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Implementing an Innovative Educational Program Delivery Strategy to Teach 2014 Farm Bill Changes to Ohio Farmers and Landowners

Abstract

The timing and complexity of the 2014 Farm Bill required quick dissemination of technical information to allow participants to make decisions affecting risk management strategies for their farms. Using existing organizational structures and incorporating a team approach allowed Ohio State University Extension educators to successfully meet the educational needs of Ohio's farmers and landowners. Program success followed due to Extension's commitments to providing proper training, support, and reward to educators and to working cooperatively with external agencies to achieve the identified outcomes.

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Introduction

The 2014 Farm Bill contained major changes that required farmers and landowners in the United States to make highly informed decisions that would affect their potential profitability for at least the subsequent 5 years. Ohio State University (OSU) Extension was charged with leading the education efforts in Ohio, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm Services Agency (FSA). It was understood that a successful educational program delivery system would contain key incentives to motivate instructors (Pritchett, Fulton, & Hine, 2012), incorporate an integrated approach, allow rapid dissemination of information among team members, and facilitate close collaboration between the agencies (Roberts & Rao, 2012). Within the Farm Bill legislation, the USDA had included a provision for funds to be used by Extension in each state to develop and deliver Farm Bill education programming. OSU Extension's response to this challenge was to design a program delivery system that met the needs and geographical distribution of Ohio's

farmers and landowners, the partner agencies, and OSU Extension itself.

Program Delivery Strategy

A Farm Bill working group was established in May 2014 as a state leader for the Margin Protection Program (MPP) Dairy and Agricultural Risk Coverage/Price Loss Coverage (ARC/PLC) educational programming efforts. This group designed a program delivery strategy that utilized Extension education and research areas (EERAs) existing within OSU Extension for training and program delivery. EERAs are groupings of counties through which educators work to plan and deliver programming. OSU Extension's goal was to develop a system to reach Ohio's farmers and landowners as quickly and efficiently as possible. With FSA offices in 65 Ohio counties and OSU Extension offices in all 88 Ohio counties, the program delivery strategy of holding many small, locally oriented meetings at which producers, landowners, and agency personnel could interact and learn was achievable. This method of education is preferred by producers, relative to Internet or distance learning techniques (Boone, Boone, Cullen, & Woloshuk, 2011). Depending on the program—MPP Dairy or ARC/PLC—and the distribution of the various producers, some programs were designed to reach multiple counties.

Attracting and Rewarding Educators

Typically, faculty and Extension educators do not seek out instructional opportunities outside their areas of expertise or discipline. Ohio did not have enough educators in farm management disciplines to meet the 2014 Farm Bill educational effort needs. Educators from other disciplines were recruited and trained to deliver the program within the model selected. To attract educators from different disciplines, the Farm Bill working group wanted to incorporate strategies that lead to successful teams. These strategies included establishing understood and agreed on goals, having an impactful program, ensuring an effective communication structure (Kelbaugh & Earnest, 2008), and offering stipends (Linder, 1998).

The fact that the importance of the Farm Bill was recognized by county educators across all disciplines was helpful in recruiting educators to be part of the delivery team. Additionally, team members were provided training at no cost, reimbursement for all Farm Bill education-related expenses, and a one-time stipend that could be used for future program development. The goals were to cover all expenses so that the additional teaching responsibility did not require use of any of the educator's local funds and to provide a financial reward for the extra responsibilities and work assumed. It is unknown whether Ohio could have recruited a sufficient number of educators without offering these incentives.

EERA educators were trained on MPP Dairy and ARC/PLC on separate dates, as details of the programs became official. They were provided with resource notebooks that included PowerPoint presentations, background reference materials, and sample program templates to facilitate program planning with their FSA colleagues for both MPP Dairy and ARC/PLC. A collaborative Internet-based box was created, allowing for quick updating of materials and providing an avenue for sharing curriculum materials. Additionally, a standard evaluation and meeting summary form was created for team use. OSU Extension and FSA reciprocated offers for leaders to participate in the respective organization's training to increase consistency in expectations and program delivery.

In each EERA, particular educators were responsible for coordinating and delivering the educational programs with FSA partners in that EERA. Educators from each EERA agreed to teach MPP Dairy, ARC/PLC, or both programs. The lead educator for each program also assisted in teaching in the EERAs when needed. Across Ohio's nine EERAs, five educators taught only MPP Dairy, eight educators taught only ARC/PLC, and four educators taught both programs, for a total of 17 OSU Extension educators engaged in delivering these programs in Ohio.

Program Reach

OSU Extension educators estimated that they collectively spent more than 2,000 hr learning about the 2014 Farm Bill and teaching 2014 Farm Bill programs. Collectively, they reached 10,649 people—through 261 programs serving 9,918 participants and personal consultations with 731 individuals—from September 2014 through February 2015. Educators reported that 818 people participated in the MPP Dairy programs delivered in 36 counties. Program attendance data showed that approximately 82% of the participants were farmers, with the balance being agency or industry personnel. In addition to the educational programs, educators reported providing 58 individual consultations to dairy producers to discuss the MPP Dairy decision. OSU Extension educators reported reaching 9,100 people through 218 ARC/PLC programs delivered in 77 counties. Program attendance data indicated that 60% were producers, 35% were landowners, and the remaining 5% were industry and agency personnel. Educators also reported conducting 673 in-depth individual consultations related to ARC/PLC, using the decision aid software.

Conclusions

OSU Extension, together with Ohio's USDA FSA, was able to effectively educate Ohio's farmers and landowners about the significant changes resulting from the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill in a timely and efficient manner. Using the existing EERA structure enabled OSU Extension to quickly identify educators to serve as leaders who would organize and teach Farm Bill programs across Ohio. Providing training, funding, and rewards for accepting the additional workload created a positive atmosphere and a team that functioned exceptionally well in delivering the educational programming needed for farmers to make informed decisions regarding the 2014 Farm Bill. An additional benefit was working cooperatively with FSA in delivering this programming. This cooperative effort fostered excellent working relationships between OSU Extension educators and their local county FSA colleagues that will continue to benefit OSU Extension, FSA, and Ohio's farmers and citizens well into the future.

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