

# IMPACT



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## Conferences Acquaint Small Farmers with Alternatives

### *The Situation*

Fifty seven percent of the farms in south central Idaho are 179 acres or less. (1997 Census of Agriculture). Furthermore, in south central Idaho 36% of all farms are less than 50 acres in size. This is an increase from the 1992 Census of Agriculture figure of 31%. In 1997, only 62% of all farm owners listed their principle occupation as farming. Many farm owners seek income outside of their farming income or they own the farm to maintain a lifestyle or to supplement off-farm income. Many of these farmers raise, or would like to raise and market, specialty crops or livestock.

### *Our Response*

March 2002 marked the fifth annual Southern Idaho Farm Conference. Location has been Twin Falls (4 yrs.) and Idaho Falls (1 yr.). Conference topics aimed to help small farmers diversify operations, widen marketing options, and improve overall farm production and management. These conferences, organized by the University of Idaho Extension, had different cooperators each year including: the University of Idaho (U of I) Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, Eastern Idaho Technical College—Idaho Falls, the Growers Market of Idaho Falls, the Idaho Rural Council, the College of Southern Idaho—Twin Falls, KMVT Television—Twin Falls, the USDA Risk Management Agency, the Western Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, and the North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Association.



Grants support came from the U of I Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, the U of I Critical Issues, the Western Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education, the USDA Risk Management Agency, KMVT Television—Twin Falls, the Environmental Resource Center—Ketchum, the Sawtooth Botanical Garden—Ketchum, and the National Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides.

Format for the conference has included a single Saturday session with the keynote leading the program and participating throughout the day, two full days (Friday and Saturday) with the keynote speaking at a Friday evening banquet, and the keynote at a Friday evening banquet followed by a full program on Saturday. Some years had concurrent sessions with some topics repeated.

Keynote speakers have included Michael Abelman, author and the Center for Urban Agriculture at Fairview Farms, Goleta, California, University of

Missouri Extension Professor of Agricultural Economics, John Ikerd, Eliot Colman, four-season farmer and author, Harborside, Maine, Jeff Rast, Center for Small Acreage Farming, Fairfield, Idaho and the North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Association members Bret Warner, Kay Hollabaugh, Rob Leeds and Charlie Touchette.

Over the years, local farmers, marketers, business owners, and university and college educators have spoken on topics such as: equipment for small and specialty operations, business and product marketing, specialty crops and specialty or value added products, rules, regulations and taxes, farm and business management; and general crop production.

## ***Program Outcomes***

Attendance ranged from 100 in 1998 to 50 in 2001. Average attendance was 75. Forty percent of those attending have come to 2 or more of the conferences.

A follow-up program evaluation, administered yearly, had a 48% return. Overall, programs scored high in usefulness (4.67) and knowledge gained (4.59) on a scale of 1 to 6 with 6 being the highest score. Presentations about marketing and rules and regulations rated as being most useful (5.03) followed closely by information on specialty crops and products (4.9). The single-most highly rated individual presentation was on direct marketing associations (6.0), followed by pesticide application record keeping (5.53) and soil organic matter (5.33). Least useful individual presentations addressed farm safety, marketing to grocery stores and using enterprise budgets (all 4.0).

Twenty eight percent of attendees planned to use ideas for direct marketing for their business or product. Nineteen percent planned to use or improve their use of farmers' markets and 16% planned to use specialty crop ideas.

Some comments from the evaluations over the years include: "I benefited from the whole program. Thank you."; "Was well worth the time and money spent."; and "Excellent information we are able to adopt to our business."

A questionnaire sent to 40 people who had attended two or more of the conferences had a return rate of 20%. Responses indicated what practices, behaviors, or decisions had been implemented and influenced by their attendance at farm conferences.

Attendees implemented an average of new 8.5 practices behaviors, or decisions. Seventy five percent had talked with others in the community about the farm conference, 63% had done direct marketing, 50% had changed their marketing techniques, 50% had used their own compost, and 50% had consulted or worked with someone they met at the conference.

Comments indicated a positive influence of the conference. One participant wrote, "The presentation... was great in showing the potential for farmers' markets... I got ideas from looking at other market displays (in visuals during the presentation)." Another noted, "It's always a pleasure to meet like-minded people (at the conference) to network with and to know that I'm not alone. Also, knowing where I can get more information if needed."

## **The Future**

External funding will continue to be important for future small farm educational activities, as well as other co-sponsoring organizations and agencies.

Topics for future activities, as suggested on the annual evaluations, include: storage and handling of products, organic management, meat production and sales, grants and programs available, and more on viable specialty crops and products.

## ***For More Information***

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