

The Whole Farm Planner

VOLUME V, NUMBER 2

www.misa.umn.edu/~mnproj/wfp

JUNE 2000

Talking the Walk: Learning to Teach Whole Farm Planning

Over the past four years, I've had the opportunity to lead workshops on whole farm planning for a variety of audiences, from Natural Resource Conservation Service staff and watershed technicians to organic farmers and intensive graziers. These audiences have taught me lessons about presenting whole farm planning concepts that I'd like to share.

HELP YOUR AUDIENCE PUT WHOLE FARM PLANNING IN PERSPECTIVE. It's important to get across that whole farm planning is the agricultural equivalent to systems planning that cutting-edge businesses—from Fortune 500 companies to start-up dot-coms—are using.

It's critical that farmers and service providers alike understand that whole farm planning must be done by the farm family for it to be effective. Service providers are there to assist. Clearly defining the roles of farm family members and service providers in whole farm planning can go a long way toward improving the process.

Because of the important role Holistic Management® plays in my workshops in defining a process for whole farm planning, people usually have confused the two by the end of one of my sessions. Audiences need to understand how holistic thinking fits into the larger context of planning.

Teaching Holistic Management® in a farmer session can easily consume an entire workshop, so take care to include at least a little detail on other tools that can be used in conjunction with Holistic Management® to better manage resources and attain goals. This is especially important when dealing with organic growers, since they may not be familiar with technical service providers and what they have to offer.

MAKE SURE PARTICIPANTS UNDERSTAND THE BASICS OF A HOLISTIC PLANNING PROCESS. No matter how short the workshop, people should leave understanding that:

- farmers, not technical resource people, need to take control of planning for their farms;
- all those with a stake in the farm need to participate in planning;
- explicitly stating and recording family goals is pivotal to meeting those goals;

- all resources available to reach family goals should be assessed;
- understanding and working with natural systems will improve farm management;
- planners should assume their decisions may be wrong, and monitor to make sure their actions are helping the family to attain their goals;
- plans must be reviewed and revised at least yearly; and
- technical resource people are available to assist in the planning process.

If the workshop is more than an hour long, it's possible to go into some depth on each of these points. If you only have an hour, give your audience a taste of each idea. No matter how much time you have, avoid *lecturing* on the topics.

PUT YOUR AUDIENCE IN CHARGE. As a workshop facilitator, you are there to make it easy for professionals to learn from one another. Give them a push—a question, a controversial issue in planning, or a chance to show and tell their experience—and then let them go. You can help shape their thinking, but not control it! When you've assessed your audience well, your facilitation will showcase the audience's interest and professional experience. Most people have some experience with planning. Start with that experience and move forward.

BE CONCRETE AT THE START. People who start by thinking big and then get more detailed tend to be drawn to planning strategies, but most people need to start with concrete examples and specific activities before the whole reveals itself to them. One way to anchor your audience in the big picture is to ask them about their experiences with planning.

With farmers, you may want to find out how much time they devote to planning and how that has influenced their farming strategies. This helps to identify those who already are planning for their whole farms, and who might help lead the learning process later in the workshop.

With agency staff, you can ask about their experiences teaching others to plan. I've found it helpful to ask them

How to Teach Planning, next page.

How to Teach Planning, from page 1.

to perceive themselves from their clients' perspective with the question "Who has an opinion about what happens on the farm—what groups are trying to influence the farm family?" From here, agency planners get a chance to share their experiences working with others in their community to realize goals of clean water and a healthy farm economy. It also helps them clarify their role in farm planning.

AVOID "CEMENT SHOES." Farmers and conservationists alike tend to learn by doing. Many of us work in agriculture because we love to be outdoors and active. Putting action in a session helps us integrate what we see and hear. Just because we *can* sit still for more than an hour doesn't mean it makes us feel and think well!

Integrating movement into the session needs to be balanced with visual and auditory material, and this balance is unique to the particular group and their needs. Have a couple of "action ideas" up your sleeve and be prepared to use them as you sense they are needed. Having people throw a ball around instead of taking turns speaking after the person sitting next to them, or giving everyone a chance to post ideas up on the board, relieves physical tension and loosens up the energy in a room.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS: GOOD—LARGE GROUP REPORT-BACKS: DEADLY! When working with large groups it is helpful to break up into smaller groups, especially when people don't already know each other very well or the discussion is likely to be controversial. People are able to engage more fully in small groups. The problem arises in trying to re-integrate the group. Simple report-backs are very ineffective at sharing information across groups, no matter how interesting the material. Ask reporters to be creative in sharing information with the full group or *nix this step altogether*.

Here are some of the creative report-back techniques I've tried.

- Have groups post a summary (visual or verbal) and then have each group travel to the summaries of other groups and discuss them. This is called a "gallery walk."
- Ask each group to act out their summary. This is fun, helps people boil down the material, and gives everyone a chance to be in the limelight. On the downside, it takes a lot of time and doesn't communicate details.
- Reconvene the entire group and ask each smaller group to share *one* thing they learned as a basis for a larger group discussion.
- Ask each group to summarize their notes for the facilitator, and then provide proceedings for participants afterwards.

GO WITH THE FLOW. You should have an agenda to share with participants at the beginning of the session, especially if the workshop is more than an hour. Some people want to know up-front how you plan to direct their time. But don't think of the agenda as written in stone.

Constantly monitor your group and think about how they are responding to the material and the manner in which it is presented. Are people falling asleep during the slide set? Are they bored or confused by the material? Are they intensely involved in a discussion about a specific issue? Respond to your participants by changing your agenda so that they get out of the session what they need. If the change is a major one (such as staying beyond the closing time), you may want to ask for a consensus to alter the planned agenda.

CLOSE THE SESSION WITH A CALL FOR ACTION. Ask people what they will take home from the session. What is the next step? Convening the family for a discussion on farm goals using the worksheet provided? Reading through the packet of materials, visiting the web site, or investing in a recommended book? Attending a longer training session? Shelving the idea until more time presents itself?

If you ask people to commit to an action at the end of the session and provide them with possible ideas, they are more likely to follow through. At the very least, everyone should fill out a workshop evaluation form so that you can get a sense of what worked and what didn't, and how you might be able to serve them in the future.

—Michelle Miller

Michelle works for the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, and is a member of the steering committee of the Great Lakes Basin Farm Planning Network.

The Whole Farm Planner is published by The Minnesota Project, coordinating organization of the Great Lakes Basin 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 Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Extension (SARE).

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

For more information, or to suggest articles for *The Whole Farm Planner*, contact Loni Kemp at The Minnesota Project, RR1 Box 81B, Canton, MN 55922, lkemp@tc.umn.edu, 507-743-8300.

Permission to reprint articles is granted in advance; please acknowledge this source.

Canada's Environmental Farm Plans

Since 1992, Ontario's Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) program has helped 10,000 farmers come up with environmental action plans and begin implementing them. Another 8,000 farmers have attended workshops, and most of these are in the process of developing or revising their plans, with assistance from local peer-review committees and from technical advisors at the Ontario Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Rural Affairs, the province's extension service.

Farmers participating in the EFP program represent all sectors of agriculture, including dairies; fruit, vegetable, tobacco, and cash grain farms; poultry, beef, and pork operations; greenhouses; and nurseries. They live and farm all over Ontario, in English-speaking and French-speaking regions. They farm small acreages and have part-time jobs off-farm, or operate family-scale farm businesses, or run huge farms and employ many workers.

Ontario's EFP is arguably the most successful farm planning program anywhere. It's widely imitated, accepted by farmers and government agencies, well-funded, and it enjoys excellent ratings from participants, who encourage other farmers to attend workshops and develop plans.

PROGRAM HISTORY, STRUCTURE

Ontario's Environmental Farm Plan was developed by a coalition of farm organizations, with assistance from a faculty member at the University of Guelph, who acted as a neutral chairman of the group. Although the coalition's actions were in some ways catalyzed by a perception that increased government regulation of agricultural activities was impending, the member organizations of their own initiative convened to devise an environmental agenda for agriculture in the province.

Once the goals of the program had been set, the coalition invited the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Rural Affairs to be a part of the initiative. The ministry agreed to follow the coalition's lead, and to provide technical assistance and education services. The Ministries of Natural Resources and Environment also agreed to cooperate.

Funding for the program comes from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. Each province can decide where to allocate the money, and Ontario has chosen to fund the EFP for nine years now. Funds go towards producing workshops and printed materials, salaries, per diem expenses for farmers serving on peer-review committees, incentive payments, and cash prizes for innovative solutions to farm environmental concerns.

Government agencies at federal and provincial levels have agreed that they would not access information farmers voluntarily provided as part of the planning process for any enforcement actions against farmers. So far, there has not been a single breach of the

confidentiality.

The EFP is administered and promoted in each of Ontario's 50 counties by small committees of farmers who review every plan as it is developed, and who arrange and publicize workshops. Word-of-mouth and the example set by these farmers have contributed to the success of the program. A certain amount of peer pressure exists to participate in the program and complete an action plan.

The EFP materials were adapted from the Farm*A*Syst program in the United States, which is primarily a farmstead assessment tool. The coalition broadened the scope of the assessment, and adapted it to fit their local regulations and environmental concerns. The workbook and reference materials are intended to be used either in a workshop setting or as a home-study course (400 farmers have chosen to use the materials on their own).

Farmers using the EFP workbook rate their site conditions and management practices, choose which parts of their operations, need to be changed soonest, and develop a prioritized action plan for making less urgent changes. Each farmer uses only the worksheets and technical guides suited to his or her farm, then integrates individual action items to formulate an action plan. Technical guides to best management practices (BMPs) are provided, and Ministry of Agriculture staff provides technical advice.

ONE FARMER'S EXPERIENCE

Mike O'Shea, whose mixed cattle, fruit, and vegetable farm is in Middlesex County in southwestern Ontario, says that while he had always considered himself "a bit of a fanatic about looking after the soil," participating in EFP got him to do more to protect the environment. "Sometimes you need a gentle reminder that some of the things you're doing could be done better," he says. "I had installed some berms to divert water and prevent erosion," he recalls. "But after doing the workbook, I put in some more berms. It's working great—it should have been done years ago."

The O'Shea family worked together to formulate their plan. Mike has found that his hired help, too, has an interest in conservation, and that his employees are enthusiastic about the farm's environmental projects.

Mike is on his county's peer review committee. He says that many of the changes farmers plan to make through the EFP process include water diversion, eavestroughs, septic system updates, pesticide storage, capping old wells, and using water wagons so they can mix chemicals in the field, rather than at the farmstead.

He notes that in the first few years of the program, farmers who were most motivated to work for

Canada, next page.

Canada, from page 3.

environmental protection participated. As the program is catching on, some who might have been reluctant to participate have attended workshops. Mike admits that at first, he was somewhat skeptical. He thought the program might be pushed by the Ministry of Environment, rather than being truly farmer-driven. He is pleased he was wrong.

ONTARIO'S AGRICULTURAL CONTEXT

Paul Verkley, whose dairy farm is in south central Ontario, expresses some doubt that Ontario's success with EFP could be duplicated elsewhere. Unlike many regions of North America, Ontario has a long history of farm prosperity, and farmers there continue to prosper. "If farmers are barely getting by," Paul says, "It's hard for them to put time and money into environmental protection."

Ontario also has traditionally had very active and progressive farm organizations. Hundreds of farmers in the province spend time on commodity organization boards, attending meetings every month, reporting to members, and networking. When the time came to develop the environmental agenda and the EFP, Ontario's farmers were organized and ready.

In the 1980s, a number of environmental initiatives were introduced in the province, using farmer-to-farmer delivery. Although these programs were short-lived, the farmers who got involved with them were primed for the EFP in the 1990s. They also realized that longevity of the program was going to be important to its success, and worked to get funding and an infrastructure that would last.

Longevity of the program does seem to have been one key to the acceptance of EFP. As Paul describes it, longevity leads to greater numbers of participants. Greater numbers lead to general acceptance of the program, and create a "positive peer-pressure environment." He points out that 2,000 farmers each year go through the workshops, and there is no sign that demand is slacking off.

Peer-pressure is not the only thing bringing farmers to the workshops, though. Paul says, "You literally have to invite people individually to come," so farmer-to-farmer contact within each county is a main component of EFP marketing. Since the EFP is entirely voluntary, each farmer must be sold on the idea.

Paul is certain that a voluntary program will produce better environmental results in the long run. Regulations require, and get compliance with, minimal standards. EFP and other voluntary programs are open-ended, and many farmers will choose to go beyond minimal standards, if they don't feel they are being forced to act.

Documenting environmental progress can be difficult. Water quality tests results are highly variable and not a

reliable source of data. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in many bodies of water, the diversity of fish species has increased over the last ten years. The SOLEC indicators (*see* WFP V. IV, # 1) could also be used to measure progress. Researchers at the University of Guelph are working with surveys of 200 EFP participants to quantify barriers to pollution implemented on farms, and to determine the commitment of farmers to continuing environmental work on their farms beyond initial involvement in the program. At least two-thirds of the farmers surveyed have gone on to undertake new activities to protect their natural resource base.

For more information about Ontario's EFP, contact the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association, 519-826-4217; oscia@netcom.ca.

CAN THE EFP BE ADAPTED?

Quebec has undertaken a significant initiation to establish an agro-environmental program. While Ontario's striking success may be unique, other regions can learn from the Ontario experience and incorporate some important elements of the EFP into their farm planning programs. The provinces of Québec, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, along with organizations in the United States, have modeled farm planning programs after Ontario's EFP.

QUÉBEC

French-speaking and English-speaking farmer groups have developed two different models for delivering an EFP program similar to Ontario's in the province of Québec. About 90% of the province's farmers speak French, and these farmers meet in 70 conservation clubs of 20 to 60 individuals. Each club hosts workshops for its members, who help each other develop plans, mostly targeted at nutrient management planning. A fee is charged for participation, with about two-thirds of the cost subsidized by the government under the Québec Agro-Environmental Investment Assistance Program.

English-speaking farmers, mostly beef producers, are adapting Ontario's workbook for home-study.

ATLANTIC CANADA

Farmers in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland have formed the Atlantic Farmers Council, and have worked with the Eastern Canada Soil and Water Conservation Centre to develop an environmental agenda for agriculture in their region. Recognizing that rural communities in the Atlantic Provinces are agriculturally based, and that degradation of natural resources by agricultural or other processes could spell disaster for rural areas, the Atlantic Farmers Council has set up initiatives in the four provinces, and developed EFP materials in French and English.

Canada, next page.

Stewardship Incentives For Profitable Farms that Protect the Environment

The National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture selected stewardship incentives as one of its top four priorities for the next farm bill. At the annual meeting in February 2000, representatives of the 2000 member groups endorsed a new farm policy which rewards those farmers who are good stewards of the land, creating environmental and social benefits that are good for all of society. By targeting payments to moderate and small farms, this policy helps farm families remain on their land. This in turn strengthens rural communities.

Principles of Stewardship Incentives

- Payments to farmers would be based on real, measurable conservation results that benefit society. Goals include surface and groundwater quality, fish and wildlife habitat, soil quality, biodiversity and genetic preservation, air quality, energy conservation, wetland preservation, and climate stabilization.
- Participants would develop a multi-year conservation plan with measurable outcomes, so that progress toward goals could be carefully monitored. The highest rewards would go to those who implement a whole farm plan achieving the highest levels of sustainable agriculture.
- Benefits would be available to all except the very largest farms and feedlots, and the structure of payments would allow a family-scale farm to obtain the highest payment. The greater the conservation results, the greater the payment to the farmer, up to a limit such as \$30,000 a year. Farmers who have always done a good job would be rewarded, as well as those who make new improvements.
- Farms of all types would qualify for participation, not just those raising “program crops” such as corn, wheat, and cotton.
- A major commitment to training and funding of agriculture professionals would be required to implement a stewardship incentives program. Agency employees, extension agents, consultants, and experienced farmers will be needed to assist farmers with their plans.
- This program complements, rather than replaces, the Conservation Reserve Program, Wetlands Reserve Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and other conservation programs.

Canada, from page 4.

Funding comes from the federal government, funneled through provincial councils. Provincial EFP steering committees or agro-environmental councils, EFP coordinators, open workshops, conservation clubs, and the assistance of extension staff are used to deliver the programs.

The BMP information, along with other support material about the Atlantic EFP program, is available over the Internet (<http://www.ccse-swcc.nb.ca>), although printed versions are available. Jean-Louis Daigle, of the Conservation Centre, says that many farmers nowadays have easy access to the Internet, so it's efficient and less expensive to make materials available electronically.

Jean-Louis also sees the need for more promotional

activities and information sharing between the provinces to ensure a continuity of the EFP initiative. EFP is a way to focus farmers' attention on environmental issues. While farmers may have a strong desire to protect their natural resources, they may not have defined ideas about how to do so. The EFP helps them to be more proactive in dealing with their concerns. “Once they have the knowledge they need,” he says, “finances may be the only barrier to making corrective measures.”

—Jill MacKenzie

A Recipe for Environmental Farm Planning?

The Ontario Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) program has been very successful, gaining the support of farmers, government agencies, farm organizations, environmentalists, and the general public. Could this process be duplicated elsewhere? Participants and leaders in the Ontario EFP program mention characteristics they think are essential to the program, including:

1. A coalition of farm organizations, bringing together different commodity groups and different perspectives on agriculture, and agreeing not to point fingers, but instead to take responsibility for protecting the environment.
2. A farmer-centered, farmer-developed, positive agenda.
3. Materials focused on technical information, not on philosophies of farming.

4. Government agencies supporting the effort, but not taking the lead or dictating plan content.

5. Confidentiality/privacy respected, and ideally legally guaranteed.

Given these essential elements, different models for delivery may be possible:

1. Conservation clubs, open workshops, or home-study workbooks.
2. County committee review, state/provincial steering committee review, or individual follow-up by extension staff.
3. Cash incentives, competitive awards program, or fee for service.

(See article, page 3, for more on Ontario's EFP and similar programs in other provinces of Canada.)