Farmer-to-farmer networks: effective grass-roots sharing

Farmer-to-farmer networks are thriving in Wisconsin as a way for farmers to pool ideas, exchange perspectives, and learn from each other. Some 20 Wisconsin networks focus on management intensive rotational grazing, weed and pest management, soil fertility, herd health, or the economics of farming sustainably. Stephanie Rittmann, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin’s Institute for Environmental Studies and former CIAS research assistant, conducted a CIAS-supported, year-long case study of the Lafayette County (WI) Grazing Network and attended dozens of field days and farm walks in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Montana. From this field work she developed a list of ideas for farmers interested in starting and maintaining an effective network.

The need and the promise
Many of Wisconsin’s farmer networks grew out of farmers’ and farm families’ need to create farming systems that better meet their needs. Networks help farmers distribute information, offer moral and technical support, and share resource leads. Farmer networks sponsor field days, farm walks, and winter workshops that encourage a flow of ideas. Wisconsin networks have established sustainable agriculture libraries, tested the use of computers in making farm decisions, sought funding for on-farm research, developed marketing links with urban centers, and coordinated major conferences on topics of interest to farmers. Most networks hold public events to teach non-farmers about their work. “Successful farmer-to-farmer networks assume that each person has valuable knowledge and experience to contribute,” explains Rittmann. “The supportive and informal atmosphere of networks facilitates the exchange of ideas, information sharing, and testing assumptions.”

“The Lafayette County Grazing Network is a wonderful example,” she says. “This is a group of people who come together to push the envelope on what they are learning about management intensive rotational grazing. This moves everyone ahead.”

Cooperative networks also can help farmers feel less isolated. “This is especially important for farmers whose practices challenge traditional production practices or thinking, as in the case of management intensive rotational grazing,” Rittmann points out. Thus many networks have grown out of members’ interest in making change happen: in farming practices, management methods, quality of life, and lifestyles. “Their reported goal is to create an agriculture that’s economically, socially, and ecologically sound,” she says.

Developing a farmer network: first steps
Like most organizations, farmer networks depend on active, energetic members and shared goals. While each network may have specific needs, the most effective ones tend to share these features:

- **Potential members set up an initial planning meeting.** A shared purpose is the glue that adheres most networks. It inspires the group and gives it energy. A planning meeting can be simple—a few people with shared interests coming together to talk about their goals for a network, their plans for the community, and strategies for working together. From there, they can develop a list of common values, aspirations, and purposes. “Experienced farmer networkers said that a lot of formality on the front end isn’t nearly as necessary as passion and shared vision,” recalls Rittmann.

- **The first members develop a core group.** While the size of networks can vary widely, it usually takes the momentum of four or more people to start and maintain a viable one. Most networks have one or two coordinators who do on-the-ground management tasks: keeping members informed of events or acting as contact persons. Additional core members provide leadership through event planning, decision making, or recruiting new members. Participation needs to be flexible, allowing other members to participate at the level most comfortable for them, whether that’s attending an occasional event or committing major time and effort to helping organize a large public gathering. Networks also usually develop a member roster to encourage people to contact each other between visits.

- **The network holds regular meetings in person or by phone.** How often a network meets depends on the group’s needs, how that fits with the round of seasonal work on members’ farms, and the distances members need to travel to get together. A network usually meets frequently at its beginning, as often as every two weeks to build cohesion and momentum. This can be stepped back as the group develops. Experienced networkers stress the importance of engineering meetings carefully. For example, when planning events and meetings, what outside commitments do participants have? What are their on- or off-farm work schedules? Do they need
help with child care? Will transportation be needed? This can mean the difference between a successful network and one that doesn’t quite get off the ground.

- **The core group finds dependable ways to finance the network.** The amount of money a network needs depends on the types of activities the group plans. Depending on the desired level of activity, basic costs can include photocopying, postage, telephone, food for gatherings, laboratory test fees for on-farm research projects, research equipment, and stipends for consultants or coordinators.

There are many ways farmer networks support themselves, but what matters most is that the support be sustainable so the network also can be.

- **Organizational support.** Networks can raise money or reduce administrative costs by establishing valuable relationships with local extension offices, government agencies, non-profit organizations, local banks, and cooperatives. For example, these groups may sponsor a dinner after a network event or donate money or time for a particular activity.
- **Membership fees.** Establishing the scale of fees may require research into what members are willing to pay and how much is needed for the network. “That budgeting is part of the work of the core group,” Rittmann reports, “but it’s worth the effort because many networks find that membership fees can be the most reliable long-term source of funding.”
- **Grants.** Many government agricultural offices, churches, farmer advocacy groups, and community organizations offer grants to support specific projects or provide short-term organizational support. While helpful for short-term projects, grants aren’t dependable in the longer term, so additional fundraising may be necessary.

**Maintaining a lively network**

Experienced farmer networkers in Wisconsin suggest key ways to maintain an effective network:

- **Share responsibilities.** The core group should encourage all members to participate in leading the group, organizing events, or acting as farm hosts or discussion facilitators. Developing these skills is an important part of farmer-to-farmer networking across a broad base. In this way, members gain a sense of belonging and the skills necessary for continuing the network, should key leaders step down.
- **Give everyone a chance to speak.** Most networks have members who are natural talkers and those who are more quiet. Yet sometimes what looks like a member’s “nature” may be a function of how meetings are conducted. Some networks ask one member to be the discussion facilitator at each meeting. Their role is to make sure each person contributes to the discussion. Learning to facilitate discussions is a solid empowerment skill for everyone who values collaborating with others.
- **Keep the network informal and flexible.** Most successful networks have an informal, flexible atmosphere that feels spontaneous, creative, and stimulating to its participants. Experienced networkers observe that organizations that are open to change are most likely to survive in the long run. Participants’ interests and involvement will change over time. And too much formality can crush spontaneity. So some successful networkers warn against defining group norms, network structure, or individual roles too closely.
- **Plan diverse events and activities.** The network’s appeal will be broadest and most powerful if it offers a variety of events and activities. Wisconsin’s diverse seasons are helpful in this respect. During the growing season, activities may include farm walks, picnics, field days, and on-farm research meetings or sessions. The winter months offer time for workshops, social events, and meetings with neighboring networks, farm record analyses, and evaluations of the past season’s activities. The more members who can contribute ideas on alternative meeting times, the more likely those farmers who have small children or spouses working off farm are likely to attend.
- **Evaluate the network regularly.** “Successful networkers say this may be the most important activity the group can undertake, even though it’s most often neglected,” Rittmann reports. A simple look back at the network’s original goals and the accomplishments and activities designed to meet them will let participants and leaders know whether the network is meeting expectations, needs, and interests. “Evaluation is often misunderstood as an exercise in fault-finding,” she points out, “yet it’s unparalleled as a way of building trust and commitment through respectful problem solving and guiding a group effort back to its original purpose.”