

The Whole Farm Planner

VOLUME IV, NUMBER 2

JULY 1999

Plan or Insight? View of an Adult Educator

—Editor's note: Nancy Grudens-Schuck completed her doctoral dissertation on whole farm planning. This article discusses some of her research and experiences.

In 1996-97, I was involved in a research project to investigate the educational value of the Ontario Environmental Farm Plan program. I talked to farmers, farm leaders, and Extension staff about the value of farm planning. I concluded that the insight generated in the process of planning, the realization of new possibilities, is more valuable than the plan itself and any new farm management practices that planning may have inspired.

As an adult educator, I advocate whole farm planning for its potential to stimulate farmers to reconsider core beliefs in which they may ground inaction, fatalism, and resistance. Not all farmers develop insight when they create farm plans. But the potential for transforming farmers' overarching perspectives, and helping them develop crucial new insights, leads me to champion environmental farm planning.

A common thread among the many approaches to environmental farm planning is the development of a written farm plan focusing on aspects of the farm that affect the environment. Many smart people argue that planning stimulates farmers to act environmentally by getting organized, and helps farmers become more knowledgeable about the environment. I won't dispute these claims, but they don't drive my commitment as an educator.

I advocate farm planning because I believe it helps farm families see fresh possibilities for living a good life on landscapes that thrive. Farm planning has value to the extent that it leads farmers to consider new ideas for surviving in a society that misunderstands and undervalues farming, and under-appreciates farmers' creativity.

Many farmers shaped my view that consideration of core assumptions, more than the plan itself, is the heart of whole farm planning. I'd like to share the experiences of a farmer I'll call 'Gord,' who used two farm planning methods: Ontario Environmental Farm Plan and Holistic Management®.

Gord farmed 150 acres in hilly, windy, snowy country in northern Ontario. He worked part-time as an agricultural technician while building a herd of beef cattle. His wife worked part-time off the farm. Gord

maintained about 100 head of cattle, a sugar bush and a firewood business.

HOLISTIC MANAGEMENT

Holistic Management® led Gord to discard several ideas, and create several new ones, in the service of living a good life on the land. Until Gord worked through the Holistic Management® model, he had believed that good farmers—'real' farmers—always operated farms larger than his, owning certain equipment and growing certain crops.

Increasingly, Gord had felt ashamed that his farm wasn't growing big enough, fast enough. Gord's image of a 'real' farmer caused him to make equipment purchases that he could neither afford nor justify, making his overall financial picture worse. As Gord saw how slowly he was able to approach his ideal farm, he came to believe he was a bad farmer. Some days, he wished the landscape was dominated by smallholders like himself who farmed small parcels and exchanged goods locally.

Through Holistic Management®, Gord realized that there was no single, desirable type of farmer. His distorting envy and anger directed at neighbors and at himself dissolved. Gord's new insight enabled him to create a farm plan and to make changes in management. With this new understanding, Gord stopped buying new equipment, and changed his farm management to suit his lifestyle and to complement the resources of larger farm neighbors.

"I guess HRM [Holistic Management®] was more a change in thought process than going out and changing a specific type of practice," Gord says. "We wanted to look at how to make our life better. We were looking for better ways to farm. . . . I can't make a living farming the way I have been taught."

He remembers the distorted assumptions that undergirded his sense of shame and failure about farming, "I think about this whole thing of 'You've got to get bigger to make a living at it': in reality, the bigger you get, the more you run. I see a couple neighbors here who have really substantial cow herds, and they are just running, running, running. That's the mentality. 'You've got to get bigger,' rather than doing more with what

Insight, continued on page 2.

Insight, from page 1.

you've got." Since his Holistic Management® training, Gord has rejected *bigger* as a goal unto itself.

Gord talks about the change in the way he conceives of his neighbors. Now he says, cheerfully, "They're a huge resource, all of them. I can see us here in a few years having very little equipment—maybe half what we have now. They all have hay for sale. If I want to buy feed, I think I can buy it cheaper. They are a real resource to me."

I commented, "It sounds like you're dependent on them." Gord agreed. "I'd like to be more dependent on them. I'd like to be so dependent on them that they cut all my hay and they own all the machinery. I mean it!" Gord has also dispensed with the notion that all his neighbors should be small-scale, like him, or else earn his scorn. As an educator, I see these insights into his anger and shame as a crucial phase of transformational learning, a theory of adult education.

ENVIRONMENTAL FARM PLAN

The Ontario Environmental Farm Plan led Gord to a different insight about the long-term nature of environmental improvement and his role in it. Through the planning process, Gord concluded that changes on his farm could be affordable, particularly if he took charge of the overall design himself. Gord says, "I think we're being proactive with the Environmental Farm Plan. We're going slowly—and there are still a lot of things to be changed here."

"Protect our water first" is a creative venture on which Gord has been working continuously for several years after receiving his Environmental Farm Plan financial incentive grant. I cannot do justice to the complexity of Gord's reworking of the flow of water on his farm to solve a manure contamination problem. His efforts to prevent spring runoff from the barnyard into nearby Owen Sound have resulted in a tidy marsh-pond filtration system. Gord knows of no one in his area with a similar system. He's working out the details of his managed ecosystem bit by bit.

Gord realized through the Environmental Farm Plan that a combination of small, determined, and inexpensive steps could lead to a large improvement in the environmental impact of his farm over the life of his operation. Moreover, Gord realized that the incentive grant the program provided was helpful, but was not the deciding factor in his willingness to farm environmentally.

It was clear in my conversation with Gord that both farm planning programs helped him act more favorably toward the environment. Transformational learning, however, was connected more to insight about the social character of acting environmentally.

For me, activity alone, even beneficial activity, isn't

enough. Right now, environmental farm planning seems to catalyze insight as well as environmental action, winning my full support as an adult educator. Insight, of course, isn't everything. As a program director, I would also value attendance. Immediate, direct action that improves or protects the environment is very important. Environmental actions may need to improve profitability as well.

My primary role as adult educator, however, returns me to the value of insight. Weighing whole farm planning programs against each other, I would look for evidence that farmers had changed their minds in meaningful ways. If educators don't value the creation of insight, who else will? Catalyzing insight, whether through Holistic Management®, Ontario Environmental Farm Plan, or some other program, is a necessary part of environmental farm planning education.

—Nancy Grudens-Schuck
Nancy is a Network steering committee member and is on the teaching staff at Cornell University. This article was originally published in another form in *Inquiry in Action*, April, 1999.

The Whole Farm Planner is published by The Minnesota Project, coordinating organization of the Great Lakes Whole Farm Planning Network. The Network brings together farmers, farm service providers, sustainable agriculture groups and farm organizations to develop and disseminate information about whole farm planning. The project, begun in January, 1995, involves working groups in Ontario and each of the Great Lakes states. The Network is funded by the Great Lakes Protection Fund, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and the Joyce Foundation.

The Minnesota Project is a nonprofit organization dedicated to sustainable development and environmental protection in rural Minnesota.

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Jill MacKenzie, production editor.

Insurance Rewards Farm*A*Syst

Northwestern Michigan is the scene of an important breakthrough in insurance coverage for local farmers. The Northwest Michigan Groundwater Stewardship program worked with North Pointe Insurance Company of Michigan in the spring of 1997 to develop an insurance program that rewards farmers for clean water practices. "We called insurance companies and asked, 'Can we make it financially beneficial to participate in the Farm*A*Syst program?'" says Janet Person of Michigan's Antrim Conservation District. "After several question-and-answer sessions, North Pointe Insurance agreed to give it a try."

North Pointe investigated Farm*A*Syst and the goals of the Michigan Groundwater Stewardship Program, and concluded that Farm*A*Syst could be at the forefront of "preventive insurance." Farm*A*Syst worksheets enable farmers and ranchers to identify pollution risks from nitrates, microorganisms, and toxic chemicals. Acknowledging that correcting the problems identified by Farm*A*Syst would potentially lower the risk of costly insurance claims, North Pointe Insurance decided to offer lower insurance premiums to farmers who participate in the local groundwater stewardship program.

To receive the lower insurance premiums, a farmer completes the requirements in three successive stages (see box below). After each stage, the farmer receives the premium credit: five percent individual reductions for Stages 1 and 2, and an additional 10 percent reduction for the completion of Stage 3. A farmer already doing a good job of preventing pollution can receive a lifetime insurance premium credit by eliminating high risks and getting a letter from the Conservation District. Program participation is open to any farmer insured through North Pointe.

As part of the program, a groundwater technician works with the farmer to develop practices to reduce the risk of contamination and to formulate an Emergency Preparedness Plan. Confidentiality and privacy are respected, allowing a close working relationship.

Is the program successful? "My first farmer could hardly wait," says Person. "After a few minor changes, all he needed to get credit was a lock on a storage shed—and he couldn't get to the store fast enough!"

So far, North Pointe is the only insurance company participating in the program, but others may soon buy in. According to Person, "We would love to work with Farm Bureau since they are one of the largest insurers in the agricultural community. In my opinion, their support would give the program a real boost."

The Farm*A*Syst program encourages partnerships among federal and state governments, farm organizations, and private business to support the voluntary efforts of farmers and ranchers in protecting the environment. Farm*A*Syst is funded nationally by USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the EPA.

*—from the November 1998 issue of Nonpoint Source News-Notes. For more information about the Farm*A*Syst/insurance program, contact Janet Person, Antrim Conservation District, 106 Depot Complex 2, Bellaire MI 49615, (616) 533-8363.*

*To find out more about Farm*A*Syst, contact Farm*A*Syst, B142 Steenbock Library, 550 Babcock Drive, Madison WI 53706-1293, (608) 262-0024, www.wisc.edu/farmasyst.*

Requirements for Earning Premium Credits

Stage 1—5% premium reduction

With a groundwater technician, complete all Farm*A*Syst worksheets pertaining to the farm. Update an Emergency Preparedness Plan that is easily accessible to emergency crews. Design a stewardship plan to correct all high risks identified in Farm*A*Syst worksheets 5 and 6.

Stage 2—5% premium reduction

Properly seal (not cap) all dug, drilled, or driven wells not in use. Provide chemical/fertilizer storage facilities that:

- are downslope and at least 150 feet from any private well,
- are 200 feet from any surface water,
- have impermeable floors (not dirt, gravel or

wooden plank), and

- are locked and are marked as chemical and fertilizer storage facilities.

Stay at least 150 feet from the wellhead when filling sprayers with fertilizers and chemicals, or when filling a sprayer at a field site.

Stage 3—10% premium reduction

Complete all Farm*A*Syst worksheets pertaining to the farm, and have no high risks except for household wastewater and hazardous waste.

Barriers to Farm Advisors' Use of Whole Farm Planning

BARRY FRANTZ

Whole farm planning is a very intensive process for farm advisors, and requires both “people” skills and technical skills. When I asked an NRCS District Conservationist what would help him be more effective in working with farmers to develop whole farm plans, he said his top need is training and information on current state-of-the-art ag production. He gave an example of a recent training he attended that covered dairy nutrition and rations, which have been changing significantly over the last 30 years. The training equipped him to work with dairy farmers on their whole farm plans, since he

now had a good idea of how his crop rotation recommendations agreed with the feed dealers' recommendations.

I think this basic need, on the part of farmers and people working with farmers, for the best technical information available, sometimes gets lost in our discussions of national policy and planning process issues. It's not that these aren't important issues, it's just that when it gets to the farm level, people still need good technical information in order to evaluate alternative strategies for meeting their goals.

—*Barry is an NRCS employee who works with*

LARRY JOHNSON

In my opinion, most service providers (agencies, bankers, academics, and other advisors) are not capable of promoting, implementing, and supporting true whole farm planning. It's not that they aren't willing to, they aren't able to. I see ten reasons for this inability.

LARRY'S TOP TEN BARRIERS

10. Don't have the skills.
9. Don't really believe in the people and process stuff. SWAPA+H is still only conservation planning, not whole farm planning.
8. Limited experience with linking goals and actions in the government arena.
7. Not always in the best interest of the service provider—administrative expediency.
6. Not enough time and support.
5. Lack of follow-up and lack of timeline: whole farm planning is an on-going process. It won't work just to fix a problem and leave.
4. Negative and reactive programs are the norm, linked either to avoidance of something bad (regulations, crop failure, flooding) or to permit requirements. Whole farm planning has to support a proactive vision initiated by the farmer.
3. Farmers are trained to be skeptical and cynical. They may see farm planning programs as just one more program from out-of-touch people, especially

non-farmer politicians, or as a flash in the pan that won't really generate any results, or as something “on the books” but not backed up by any action.

2. Farmers fear getting caught doing something wrong, incurring more costs, or bringing on more paperwork.

1. Lack of hope and imagination, on the part of farmers and service providers.

THREE PROPOSED ACTIONS

1. Start with a positive vision. Describe and work for what we want, not what we don't want. This positive vision should include profitable farming businesses, thriving communities, and healthy people. In other words, farmers and service providers must develop a common vision, a direction, and work together to support that common vision.

2. Recognize our limitations and hire people who have people skills as their first language and can communicate. They must learn to ask and listen, rather than tell.

3. Model the behavior we promote. We must do it first before asking others to do it. How about whole farm planning for university research facilities and state and federal lands? Or whole agency planning? Whole family planning?

—*Larry is a certified Holistic Management® instructor and the coordinator of the Whitewater Watershed Project in Minnesota.*

Planning Process in Kansas Based on Ontario's Tool

The new River Friendly Farmer Assessment whole farm planning process, currently being tested in northeastern Kansas, uses worksheets similar to Farm*A*Syst and the Ontario Environmental Farm Plan. The Assessment was developed by the Agricultural Committee of Kaw Valley, a coalition of researchers and non-profit groups, ranging from the Sierra Club to the Farm Bureau, who work together to protect the Kansas River. ("Kaw" is a local nickname for the river.) The Agricultural Committee's goal in developing the planning process was to reward farmers who were actively working to protect the river. The group wanted to base their awards on documented practices, rather than good intentions. After presentations by representatives from Ontario, they adapted the Environmental Farm Plan for use in Kansas.

In addition to making the new version comply with U. S. and state regulations, they added a section on setting goals, along with a "scorecard." Rhonda Janke of Kansas State explains that the scorecard is a page for recording all ratings for current practices, and priorities for changing practices that get low ratings. The scorecards contain no information that could be used to identify who filled it out, so they can be reviewed without compromising farmer privacy.

The River Friendly Farmer Assessment is currently being tested by two groups of farmers who have participated in workshops, and reviewed by farm service providers across the state. Rhonda says that changes to the materials based on feedback from farmers and other reviewers is "tweaking" to make the materials better reflect Kansas farms, so the process should be ready for wider use soon. Rhonda expects that future use of the process will also be in a workshop setting.

LEGAL SETTLEMENT TO ENCOURAGE USE

The River Friendly Farmer Assessment should be widely used in coming years, due to a lawsuit settlement. The Sierra Club and the Kansas Natural Resources Council sued the state and the Environmental Protection Agency, as environmental groups have done in many other states, for failure to comply with the federal Clean Water Act. Under the Act, any streams or segments of streams having more than an allowed load of nutrients, pathogens or chemicals was supposed to be cleaned up, and the

amount of contaminants reduced to below the threshold. Although some of the water quality problems are attributable to urban contamination, agricultural contaminants are also present. Kansas rivers are sources of drinking water for urban areas and are widely used for recreation, yet the state had not acted improve water quality as mandated.

The environmental groups sued the state to force it to comply. Under the settlement reached in 1998, the state has to develop and implement a plan to reduce contaminant loading to those stream segments identified as above threshold. The plan, to be finalized this summer, includes strategies to encourage the use of best management practices and to educate farmers about ways to reduce contamination of streams. It will also include strategies to get farmers to participate in the River Friendly Farmer Assessment program.

Participation in the program will be voluntary. Farmers in the pilot groups have received a stipend for their participation. Once the assessment becomes widely adopted, money could possibly be available to cost-share changes on participating farms, or to pay a stipend to farmers for the time spent in the workshops. Although funding sources have not been finalized, Rhonda thinks federal Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) funds, money from farm membership organizations such as wheat, corn, cattle, and hog producers' associations, or state appropriations are likely.

The program will be implemented on a watershed-by-watershed basis, beginning in 2000 with workshops for farmers in the most contaminated watershed. The next year, the second most contaminated area will be the focus of the workshops, and so on. A few participants in each group will be recruited to follow a monitoring program. The monitoring farmers will use the Land Stewardship Project's *Monitoring Toolbox* (see below) and other tools to test water for nutrients, pathogens, and other contaminants, to see if and how their changed practices improve water quality.

—Jill MacKenzie

The Monitoring Toolbox

The Monitoring Toolbox, from the Land Stewardship Project, is a practical, easy-to-use guide for those interested in monitoring the impact of management decisions on their land. The *Toolbox* contains ways to measure success in terms other than bushels per acre or pounds of milk per cow, such as number of earthworms in soil, condition of streambanks, level of support for

farm employees as measured by salaries and benefits, diversity of bird and frog species, and how closely the values of the farm family are reflected by the choices they make.

The Monitoring Toolbox is available for \$42 (includes postage) from the Land Stewardship Project. To order, or for more information, contact LSP, P.O. Box 130, Lewiston MN 55952, 507-523-3366.

Climate Change and Whole Farm Planning

It has often been noted that soil quality makes a good theme for a whole farm plan, because soil quality is a fundamental measure of the health of a farm. Now there is new urgency to that idea, because of global climate change concerns.

In response to these concerns, nations have committed to reduce carbon air emissions in the 1997 Kyoto treaty. In addition to cutting emissions from power plants and cars, countries are also considering capturing and holding carbon in forests and soils. That is where agriculture comes in. Farming practices that increase soil organic carbon—including cover crops, crop rotations, manure and compost applications, residue management, and conservation tillage—can make a significant contribution to carbon sequestration, thereby slowing the rate of climate change.

Building soil carbon is a fairly complex process affected by many factors and is not simple to measure. Scientists are still studying how much carbon can be stored in soils, and how different farm practices build organic matter and carbon. Any program developed to reward farmers for building soil carbon levels will have to be both flexible and long-term, allowing an array of choices in farming systems and giving organic matter

time to build up. It seems that a whole farm planning approach will be the best way to implement such a program. Indeed, without a whole farm planning program there is a danger that simplistic policies would end up endorsing a single practice, such as residue management, while ignoring even better practices such as crop rotations and cover crops.

Recently, a coalition of groups led by the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition sent a letter and recommendations to the Administration urging immediate steps to enhance U.S. agriculture's ability to sequester carbon. The specific policy recommendations called for using the Conservation Farm Option, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program, and the Integrated Farming Systems partnerships. These programs were billed as a "win-win" proposition for increasing sustainability while giving the farming community a positive role in addressing climate change.

—Loni Kemp