



Cooperative Extension • University of Wisconsin-Extension

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Clark County Needs Assessment

Multiple approaches were utilized as part of the needs assessment process for crops and soils education in Clark County. Key personal representing six agronomic service businesses in Clark County were interviewed in order to gain a general sense of the crop production issues. Written surveys were circulated at meetings and pesticide applicator training requesting respondents to rate their interest in subjects such as forage production and grazing, grain production, sustainable agriculture and financial management, and home and commercial horticulture. The thirty-six respondents identified the highest priorities as nutrient management, weed control, forage production and forage quality.

A series of focus group interviews were held in the spring of 2005. The Clark County Grazers were asked a specific set of questions designed to bring direction to their programs for the next year. The strongest information gathered through the needs assessment process came from the three dairy operator focus groups. Three locations were selected representing geographical areas in the county. Fifteen to twenty-four were invited to each location. Diversity of dairy farms represented in the focus groups ranged from traditional Mennonite farms with 40 milking cows with just over 100 acres to an 800 milking cow operation with approximately 8000 acres. The first focus group drew six participants representing the Thorp, Withee, and Greenwood communities. A focus group held in Greenwood was very successful drawing eleven participants from Greenwood, Loyal, Neillsville, and Granton. The third focus group was held in an area of the county with traditionally low Extension interaction drawing four participants from Abbotsford and Dorchester. A summary of the focus group question responses are provided below.

What are some ways you have worked with the Extension office in the past?

4-H as a youth typically is the first Extension contact for farm operators. Later in life, parents continue to use Extension through 4-H involvement with their children. Many farmers use the resources of the Dairy and Livestock Agent at some point. The contacts with the Crops and Soils Agent were developed through Pesticide Applicator Training, occasional Forage Council events, and annual nutrient management training.

Could you please give me a couple of issues you are dealing with today on your farm?

Manure management is a key issue dairy producers face on a daily basis. They are concerned about potential changes in regulation, meeting current regulations, and repercussions at the community level due to neighbors not understanding the handling of manure. In particular, farmers are concerned with the continued build up of

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phosphorus and finding ways to prevent it from reaching excessive levels. An overall sense of stewardship is present in response to the need of protecting ground and surface water. Participants felt that with good management practices manure issues still can be addressed. Tools that farmers feel are important included phosphorous management in feed, the NRCS EQIP program, and SNAP software. Storage is recognized as an important piece of nutrient management either in the form of liquid lagoons or a compost pad.

Farm financial stability is an immediate and long term issue that is on the minds of many farmers. Single family operations with approximately 60 cows or less feel a strong desire not to be forced into expansion, meanwhile there is a concern that economic scales will force them to expand to 120 to 150 cows. If the time comes that it is necessary to build, modernizations need to be done in a way that makes daily operations easier and done in a cost effective way. Overall debt load and costs of production inputs are issues dairy farmers face daily.

Herd health concerns are often unique to each operation yet there is an appreciation among farmers that they can learn from each others experiences. In the winter months, teat dips and balms are important to prevent mastitis and udder problems. Dairy rations are key to milk production. The inconsistency of forage and constant changes to the cow diet continue to cause milk production issues. Rations become a constantly moving target. Calf health issues and ideas were also shared.

Please list a few long term issues you see as challenges to your farming operation.

Influence from outside of the agricultural community is viewed as a long term obstacle to maintaining dairy farms. Two levels of obstruction were identified: regulation and urban sprawl. The combination of local, state (DATCP), DNR, and federal regulations being proposed and passed are a top concern. Producers feel that rules and regulations continue to mount that make it more difficult to farm in Clark County. There are concerns about fines and lawsuits caused by being out of compliance. Regulations in place are viewed as challenges to growth or property transfer. Secondly, the increasing number of urban dwellers that move to the county settings without understanding farming is a concern. Complaints about odor, noise, and general nosiness and trespassing continue to increase. Potential home buyers and local government need to understand producers want to maintain the ability to sell some land for development without the threat to their operation.

Personal health is an obstacle faced by many individual farm families. Farming practices that diminish the daily wear on farmers' bodies will help them continue to operate for a longer period of time. Another concern about health is the raising cost of health insurance. Many farmers site insurance premiums in excess of \$1,000 per month for policies with large deductibles. The costs are forcing farmers or their spouses to choose between seeking off farm employment or face reduced profits. In Wisconsin, 36% of dairy farmers are uninsured or underinsured. Farm operation insurance

premiums for coverage of business liabilities and property damage are also increasing. Farmers are concerned that if they do file claims, the insurance provider will drop their coverage.

A variety of crop production issues related to pest management and agronomic production were identified, however there was not one issue that was an overwhelming concern. There are mixed responses to biotechnology traits in that some large operators felt that such traits made their operations more efficient while others were discouraged because it is difficult to find seed of conventional germplasm. Farmers feel that they are being forced to purchase trait carrying seed because there are few conventional alternatives. Other general concerns included disease, weed, and insect control. Some participants questioned the profitability of cash cropping in Clark County, in particular the corn-soybean rotation. Producing adequate, clean, quality forage was also discussed as a potential challenge.

Finding good help is a concern for smaller farmers whom need to find replacement milkers occasionally. Custom operators need more reliable help. Overall, the large operations have been satisfied with the quality of work received from Hispanic farm help in particular for the task of milking.

What sources of information influence your crop production decisions?

Written sources of information are important to farmers because finding time to read requires flexibility. The Clark County Extension Views newsletter is highly valued. Producers can easily track upcoming events through newsletter posting. Articles are valued in the newsletter because they address immediate Clark County circumstances. Most farms receive at least one agricultural newspaper. The Country Today is the preferred paper for Clark County farmers while Agri-View is also read regularly. Wisconsin State Farmer is read to a lesser degree. Hoard's Dairyman is preferred over the Wisconsin Agriculturalist. Local county papers are not read for their agriculture coverage. The Tribune Record Gleaner seems to be the most read among farmers.

The most listened to radio stations are WAXX (104.5) from Eau Claire and WOSQ (92.3) from Marshfield. Both stations have regular agricultural news updates. 99.3 from Medford and WDEZ from Wausau were also listed too. WCCN broadcasting out of Neillsville is not a radio outlet typically used by farmers.

Many producers use the internet sporadically to find production information. Time restraints and aggravation with the slow dial-up service found in rural Clark County were cited as the obstacles to using the internet more. Due to long delays between switching pages and conducting searches, producers felt that the information needs to be quick and easy to find. Current agricultural issues should be posted on the County Extension web page with a minimal number of layers to find information.

What settings or formats do you like to learn in?

Meeting times and settings that would be most attractive for farmer attendance were discussed. If a longer educational program with multiple topics and speakers are produced, sessions should range from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm. If a free informational meeting is offered, the afternoon is best from about 1:00 to 3:30. Discussion groups with a brown bag lunch setting could last from around 11:30 to 2:30. Short programs with no fees or meal were described as the most appealing. Tours of farms and discussion settings where farmers can openly exchange ideas is a preferred learning setting. Farm shows generally are enjoyed.

Locations that work well are bank meeting rooms, fire halls, town halls, Loyal Legion, Thorp Library, Greenwood Legion, Colby VFW, El Norteno, and Abby Travel Plaza at Curtiss.

Farmers are more likely to attend because of topic matter than presenter. Bringing in state specialists will not by its self draw attendance because there is a feeling that the farmers have heard the specialists before. Quality information presented by the local Agent or a team of local educators is equally as attractive.

While salesmen and consultants do play an important role in farm operation decision making, farmers typically are aware that there is a product being sold. Cooperative Extension is viewed as an impartial source of information. Some aggravation was expressed towards Extension when recommendations addressing production issues are changed. While the current model of Extension programming has moved to more seminars and presentations, many farmers still appreciate a farm call by the County Agent.

Are there specific crop production education programs you would be more likely to participate in or attend?

Nutrient and manure management is an area farmers felt additional knowledge is needed. A variety of nutrient management approaches exist. Some farmers use SNAP software and will use SNAP-Plus once it is ready. There may be an opportunity to conduct farm visits to load the software. A SNAP-Plus training session may be a possible program. There also are operators that use a consultant while other farmers have no nutrient management plan whatsoever. Clark County has a fairly large number of growers who use unconventional fertilizer inputs. They are curious about the amount of research behind the products.

Forage production, vital to dairy profitability, also generated a considerable amount of interest. While summer forage field days are considered valuable, the challenge with attending is that a good day for a field day also is a good day to harvest forage. There is a considerable amount of interest in ryegrass as a cover or as a rejuvenation planting. More information on maintaining alfalfa stands is important. A considerable amount of dry western hay is purchased in Clark County. Information guiding the harvesting and

storing of high quality forage in the form of dry hay or baleage will be beneficial.

University of Wisconsin Extension plays a vital role in emergency response. When agronomic issues such as frost, winter kill, or pest problems surface, Extension is viewed as the foremost source of information. Farmers are relying on a quick response.

Another challenging aspect of agriculture education in Clark County is the diversity of farm sizes. Large operations tend to hire consultants for their information. Operators of small farms indicated they feel Extension plays a pivotal role in helping the farm stay profitable without forced expansion.

Summary

Nutrient management and forage quality were identified as the areas of most significant education interest. Within the focus groups and in private conversations, the question of how soil fertility levels influence dairy ration analysis came up numerous times. There may be an opportunity, with adequate funding, to conduct scholarly research addressing livestock nutrition management through soil nutrient management.

Considering the overall rural setting, the degree of concern with regulation and urban sprawl in Clark County was surprising. An education program that addresses the impact and interaction of city dwellers moving to the county may need to be researched and developed for state wide release.

The question of "What piece of information are you likely to seek from UW-Extension before any other source?" was not well addressed. Emergency response to cropping problems such as winterkill was mentioned as a high priority.

Submitted by
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