

Expanding Farmer-to-Farmer Learning for Idaho's Organic Farmers

Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides

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Project Summary

The goal of this education and outreach project was to enhance the success of organic farmers in Idaho by strengthening the sharing of organic production and marketing practices. The Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides (NCAP) worked with organic farmer leaders in Idaho to hold two farmer-to-farmer exchanges. This training was based on a successful model used by Oregon farmers for the past ten years.

The daylong farmer-to-farmer exchange used a facilitation technique called 'open space.' 'Open space' facilitation empowers participants to take responsibility for their learning and encourages engaging and relevant conversations.

Prior to the exchange, organic farmers suggested topics, an advisory committee narrowed the topics to be considered, and participants voted on their highest priorities. Farmers were notified of the discussion topics ahead of the exchange so that they could bring pertinent information, pictures and questions. Prior to the exchange, our project team identified farmer presenters to convene each discussion topic and another farmer to moderate each session. This increased the pool of farmers in leadership roles, which was important in creating greater ownership of the exchange. In the sessions, our project team created an environment where each farmer was recognized as an expert and was encouraged to share.

Specifically, this project achieved the following objectives:

- a) In February 2011, 38 farmers shared information on their organic production and marketing successes and challenges during the farmer-to-farmer exchange. In February 2012, 54 farmers participated.
- b) Farmers continued the discussions and gained additional information through follow-up conversations with other attendees. Nine farmers from 2011 and 19 farmers from 2012 reported that they had contacted another attendee for further information.
- c) As a result of learning new organic production and marketing methods during the farmer-to-farmer exchanges, 26 farmers in 2011 and 43 farmers in 2012 committed to implementing a new practice during the following growing season.
- d) After the 2011 growing season, 12 farmers reported that they had implemented or started to implement the new production or marketing practice identified during the farmer-to-farmer exchange. (Participants at the 2012 exchange will be surveyed after the growing season.)

Introduction

The focus of this project was to enhance organic farming in Idaho by supporting farmer-to-farmer sharing of organic production and marketing practices. According to the 2008 USDA NASS Organic Production Survey, Idaho is among the top organic states in the

nation. Idaho ranks 13th based on the number of farms and ninth based on the number of acres. Ten years ago there were 152 organic farms on 72,000 acres, according to the Idaho State Department of Agriculture. The 2008 USDA NASS Organic Production Survey showed an increase to 254 farms on 148,000 acres. Despite the growth in the number of organic farms and acres, there are few local resources for Idaho organic farmers. Both new and experienced organic farmers often find themselves isolated in their rural communities. In addition, there has not been an annual organic conference for farmers to meet, learn and discuss their farming and marketing strategies.

The Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides (NCAP) focused on this particular educational training style in direct response to the request of farmer leaders in the Idaho organic farming community. Beth Rasgorshek of Canyon Bounty Farm, an organic farmer in Nampa, Idaho, first tried to launch a farmer-to-farmer exchange in 2005. She began by surveying other farmers to gauge their interest level. Despite a strong response, she was not able to organize the exchange due to the wintertime constraints of her organic seed business and greenhouse operation.

NCAP also heard from many other farmers who attended summer organic farm tours. These farmers wanted more educational offerings where they could learn directly from other organic farmers.

NCAP also selected this type of educational programming because of the successful farmer-to-farmer exchanges occurring in Oregon.

This educational training was built directly on the needs and interests of the participating farmers. When we developed the proposal, NCAP was conducting a state-wide survey with the assistance of the Washington State University Survey Center to better understand the challenges and needs of Idaho's organic farmers (Goldberger, 2010). Information from that survey was used to guide the list of potential discussion topics at the farmer-to-farmer exchange. To meet farmers' needs, we selected an advisory group to meet ahead of time and further refine the list of potential topics. Additionally, all participants voted on the topics of discussion as part of the registration process.

Objectives Statement

The goal of this project was to improve the success of organic farmers in Idaho by strengthening the sharing and exchange of organic production and marketing practices among Idaho organic farmers. In recent years, the number of organic farmers has grown significantly, yet there is little interaction between new farmers and seasoned organic farmers in Idaho.

The objectives for this project were the following:

- a) 100 organic farmers will share information on their successes and challenges during either a November 2010 or February 2011 farmer-to-farmer exchange.
- b) Within two months of each workshop, 80 of these organic farmers will have contacted another participant for follow-up information, as measured by a survey.

- c) After learning new methods during the farmer-to-farmer exchanges, 50 farmers will commit to implementing a new production or marketing practice during the 2011 growing season.
- d) By October 2011, 30 farmers will have implemented a new production or marketing practice learned at the exchange workshops, as measured by a follow-up survey.

We changed the timeline of our objectives after determining we needed to conduct only one farmer-to-farmer exchange in a year. Originally, we planned to offer two in southern Idaho. As we began to implement this project, we determined that there were not enough organic farmers in eastern Idaho to support a viable separate farmer-to-farmer exchange. In order to offer a useful and successful exchange, we needed a strong core of individuals. Despite NCAP's previous work with producers in eastern Idaho and outreach to partner organizations active in eastern Idaho, we determined that it would be better to encourage eastern Idaho farmers to attend the meeting in south-central Idaho. We received a one-year extension for our project to conduct the second farmer-to-farmer exchange in 2012.

Modified objectives:

- a) 100 organic farmers will share information on their successes and challenges during either a February 2011 or 2012 farmer-to-farmer exchange.
- b) Within two months of each workshop, 80 of these organic farmers will have contacted another participant for follow-up information, as measured by a survey.
- c) After learning new methods during the farmer-to-farmer exchanges, 50 farmers will commit to implementing a new production or marketing practice during the 2011 or 2012 growing season.
- d) By October 2011 and 2012, 30 farmers will have implemented a new production or marketing practice learned at the exchange workshops, as measured by a follow-up survey.

Educational Approach

NCAP modeled this educational learning style on the successful exchanges offered in Oregon for the past ten years. A summer 2012 article in the Oregon State University Small Farms Program newsletter shared highlights from their tenth exchange (Andrews, et al, 2012). We selected this type of educational approach based on the requests of organic farmers in Idaho and to foster information sharing among Idaho's organic producers. Farmers have repeatedly reported to NCAP that the best resources in Idaho are other organic farmers, so we wanted to bring the farmer-to-farmer exchange to Idaho. This educational learning style recognizes and features the experience and knowledge of farmers.

In order to successfully deliver this project, we interviewed three key individuals involved in the Oregon farmer-to-farmer exchanges. For our first farmer-to-farmer exchange (which was offered before this project was funded), we included an experienced organic farmer educator from the Oregon farmer-to-farmer exchange. Josh Volk from Slow Hand Farm in Portland, Oregon helped our project team develop the first farmer-to-farmer exchange and evaluate its effectiveness. We used this information to fully launch the educational training in 2011 as part of this grant.

Ahead of the 2011 farmer-to-farmer exchange, we identified an advisory group of six farmers. (Nine farmers participated in the advisory group in 2012). These farmers had participated in the initial launch of the farmer-to-farmer exchange in 2010. We met by conference call ahead of the conference to identify discussion topics and other aspects of the conference. These topics were then sent out as part of the registration packet for farmers to vote on their priorities. Two weeks prior to the conference, NCAP and Beth Rasgorshek selected the top priorities. Farmers were notified of the selected topics and asked to answer questions about each topic in preparation for the exchange.

For each discussion topic, we selected one farmer to act as the convener and another to be the moderator. The convener had some particular experience or interest in the topic and helped to launch the discussion by sharing slides, a success or a challenge. Farmers have convened sessions by sharing slides of their most valuable cultivation equipment, providing an overview of their sources on alternative livestock health management, or demonstrating use of an on-line enterprise crop budget. The moderator's job was to ensure all farmers had a chance to participate and to ensure that the discussion did not get too off-target. (The roles of convener and moderator are described in the handout 'Your Seat in the Circle.')

With a large percentage of the farmer participants involved in a leadership role, a greater sense of ownership was established.

Another key to the success of these farmer-to-farmer exchanges has been to create an open and comfortable atmosphere. Since many of the farmers are fairly new to organic farming and come from across hundreds of miles, they do not know each other. The evening before the farmer-to-farmer exchange we focused on introductions and relationship building. We hosted a dinner with three to four farmers giving virtual farm tours. The 15-minute virtual (slide show) farm tours have been highly successful for introducing farmers to each other and more so in terms of sharing innovative production and marketing methods.

We also make time for introductions and an icebreaker activity. In 2012 we had a larger group, so we decided to abbreviate the introductions. We heard from farmers that the method did not work and that they really valued the basics of putting faces with farm names. In order for attendees to openly share during the farmer-to-farmer exchange, we have learned it is important to give adequate time to networking.

After the conference, a small team reviewed the exchange and the evaluations from farmers. From these evaluations in 2011, we learned that the farmers missed the guest farmer presenter who joined the exchange in 2010. Our team had originally planned for

this guest farmer to assist in the facilitation, since it was our first exchange in 2010. Through feedback from farmers, we learned that the guest farmer brought many new ideas and energy to the exchange. So in 2012, NCAP secured additional funding to host another guest farmer from Oregon who had regularly participated in the Oregon farmer-to-farmer exchange. Jim Bronec of Praying Mantis Farm in Canby, Oregon has participated in the Oregon farmer-to-farmer exchange for several years. He convened the sessions focused on the cover crop nutrient calculator and finding your niche.

In our research about farmer-to-farmer exchanges, we learned that Georgia Organics and the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group use an on-line forum. We have tried to continue conversations among all the year's participants through a listserv, but determined that could not be the main focus. Our survey of organic farmers in Idaho showed that only 40 percent regularly use email. There is some activity on the listserv, but it is fairly limited. This further illustrates the current need for face-to-face interactions.

Each session includes a note-taker and notes are provided to all participants following the conference. Our project team decided to follow this component of the Oregon farmer-to-farmer exchange. This is a way to document the many resources that are identified during the discussions.

At the end of farmer-to-farmer exchanges, participants complete a self-assessment where they identify new ideas they plan to further research or implement and the topics they plan to contact other attendees about for further information. This time to reflect on what they have learned and plan to research further or implement is an important step in the farmer-to-farmer exchange. NCAP follows up with producers in the spring to remind farmers of their plans, answer questions and share resources. Then after the growing season, NCAP conducts a survey to measure their actions.

Project Results

Modified objectives:

- a) 100 organic farmers will share information on their successes and challenges during either a February 2011 or 2012 farmer-to-farmer exchange.

Thirty-eight farmers attended the February 2011 exchange and 54 attended the February 2012 exchange. We used both large and small group sessions, allowing all farmers to share and ask questions. We encouraged farmers to take responsibility for asking questions and gaining information they needed by having them vote for the discussion topics ahead of the exchange and offering some concurrent sessions. We also identified one farmer to be the convener and another to be the moderator to ensure all farmers had a chance to ask a question.

- b) Within two months of each workshop, 80 of these organic farmers will have contacted another participant for follow-up information, as measured by a survey.

In the self-assessment administered at the exchanges, we asked participants if they planned to follow-up with another farmer outside of the exchange. In 2011, 17 farmers planned to contact another participant for additional information about a specific topic covered at the farmer-to-farmer exchange and 33 planned to do so in 2012. From the returned follow-up surveys, 9 reported contacting another participant after the 2011 exchange and 19 did so after the 2012 exchange.

- c) After learning new methods during the farmer-to-farmer exchanges, 50 farmers will commit to implementing a new production or marketing practice during the 2011 or 2012 growing season.

Also in the self-assessment administered at the exchange, we asked farmers to identify a new production or marketing practice that they planned to research further or implement in the coming growing season. Twenty-six farmers in 2011 and 43 farmers in 2012 committed to implementing the new practice.

- d) By October 2011 and 2012, 30 farmers will have implemented a new production or marketing practice learned at the exchange workshops, as measured by a follow-up survey.
Surveys of farmers attending the 2011 showed that 12 were able to further research or implement their identified production or marketing practice. We will survey the 2012 group in October and expect to reach our target of 30 farmers.

Conclusions and Discussion

Overall, we learned that the farmer-to-farmer exchange is of great value to Idaho's organic farmers. Many of the farmers feel isolated in their home communities, so this is an important opportunity to network, learn and share with other organic farmers. We have learned to add more unstructured time and networking opportunities to further strengthen the community of organic farmers.

We have also learned that it is important to have a guest farmer attend. This brings new ideas and energy to the gathering. We will continue to seek funding to be able to cover the travel costs and honorarium for an outside farmer presenter. We also learned that it is important to include virtual farm tours and an icebreaker the evening ahead of the farmer-to-farmer exchange. This helps to create a comfortable environment, which is needed in order for the farmers to feel confident in sharing and asking questions during the farmer-to-farmer exchange.

Another key to our success has been to create farmer ownership of the exchange. We do this through an advisory committee, which completes the initial selection of the topics to be considered. We also identify one farmer to act as the convener and another to act as the moderator in each session. This way the sessions are led and moderated by farmers.

Outreach

NCAP reached organic farmers through a variety of methods, including contacting our list, sending announcements through partner organizations, and obtaining media

coverage. NCAP has built its email and mail list over the past ten years from previous organic field days and conference. In addition, we identified additional organic farmers from the Idaho State Department of Agriculture directory of organic producers. We also worked with the University of Idaho and the non-profit organization, Rural Roots, to further share our email announcements. We issued a press release to area newspapers and the *Capital Press*.

Attendees were charged a minimal fee to attend the farmer-to-farmer exchange, which covered the catering costs.

Leveraged Resources

We received additional funding from USDA Risk Management Agency to bring a guest farmer participate from Oregon to attend the 2012 farmer-to-farmer exchange and cover the organizing costs for \$7,510. The additional coordinating costs of \$4,340 for the 2011 farmer-to-farmer exchange were covered by NCAP's unrestricted funds, including individual donations. We partnered with the University of Idaho to secure a discount of \$938 on the meeting facilities over the two years. The total leveraged dollars were \$12,788.

References

Andrews, N., L. Selman and A. Rodman. 2012. The Annual NW Farmer to Farmer Exchange Turned Ten This Winter in the Cascade Mountains, Oregon Small Farm News 7 (3): 5-7. <http://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/sites/default/files/sfnsummer2012.pdf>

Goldberger, J. R., S. Connor and J. Miller. 2010. The Experiences and Perspectives of Idaho's Certified Organic Producers: Results from a State-Wide Survey, Sustaining the Pacific Northwest 8 (2): 8-11. <http://csanr.wsu.edu/publications/SPNW/SPNW-v8-n2.pdf>

Photos and other addenda

Media Coverage:

Organic Farmers Share Tips at Conference. February 3, 2012. KMVT-TV (Twin Falls, Idaho) <http://www.kmvt.com/news/local/Organic-Farmers--138686539.html?video=pop>

Event to cultivate organic industry: Conference taps 'knowledge and experience of a room full of other farmers.' January 20, 2012. *Capital Press*. <http://www.capitalpress.com/idaho/SE-organic-seminar-012012>

Pictures:

February 2011 and 2012 Farmer-to-Farmer Exchange Pictures were sent in a separate email.

Handout:

Your seat in the circle. (This handout briefly explains the open space technology used in the farmer-to-farmer exchange.)

Your seat in the circle

The **Grower's Own** Conference uses the learning and sharing style called Open Space. Have you ever noticed that the best information at a conference comes from the informal exchanges that happen during the breaks? Open Space seeks to replicate those quality exchanges as the focus of the conference.

While Open Space is known for its apparent lack of structure, it is organized and there are parameters that guide the interaction. Please embrace this new and unfamiliar method with the following principles and one law in mind.

Guiding Principles

1. Whoever comes is the right collection of people

- The wisdom to achieve solutions is present in the room.

2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have

- Keep the attention on the best possible effort in the present, instead of wondering endlessly about what should or could have been done.

3. Whenever it starts is the right time

- Creativity cannot be controlled.

4. When it is over, it is over

- Continue discussion so long as there is energy for it. This may result in a short session not filling the entire time allotted, or it may result in further conversations during a break.



'The Law of Two Feet' states that if you find yourself in a situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, you are responsible for moving to another place – using your two feet to find a place where your participation is more meaningful. Responsibility for a successful outcome in any Open Space event resides with exactly one person – each participant. **Individuals can make a difference and must make a difference.**



Here is one final point about being aware of your interaction style.

- Do you easily find things to contribute and want to share every idea?
- Do you have a hard time entering a conversation and often prefer to listen?
- Or maybe, you find yourself in between.

To ensure that we hear from all participants, we will give each person a chance to contribute before hearing from the same person twice on a given topic. We will have a moderator in each session, helping to be sure that everyone has a chance to share.