Workshop: Meeting Landlord and Tenant Conservation Interests

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Over 40 percent of our nation’s agricultural landowners do not operate the land they own. In fact, in many areas of the U.S., non-operator landowners own the majority of agricultural land. And, today more than ever, agencies are being pushed to focus their assistance on critical resource areas. Therefore ignoring this larger segment of the population is not an option. Special implementation strategies may be needed to achieve higher levels of adoption. However, little is known about this non-traditional group or their interest, understanding, or motivation for conserving and improving natural resources.

Recent research in the Great Lakes region indicates absentee landowners may hold an extraordinary opportunity for conserving natural resources. From a list of 20 subjects, conservation topics were identified as the top four most important to landowners regarding their land. And “conservation/concern for the environment” was cited as the largest influence on decision-making. Additional findings from the study also support the idea that absentee landowners may be a significant untapped audience for conservation.

With promising attitudinal findings, a big question still remains: Can the interest and motivations reported by these landowners be turned into real conservation action? Agren initiated multi-contact, multi-media direct marketing campaigns to absentee landowners in the same geographic areas in 2008. Results to date indicate that direct marketing has been very successful in increasing the awareness and interest of absentee landowners in conservation. However, the number of landowners who have been motivated to initiate action has been disappointing (See Figure).

This lack of action has been attributed to three key reasons. First, the absentee landowner audience is very new to conservation resources. Pilot projects indicate 50 to 80 percent of program participants have never before worked with a conservation organization. Because the audience is so new to the resources being offered, it takes time to build a relationship before they are willing to make a commitment. Secondly, acts of “lead nurturing” are extremely important to engaging landowners in action. Repeated follow-up and consultative sales approaches are essential to converting conservation interest to action. Finally, a lack of information on specific landowners, property features, and landowner interests make targeting direct marketing messages challenging and inefficient.

Several options are being explored as possible means to engage absentee landowners beyond mere interest in conserving natural resources. One possible solution is employment of a dedicated "landowner advocate" to adequately follow-up and build relationships with new landowner clients. The concept of a landowner advocate is similar to a patient advocate in a hospital—a person who can walk the customer through the conservation process step by step, offering answers to questions and giving guidance.

A second potential solution is development of a customer relationship management (CRM) database, used to compile and track information on landowners and property. Typically, CRM software (essentially a large, multi-relationship database) is used by customer service, marketing, and sales departments to enter, track, and access information about customers and all customer interactions. This information could be collected from landowners through a variety of means including return mail cards, profiling phone calls, and meetings with a landowner advocate or local conservationist. Ultimately, this would help target specific and appropriate messages to individual landowners, as well as improve the continuity of services provided between different conservation partners in a local area.