throughout the instruction guide a flag icon (⚑) will direct you to relevant resources in the toolbox.

Finally, case study examples from the LOWF appear throughout the text in shaded boxes. These examples provide on-the-ground lessons from a successful farmer network.

Getting Your Network Started

To start your network you need to identify your target audience and define the network's mission. Once you have recruited members, it is important to focus on how to maintain their participation. The following outlines key steps in launching a successful farmer network.

Identify your target audience

In the early planning stages, determine the farmer populations you are interested in recruiting as members. Two important considerations are whether the network will target a specific group of farmers for a specific purpose (such as women farmers or beginning farmers) or a broader population of farmers. Keep in mind that a more broadly defined network might strengthen the knowledge base and provide a greater breadth of learning opportunities.

You can begin the process of identifying your target audience by asking what you want your network to achieve. For example, will it develop relationships between farmers in a local region? Provide skill-building and educational

opportunities? Serve as a vehicle for cooperative marketing? Act as a support system for new farmers?

Create a mission statement

An effective mission statement clearly articulates the network's purpose. If you are unsure what your network's mission should be, get help by convening a focus group of farmers. Invite a group of interested farmers to brainstorm about your network. Introduce the concept of a farmer network and lead a discussion based on three or four questions you've prepared. For example, ask the group: "What agricultural skills and knowledge would you like more classes on?" Or, "What would be your primary interest in participating in a farmer network?" Focus group sessions last typically 30 to 60 minutes.

Willamette Women's Farm Network mission statement, page 29

During the planning stages of the League of Women Farmers, the cofounders, who were both Extension agents and small farm operators, believed that women farmers would benefit from a network designed exclusively to address their needs. Specifically, they observed that women farmers wanted classes to learn skills traditionally performed by men, including tractor maintenance and fence building. They did not convene a focus group or conduct a formal needs assessment but proposed the idea to a number of women farmers who had expressed interest in participation. They held an initial meeting and invited many of the commercial women producers they knew through their Extension work. They sent a flier to a list of 25 women. Fifteen women attended the first meeting and provided ideas for the network. The network's geographic area was based on the counties covered by the network cofounders' Extension positions.

Set the geographic area of the network

When considering the geographic boundaries for your network, factor in driving time, road accessibility, climate differences, types of farm production systems, and meeting frequency. If the main goal is to develop a network of farmers with diverse enterprises and experience levels, you may need to define a broad geographic area to include a diverse membership. Keep in mind that the larger the area, the more creative you may need to be to communicate with and assemble members.

Recruit members

Once you have identified whom your network will target and what it has to offer area farmers, you are ready to begin recruiting members. Some key considerations in your recruitment efforts are:

- **Timing**. Try to avoid busy seasons when potential members are consumed with other activities. Instead, plan to recruit farmers when they feel that the network is a benefit and not just another commitment. Schedule the first few network events prior to the start of the busy season so the network can gain some momentum. For example, the LOWF held its first meeting in November.

  Coordinate your recruitment efforts with other outreach activities. For example, if the farmer population you hope to attract will be attending another organization's annual meeting, ask for a few minutes on the agenda to talk about your network and its benefits.

- **Materials.** Prepare interesting and eye-catching recruitment materials that are easy to reproduce. Some useful outlets for distributing materials are:
  - — Newsletter or newspaper articles
  - — Press releases
  - — Brochures or fliers
  - — Websites
  - — Social media
- **Methods.** Tailor your recruitment method to your target audience.

  For **broad recruitment**, tap into:
  - — Advertisements or articles in the local or regional area newspapers
  - — Listservs, websites, social media, or partner organizations

  For **targeted recruitment**:
  - — Identify existing farmer groups
  - — Encourage engaged farmers to share with others
  - — Have a presence at marketing venues or specific meetings/conferences
  - — Use a specific mailing list

  To **create a mailing list**, try to access:
  - — Membership lists from growers' markets
  - — Distribution information from market managers
  - — County tax databases

During the recruitment stage for the League of Women Farmers, cofounders developed a flier to explain the vision of the network and invite women to the first meeting. Because the network cofounders were also Extension agents, they had relationships with many of the local growers. Fliers were mailed to a list of 75 women farmers who had participated in Extension events and programs.

As you recruit new members, consider asking them to sign release forms to:

- **Share contact information among network members.** This can be especially useful if you are trying to organize carpooling to an event.
- **Have their photo taken at events.** Photographing classes and workshops is an important part of keeping records for your network. Photos can also be shared on online social networking sites.

Recruitment plan worksheet, page 29

League of Women Farmers meeting flier, page 30

Develop a strategy for maintaining members

Once you have recruited members and the network has begun to meet, consider setting up an advisory committee comprised of a few active members.

An advisory committee can help your network maintain its focus and support your leadership.

Plan an appropriate method to keep track of your membership's contact information as they sign-up to participate in the network. Consider sharing this information through a network directory.

Be aware that people may choose different levels of membership involvement. For example, if your network communicates through an e-mail listserv or website, expect that some members may participate by following online activity instead of attending meetings or activities. Periodically reassess members' needs to more effectively plan network activities and maintain membership.

Planning Your Program

Now that you have identified the purpose of your network and recruited members, the fun part begins! Start by brainstorming a list of workshop and meeting topics that are exciting and relevant to your members. The following is a list of potential topic ideas, organized by category. There is an infinite number of topics to cover, so be creative, solicit ideas, and keep your ear to the ground for any new, hot topics in the world of agriculture that are relevant to your audience.

Skill-building sessions

When organizing a skill-building session, pay careful attention to the student-teacher ratio. A good ratio for skill-building sessions is 10:1 Hire a teacher who is both highly skilled and a good instructor. Make sure to have participants sign a waiver if they are using potentially dangerous equipment, and consult your university or landowner regarding liability insurance. Skill-building classes are often most effective when they focus on a specific project from start to finish. Examples include building a chicken coop or welding a gate. Ask a network member whether he or she is willing to host the session on his or her farm and pay for some of the project materials.

Possible skill-building topics include:

- Carpentry for farmers
- Welding for farmers
- Fence building and repair
- Tree pruning
- Tractor maintenance
- Tractor use
- Irrigation setup and repair

Willamette Women's Farm Network tractor training flier, page 31

Production classes or workshops

These meetings can be hosted either on a farm or in a classroom. If they are held on a farm, set aside 30 to 60 minutes at the beginning for a farm tour.

Making a plan for your farm tour, page 32

You may want to invite an agricultural professional or a specialist to help teach production classes or workshops. The agricultural professional can provide a formal structure for the class, with a presentation and/or handouts and a list of resources. (Note: If the topic includes pesticides, even organic pesticides, make sure the speaker has the appropriate license and endorsements.) Once the agricultural professional has given an overview of the topic, you can invite one or two farmers with experience in this area of production to discuss their operations.

Possible topics include:

- Beekeeping
- Pasture management
- Introduction to raising poultry
- Small-scale orchards
- Seed-saving
- Berry production
- Organic vegetable production
- Season extension
- Integrated pest management

Marketing/business classes or workshops

These meetings can be set up in a similar way to the production classes or workshops, by inviting an agricultural professional and one or more farmers as your speakers.

Possible topics include:

- Value-added products
- Managing cash flow
- Online marketing
- Finding niche markets
- Financial record-keeping
- Conducting market research
- Succession planning
- Cooperative marketing

Tips for facilitators, page 33

Discussions

You can also set up meetings to share ideas on certain topics. These meetings do not require an invited speaker but will need some facilitation.

Possible topics include:

- Balancing farming and family
- Rural living
- Preserving surplus food
- Politics of agriculture
- Negotiating with neighbors

League of Women Farmers meetings/events summary, page 33

Willamette Women's Farm Network meeting schedule, page 34

Annual meetings

You may want to have a general meeting once a year to bring together as many of your network members as possible. Make sure to give members plenty of notice and schedule the meeting at an optimal time. The winter months are often the best time for farmers to meet.

The League of Women Farmers annual meetings have included opportunities for members to share highlights of the past year's network events, a contest for the best potluck dish, and time for members to share photos and stories from their farm operations.

Annual meetings should be fun and festive, and should also provide time for an open discussion about the previous year's network events and future goals. Have a dry-erase board or butcher-block paper to record brainstorming ideas for planning the upcoming year.

Social/cultural gatherings

Network meetings are also an opportunity for farmers to socialize. Consider organizing:

- Film screenings of agriculture-related movies
- Agricultural book club
- Farm storytelling night

Surveying Farmers

Surveys are a useful tool for gathering information on how to structure your farmer network and evaluating its progress. Data measuring the results of your farmer network can be reported in professional journals or grant proposals.

Surveys collect qualitative or quantitative information or both. Qualitative questions are open-ended and solicit descriptive, subjective answers from participants.

During an annual League of Women Farmers meeting, members brainstormed approximately 45 ideas for gatherings for the following year. The facilitator noted all of the ideas on a whiteboard. After the meeting, the facilitator created an online survey listing all 45 topics. Members received an e-mail link to the survey and marked their top 10 choices. The facilitator then used the top 10 topics as network gatherings for the following year.

Quantitative questions are yes or no questions, or ask participants to rate an activity or statement using a scale.

Surveys can capture specific types of information, such as:

- Best times/days of the week for people to meet
- Frequency with which people would like to meet
- Topics people would like covered during meetings
- Skills or information learned during trainings
- Business relationships that develop out of the network

Surveys can be administered in writing (using a paper form), verbally (either in person or over the phone), through e-mails, or through an online survey program (such as Survey Monkey). An advantage of online survey programs is that they can generate charts and graphs once the information has been gathered. However, a potential challenge is getting people to take the time to fill out an online survey. For online surveys, you may need to send multiple e-mail reminders to achieve good participation.

Surveying members worksheet, page 36

Sample member survey: Oregon Women Farmer Networks, page 37

Select summary of survey results: Oregon Women Farmer Networks, page 43

Choosing an Organizational Structure

Every organization has an inherent structure, whether or not the members of the group have chosen it consciously. Groups tend to be more successful if members have thought about the type of structure that best matches their goals and attributes. Most farmer networks have a simple organizational structure.

Identifying an organizational structure is critical to a successful farmer network. An established structure provides members a road map for how to move forward with decisions and how to settle differences of opinion. A structure also gives network members a sense of shared vision and values by providing meaning and identity to individuals within the group and to the group as a whole.

Core elements

Organizational structures have three core elements:

- **Type of governance.** The governing person or group makes decisions for the organization. In a farmer network, this could be the coordinator or a small group of committed members.

- **Rules by which the organization operates.** Informal and formal rules should be clear to all members. Informal rules often help describe the organization's culture (e.g., most events are also potlucks). Formal rules define

how the organization operates. Formal rules to consider for your farmer network are:

— Membership dues

— Minimum requirements for joining (e.g., commercial producer in business)

— Minimum requirements for being a member in good standing

- **Distribution of work.** Developing and maintaining a functioning farmer network requires time and effort. As the founder and/or facilitator of a farmer network, consider what work you will take on and what you will delegate. Organizational work includes:

  — Recruiting members

  — Scheduling and announcing meetings

  — Surveying members to assess areas of interest

  — Facilitating meetings

  — Contacting speakers or instructors

  — Maintaining membership list

  — Bookkeeping

  — Developing and maintaining a vision and/or mission statement

  — Communicating with membership

Common roles

While every group is different, most organizations share some common administrative roles and responsibilities. This list describes a wide variety of administrative roles that can be part of an organization. Farmer networks typically have a simple organizational structure and use only two or three of these roles. As you read through the list, consider which ones would best serve your network:

- **Steering committee** is the group of people who start the organization. This group often will create the initial plan and vision. Steering committees usually dissolve once the organization is established. If steering committee members continue to meet six months after the launch of the organization, they are considered the coordinating council. Steering committees are usually comprised of 5 to 11 members.

- **Coordinating council** (also referred to as the executive committee or the executive council) is made up of staff members and co-chairs of other councils. The coordinating council monitors the overall objectives and strategies for the organization and responds to input from individuals or subcommittees.

- **Executive Director, Network Coordinator, Program Director, or President** often takes the place of the coordinating council or serves as its head. This is sometimes a paid position with responsibilities such as coordinating, managing, inspiring, supervising, and supporting the work of other members of the organization. In the case of a farmer network, this may be an agricultural professional who is paid to facilitate the organization.

- **Task forces** are made up of members who work together on topic-specific objectives. These groups integrate their ideas with the work being done in the greater community outside of the network.

- **Support committees** are groups that help ensure that the other committees have the resources and opportunities necessary to realize their vision. For example, a farmer network may have a support committee to facilitate media relations, conduct fund-raising, or maintain financial records.

- **Board of directors or board of trustees** provides overall direction, advice, and resources to members of the support committees. Board members are often people directly affected by the issue or leaders in the greater community.

- **Grantmakers** are private companies and foundations, or local, county, state, or federal government organizations that provide funds for organizations. Grants specific to farmer networks include funding to support risk management education for new and beginning farmers, and for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

- **Support organizations** give your organization the technical assistance it needs. University research groups and private organizations often fill this role.

- **Partner organizations** are other groups working on some of the same issues as your organization. With online networking, partnerships may also include groups around the country and the world.

Farmer networks will often start with an individual who recruits a small group to serve as the steering committee. Once a core group has been established, network members may decide to elect a board or create subcommittees to tackle certain responsibilities. Members sometimes rely on an agricultural professional to coordinate and lead their farmer network; however, increased leadership among members creates greater investment in and ownership of the network.

Organizational structures worksheet, page 45

Communicating with Your Network

As you think about organizing a farmer network, consider the many different options for communicating with and recruiting potential members. In general, use multiple communication tools to share information with your network

members. Some farmers restrict their technology use as part of a lifestyle choice, so for them, communication needs to include phone calls and sending letters through the mail. E-mail, listservs, and social media may better serve your more tech-savvy members.

The following list describes the advantages and disadvantages of various communication tools.

Mailings

Mailing letters represents one way to introduce your farmer network to a broad spectrum of individuals. Create a flier or letter that describes the intention of the network and provides information for the first meeting. Then generate a list of names and addresses of potential members for a mailing.

- **Advantages of mailings**:
  - Most groups and organizations use e-mail more than regular mail, so a letter may have a greater chance of catching someone's attention.
  - Letters are more formal than e-mails or phone calls and may be more appropriate as an initial invitation to join a network or attend an annual meeting.
- **Disadvantages of mailings**:
  - Printing and postage can be expensive.
  - Some people tend to throw away mail that is not clearly a personal letter or a bill.

Phone calls

Phone calls offer opportunities to make personal connections with members or potential members. Although time-consuming, phone interactions can result in members having a better understanding of and commitment to a network.

- **Advantages of phone calls**:
  - One-on-one personal contact is a more effective way of engaging prospective members during the recruitment phase and reconnecting with individuals whose memberships have lapsed.
  - Phone calls with members can result in longer conversations that elicit useful information. For example, after providing information on the upcoming annual meeting, a member may then let

Members of the League of Women Farmers (LOWF) have resisted a formal organizational structure. Without a toolkit to guide their process, they did not form a steering committee or advisory group. Several months following the founding of LOWF, a board was proposed, but participants were content to let the co-founders make decisions and lead the group; however, every major decision is brought to the larger group for discussion.

From its inception, LOWF attracted media attention and quickly gained popularity. For the first 18 months, meetings were open and no formal membership process existed. In the early spring of 2010, an article in the local paper described LOWF and mentioned its next event, a farm tour. Approximately 80 women attended the farm tour, many of whom were beginning gardeners—not farmers. Some of the regular LOWF participants complained that the network was becoming too diluted and no longer meeting their needs. As a result, a spin-off group was formed: the League of Women Gardeners (LOWG). LOWF became a membership organization for commercial growers, who pay annual dues of $30. Commercial growers are not strictly defined, but it is expected that members either have a farm business or are working toward developing a farm business. There was not enough interest in the LOWG for that organization to continue.

An OSU program assistant does almost all the work for LOWF. She recruits new members, organizes and schedules events, communicates with members, does the bookkeeping, surveys members, and maintains the membership list. She is paid through grants from the USDA. While LOWF is fortunate to have funds to pay a coordinator, your network may need to recruit volunteers and develop leadership from within the membership.

you know why he or she hasn't been able to attend the last few meetings or provide feedback on a recent skill-building session.

- **Disadvantages of phone calls**:
  - Calling each individual member of a network can be time-consuming.
  - Calling through a list of members often results in leaving numerous phone messages, which can be frustrating.

Listservs

Listservs are electronic mailing lists. A listserv works well when you want to send a single e-mail message to many recipients.

- **Guidelines for using a listserv**:
  - Make sure your post is addressed to the correct recipients.
  - Be aware that sometimes a person will inadvertently send everyone a message that was only intended for one person.
  - Discourage members from using "reply all" when responding to an e-mail.
  - Be aware that the high volume of e-mails received via the listserv may frustrate some of your members.
  - Edit your e-mail messages. Make sure your grammar, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure are correct.
- **Advantages of listservs**:
  - One message can be shared with a large audience.
  - It can be a useful platform for exchanging ideas.
- **Disadvantages of listservs**:
  - Messages that are meant for one person may be inadvertently sent to the entire list.
  - Unsubscribing can be difficult, depending on the listserv.

E-mail newsletters

E-mail marketing companies provide stylish, easy-to-use templates and keep lists of your e-mail contacts. Services (from companies such as Vertical Response, Constant Contact, iContact, and MailChimp) range from a simple notification of an upcoming event to a comprehensive newsletter with articles, links, and photographs. Depending on the company, the cost of e-mail marketing is based on either a monthly or pay-per-use fee.

- **Advantages of e-mail newsletters**:
  - E-mail newsletters are attractive and tend to be easier to read. Your members are more likely to forward e-mail newsletters formatted with color and photos to friends, neighbors, and potential new members.

  - Once you send out an e-mail newsletter, you can monitor how many of your members actually opened the e-mail and how many clicked on embedded links. This feature allows you to evaluate how members are engaging with the e-mails you send.
  - Many of the e-mail marketing companies also provide technical support.
- **Disadvantages of e-mail newsletters**:
  - While e-mail newsletters may increase the likelihood of members opening and reading e-mail correspondence, they can also be time-consuming to create and edit.
  - E-mail newsletters cost money, whereas e-mails and listservs are free.
  - Bandwidth issues in rural areas with dial-up access can make downloading all but text-only newsletters slow and frustrating.

Social media

Online social networks (OSN) are web-based communities where members can socialize online with friends or professional colleagues. These are friend-of-a-friend networks, meaning that when you join, you note who else on the network is your "friend," and then others are able to see these associations. These platforms are set up for OSN members to frequently update each other. The most popular OSN sites in the United States are Facebook and Twitter. LinkedIn is an example of a professional OSN.

If you are too uncertain about or overwhelmed by online networking to try it on your own, ask other farmer network members how they work and how other organizations use them. It is highly likely that some of your members are already using OSNs for their farm businesses. Ask your members what OSNs they currently use, and research the demographics of various OSN sites you're considering. For example, some OSNs target younger audiences, while others target more professional populations.

- **Advantages of OSNs**:
  - There's usually no fee to join an OSN site.
  - You can create a unique group profile or fan page for the farmer network. Members and other network supporters can link to the organization as a "friend" or "like" the organization, organically extending the organization's visibility.
  - Once the farmer network has a profile, you can use the page as an outreach tool to attract new members, encourage members to attend events and gatherings, and bring awareness of your network's function to partners and other interested persons.
  - Members of the network can post questions and responses to discussion areas on different OSN platforms (as appropriate). This discussion creates more visibility for the network and establishes the network's relationship to a particular topic or issue.
  - Members can share photos with each other through an OSN site.
  - Members can post new information about related, relevant topics.

- **Disadvantages of OSNs**:
  - Members may try to promote their own businesses through your OSN. Establish guidelines as to what is appropriate for members to post.
  - Network members may want to keep their online social networking activities separate from their professional and volunteering activities. Therefore, participation may not be as high if the farmer network communication is facilitated exclusively through OSNs.
  - Members may be asked to link to others as "friends" on social networking sites, but they may not want to do so with everyone. Encourage members to respect that some people may want to keep their OSN activities separate from their business or organizational relationships.
  - Many OSN platforms are not accessible for people who have certain disabilities and use assistive technologies. OSNs are also inaccessible for those using older computer software and hardware. Therefore, the network should not exclusively use OSN sites for its outreach activities.

Willamette Women's Farm Network Facebook page, page 45

Facilitating Network Meetings

To facilitate successful network meetings you need to consider everything from how people interact to where the meeting is held.

Meeting management

Marya Axner writes in *The Community Toolbox:* "The more you know about how to shape and run a good learning and planning process, the more your members will feel empowered about their own ideas and participation, stay invested in your organization, and take on responsibility and ownership, and the better your meetings will be." To create an environment where members feel safe and confident to share their ideas and work together, you need to develop some essential facilitation skills.

As the facilitator of a network meeting or gathering, your job is to draw out members' opinions and ideas, while remaining objective and focused on the process. Facilitators should know the goals of the meeting and of the members in attendance. A good facilitator includes all participants and leads people in a democratic discussion and decision-making process, while moving the meeting forward. The ability to diffuse conflict and manage people with differing viewpoints in a positive and productive way is an invaluable skill.

An effective facilitator:

- Is organized
- Communicates well (e.g., summarizes key actions, checks with individuals that they feel comfortable, allows for constructive conversation)

- Remains alert, flexible, and sensitive to group and individual needs
- Maintains a positive attitude (e.g., encourages participation and comments from all individuals)
- Is an active listener
- Encourages group and individual discussion
- Clearly identifies logistics, such as meeting times, places, agendas, etc.
- Is process oriented and effective at managing group dynamics
- Encourages members to take ownership by identifying and training group leaders

As a facilitator organizing a meeting, consider three important details: environment, logistics, and ground rules.

The League of Women Farmers (LOWF) uses a variety of approaches to communicate with its members. Initially, invitation letters were mailed to potential members. During the network's first two years, regular e-mails were used to announce upcoming events. Today, members receive e-mail newsletters using Vertical Response. The LOWF Facebook page invites members to events, displays photos, and provides updates on relevant agriculture news. Before the annual meeting in December, phone calls are made to personally invite members to the meeting and confirm their current e-mail addresses. While time-consuming, this effort increases attendance at the annual meeting and verifies that members are receiving e-mails.

Environment

The environment is where the meeting is held. Aspects of the meeting location, including size and lighting, will set the tone for the participants' experience. When choosing a location, think about what is comfortable and familiar. Accessibility is also important, including being able to accommodate participants with disabilities and keeping the location close to where most members live. When deciding on room size, try to create an intimate atmosphere based on the group's size. If you opt for an outdoor meeting, make sure that participants will be comfortable.

Meeting logistics

Think about how you set up the room and arrange chairs to encourage conversation. What sort of tools will you need? Will you have food (in farmer groups, potlucks are always popular)? Will you take attendance? Consider the following checklist for meeting supplies:

- Sign-in sheet
- Evaluation form
- Utensils, plates, cups
- Easels with pens
- Dry-erase board and markers
- Laptop and projector

Ground rules

Before facilitating any group process, it is important to establish ground rules. You may choose to use *Robert's Rules of Order* or adopt other rules that work for your group.

In one of the first gatherings of your farmer network, you may choose to use a group process to develop common ground rules, such as:

- Only one person may speak at a time.
- Members should raise their hands if they have something to say.
- Members should maintain respectful communication at all times by listening to what other people are saying and avoiding any derision of other people's ideas.
- Members should arrive to meetings on time and return from breaks in a timely way (especially if it's a long meeting).

Common meeting places

Choose an appropriate venue for your meeting. Consider these common meeting locations:

- Granges
- Extension offices
- Community centers
- Farms
- Libraries

Running meetings

The structure of your meetings will depend on the goals and content of the particular meeting. Examples of farmer network meetings include:

- Presentations by invited speakers or panel discussions
- Topical discussions
- Farm tours
- Informal networking events
- Brainstorming meetings to generate ideas for future gatherings or classes
- Business meetings to discuss network vision or structure
- Social events, like annual picnics or holiday parties

As a facilitator, it is your task to start and end meetings on time. Begin the meeting with an enthusiastic welcome and have members introduce themselves. You may want to set the length of introductions based on the number of participants. For example, if you have more than 30 participants, encourage people to limit their introductions to their name, farm name, and location. For groups of 10 members or fewer, there may be enough time for people to briefly describe their farm businesses and mention their interest in attending this particular meeting. You can also include an icebreaker activity to help participants become comfortable in a group meeting setting.

Sample icebreakers, page 46

For **all meetings**, establish a clear agenda with objectives. Sticking to the agenda will help meetings run smoothly. Assign a member to take notes or record on butcher paper or a dry-erase board the ideas, outcomes, objectives, and commitments that are discussed. To stay focused on the process, as facilitator, you should not also serve as a meeting recorder. Make sure you cover all agenda items and, at the end of the meeting, review commitments made by members. Conclude the meeting with a reminder about the next gathering time and place, and any announcements.

League of Women Farmers introductory meeting agenda, page 47

For farm tours, speaker presentations, and panel discussions, you can help keep the speakers or farm tour hosts on topic and following the schedule. Share the farm tour planning tool (page 32) with farm tour hosts to help them prepare for your members' visit. Encourage discussion among participants and invited guest or farm tour hosts. Ask open-ended questions, if group members do not ask them, to elicit essential information and support discussion. The structure of these types of gatherings will depend on the content being delivered and your style and level of facilitation expertise.

In preparation for on-farm events, make sure to set aside time to plan with your host. You will want to discuss logistics such as parking, setup, expectations, concerns, and your roles and responsibilities during the visit. Will you need portable sanitary stations and handwashing stations? How can you limit negative impact on the host's property? Hosting an event takes time and energy, so be sensitive to the needs of your host and express gratitude for his or her efforts.

Topical discussions and informal networking events will tend to have a more informal structure. During group discussions, you may want to help facilitate the conversation by preparing a list of thought-provoking questions beforehand and posing them to the group, if the conversation begins to wane or move off-track. You may also want to monitor levels of participation among people and create opportunities for quieter members to speak. Even the most informal meetings should have a clearly defined beginning and end.

Brainstorming and business meetings may need to have a more clearly defined structure. Many organizations use *Robert's Rules of Order*, which are based on English parliamentary law, to conduct meetings. *Robert's Rules of Order* has the advantage of being a well-known, straightforward style of facilitating meetings. However, your farmer network will need to decide if it wants to adhere to this structure, which uses a majority rule to make decisions. Some organizations opt to use a consensus or consensus minus-one decision-making process. The steering committee should decide how meetings are run and how decisions are made within the farmer network.

Evaluating your network's success

Evaluating your network's success will take planning, time, and energy, but the data you generate will be useful for membership outreach, grant writing, and project reporting. Here are some general guidelines:

- **Short-term impacts** are measured immediately after a class or workshop. A written evaluation—either a paper copy distributed at the end of a meeting or an e-mail survey sent out shortly after the meeting—is best. Short-term impacts measure the specific knowledge or skills learned during a class.
- **Midrange impacts** are measured through surveys or interviews conducted between six months and two years after attending a specific class or participating in the network. They address changes in people's attitudes or behavior as a result of attending an educational event or participating in the network. Midrange impacts can be gathered through quantitative or qualitative questions. Quantitative questions have "yes" or "no" responses, or ask participants to use a rating scale. Qualitative questions ask open-ended questions that have longer answers. Answers to qualitative questions can be used as quotes in impact reporting.
- **Long-term impacts** are measured through surveys or interviews at least two years after attending a specific class or participating in the network. Long-term input surveys document the social, environmental, or economic changes that occurred as a result of attending an educational event or participating in the network. As with midrange impacts, both qualitative and quantitative questions can be used.

Maintaining Your Network

An active farmer network can take considerable time to manage. At this point, you have some decisions to make. Do you continue to devote the time necessary to effectively coordinate the network? Do you seek grant or contract funding to hire a qualified person to help? Or do you turn to the network itself for leadership?

Tips for maintaining an active network, page 48

Addressing common farmer network problems, page 49

Training members to become network leaders

Many farmers are natural coordinators. As part of their operations, they prioritize tasks, understand the steps required to complete work, and delegate when possible. While some farmers may not feel they have the leadership skills or confidence necessary to coordinate a network, you can help them overcome these feelings with support, encouragement, and experience.

A first step is to ask for help from your membership. Identify network members who are excited and motivated about the opportunities provided by the farmer

network. Likely, these are the same members who actively participate and attend events. Ideally, they'll also be individuals who have skills and knowledge that will be helpful in coordinating the group, such as writing, social networking, public speaking, business management, or community organizing. Invite five or six of these farmers to a committee meeting and let them know that you need their expertise and energy to help move the network forward. Be sure to mention the benefits they will gain from their leadership roles (e.g., strengthened résumés, increased experience with software). Determine the time commitment you need from them and the tasks you need help with. One person might take the lead, or a small group might share responsibilities. Having consistent leadership within the network will increase member investment and create a stronger organization.

Steps for training new leaders:

- Create opportunities for them to learn and practice new skills that will build their confidence.
- Encourage and help them plan a network event on a topic in which they are personally interested.
- Share tips on how to effectively organize network events.
- Share meeting management ideas.
- Review this toolkit together.

Funding for networks

One aspect of maintaining your network is to consider how to fund it. You may need funding for several reasons, including compensating a coordinator or paying for ongoing activities.

There are many types of funding streams to consider:

- **Grants**: There are many grant opportunities that recognize farmer-to-farmer networks as an emerging educational tool and service. Writing grants to fund a coordinator position is one way to maintain your network. The LOWF has relied on several granting agencies to support its coordinator, including the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and Risk Management Agency (RMA), and Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE).

  Most of the USDA grant programs and sustainable agriculture grants will support salary for an initiative focused on farmer networks.

- **Membership Dues**: The LOWF charges an annual membership fee. This raises money to support classes and field trips, and to sponsor the membership of new and beginning farmers.

- **Class Fees**: A fee charged for a class can be used to cover expenses for that class; extra money can go back to support the network.

- **Sponsorships**: Explore partnerships with local, state, or regional businesses (e.g., feed stores and tractor suppliers) that can sponsor some of your activities. Many businesses invest in local activities because part of their mission is to promote social responsibility. Sponsorship is also a positive marketing tool for a business's corporate image in the community.

- **Donations**: Increasingly, the public is interested in supporting local farms, farmers, and farmer networks. Private individuals sometimes donate generously to support an effective, visible, and well-respected local farming network.

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Examples of farmer networks

A group of farmers may join together to exchange knowledge, learn new technical information, explore marketing opportunities, share equipment, or simply meet and socialize with others who have common goals. The network may plan to meet indefinitely, or convene for a short period of time or until specific tasks are accomplished. Membership can include farmers who have broad agricultural interests or be tailored to include only farmers in a specialized niche. As you work to develop a farmer network in your area, it is important to tailor the network's purpose to match the participants' needs.

Women farmer networks

- OSU Women Farmer Networks
  http://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/osu-women-farmer-networks
- Pennsylvania Women's Agricultural Network
  http://agsci.psu.edu/wagn
- Women, Food and Agriculture Network
  http://www.wfan.org

Beginning farmer networks

- Beginning Farmer Network of Massachusetts
  http://nesfp.nutrition.tufts.edu/resources/bfaa.html
- Vermont New Farmer Network
  http://www.vermontagriculture.com/agdev/new%20farmers/vnfn.htm
- Farmers for the Future
  http://farmersforthefuture.ning.com/

Farmer networks with production system emphasis

- Chattanooga Sustainable Farmers
  http://www.chattanoogasustainablefarmers.org
- Cornell Organic Farmer Networks
  http://cuaes.cornell.edu/cals/cuaes/organic/projects/networks/index.cfm

Farmer networks with specific interest topic

- Southern Willamette Valley Bean and Grain Project
  http://mudcitypress.com/beanandgrain.html
- Farmer to Farmer Hay, Forage & Corn List
  http://farmertofarmer.uwex.edu/

Case study: North Country Farming Network

The North Country Farming Network represents a group of farmers in six counties of northern Vermont whose mission is to promote small-scale, sustainable agriculture. The group, which was designated a Vermont Domestic Nonprofit Corporation in 2005, is a membership organization and is open to all individuals. While the group is all-inclusive, emphasis is placed on increasing regional food security and on supporting low-income farmers who have little access to capital, land, and livestock.

The network's board consists of two volunteer representatives from each of the county chapters. Technically, the board oversees the local chapters, but the chapters are largely autonomous and self-directed. A part-time coordinator helps facilitate each of the chapters by meeting with the board, organizing events, working with individual members, and coordinating trainings and networking. The organization also relies on many engaged volunteers who donate their time and energy to coordinate projects.

Network activities can be roughly divided into five categories:

- **Shared equipment**—Network members have access to agricultural equipment, including egg incubators and honey extractors, poultry processing equipment, food processing tools, and a resource library. The shared equipment pool allows farmers to share equipment, incubate new businesses, and avoid unnecessary capital expenditures that could make an enterprise unprofitable.
- **Livestock placements**—The livestock placements follow Heifer International's "Living Loan" project, in which low-income farmers receive an animal and then donate one of its offspring to another family.
- **Training**—Trainings consist of hands-on workshops for members that focus on sustainable agriculture practices.
- **Grain bin**—The grain bin program allows farmers to purchase animal feed in bulk through a cooperative grain bin, thus saving on expensive feed prices and increasing profit margins.
- **Marketing**—Network members share marketing opportunities at local farmers' markets and through a cooperative farm stand.

Early on, the group received grant funds and in-kind support from Heifer International, the University of Vermont's Women's Agricultural Network, Rural Vermont, and the Northern Vermont Resource Conservation & Development Council. Initial funds enabled the group to organize and begin important project work. Later on, the group received funding from Ben & Jerry's, as well as a large grant from Heifer International. Grant funds have supported local coordinator positions and many of the projects listed above. Although this network offers opportunities for farmers to gather and exchange information, the real emphasis is on creating opportunities to make small-scale agriculture more financially viable.

Case study: Practical Farmers of Iowa

Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit membership organization founded by farmers in 1985. PFI was formed with the goal of finding alternatives to conventional agriculture that could sustain Iowa farms through the farm crisis. These alternatives were discovered through on-farm research conducted by the people most invested in Iowa agriculture: the farmers themselves.

Methods

As an organization, PFI facilitates farmer-to-farmer knowledge and information sharing. This is accomplished in a variety of ways, including:

- Helping farmers design on-farm research, record keeping, and demonstration projects, and paying them for their time. Research reports are then made freely available on the PFI website.
- Funding farmers to host field days and pasture walks where others can learn from them.
- Organizing events where farmers can network and learn from each other, including a popular annual conference.
- Facilitating regular, live, free, online seminars ("farminars") where a beginning farmer and an experienced farmer discuss challenges and solutions to on-farm problems.
- Providing other communication channels for farmers to share knowledge, including a quarterly newsletter and five active e-mail discussion lists.

PFI's ethos is "farmer-to-farmer." As much as possible, PFI encourages farmers to take leadership roles—from conducting research on their farms, to speaking at conference sessions, to hosting field days, to serving as media spokespeople. PFI's staff of facilitators provides support and infrastructure for farmers to connect and share their knowledge, and let the farmers do the talking.

Membership

PFI currently has around 1,500 individual members. About 41% of its members have been farming for 10 years or more; 22% have been farming for less than 10 years; 9% want to start farming; and 28% are non-farmers. Non-farmer members are referred to as "friends of farmers." Many of them are simply consumers who want to support local farms, but some are food- or agriculture-related organizations or individuals associated with those organizations.

Members pay dues annually. Membership in PFI is available at three levels: $35 for an individual, $45 for a farm or family, or $75 for an organization. The principal benefit of the farm/family and organization membership levels is a discount on registration for the annual conference. Farm/family members pay one registration fee for the entire family, and organization members pay one registration fee for two attendees.

Members are organized into districts by their location in Iowa: Northwest, North Central, Northeast, Southwest, or Southeast. There is also a district for out-of-state members, who represent about 15% of all PFI members.

Case study: Practical Farmers of Iowa (cont'd)

Staff

PFI currently has 11 paid staff: 10 full-time and one part-time. It also employs consultants and interns as needed. Each PFI district is represented by two board members who live in that district. Out-of-state members are represented by two at-large non-farmer board members. There are also two permanent ex officio board members.

Funding

PFI's fiscal year 2012 budget is about $1.1 million. Its funding comes from the following sources: 42% from foundation grants, 37% from federal grants, 7% from state grants, and 14% from unrestricted giving (individuals and organizations).

While unrestricted donations are preferable because of the flexibility they allow, the scope of PFI's work exceeds what can be raised from donations. PFI applies for grant funding that aligns with its organizational objectives, as ratified by the board of directors. These objectives come directly from the priorities indicated by members on their annual member survey.

Case study: Northwest Farmer-to-Farmer Exchange

Suzi and Robilee Evans of Foundhorn Gardens started the annual Northwest Farmer-to-Farmer Exchange in 2003, after noticing a significant lack of farmers at many of the regional sustainable agriculture conferences. The majority of attendees at many farmer conferences were agricultural professionals, Extension agents, researchers, nonprofit staff, and representatives from commodity groups; farmers seemed to be in short supply. In addition, the Evanses observed that farmers were sharing the most relevant, useful information between conference sessions in more informal settings.

Based on these observations, Suzi and Robilee Evans decided to form their own farmer conference, targeted to commercial vegetable farmers using organic practices. They chose Breitenbush Hot Springs as the venue, primarily because it is a rustic and relatively inexpensive retreat center that offers a respite for weary farmers. Breitenbush is located about two hours southeast of Portland, Oregon. The Evanses approached Oregon Tilth, a regional organic certifying agency, and Organically Grown Company, a wholesale buyer, to help sponsor the conference and offset the cost of attendance. Both organizations agreed and have been sponsoring the conference since its inception.

Attendance to the conference is by invitation only. Suzi Evans acts as the gatekeeper and maintains strict standards about attendees, ensuring that participants are commercial vegetable farmers currently running a business. Once someone attends the conference, they are on the invitation list for subsequent years and may suggest other potential attendees.

The organization of the conference sessions has evolved over the years. In the past, attendees brainstormed workshop sessions on the first evening with the entire group. Although the process aligned with the grassroots, egalitarian spirit of the conference, it was also time consuming and sometimes frustrating. In an effort to streamline the process, the Evanses now lead a brainstorming session during the final session of the conference in preparation for the following year's conference. In the months leading up to the conference, they e-mail surveys to attendees to finalize the conference session topics and facilitators.

The conference takes place over three days. Meals and lodging are provided. After dinner on the first evening, conference participants, who number about 100, meet for the first official gathering. The Evanses go over announcements, schedules, and housekeeping items. Farmers then each take a few minutes to introduce themselves. On both evenings, participants are invited to bring photos of their farms for slideshow presentations. Between four and seven farmers show photos of their farms each night.

During the second day, the entire group gathers in the morning to share "ah-ha" and "uh-oh" moments from the past farming season. Farmers take turns offering nuggets of wisdom and experience through their most memorable mistakes and greatest discoveries. The rest of the day consists of three breakout sessions, free time, and meals. The sessions are held in three on-site venues and are run by one or two facilitators. The facilitators often have topics or questions to cover, but the tone of the sessions is quite informal. Participants share their experiences on the main topic and offer anecdotes, suggestions, and challenges. Often

Case study: Northwest Farmer-to-Farmer Exchange
(cont'd)

a newer farmer will begin by asking for advice, and then several of the more experienced growers will share answers based on their own operations.

The third day includes one breakout session and a final gathering of the entire group. The final meeting allows time for feedback and planning for the next conference.

Conference participants can opt to be on a listserv as a way to stay in touch between conferences. During the year, people communicate on the listserv, posing questions or providing feedback or both.

Many farmers make the annual pilgrimage to Breitenbush to see old friends, learn new information, and get excited for the upcoming season. The setting and format of the sessions, along with the fact that all participants have direct experience with farming, are considered the primary reasons for the conference's success.

Willamette Women's Farm Network mission statement

We are a community of women from the central and southern Willamette Valley of Oregon that is actively engaged in farm and ranch activities. We join together to further our knowledge of farm and ranch related issues, both in the marketplace and in agricultural practices. We are working together to enhance our economic self-sufficiency through shared experiences, resources, and visions of how our farm work will impact ourselves and our community. We will provide each member a safe, supportive environment and opportunity to learn safe and lawful practices regarding farming/ranching that promote responsibility, profitability and conservation of the land.

Recruitment plan worksheet

Use the questions below to help you plan for recruiting members.

- Who will I invite to participate in a focus group?
- What are my focus group questions?
- What is the one- to two-sentence founding mission statement for my network? (Remember that the mission may evolve and is not set in stone.)
- Who is my target population?
- What geographic area will the network cover?
- When is my first meeting scheduled?
- What outreach materials will I use to recruit members?
- What lists of growers will I use to recruit members?
- In which newspapers or publications will I place ads, announcements, or articles to recruit members?
- How will I keep track of the contact information for members/participants?
- How will I communicate with members?
- How will I gather more information?
- The people I would ask to be on a committee are _____ .
- How will I do outreach?
- When will I start?
- My first meeting will be _____ .
- I will keep track of people via _____ .

League of Women Farmers meeting flier

The OSU Extension Small Farms Program invites you to join the

League of Women Farmers

Farmer-to-farmer learning groups are self-directed groups of farmers interested in sharing knowledge about common issues related to agriculture. In this case, women farmers running sustainable small farms are the common ground. Participation is limited to women who are currently selling their agricultural products.

Possible group meetings can alternate between discussion forums on relevant topics and farm tours with a technical training component. This first meeting will be an opportunity for women to share their ideas, ask questions and set goals and ground rules. Children are welcome.

Possible topics for group meetings include:
***Balancing family life with farming**
***Ergonomics of using heavy equipment**
***Marketing**
***Adding Value**
***Business Planning**

The first meeting of this group is:
Thursday, October 11th from 5:30-8:00 p.m.
OSU Extension Library
569 Hanley Road, Central Point

Please RSVP by Monday, October 8th.
Ask questions to Melissa Matthewson or Maud Powell at 776-7371 or melissa.matthewson@oregonstate.edu/maud.powell@oregonstate.edu.

OREGON SMALL FARMS

Oregon State UNIVERSITY OSU

Willamette Women's Farm Network tractor training flier

Tractor Safety & Driving Field Day

PLAN FOR THE DAY

9:00- Safety training relating to equipment, roll over protection systems and more.

10:30- Basic tractor operation. Starting up the tractors and getting them moving.

12:00– Break and pizza lunch

12:30– 5:00– Small groups rotate through stations. Learn how to hook up a 3 point hitch, about power take off for implements, and how to maneuver with a trailer (including backing up).

We hope that limiting the class to 20 participants will allow for plenty of "in the seat" tractor instruction.

Saturday, August 7th

The Willamette Women's Farm Network is having a full-day tractor safety and driving field day. The goal is to provide a safe, encouraging atmosphere while having fun learning about tractors and equipment.

- 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
- Lewis Brown Farm near Corvallis, Oregon
- $15 registration to cover lunch and materials
- Limited to 20 participants (Ladies first! Since participation is limited, male partners will need to wait and see if space is available)
- Pre-registration by August 2nd is required for this gathering.

Contact Melissa Fery to register!

Melissa.Fery@oregonstate.edu OR 541-766-3553

A waiting list will be kept once we fill up this event. We hope that if there is need, we can offer this training on an annual basis.

Making a plan for your farm tour

A farm tour is an excellent way for farmers to share and learn from each other. When thinking about the plan for the tour, consider two or three key points or learning objectives that would be appropriate and build the tour around those.

Basic information for guests

Before your tour begins, ensure that your guests can find your farm and have a phone number to contact you. Provide information on where to park, whether there are any special circumstances (e.g., unfriendly farm dogs, rough gravel driveways) to consider, and what, if any, special gear (e.g., rubber boots, gloves) you recommend.

Decide on your route

Make a map or list of places you want to visit on the farm. Think about how you want the tour to flow. You may decide to use a theme, like following the chronology of farm development, focusing on a specific farming practice, or starting the tour closest to the house or gathering area and moving farther away. Consider an alternate route for participants with disabilities.

Plan for time

Decide how long you want the tour to last. One hour is usually a good duration. Designate an amount of time to spend at each location. Write down any talking points you want to cover. Think about including one anecdote for each spot. Allow time for questions and discussion before moving on.

Ending location

Consider where you want the tour to end. If possible, find a place where people can sit comfortably to ask questions, discuss the tour, or share a meal or light refreshments.

Giving the tour

Establish if you want to take questions during or after the tour. Introduce yourself and provide an introduction to your farm, including:

- How long you've been there
- What you grow or raise and how you do it
- What your markets are
- An overview of the property (e.g., soils, irrigation source, common weeds or pests)
- A brief overview of the tour so that people have a sense of what to expect

Consider the comfort of the people on your tour—if it's a hot summer day, find shady spots to stop and have sunblock on hand, or limit outside time if it's raining or cold. If you are giving a tour to a large group, make sure everyone can see and hear you at each stop.

Have fun! Use the structure you've created as a guide, but pay attention to your audience and adjust accordingly.

Tips for facilitators

- Silence is key. Be careful not to talk too much or put words in people's mouths. Your job as a facilitator is to draw out people's ideas and opinions, and keep the group cohesive. So, talk—but then be quiet!
- Try to read the group's body language. Are people shifting? Do they look bored, tired, or confused? Think about calling for a break when this happens.
- Check in with the group frequently about the direction in which the meeting is going.
- Be aware of your eye contact, voice volume, and speaking manner. Walking around engages people. Hold onto something to keep your hands occupied.
- Always talk to the group and not the walls, easel, or participants' shoes. Try your best to maintain eye contact and look around to all areas of the room.
- Encourage participation from everyone; do not let one person dominate the discussion.

League of Women Farmers meetings/events summary

- Fruit Tree Pruning & Orcharding. Vaughn Family Farm, 1014 Old Stage Lower Rd., Central Point, OR. 1/10/11 *14 participants*
- League of Women Farmers Retreat. Buckhorn Springs, 2200 Buckhorn Springs Road, Ashland, OR. 3/4/11 *19 participants*
- Agricultural Book Club. Vaughn Family Farm, 1014 Old Stage Lower Road, Central Point, OR. 4/1/11 *7 participants*
- Agricultural Book Club. Bridge Street Garage Farm Store, 334 Bridge Street, Ashland, OR. 5/7/11 *6 participants*
- Farm Tour & Film Screening. Easy Valley Farm, 2557 East Evans Creek Road, Rogue River, OR. 5/17/11 *5 participants*
- Women's Carpentry Workshop. Wolf Gulch Farm, 7000 Little Applegate Road, Jacksonville, OR. 6/4 & 5/11 *CANCELED*
- Agricultural Book Club. Barking Moon Farm, 5960 Thompson Creek Road, Applegate, OR. 7/2/11 *10 participants*
- Farm Tour & Potluck. LeMera Gardens, 5126 South Pacific Highway, Phoenix, OR. 8/26/11 *9 participants*
- Tractor Training. SOREC, 569 Hanley Road, Central Point, OR. 10/21/11 *8 participants*
- Chain Saw Training. 580 Hawk Gulch Lane, Medford, OR. 11/13/11 *8 participants*
- Annual Meeting. Walker Creek Farm, 670 Old Stage Road, Central Point, OR. 2/13/11 *21 participants*

Willamette Women's Farm Network meeting schedule

Upcoming Gatherings for the Willamette Women's Farm Network
Each gathering will include a brief meeting in addition to the scheduled topic.

Coordinator: Melissa Fery
OSU Extension
(541) 766-3553
Melissa.Fery@oregonstate.edu

Our Mission Statement:

We are a community of women from the central and southern Willamette Valley of Oregon that is actively engaged in farm and ranch activities. We join together to further our knowledge of farm and ranch related issues, both in the marketplace and in agricultural practices. We are working together to enhance our economic self-sufficiency through shared experiences, resources, and visions of how our farm work will impact ourselves and our community. We will provide each member a safe, supportive environment and opportunity to learn safe and lawful practices regarding farming/ranching that promote responsibility, profitability and conservation of the land.

December 2009

Date: Sunday, December 6th, 2-5 p.m.
Location: Benton County Extension Service
1849 NW 9th Street, Corvallis
Topic: Keeping Farm Financial Records. Learn about what records you need to be considering for tax season. Mark Poorman a local farmer and CPA for several women in our network is planning to attend and share some valuable information. If you'd like, bring a snack to share.

January 2010 (2 gatherings scheduled for January)

Date: Wednesday, January 20th, 6-8:30 p.m.
Location: Linn County Extension Service (Armory Building)
Corner of 4th and Lyon in downtown, Albany
Topic: Organic Production Principles. This session will be taught by two of our own network farmers, Beth Hoinacki and Bonnie Hoffman-Cox. They both have experience with organic certification and know what it takes to grow quality organic products in the valley. Beth will be requesting input prior to this class so that your information needs can be met.

Date: Saturday, January 30th, 10 a.m.-3 p.m.
Location: Phyllis Morris' Hazelnut orchard near Mollala, OR
Topic: Pruning Demonstration hosted by Phyllis Morris. Review tool use and maintenance, pruning technique, demonstration on nut and fruit trees. If there is time, we'll also review pruning of berries and grapes. There will be a potluck lunch at this gathering. A van carpool will be available from the Corvallis/Albany area, so you won't even have to drive yourself!

Willamette Women's Farm Network meeting schedule
(cont'd)

February
Date: Saturday, February 13th, 10 a.m.-1 p.m.
Location: LaMancha Ranch and Orchard near Sweet Home, OR
Topic: Fruit Tree Pruning Demonstration hosted by Anita Azarenko.

March
Date: Tuesday, March 23rd, 6-8:30 p.m.
Location: Linn County Extension Service, Albany, OR
Topic: Irrigation System Planning. The purpose of this gathering is to freshen up on monitoring soil moisture and crop water requirements. There will be a focus on drop irrigations systems. Hands-on demo with PVC pipe.

April
Date: Saturday, April 24th, time to be announced
Location: Matt-Cyn Farms, near Albany, OR
Topic: Gopher and Mole Control Clinic. We're not talking about "relocating" these critters once they are caught, so self-select if this network gathering is for you. Matt and Cyndee have become proficient at trapping these farm pests. Learn the subtleties around trap selection and preparation as well as identifying a good trap site and setting the trap.

May
Date: Tuesday, May 11th, 5-7 p.m.
Location: Linn or Benton County, hosted by Cynthia of Midway Farms
Topic: Collaborative Marketing Opportunities. A planning meeting to get some ideas up and going for the 2010 marketing season.

August (2 gatherings scheduled for August)

Date: Saturday, August 8th, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m.
Location: Lewis Brown Farm, near Corvallis, OR
Topic: Tractor and Equipment Safety. We'll be covering driving technique, safety, and basic maintenance of a variety of farm equipment.

Date: Saturday, August 28th, 4-7 p.m.
Location: Goodfoot Farm, near Philomath, OR
Topic: Farm Walk at Goodfoot Farm, hosted by Beth Hoinacki. This farm is in an integrated small farm with annual, perennial and some livestock production.

Surveying members worksheet

What is your motivation for surveying members? (Check any that apply.)

- ☐ Collecting demographic information to find out more about your target audience
- ☐ Gathering data for impact reporting or grant writing
- ☐ Collecting information for planning purposes
- ☐ Evaluating classes and events

Are you using qualitative or quantitative survey questions?

What are the questions you will ask?

How will you survey network participants? (Check any that apply.)

- ☐ Paper surveys
- ☐ E-mail or online surveys
- ☐ Interviews

How will you use the information gathered?

How often do you plan to survey members?

What is your goal for percentage of participants who will complete the survey?

What steps will you take to reach your goal for survey participation?

Sample member survey: Oregon Women Farmer Networks

The Oregon State University Extension Small Farms program currently coordinates three women farmer networks in different regions in the state. The League of Women Farmers was established in 2007, Willamette Women's Farm Network was established in 2008, and the North Willamette Women Farmer Network was established in 2011. OSU Extension faculty and network coordinators prepared a comprehensive needs assessment survey to collect data about the impacts of the networks, receive feedback about network programming, and gather demographic information. The survey was approved by the OSU Institutional Review Board and delivered via an online survey program in 2012.

Survey Questions

It's time to check in, get feedback, and define where we're headed. This survey is designed to gather information about and assess the needs of the women farmers currently active in Oregon's Women Farmer Networks. The survey will be used to plan events for the networks. If you choose not to answer any one question, please go on to the next.

Logistics & General Thoughts

1. Which network are you a member of:

☐ League of Women Farmers (LOWF)

☐ Willamette Women's Farm Network (WWFN)

☐ North Willamette Women Farmer Network (NWWFN)

2. How many network meetings, gatherings or events have you attended?

☐ I have not yet attended

☐ 1-5

☐ 5-10

☐ More than 10

3. Regarding regular meetings:

Agree (5) and Disagree (1) 5 4 3 2 1

- I prefer a standard meeting day and time so that I can plan around these events (for example, the third Thursday of the month at 6:00).

Agree (5) and Disagree (1) 5 4 3 2 1

- I prefer a variety of events on different days and times, and I will come when I can.

Sample member survey: Oregon Women Farmer Networks
(cont'd)

4. How often would you like to meet?

Agree (5) and Disagree (1) 5 4 3 2 1

____Monthly, all year

____Monthly, seasonally November-March

____Every other month, all year

____Quarterly

5. When is the best meeting day and time for you?

☐ Monday-Thursday evening

☐ Friday afternoon or evening

☐ Saturday morning

☐ Saturday afternoon

☐ Saturday evening

☐ Sunday afternoon

Other, specify:

6. Do you think there is a need for a program that addresses the particular needs of women in agriculture? Why or why not?

7. What is your motivation for being part of a women farmer network?

8. As a result of participating in your network, you have (check all that apply):

☐ Increased knowledge

☐ Increased networking

☐ Job opportunities

☐ Increased customer base

☐ Greater satisfaction with your occupation/community

☐ Developed farm skills

☐ Feel more connected with the farming community

9. How has the network benefited you or your farm? Please give specific examples:

Sample member survey: Oregon Women Farmer Networks
(cont'd)

Programming

10. I am interested in opportunities to engage in discussion groups and networking meetings.

☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Agree
☐ Not Sure
☐ Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree

11. If you are interested in opportunities to engage in discussion groups and networking meetings, please suggest topics of interest.

12. I am interested in farm walks to learn about different production systems.

☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Agree
☐ Not Sure
☐ Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree

13. I am interested in informational/educational sessions.

☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Agree
☐ Not Sure
☐ Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree

14. If you are interested in informational/educational sessions, please suggest topics of interest:

15. Which of the following categories of workshops/gatherings would you consider attending? (Check all that apply)

☐ Farm accounting, record keeping
☐ Marketing and expanding your customer base
☐ Animal husbandry (which animals:_____)

Sample member survey: Oregon Women Farmer Networks
(cont'd)

- ☐ Plant propagation
- ☐ Ecological restoration/creating wildlife habitat on your farm
- ☐ Farm planning
- ☐ Planning and building structures
- ☐ Organic production and certification
- ☐ Farm/food advocacy and activism
- ☐ Mechanical skills (welding/fence building/carpentry)
- ☐ Writing and managing grants
- ☐ Creating a farm website
- ☐ Native plant/weed identification, propagation, and management
- ☐ Mothering and farming
- ☐ Organic or biodynamic production techniques
- ☐ Farm taxes
- ☐ Starting and managing a CSA
- ☐ Multiple farm CSAs
- ☐ Flower farming
- ☐ Growing and processing beans and grains
- ☐ Creating value added products

16. I am interested in skill building activities.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Not Sure
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

17. If you are interested in skill building activities, please suggest topics of interest.

18. If there were a class, like carpentry, welding or tractor driving that required a fee for materials or expertise ($10-$60), would you participate if the topic was of interest to you?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

Sample member survey: Oregon Women Farmer Networks
(cont'd)

19. Would you be interested in an annual Women Farmers Retreat hosted alternately by each of the three regional women's networks? (i.e., hosted in 2012 by WWFN, 2013 by LOWF, and 2014 by NWWFN but all groups invited to each).

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

20. Please describe any other networking activities that you are interested in.

Demographics

21. Are currently farming or ranching?

☐ Yes

☐ No (If no, please go to Question 27).

22. How many years have you been farming?

☐ Less than one

☐ 1-4

☐ 5-9

☐ 10 or more

23. What is the ownership structure of your farm?

☐ Family

☐ Single owner

☐ Partnership

☐ Other

24. What is the size of your farm?

☐ Less than one acre

☐ 1-5 acres

☐ 6-15 acres

☐ 16-30 acres

☐ 30 or more acres

Sample member survey: Oregon Women Farmer Networks
(cont'd)

25. What kind of farm do you own/operate/work on? Please check all that apply.

- ☐ Livestock
- ☐ Crop
- ☐ Fruit/Vegetable
- ☐ Other

Please specify other here:

26. What are your primary markets? Please check all that apply.

- ☐ CSA
- ☐ Farmers' Markets
- ☐ Direct/Retail
- ☐ Wholesale
- ☐ Other

Please specify other here:

27. If you are not farming, how do you describe your occupation?

28. If you are not presently farming, please describe your interest in the network.

29. Are you interested in hosting or organizing a tour, class or gathering?
If yes, please provide contact information or contact your network's coordinator.

30. Other comments you'd like to share:

Select summary of survey results: Oregon Women Farmer Networks

The overall response rate on the 2012 Oregon Women Farmer Networks Survey (page 37) was 44% from all three networks combined. The individual response rates for each network were: League of Women Farmers – 38%, Willamette Women's Farm Network – 63% and the North Willamette Women Farmer Network – 32%.

Do you think there is a need for a program that addresses the particular needs of women in agriculture?

Yes – 83%

No – 2%

Maybe – 15%

The top three reasons for participating in the network were:

- More connection with farming community
- Increased networking
- Increased knowledge

How has the network benefited you or your farm?

The responses to this question were diverse. Here are a few examples:

- I participated in classes about using a tractor and basic carpenter skills. I now use those skills.
- The e-mail listserv has helped me the most. I have connected with other farmers and we have helped each other.
- I haven't attended a meeting yet, but I do feel supported and connected by just reading about what other women in the area are doing.
- At least two times I was looking for either a piece of equipment or information. I received valuable contacts and answers back from other farmers.
- Inspiration to tackle new projects and a sense of belonging.
- Since I am not actually on a farm yet, I can say that it is helping me prepare for when I get there!
- I've learned a lot of helpful tips for managing pasture and preserving food. I've learned where to go for small engine repair, how to easily remove a T-post, the best gear to use when using a brush hog, and tips for making my own soil. I've made great friends with folks, some of whom are soon to be business partners. I am so grateful it exists. So many fabulous people.
- Increased my confidence.
- I am at a significant distance from where programs are taking place so have been unable to attend. But even knowing that this group exists shores up my determination.

Select summary of survey results: Oregon Women Farmer Networks (cont'd)

The top two opportunities available through the work of interest were:

- Farm walks to learn about different production systems (4.55 out of 5.0)
- Informational/educational sessions (4.47 out of 5.0)

Topics for educational and skill building sessions

Among the many topics that were suggested by the survey, the top three were:

- Mechanical skills (welding, fence building, carpentry) – 63.3%
- Farm accounting, recording keeping – 62.2%
- Planning and building structures – 58.7%

Willingness to participate and pay a membership fee

83.8% of the respondents replied "yes" they would participate and be willing to pay a fee ($10-$60) for materials or expertise, if the topic was of interest to them.

Basic demographics

- 78.1% of the respondents are presently farming
- 41.6% of the respondents have been farming 1-4 years

The size of farms varied:

- Less than one acre 12.9%
- 1-5 acres 28.2%
- 6-15 acres 21.8%
- 16-30 acres 12.9%
- 30 or more acres 24.2%

Organizational structures worksheet

- Who makes what decisions about your network?
- What are the formal rules of your network?
- What are the informal rules of your network?
- Who does the work for your network?
- What roles and/or committees does your network use?

Willamette Women's Farm Network Facebook page

Sample icebreakers

- Have participants split up into pairs and interview each other. Reconvene the group and have members introduce their partners.
- Ask a "favorite question" (e.g., favorite tool, favorite food, favorite vegetable to grow), and have each member answer.
- Create a farmer bingo board (see below). Give meeting participants 10 minutes to walk around and find people who represent the bingo squares. The game ends when someone gets five in a row and calls out "Bingo!"
- Have a "snowball fight." Give each person a half-sheet of paper and ask them to write down the answer to a question such as "Why are you here tonight?" Or, "What do you hope we accomplish tonight?" Tell them to wad up the paper and throw it across the room. People should pick up and throw "snowballs" several times, until the snowballs are well mixed up throughout the room. After the rounds of throwing, everyone picks up a snowball and takes turns reading its contents out loud. With this approach, everyone gets to hear what is important to others, but individual responses are not associated with specific individuals.

Farmer bingo board

owns a tractor	grows berries	irrigates from a river	prefers to drive a pick-up	sometimes eats dessert first
has a farm business plan	native to Oregon	belongs to a CSA	developed a farm partnership	has an orchard
grows potatoes	had soil treated last year	first-time OSU Extension class participant	sells at a farmers' market	irrigates with a drip system
uses a high tunnel	raises poultry	has children at home	knows how to ID cucumber beetles	farm is certified organic
can ID at least two species of thistles	grows herbs	owned farm less than 1 year	runs a CSA	has heavy, clay soil

League of Women Farmers introductory meeting agenda

League of Women Farmers

October 11, 2007, 5:30 p.m., OSU Extension Library

AGENDA

5:30 – 5:45	Welcome
5:45 – 6:15	Introductions
6:15 – 6:30	Establish Group Vision and Goals
6:30 – 7:15	Set Ground Rules & Group Operation (Decision-Making, Structure & Membership)
7:15 – 7:45	Brainstorm Activities and Discussion Topics
7:45 – 8:00	Next Meeting Time, Place & Agenda

Tips for maintaining an active network

Train members for leadership positions

Cornell University Small Farms director Anu Rangarajan researches farmer networks and cooperatives. According to her, "initial research suggests that the life expectancy of producer cooperatives and networks correlates strongly with the level of leadership and decision-making among members." Members who take on leadership roles tend to have a greater investment in the network, will bring new ideas and perspectives to the organization, and may reduce the burden of responsibility on the network coordinator. In addition, training members as leaders is a great way to build their confidence and organizational skills, which can then be applied to individual businesses and other community efforts.

Include food at as many meetings as possible

Farmers enjoy showing off their products by preparing the food they grow. Farmer network potlucks tend to be quite sumptuous and provide opportunities to showcase new recipes or new crop varieties or both. Combining a meeting with a meal also fosters a sense of community through the sharing of nourishment and new tastes. Food can make a meeting or workshop seem festive. Busy farmers appreciate taking the time to enjoy the fruits of their and other farmers' labors. Keep in mind that hosting a potluck requires extra effort for preparation and cleanup. Some networks encourage members to bring their own plates and cutlery. If a member is hosting the event, make sure to offer and solicit help for them. A review of food safety principles and practices is a good idea if people bring food to potlucks.

Strike a balance of support, skill-building, social, and educational events

Network members will represent a diverse set of needs, learning styles, and preferences. Use different types of learning environments, including on-farm, classroom, and informal settings to best serve your members. Keep in mind that there are at least four dominant learning styles: auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and tactile. Some of your members will learn best through lectures and discussions, while other members will absorb information best by doing. Your members will also have different expectations and goals for participating in a network. Some may desire more social contact, while others hope to learn new skills.

Survey members frequently to assess changing interests within the group

As membership shifts or matures, you'll have to adapt your programs to address changing needs. Regularly surveying your members is an effective and efficient way to ensure the network continues to meet changing needs.

If meeting attendance decreases, consider holding fewer meetings and devoting greater efforts to planning and outreach. Having frequent, poorly attended meetings can feel like a waste of time and energy. If your meeting size

Tips for maintaining an active network (cont'd)

drops, take time to consider why attendance is declining. Check in with your members to determine their meeting preferences.

Keep it fun

Add show and tell, recipe swaps, cooking contests, film screenings, storytelling, etc. A farmer network should not feel like work. Offering fun, creative outlets for your members will keep them engaged in the network.

Addressing common farmer network problems

Problem: Different levels of knowledge and experience among members

Solution: Determine who the target audience is for your farmer network. Whether you are focusing on commercial producers, aspiring farmers, specialty crop producers, or ranchers, make sure all participants are aware of the subject material and level of complexity that will be covered during educational programs. If you choose to have a mixed group of both beginning and experienced producers, consider alternating between introductory and advanced material. Always be transparent in your outreach material about who your target audience is. It can be frustrating for a beginning producer to attend an educational event that's geared toward seasoned producers. Likewise, hosting only introductory-level programs will result in longtime commercial growers losing interest. If your group members vary widely in knowledge and experience, look for opportunities to foster mentor relationships.

Problem: Distance to program or meeting venues makes attendance challenging for some members

Solution: If your farmer network covers an entire state or region, for example, hold an annual weekend conference with multiple speakers or several hands-on workshops instead of monthly meetings. Another solution is to hold meetings at various locations around the state or region so that members can attend events that are close to them. As the organizer, you can also help facilitate carpools by sending group e-mails to members that live in close proximity to one another. Time spent together in a car can be a valuable networking opportunity. Contact

Addressing common farmer network problems (cont'd)

your county Extension office, local schools, or libraries to find out if distance technology options exist so you can conduct a virtual meeting.

Problem: Farmers are too busy to attend events

Solution: Consider holding fewer events and emphasize meeting during the slower seasons. With fewer meetings to organize, you can use the extra time to recruit dynamic speakers or identify a compelling farm to visit. Instead of hosting formal meetings or events, consider coordinating work parties at members' farms. This offers busy farmers several benefits: many hands can complete a task more quickly, cooperative activities provide a chance to connect with other farmers, and beginning farmers can develop new skills.

Problem: Conflicting harvest/market days make it difficult to schedule events

Solution: Survey farmers to find out which times and dates work for the majority of your membership. Alternate meeting times between the most popular times and dates.

Problem: Communication

Solution: Survey members to find out the best form(s) of communication. As an organizer, the most convenient and efficient way to communicate is through e-mail or an online social networking platform. However, if you have a large number of members who don't use e-mail, consider organizing a phone tree or finding a volunteer willing to make phone calls or both.

Notes

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