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Providing Agricultural Information to Amish and Mennonite Farmers: Creative Adaptations to Wisconsin Extension Programs and Communications

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Abstract: This service provider report taps into the experience of a longtime Extension Educator in Wisconsin. Pulling from his work in Clark County, WI, where Amish and Old Order Mennonites have been particularly important to the local agricultural economy, he provides examples of how Extension can modify programming to meet the needs of plain producers. Topics of interest to Amish and Mennonite farmers include nutrient management, forage quality, and farm safety. Areas of program modification include approaches to communication, training, and support in ways that are culturally sensitive to church restrictions. In-person training and informational voicemail recordings have been particularly useful modalities. [Abstract by editors.]

Keywords: Old Order Amish; Old Order Mennonite; Groffdale Mennonite Conference; agriculture extension; nutrient management planning; in-person training; agricultural communications

PLAIN PRODUCERS IN CLARK COUNTY, WI: RECENT GROWTH IN POPULATION AND AGRICULTURE

Clark County, WI, has a population of 34,000 people, of which about 11,000 are members of several plain Anabaptist churches, including Amish and Mennonite, who have moved from eastern states as land there became too expensive. Many farmers in central Wisconsin of retirement age, and most of these farmers did not have heirs who were willing to take over the farm operation. Land prices were very low, and it attracted many plain producers to buy land in Clark County.

The increase in plain producers in places such as Clark County makes it critical for Extension and other agricultural service providers to learn

best practices to work in this growing sector. I am an Extension agent in Clark County who has been, and continues to be, guided by formal training in agronomy, a farm background, and work experience as a crop advisor and in the private agricultural sector. From my first day on the job as an Extension agent, connecting with plain people was a priority. The main concern for the delivery of education in the plain Anabaptist faith groups was transportation (most use horse and buggy transportation) and their desire not to use electronic media as a delivery system for education.

Plain producers in this area are involved in a variety of agricultural sectors with a particular emphasis on dairy. Most of the people in these groups settled on dairy farms. In addition, many set up support businesses (e.g., machine shops,

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bulk foods, and fabric shops) which were common in the states from which they had moved. Many of the businesses supported livestock operations in addition to greenhouses and fresh produce production. Over the years, this has expanded to now include poultry operations and hog finishing facilities. According to 2017 Wisconsin Agricultural Statistics, Clark County is home to over 2,000 farms with 167,000 head of livestock of which 67,000 are mature dairy cows. Forages are the major component of the livestock diet. Forages are grown on over 99,000 crop acres in Clark County.

HOW DO EXTENSION EDUCATORS DETERMINE WHAT IS IMPORTANT FOR PLAIN ANABAPTIST FARMERS? AND HOW DO EDUCATORS RESPOND?

Throughout the year, I visit with community leaders to understand their needs and wants for education and then deliver a program. In Clark County, some key areas of agricultural concern—and thus Extension programming—are nutrient management, forage quality, livestock production, and farm safety. Key areas of church concern include limitations on electronic technologies, communication mediums, and transportation mediums. An emphasis on family labor also presents challenges for farm safety for plain producers.

Two of Clark County's lakes have 303d impaired water, which is water that exceeds the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) of pollutants. It is likely that livestock farming in the area is a contributing factor. In the case of Clark County, much of the sediment is from soil erosion, which is why Nutrient Management Programs are important for informing farmers not to exceed crop needs for nutrients and to educate them on practices that reduce soil erosion. Approximately 40% of the livestock farm operators in Clark County are Old Order Mennonite or Amish. Clark County has a manure ordinance, which requires farmers with manure storage to hire someone to develop a nutrient management plan or be trained to become certified to develop their nutrient management plan. To me as an agriculture educator, this demographic presented some challenges for adaptation of relevant nutrient management educational programs. There is a curriculum available, but it is a computer-based program, which is not appropriate for plain producers.

Our Extension office adapted nutrient management training for plain producers in collaboration with the Clark County Land Conservation Department. We adapted what we denoted as an “on the roadshow” training where we provide training in machine sheds or town halls near the farm operations owned by plain producers. Instead of a computer program, we used calculators, pencils, and ruled paperwork books to develop a nutrient management plan. Approximately 40 farmers attended the training the first year and subsequently were each able to write their own nutrient management plans.

Beyond the delivery of the training, we provided face-to-face visits with the farmers so that they could complete and implement the nutrient management plan and subsequently improve their use of environmentally sound farming practices. During the face-to-face visit, the farmer reviews the plan with a certified crop adviser (CCA). If the plan is complete, the CCA signs off, certifying the farmer for four years. After four years, farmers are required to receive refresher training to be re-certified. Over the past fourteen years, we have trained many plain producers to develop and implement nutrient management plans.

Another important aspect of livestock (dairy in particular) farming is producing quality forages to feed livestock. The first cutting of alfalfa will provide about one-half of the forage yield for a growing season. Cutting forage at an optimum stage of growth is very important to livestock producers. University of Wisconsin (UW) Extension agriculture educators, along with a specialist at UW-Madison, developed a network to collect scissor clip data, i.e., a predictive equations for alfalfa quality (PEAQ) stick measurement to determine the maturity of forage. These data can help determine the ideal time to begin to harvest forages to optimize forage quality. The data are currently reported to an online webpage, via radio media, and on the county webpage. However, plain producers typically do not have regular access to electronic media. So, we as Extension educators asked ourselves, “How can we deliver this valuable information in a timely fashion to plain producers?” We addressed this challenge by creating a voicemail system where I would update the status of forage quality in the county and record the data in a message. Farmers can call that number twice a week until harvest to receive the

updated information. I publicized this service on an Extension newsletter in the early spring. Many plain producers who were interested in the current status of forages during the first cutting period called in to listen to the voicemail updates.

Another area of concern in Clark County was the increase in farm fatalities in plain families. In response, we created an education day on farm safety with the Clark County Public Health Department, Sheriff Department, National Farm Medicine, Marshfield Clinic, and leaders of multiple plain churches. Plain producers hoped to educate both youth and adults on farm safety. The program was held at one of the local meeting halls and that group provided lunch for about 190 people who attended the program. Amish and Mennonite adults and fifth and sixth graders attended the farm safety day. That day focused on age-appropriate jobs on the farm, basic first aid, and safety around farm machinery and livestock. We received many compliments from those attending and from both youth and adults.

Another important aspect when programming with plain people is communication. Phone calls, and newsletters (1,400 receive our newsletter), personal letters to answer questions, fact sheets, and bulletins sent by mail are just a few examples of how to deliver information to a plain Anabaptist producers. The most important method is personal contact or face-to-face communication. In an era of virtual communication, it is a breath of fresh air to shake hands with real people and see their reactions when providing information. It is important to take time to explain terms, given that plain people are bilingual. For example, I used the word “synergy” to describe how a legume plant captures nitrogen from the atmosphere. When I realized that term was not understood by everyone in the room, I then began to explain how a legume plant and bacteria in the soil each contributed parts for the greater good of both organisms. This is an example of how educators should not assume their audience’s knowledge of scientific terminology.

hope this information is valuable to readers. If you have questions, please contact me.

CONCLUSION

I hope to learn more about how to determine what is important for plain people in any given community. I continue to meet with community leaders but still feel there is more I could do to fully discern the importance of various issues. I

