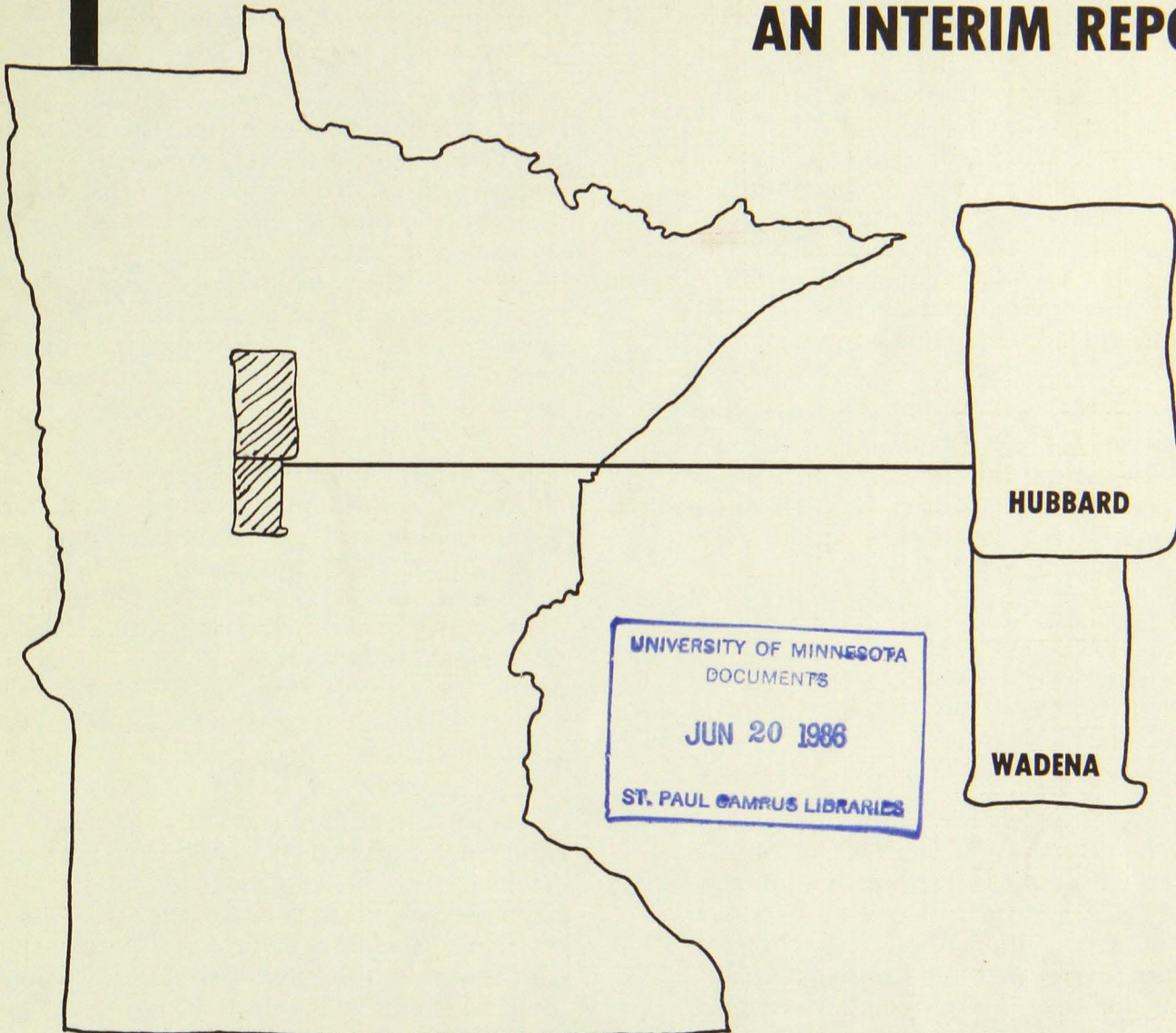


AN INTERIM REPORT



THE OPPORTUNITY FARM PROGRAM

A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PROGRAM AIDES
IN EXTENSION PROGRAMS
OF HUBBARD & WADENA COUNTIES

PROGRAM AIDES

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INTRODUCTION

The opportunity farm program was started in 1975 with a grant from the Governor's Rural Development Council. It is administered by the University of Minnesota's Agricultural Extension Service.

The program is currently in its 8th year of operations. It originally covered the four counties of Becker, Hubbard, Ottertail and Wadena. It is currently concentrating on programs in Hubbard and Wadena Counties. Utilizing the direct outreach approach, over 750 farm families have been contacted by program aides; some 150 families are now receiving on-the-farm counseling and assistance.

The program was proposed by a group called The Area Small Farm Committee which is composed of farmers, business personnel and agency representatives concerned with the ability of small farmers to obtain and use educational information.

This is an interim evaluation of a program which uses experienced local farmers as Program Aides in Cooperative Extension Education for small-farm operators.

Specific objectives of this study are 1) to determine the effectiveness of Program Aides in Extension education in further developing the capacity of small-farm operators to take advantage of income opportunities; 2) to identify activities performed by Program Aides which influence the socio-economic development of small operators in the program.

THE GENERAL PROGRAM OBJECTIVES ARE AS FOLLOWS:

1. To increase farm family income from all sources.
2. To increase the use of appropriate agricultural technology and managerial techniques on the farm.
3. To increase knowledge and use of public agencies.
4. To increase farm families' participation in community activities.
5. To create a positive attitude toward their opportunities.
6. To increase appreciation and skill in the involvement of family members in setting and working toward family goals.

Small scale farms in Wadena and Hubbard Counties can be characterized by the word diversity. They produce a broad range of commodities such as dairy products, lamb, pork, feeder pigs, vegetables, and crops, etc.

The small scale farmers are equally diverse with many of them moving into this area in recent years. Many worked at non-farm jobs and then turned to farming to escape the rat-race of city life. Many have never farmed before; others have had some previous farm experience in other areas of the county with different soils and climatic conditions. Typically, these people are hampered by limited resources of capital, land and technical knowledge.

These farm families use conventional and alternative cultural practices, work land varying in quality and span the range of income levels. With all of this diversity, they often share common problems related directly to their small size and technical abilities. To meet this related size and technological lag problem, the Opportunity Farm Program was developed to disseminate information and provide technical assistance.

The erosion of the agricultural base in many rural communities has resulted in an economic decline, with a reduction of services and businesses supporting farm activity. Various economic, social and historical trends have contributed to the present situation. Many of these farmers feel ignored by traditional providers of educational, technical and financial assistance.

National trends toward fewer, larger farms hasn't held true in these counties. Census figures show that the total number of farms actually increased in Wadena and Hubbard Counties between 1974 and 1978 while declining only slightly in Ottertail County.

1974-1978 U.S. CENSUS DATA Number of Farms in County

	Wadena	Hubbard	Ottertail
1973	746	484	3,555
1978	759	520	3,408

*The 36 farms in the survey averaged 275 acres.



Glen Ball, Norman Adams and Roger Tellock review information on dairy production at monthly staff meetings. The aides contact county extension offices weekly to coordinate activities and get the latest information.

REPORT OBJECTIVES:

The report reflects the activities of the Program Aides in terms of:

1. Changes in attitudes and values.

If Program Aides are effective in communicating with participating farm operators about educational assistance provided by the Extension Service, farm operators should have a more positive attitude toward the Extension Service and assistance programs offered.

2. Increase acceptance of educational assistance.

This is one anticipated result of the strengthened attitude of participants. It would include participation in formal and on-going programs of the Extension Service and other USDA Agencies, and a willingness to accept information provided by Program Aides during farm visits.

3. Changes in production method and techniques.

It is assumed that educational activities would be planned specifically for each participant and that recommendations would be logically accepted or implemented by participating operators. Increased acceptance of educational assistance is expected to result in adoption of recommended practices and procedures in production and marketing plus the utilization of services of available USDA Agencies.

4. Increased Gross Income.

Adoption of recommended practices and procedures should normally reflect increases in income from sale of farm products.

5. Opportunities of Changes in Level of Living.

Increases in income and awareness of opportunities for improvement should allow farm operators who are not satisfied with levels of living to improve them.

INDICATORS OF CHANGE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF PROGRAM AIDES:

The three Program Aides each surveyed 12 farm families (a total of 36*) to determine effects of their working with families over a 3-year period, 1979-82. The families were selected by the aides based on a minimum of three years of work with the family and an agreement with the family to provide information. (Families were selected in non-random basis and included a cross-section of farm operations worked with in the program.) The survey was completed by two different methods: about 1/3 were completed by families; the balance was based on observation and consultation by the three aides. Economic changes measured included increase in milk sales receipts from plants, DHIA record figures, savings of tractor and machinery repair and maintenance, and increases in crop yields.



The tractor maintenance program has both classroom and hands-on experiences. Classes are small group activities held in the farmer's home or shop on a weekly basis. A small tuition fee is charged to help defray the cost of the instructors. The instructor is funded through the Vocational Education Program.

A. Tractor and Machinery Repair/Maintenance Program.

The emphasis of this aspect of Program Aide work was twofold: 1) to help farmers develop a better understanding of preventive maintenance; and 2) repair of existing tractors and machines so farmers could be in position to get crops in timely.

In the 3-year period, tractor and machinery classes involved 22 farmers who actually overhauled 48 tractors with an estimated repair value of \$44,000. Fourteen farmers in farm machinery repair classes resulted in 38 machines repaired. Over 40% of the farmers in the tractor and maintenance classes improved timeliness of planting and harvesting. The improvement in timeliness may account for the increase in yields of 25% for corn silage, 40-50% in hay, and 25-50% in oat yields.

Program Aides observed changes in attitudes and habits of the 36 tractor and machinery maintenance participants. They found the following:

	NO. Farmers	% of Farmers Surveyed
Changed oil more often	13	36
Cleaned and changed filters more regularly	13	36
Referred more frequently to operator's manual	19	53
Pre-season check-ups	7	19
Know how to make better adjustments on machines	13	36
Doing better job of machine and tractor lubrication	12	33

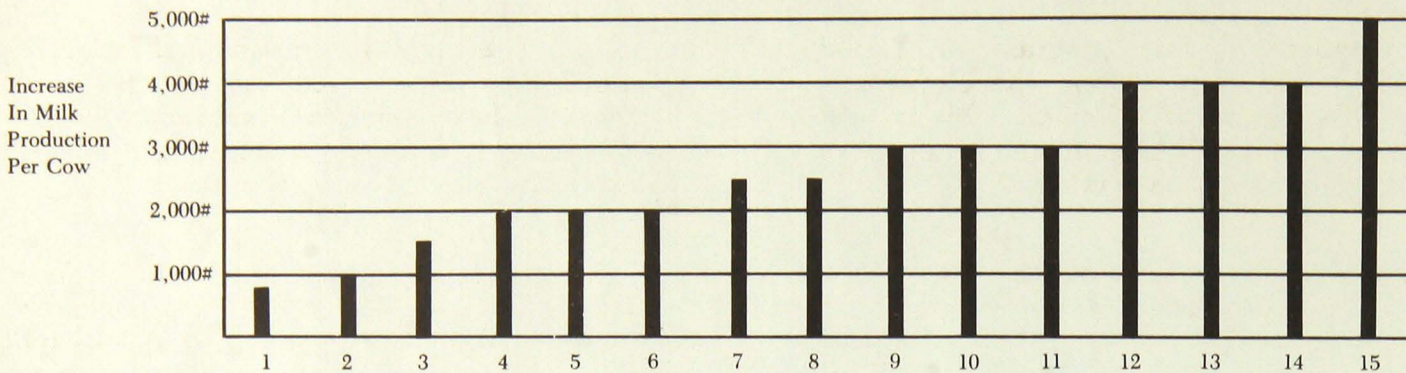
B. Livestock Production.

1. Dairy Production--Of the 31 families surveyed who have dairy enterprise, 15 showed significant increase in milk production. The increases amounted to 2,646 lbs. per cow per herd. (Range of 500 lbs.-5000 lbs.)



Roger Tellock works with Rodney and Susan White of rural Sebeka in understanding their feeding program and DHIA records. The Whites moved to the farm in 1978 with ten bred heifers and 14,000 lbs. herd average. At the present time they have 30 cows and a 16,300 lbs. herd average. They credit Tellock in helping them with the overall management of feeding and breeding their livestock. They originally came from Maine where Susan was a teacher and Rodney was a researcher in biochemistry. They state that one of the important things that Tellock has helped them with is that they have been kept informed of meetings, schools, and new information. They have used this knowledge also to help their neighbors in tractor maintenance and feeding programs.

Chart 1 Increase in Production per Cow on 15 Farms Reporting Significant Increases



15 Herds Showing Increased Production



In five years Donald Twaddle of rural Staples has raised his dairy production from 12,653 lbs. to 15,198 lbs. per head. Testing of hay is one of the key management decisions in this improved production. Last year no protein supplement was purchased in his ration, consisting of barley, hay, and high moisture corn. Twaddle says, "I don't think I would have made it, if it wasn't for Norman Adams, Opportunity Farm Aide. I would have made a lot of blunders." Donald has used his knowledge to help his neighbors improve their rations and participate in the tractor program.

The nature of Program Aide work with the dairy producers included ration balancing, analyzing feed tags and value, forage testing, breeding program, helping farmer to go on DHIA testing program, mastitis prevention, ventilation and building improvement, selection of better quality dairy cattle when purchasing, culling low producers and other herd management aspects.

Other livestock work by aides involved advising on beef, sheep and hog production.

C. Crop Production

The survey showed that of the 36 farmers, the following practices were adopted or changed in crop production:

Practice	No. Farmers	% of Farmers Surveyed
Did soil testing	36	100%
Fertilized crops more to recommendations.	25	69%
Doing planting more on time	20	56%
Doing better control of weeds	20	56%
Increased corn, oats, alfalfa yields	15	42%
Doing better job of harvesting and storage	15	42%

Increase in yields of 2-3 tons per acre in corn silage production or 25%, 1-1½ ton increase in hay production, 40-50%, and 10-30 bu. increase in oat yields, 25-30%, were reported by 15 farmers.

D. Farm Financial and Business Planning.

The Program Aides have helped farm families to understand availability of financing through various agencies and have helped to develop the feasibility for financial plans.

The areas of most help to the 36 families surveyed were the following:

	No. Farmers	% of Farmers Surveyed
Helped family to secure financing plan	7	19
Worked out plan for change in livestock enterprise	19	53

An increase in acceptance of information and educational assistance by participating farmers is expected to be accompanied by an increase in farm incomes.

Of the 36 farmers surveyed, 11 farmers reported annual farm income increases ranging from \$1500 to \$20,000 or an average of \$8200 annually.

Reorganization of enterprises, buildings, equipment and cropping programs is the main farm business education of the Program Aides.



Jim Gack, shown with Glenn Ball, Opportunity Farm Aide, cleaning up a set of pistons on a tractor that had not been operated for four years. The closest repair shop for most of the farmers in the area is almost 50 miles away. Following the classes, all the farmers were able to do their own maintenance work, and were more comfortable doing major repair work. The instructor is on call.

E. Program Aides as Counsellors

In addition to the benefits of Program Aide assistance to farm business production, the Aides have helped many farmers in financial stress, to seek out more information which has opened new doors for families to be informed and to help families to feel more secure in the farming business.

In addition to the Aides helping families to understand and use Extension Service information and recommendations, they also helped many families learn more about ASCS, SCS and FmHA (USDA agencies) programs and how these agencies could benefit the farm family business.

Enlisting volunteers to assist families or individuals to teach others has been another role which Aides have employed to work with farm families. They have organized teams of neighbors to help families when a family home or livestock barn was lost to fire. They have enlisted volunteers to give teaching support to individuals and to 4-H clubs. Aides have served as coordinators for action programs such as grasshopper control program. These are examples of the kind of people-oriented, empathetic jobs aides do for families and the communities.

SUMMARY:

The major purpose of the opportunity farm program is to demonstrate the effectiveness of local farmers employed as program aides in Extension education. The method of education is based on the premise that farmers who live in the community can have more effective communication on a one-to-one basis therefore being more effective in bringing about changes.

Relating to the report objectives, the survey strongly indicates that program aides are getting people to use new technology, providing information to farmers, and increasing awareness of programs available through extension and other agencies.

The program aides are effective in coordinating and helping to bring about changes in educational acceptance.

The program aides have contributed significantly to an increase in production, resulting in financial betterment for limited resource farm families.

The observation of the Extension Agents-Agriculture in Hubbard and Wadena Counties supports the survey data as to the effectiveness of the aides. The Extension Agents have received numerous comments on how the program aides have helped farm families in developing their business as well as family goals and plans.

Quotes received from farmers verify the effective work of the program aides. Examples of these are:

"I don't think I would have made it if it weren't for Norm--would have made a lot of blunders," according to Donald Twaddle.

"Without the program the bills wouldn't have gotten paid" according to Darryl Niskanen, "would never been in dairying--Roger kept pushing us."

Rodney & Susan White, while discussing the program said, "One real helpful thing is that we have been kept informed of meetings, schools and new information."

"Helped several neighbors on tractor and feeding programs."

The program aides have worked to tie farm families into on-going county and area Extension programs.