MINNESOTA EXTENSION SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
AGRICULTURE

Agricultural News

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The weather mandates the program

It's a drought, flood, grasshopper problem, blizzard, winter cold snap or early fall frost. And sometimes all of them within a year or two.

The Extension Service is there—explaining the alternatives of replanting vs. hoping for the best, putting damages in context and helping people make informed decisions, based on the latest research.

And always, it's a team approach. County and area agents work with St. Paul Campus specialists to help people with many questions—questions that require answers in hours or days—not weeks or months.

An example was the wet spring of 1991. "There was little or no field work until middle to late June," says **Gary Wyatt**, county agricultural agent in Watonwan County.

Planting dates were extremely late for corn and soybeans. Many farmers were forced to plant ground intended for corn to beans—meaning soybeans were planted two successive years and more susceptible to diseases.

"We were fortunate to have Ward Stienstra's research on soybean cyst nematode and other diseases available to pass on to farmers. He has done a lot of work with variety plots, educational tours and winter meetings," Wyatt says.

"This year we're back on track with 50-50 corn-soybean rotations. But some farmers ended up planting soybeans on the same field for three successive years (due to the '91 wet spring).

Watonwan County Extension Agent Gary Wyatt and M.D. Holland check a muddy field in June, 1991. (photo by Don Breneman)

"We advised farmers through winter meetings and the news media about the soil test for soybean cyst nematode and selecting resistant varieties. George Rehm and Mike Schmitt provided soil testing and fertility information for agents to share with clientele."

It seems the year is never "normal." Wyatt says this year's crop is in "fairly good shape. "But we anticipate an increase in symptoms of soybean cyst nematode.

"And cool spring temperatures have stressed crops and limited growth. The weed canopy is also getting high for post emergence herbicide treatments.

"The trend to less tillage has resulted in more post emergence herbicide spraying. This year we're looking at more potential for crop injury and poor weed control due to less uptake of the herbicides.

"Jeff Gunsolus (weed control agronomist) has been working with agents, crop consultants and farmers. The next 'story' could be potential crop injury from post emergence herbicides if they're applied when the weather gets hot."

During the wet spring of 1991, Wyatt and other cluster agents worked hard to keep ahead of farmers' questions. "Dale Hicks and Lee Hardman (agronomists) were instrumental in pulling information together on crop maturity dates, yield loss, hybrid selection and planting options.

"We updated information weekly in

Continued on page 4

A county extension agent (left) checks an alfalfa field during the 1988 drought. (photo by Don Breneman)

Nothing 'automatic' about collecting weather data

Mark Seeley says neither the National Weather Service—nor any other agency—has a mandate to provide agricultural and market weather information.

"Any application of weather data to the agricultural community through the Extension Service is going to be greatly appreciated. There's no other agency out there doing it," he says.

"In a way, the Extension Service does have a mandate since we provide information and market information relating to crops and livestock. It's a natural fit.

"But we have to make a special effort to tap agricultural weather data sources—they don't come to us automatically," says Seeley, an agricultural climatologist with the Minnesota Extension Service.

There are nine different weather observation networks in Minnesota. "It's a real challenge to get this data and compile it in a central agricultural-related data base. We access data by computer, telephone and through other agencies such as the National Weather Service."

The job of collecting weather data (such as precipitation and snow cover) falls to about 1,500 volunteers throughout the state. "Our statewide weather observation is as good or better than most states," Seeley says.

However, other states like Iowa and Oklahoma have more centralized data collection systems that make it easier to compile the information. "Iowa put part of their federal pest management funding into a weather and climate data network. And Oklahoma uses oil 'overcharge' funding for a centrally controlled system," Seeley says.

Seeley cooperates with the National Weather Service and the State Climatologist's Office to anticipate weather patterns. "We try to anticipate a drought; or any severe weather that may affect agriculture.

"Then, diagnostically, we go back and define the time and geographical space where it occurred. Over the years we're provided data on drought relief, local water planning, irrigation planning, and crop pest management. Weather anticipation is a big factor in plant pest control," he says.

"We determine which areas are most adversely affected, based on climate. We also estimate recovery time, based on long term climatology; and what weather patterns are needed for recovery.

Seeley's office has been involved in herbicide injury questions: crop injury, volatilization, drift or a failure to control weeds. "We go back and diagnose the climate conditions, the culprit. Sometimes the product was used under the wrong conditions; or proper conditions were anticipated but someone forgot to listen to the forecast and didn't know the weather would change abruptly."

"Abnormal" weather is never lacking. Earlier this year Seeley provided climate information doe hay relief due to severe winter damage to alfalfa stands. He used the Minnesota climate data base to document climatic factors such as soil and air temperature and departures from long term averages.

"One thing we're learning is that it's important to keep on-line data as current as possible. We update the system with yesterday's data to provide the latest time frame for decision making.

"So much can happen in a few days. Information that's a week old isn't very useful. We're striving to have the latest information available by constantly gathering the latest data we can get," he says.

Jack Sperbeck

Agricultural News is a publication of the Agriculture Program Area, produced by Educational Development System, Minnesota Extension Service. Ideas for stories and letters to the editor are encouraged. Contact Jack Sperbeck, 447 Coffey Hall, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108. Tel. 612-625-1794.

Editor:	Jack Sperbeck
Design:	John Molstad
DeskTop Editor:	Phyllis Petersen
Photo Editor:	Don Breneman

Insert on Commodity Marketing

You'll notice an insert in this issue on an Agricultural Marketing Focus Group Study conducted in five Minnesota counties last winter. It has 14 recommendations for agricultural marketing programs conducted by MES. Please read it and save it.

Agricultural Marketing Focus Group Study

MINNESOTA EXTENSION SERVICE
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SUMMARY ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

For many years, agricultural producers have ranked Extension commodity marketing programs as a high priority. As a result, the Minnesota Extension Service has emphasized Agricultural Outlook and commodity marketing programs in recent years. Outlook and marketing programs have been a priority for both cluster agents, specialized in farm management and marketing; and state marketing specialists. Several program delivery methods have been used to deliver Extension marketing information.

Focus group sessions were scheduled as a part of the effort to evaluate Extension Agriculture Marketing programs. These sessions involved agriculture producers with experience in Extension marketing programs, as well as agricultural lenders, business people, and educators familiar with Extension efforts in commodity marketing education.

PURPOSE

The coordination team's objectives for the focus group study included:

1. To determine the types of marketing information are available to agricultural producers from the Extension Service and other sources.
2. Determining how producers use marketing information and its importance in commodity marketing management.
3. Documenting what additional marketing information is needed by producers and what role the Extension Service could serve in providing it.
4. Determining the role of the Extension Service in enhancing the agricultural marketing skills of clientele.
5. Ascertaining preferred delivery methods for producers to receive commodity marketing programs and information.
6. Determining the potential for utilizing alternative delivery methods (satellite transmission and video tapes) to deliver extension educational programs.

DEVELOPMENT

The Focus Group Study selected four counties for the project because of active educational programs in agricultural marketing through the Minnesota Extension Service. Counties and locations were:

* Blue Earth County - - - - - Amboy
* Dakota County - - - - - - - Farmington
* Mower County - - - - - - - Austin
* Nicollet County - - - - - - St. Peter

The Extension agent-agriculture in each county was asked to host a focus group session. They were also asked to invite approximately ten agricultural producers in their county experienced in commodity marketing, who were familiar with Extension Service marketing programs.

Another focus group session was added in Mankato for agriculture lenders, business people, and educators serving South Central Minnesota. Again, ten individuals were invited who were familiarity with agricultural marketing programs of the Extension Service.

METHODS and ANALYSIS

The focus group sessions were coordinated and conducted by Marilyn Grantham, agricultural program leader; Jack Sperbeck, communications specialist; and Kent Thiesse, specialized farm management and marketing agent. The coordination team developed questions for participants. These questions were based on the objectives established for the focus group process.

After the five focus group sessions were completed, the coordination team analyzed the focus group summaries. Here is the analysis procedure:

- Each member of the team worked independently and listed 6-10 **"Main Themes"**, with associated **"Notable Quotes"** for each location.
- Each member of the team prepared a list of **"Overall Themes"** and **"Recommendations for the Extension Service"**, based on the combined summaries from the individual locations.
- The coordinating team combined their independent analyses into a final list of **"Overall Themes"** from the focus groups and **"Recommendations for the Extension Service"** which was used to prepare a final focus group analysis report.

"OVERALL THEMES"

Here are the **"Overall Themes"**, with some participant quotes, identified in the focus group process:

1. Farm producers receive commodity marketing and outlook information from a wide range of sources.

   "Farmers are not looking for one source of information, but a lot of variety."

2. Grain marketing information is needed on a continuous basis, but is most critical during the spring and early summer, when traditional market rallies usually occur.

   "We have time to study the grain markets in the winter months, but April, May, and June are the critical times."

3. There is more than enough grain marketing information available to producers; however, the challenge is to help producers analyze and utilize the information.

   "Sometimes we can get so involved in absorbing fundamental information that we do not stand back and look at the big picture."

4. More marketing information is needed on livestock, especially on comparing market programs offered by various packers.

   "There is a need to know the various hog pricing programs that packers offer."

5. Most producers have enough marketing information; however, they need assistance to gain discipline skills to make marketing decisions.

   "At this time farmers may be exposed to an excess of information. They need a good decision making model to sort the wheat from the chaff."

6. Marketing programs and information from the Minnesota Extension Service are of very good quality and serve a useful purpose.

   "There is a high degree of trust in Extension information, where there may be some bias in private information."

7. The Extension Service Marketing Newsletter is very understandable and contains some useful information, especially on government farm programs, market trends and analysis, basis, and marketing strategies.

   "Most producers are at different levels of marketing skill and the newsletter helps them individualize their marketing plan."

8. The Ag Outlook Inserts contain some useful marketing information and are used as a base information source by ag professionals; however, many producers do not read or use this information.

   "The Outlook booklets give an indication of what happened and why it happened."

9. Farm producers need to develop marketing plans based on their individualized cost of production; then adjust the plan due to changing circumstances and market their grain accordingly.

   "One of the best ways the Extension Service can help is by working with farmers to get a handle on their cost of production."

10. Farmers need to be more aware of the world-wide situation and need more information on the impact of world conditions on commodity markets.

    "The effect of world-wide economy problems on U.S. agriculture and our market prices is a big concern."

11. Topics needing more emphasis include options, basis, decision-making models, and "value-added" industries.

    "Options have been portrayed as a marketing insurance program or "safety net" and they are not serving that purpose."

12. Time commitment is a critical factor in getting producers to attend meetings and workshops; attendance will probably be determined by program quality and interest in the topics addressed.

    "Sometimes a small group of people, an interesting topic, and a pot of coffee are all that is needed for a good meeting."

13. The Extension Service must have closer links with private sources for getting marketing information to farmers; both parties must become less competitive and more cooperative.

    "It is important for Extension to have ties with private firms to encourage attendance at marketing programs."

14. The Extension Service needs to do a better job of targeting educational programs and should consider expanding potential audiences, especially women.
    "It is very important to have women involved in developing marketing plans."

15. Alternative program delivery methods, (satellite technology and video tapes) can reach many people with high quality programs. However, the Extension Service must realize the limitations of this technology and the importance of quality program delivery when using it.

    "Part of the U of M's responsibility is innovation in communication and information transfer."

EXTENSION SERVICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the focus group study, the coordination team makes these recommendations for Minnesota Extension Service agricultural marketing programs:

1. Build programming on the existing strong base of successful Extension agricultural marketing programs. Many Extension programs are viewed as high quality, useful, and very informative. Do not eliminate successful program efforts; expand and enhance them.

2. Conduct marketing workshops that help farm producers analyze their cost of production and to develop marketing plans that are adjusted with changing market situations. This includes providing training and support materials for specialized cluster agents.

3. Conduct programs on strategies for producers to utilize "Put" and "Call" options in their marketing strategies, including more advanced strategies that go beyond using Options as price insurance protection.

4. Develop understandable pertinent materials on the world-wide economy, GATT negotiations, weather information, and other world events that help farm producers develop marketing strategies.

5. Develop concise, understanding materials on the economic impact to agricultural producers and rural communities of "Value-Added" agriculture industries (corn processing plants, expanded livestock production, etc.).

6. Develop marketing "models" to help producers make marketing decisions. These "models" should propose various scenarios that may exist with the current marketing situation, and could be included in the Extension Service Marketing Newsletter.

7. Have a page on Dataline to get timely marketing information to farm producers. The Dataline page could be prepared by state marketing specialists and selected specialized farm management and marketing extension agents.

8. Work more closely with private industry to plan and deliver agricultural marketing education programs for producers, both at the state and cluster level.

9. Coordinate program efforts in marketing to avoid duplication within the Extension Service and private industry. The Extension Service needs to be a leader in program coordination and cooperation.

10. Target educational programs in Ag Marketing for farm women or farm couples, especially younger age groups. This may include using delivery methods such as weekend retreats and home study courses due to the extreme time commitment demands on this targeted group.

11. Hold specialized meetings and provide special agricultural marketing information for agricultural professionals who work directly with farm producers. This target audience is a key to getting high quality Extension information to the end-users--agricultural producers.

12. Develop strategies to manage and utilize satellite technology to deliver Extension programs in agricultural marketing, keeping in mind the limitations of the technology. The Extension Service should provide innovative approaches to communications and information transfer.

13. Develop and utilize agricultural marketing video tapes where they fit into a planned program that will be implemented; remembering that marketing videos become outdated rapidly.

14. Remember that satellite programs and video tapes can not substitute for personal contact among producers and other delivery methods of Ag Marketing programs by the Extension Service. These technologies need to fit into the entire program delivery scheme for Ag Marketing programs.

SUMMARY

The five focus group sessions brought over 50 top-notch agricultural producers and business leaders together from several Southern Minnesota counties. Focus group settings provided an excellent forum for these key individuals to state their points, exchange ideas, and offer suggestions for agricultural marketing programs and information. The focus groups were a valuable professional experience for the coordinating team and for the focus group participants.

The **"Overall Themes"** indicate the types of agricultural marketing programs and information that agricultural producers and business leaders value. They also suggest additional programs and ideas to improve existing Extension programs. These themes, along with selected quotes by participants, help serve as a guide to assist the Extension Service in developing agricultural marketing programs in the future. Based on the Focus Group Study, there appears to be a **"Window of Opportunity"** for Extension educational efforts in agricultural marketing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1. FOCUS GROUP TEAM COORDINATORS

   * Marilyn Grantham, Agricultural Program Leader, MN Extension Service
   * Jack Sperbeck, Communications Specialist, MN Extension Service
   * Kent Thiesse, Specialized Farm Management/Marketing Agent, Blue Earth County

2. HOST EXTENSION AGENTS

   * Gary Hachfeld, Nicollet County
   * Harlan Johnsrud, Mower County
   * David Preisler, LeSueur County
   * Warren Sifferath, Dakota County
   * Kent Thiesse, Blue Earth County

3. OTHER KEY INDIVIDUALS

   * Curt Norenberg, Extension Program Development MN Extension Service
   * Dick Krueger, Extension Program Evaluation MN Extension Service
   * Stan Stevens, Ag Marketing Specialist MN Extension Service
   * Marge Beeman, Support Staff, Blue Earth County Extension Office

Agriculture update

From the Extension Service, USDA

Nutrient Management Plans: *Improved nutrient management is a major water quality concern. A number of programs and legislative proposals look to the farm level to ensure good nutrient management.*

The Integrated Crop Management (SP-53) cost-share practice offered by ASCS requires a nutrient management plan. A nutrient management plan is required for incentive payments for Integrated Crop Management under the Water Quality Incentive Projects (WQIP).

Regulations proposed for the Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA) require farm nutrient management plans in the coastal areas. This CZMA approach is proposed as a model to be implemented nationwide through the Clean Water Act reauthorizations.

Residue Management: *SCS and CTIC: Eighty percent of current farm plans use residue management to achieve erosion control required by the 1985 Farm Bill. These farm plans must be implemented by Dec. 31, 1994. Many producers don't realize the implications of a 30 percent cover, required by their plans.*

Sustainable Agriculture: *Congress repealed the Agriculture Productivity Act of 1985 and replaced it with "Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education, Title XVI, Subtitle F., of the 1990 Farm Bill.*

Congress defined sustainable agriculture as "an integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will, over the long-term; satisfy human food and fiber needs; enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agriculture economy depends; make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on farm/ ranch resources; integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and control; sustain the economic viability of farm/ranch operations; and enhance the quality of life for farmers/ ranchers and society as a whole."

This definition strongly supports the coordinated efforts of ECOP and ESCOP.

Planning Quality Extension Programs

"Rapid Response" Programming

MES' agriculture faculty have a long history and considerable success at "rapid response," as you see in this issue's articles. You might say quick turnaround efforts are one of our educational programming "niche markets." Our State Agriculture Advisory Council (January/February 1992 Agricultural News) strongly recommended continuing to respond to weather and other "crisis" situations.

But in tough budgetary times the question always comes up about what to eliminate. Providing rapid response depends on maintaining our research base and having flexible staff time -- both items difficult to maintain with tightening budgets. So, how do we provide more in-depth, issue-focused programs like the Dairy Initiative, and still continue to also provide quick turnaround response to weather and other emergency situations?

I remain convinced we have to plan ahead and focus on fewer, major programs so we allow ourselves the flex-time for response. In addition to the State Agriculture Advisory Committee, the focus group respondents in Kent Thiesse and others' marketing study clearly indicate that our organizational credibility depends on the quality and timeliness of our information. Sources in this month's issue say a "normal" weather year doesn't exist. So, every year we can anticipate providing some sort of rapid response--we just don't know the exact topic until the situation unfolds.

Comments in this issue also strongly support maintaining our applied research, which in turn, depends on basic, longer-term research. The comments stress the need for collaborative state-area-county faculty efforts in providing responses, cooperation with other agencies and organizations, and making maximum use of the media. Developing good media relations is a major contribution of our EDS' agriculture team that pays off when we need to get information out fast.

How do we continue to provide rapid response? Well, for one thing, we need to do a better job of telling our story to legislators, county commissioners, and other funders. Our new media and public relations plan is intended to help us do that. In addition, each rapid response situation could be documented as a "case study" in terms of the research base used, the amount of time contributed by faculty and staff, and the economic impact. This information should be shared with our funders and state and local advisory committees. We've done this sometimes, but perhaps not as thoroughly and consistently as we should. Likely very few people outside MES have any idea of the background work and total effort involved in some of our rapid response efforts in recent years.

Our future depends on doing a better job of documenting and publicizing our efforts, as well as rapidly responding.

Marilyn Grantham
Program Leader

Growing season weather makes the market

Tell the grain market what the weather will be, and the market can decide where to go.

"We're in a bit of a weather market right now," said **Stan Stevens**, grain marketing economist on May 28. "Since about May 1, the market has been sensitive to weather information. The market has been 'watching' computer weather models in the U.S. and Europe.

"The 6- to 10-day weather outlook is driving the market now. Corn moved rather violently across a 20-cent range. The market was up and down twice since May 1, trying to decide on the weather. And the market doesn't know yet.

"By the end of summer, the corn market will be 50 cents lower or a dollar higher, depending on what weather pattern emerges," Stevens said.

Al Harris, area marketing agent stationed at Morris, says nothing is ever "normal" about the weather or grain market.

"The grain market trades on what weather is being perceived in the future. If the market perceives a drought, the market rallies. If the market perceives a weather system emerging that's cooler and wetter, then it goes the other direction.

"Accuracy of the forecasts isn't the issue. The issue is being in tune with directional changes," he says.

Harris thinks the Extension Service needs "a few more people interested in the technicals of price decision making. If we're concerned about producer price decision making, we need to look at the technicals and make evaluations of what's going on in the markets.

"We need to be a lot more proactive to weather markets. We should be attuned to 30- and 90-day forecasts—even longer."

Harris says we could be looking at a major drought in 1993, based on current world weather patterns. "Our last two droughts—1988 and 1983—were preceded by dry conditions in Asia and India.

"Computer models were predicting a major drought three to nine months in advance of the 1988 drought. Now we're seeing the same pattern—there's a drought in the Philippines and monsoons in India and Indonesia were below average."

Stevens "works the weather market hard through radio programs, but timing is extremely important. In a couple of days, things change."

The most effective way to do weather-related programming in counties—both market and production related—is through winter educational background and context-setting sessions.

Stevens would welcome a state radio or teleconference network. "Iowa State has daily weather-market reports, with an El Nino update on Fridays at 12:30. Their weather people integrate weather with markets," he says.

Plant soybeans in April?

The weather never ceases to bring new questions for county agricultural agents.

"This year a farmer asked me on April 30 if it was too early to plant soybeans," said Cindy Arnevik, agriculture agent in Faribault County. "The long term effects of planting that early are scary due to frost and other potential problems," she says.

Some early planted beans were up and "growing beautifully" in late May. "But we had temperatures of 34 and 35 degrees the last few nights.

What a difference a year makes. Almost exactly a year ago, there were record floods, no crops planted, and Arnevik and other agents in her cluster were hosting a meeting for 700 farmers.

Jack Sperbeck

Chances of lower yields, per this sparsely filled ear on a Sibley County farm in 1988, drive the weather market. (photo by Don Breneman)

Weather/*Continued from p. 1*

our news releases and radio broadcasts," Wyatt says.

How does the Extension Service prepare for possible weather-related emergencies? "It's difficult to be prepared for all weather-type conditions," Wyatt says.

"It was very helpful when statewide committees (drought and grasshopper problems) developed materials and news releases for agent use. We can't predict all weather problems, but we can anticipate some problems based on longer range weather patterns.

"That way we'll be better prepared to help producers make better decisions, using research based information."

Jack Sperbeck