

Small Farmers Learn About Alternatives

The Situation

The USDA defines a small farm as 179 acres or less. By this definition, 57 percent of the farms in south central Idaho are small farms (1997 Census of Agriculture). In fact, in south central Idaho 36 percent of all farms are less than 50 acres in size. This is up from the 1992 Census of Agriculture figure of 31 percent. In 1997, only 62 percent of all farm owners listed their principle occupation as farming. This means many farm owners seek income outside of their farming income or they own the farm to maintain a lifestyle or to supplement another off-farm income. Many of these farmers raise, or would like to raise, specialty crops.

Our Response

The second annual Southern Idaho Small Farm Conference held on Feb. 20, 1999, in Idaho Falls addressed niche markets and business plans. Organized by the University of Idaho Cooperative Extension System, the Growers Market of Idaho Falls, the Idaho Department of Agriculture, and Eastern Idaho Technical College, speakers explained how and where to market specialty products. Information on business aspects of small acreage and specialty crops was provided. Keynote speaker was Jeff Rast, a small farmer from Fairfield and founder of the Center for Small Acreage Farming. He spoke on pursuing sustainability by farming on a scale that fits. During a class session, he also covered building your farm through optimal profitability. Other speakers addressed community supported agriculture, specialty market trends, Idaho State Sales tax, organic production, and Idaho State health regulations.

Achievements

Seventy-five people participated in the conference. A follow-up questionnaire returned by 50 participants scored the program high in usefulness (5.1) and knowledge gained (4.9) on a scale of a possible 6. Comments included: "Nothing but praise, well done...it was a worthwhile day" and "I intend to use this information in my kitchen, more professionalism and more efficiency in the garden and in bookkeeping". Another noted, "We will use marketing information. Speakers supported ideas that we already had and we learned new information about laws and resources."

The Future

A yearly activity to provide small farm resources will be conducted by Cooperative Extension in southern Idaho. External funding will continue to be important and other organizations and agencies will be solicited as co-sponsors for future programs.

Topics for future activities, suggested by 1998 and 1999 participants, include storage and handling of products, drip irrigation, determining the best crops, weed control, soil management, meat production and sales, and lending and funding sources.

For More Information

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