Farmer Discussion Groups: Getting Started

Think about the last time you heard a great idea or had an opportunity to share an idea of your own with a group of interested listeners. Chances are good this occurred in the company of people you had something in common with—people who had likely come together with a specific purpose in mind. After getting comfortably settled, perhaps sharing news and stories, you naturally turned your attention to the common interest or topic at hand, and soon a lively discussion evolved. Information was exchanged, and everyone learned something new or gained a fresh perspective. This is what typically occurs at regularly planned farmer discussion groups.

**Farmer discussion groups and farmer-to-farmer networks are helping to revitalize and strengthen farm people, their communities, and farming itself, in the United States and abroad.**

Discussion groups are effective because they:

- bring the people/farmers together in a relaxed and supportive setting;
- encourage the farmers to share and learn at a practical level, quite quickly;
- foster and improve personal respect and idea sharing (and use) among the people/farmers;
- help farmers avoid the pitfalls of working in isolation; and
- provide a sounding board for dealing with the challenges of farming.

How Do Farmer Discussion Groups Start?

Farmer discussion groups and networks grow out of farmers' or farm families' needs to share information to create or manage change, and to socialize with like-minded farmers. Farmer discussion groups typically form to give farmers an opportunity to address a common interest or to solve a common problem.
Common start-up pattern

Here is a common start-up pattern: One or two energetic farmers or agricultural advisors in the community rally the interest of a few others. After an initial planning session, these organizers schedule a follow-up meeting to which other farmers, usually neighbors, are invited. From here, further meetings are scheduled, often the same day of each month, and with topics, farm hosts or other meeting sites, group facilitator(s), and meeting notice methods selected.

Groups that are most productive and last the longest are often composed of farmers living in close geographic proximity. This is due in part to the fact that neighboring farmers trust the experience and knowledge of those working in conditions similar to their own, because they are curious about certain experiments or techniques they have seen their neighbors undertake, and because the driving time to get to other farms in the group is not too long.

Successful groups tend to rely on a handful of core members to assist with ongoing organization. These folks schedule and promote meetings, often making reminder telephone calls several days before the next discussion. Core members also take on planning responsibilities, such as contacting guest speakers and potential new members, and may also share a role of facilitating meetings and setting agendas.

Meeting styles and formats vary according to the members’ preferences, and often change over time. Some group members like to take turns hosting meetings at different farms, while others engage a local meeting hall where members can gather to share a meal and talk. Across the country, meeting styles range from informal neighborhood gatherings to monthly breakfast clubs to chartered cooperatives to regional associations of many local- or county-level groups.

The size of the group, its leadership style, and the format through which the members are brought together can be varied to meet the needs of the individuals involved. The important principle is that these factors be designed to promote the group’s shared interests. Other factors affecting how well a group evolves include the types of farms involved, the time of day and frequency of meetings, and the success with which an effective and enjoyable balance is struck between social time and discussion time.

Helpful hints for getting started

First meetings are always about how to proceed. A group of farmers may gather over refreshments in a neighbor’s kitchen for an informal discussion about starting a group. But even these initial, informal gatherings will require some form of leadership. Such a role may fall naturally to one member or another, or more likely to a host farmer.
if the meeting is taking place at his or her farm.

Host farmers can help everyone to feel welcome and comfortable by initiating the discussion of purpose: "I'm interested in organizing this group because I need practical or technical information to help me figure out..." Such needs might address cutting costs, improving management and production, increasing profitability, influencing farm policy, developing environmentally sound practices, conducting on-farm research, and enjoying farming more.

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By taking the role of speaker, the host encourages others to talk about their own needs. An open discussion of needs and interests in the early stages will help everyone to understand what might be gained from further discussions of specific topics and to identify other farmers who might be valuable to invite to future meetings.

The business of getting organized and into a good rhythm can also be expedited through the services of a facilitator, someone who has had experience helping other groups get started. Facilitators help build trust and confidentiality by helping the group establish ground rules for meetings. Group productivity may also be enhanced by including a guest speaker. These invited guests can provide valuable information regarding farming techniques, policy questions, economics, or planning.

Especially in the first few meetings, a facilitator can provide valuable assistance and insight in the following areas:

- introductions, getting to know one another;
- planning the agenda;
- keeping the discussion on topic and moving forward; and
- listening well and coaching the discussions to make sure that everyone feels able to contribute.

Practical Tips for Conducting a Meeting

If you are hosting a meeting, start off by taking the group on a short tour of your farm. Looking at animals and crops, inspecting buildings or equipment, showcasing new developments in your operation are all effective ways of showing visitors how your farm runs. Tours are excellent openers, especially in the early stages of establishing the group identity, because they help folks get to know each other.

Following the tour, invite your visitors into your kitchen or living room. Holding the meeting in a room that is vital to both home and business will help visiting group members feel at ease and on task. Even though the handshakes may have already been exchanged, and even if you are all well acquainted already, ask everyone to introduce themselves.
themselves and to make one or two statements about what they would like to get out of the meeting.

When everyone has taken a turn at the introductory round, a group member, facilitator, or host farmer can easily move the discussion into focus by briefly summarizing the group interests and then guiding everyone toward a hot topic or issue for today's meeting to address in detail. Following the meeting's topical discussion, turn attention to setting agendas for future meetings. Setting the date and location of the next meeting before you adjourn is a helpful way to keep the group going.

Talking about how discussion groups work and listening to some real examples shared by farmers or facilitators involved with other groups is also important. In the early meetings of new groups, members may not have acquired much experience in the group process. But the two descriptions that follow will provide some illustration of how other farmers have collaborated successfully.

Case Studies
Androscoggin County, Maine

In the Androscoggin Valley in south-central Maine, a group of dairy farmers was inspired to organize to discuss nutrient management. The formation of the group was sparked by farmers' interests in this particularly complex issue. Assistance with group organization was provided with the help of a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency water quality grant administered by a local Conservation District. The District's grant manager helped the discussion group coordinate meeting schedules and promote participation.

In its first season, the group convened its meetings at a USDA service Center. As a core group in its early stages, these farmers met with Extension researchers and USDA NRCS personnel to set up topics to investigate soil fertility. Meetings were held once a month from January through April. The grant manager developed the season's schedule of topics and contacted farmers in advance of each meeting to help them prepare for the discussion. In this first phase, five farmers attended nearly all the meetings. Others participated as topic or opportunity allowed.

In its second year, participation increased. Farmers took turns hosting and invited their fellow group members beyond the driveway and dooryard to look closer at (and learn from) their own specialized circumstances. For many, this was the first opportunity to really visit. (As one farmer said, "You don't pay a visit unless you're invited.")

The grant manager continued to facilitate the development of the group by coordinating the season's meeting calendar and listing potential topics for discussion.

Recordkeeping, pasture dry matter measurements, and ration balancing were among the subjects of conversation at this farmer meeting.

During its three-year life, this group succeeded in collaborating with Extension to conduct on-farm research on correlations between the soil test values and crop nutrient uptake for phosphorus and potassium. It also brought farmers into each other's fields to look at new, experimental crops like oil-seed sunflowers and silage corn intercropped with legumes. Further, these farmers examined new technical practices like intensive multi-species rotational grazing. Overall, the
group’s success was demonstrated by the ways farmers found for themselves the information they needed from within their own community of neighbors, agriculture agencies, and farm services.

Vermont

Since 1996, several farmer discussion groups have started up in Vermont. The members have realized tremendous benefits in getting expert advice on their management decisions. In addition, the groups that keep going usually do so because the moral support derived from each gathering is inspiring. Members of some discussion groups have made significant changes on their farms due to input they have received from other group members. Groups that have a relatively low turnover rate of membership, and have been regularly meeting for a year or more, have built a level of trust and confidentiality. Consequently, some group members are beginning to share their financial data and have received some very specific suggestions on how to cut costs and increase profitability.

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Following are some of the common factors that have made Vermont discussion groups successful over the long run. These can also be considered as helpful hints for other folks interested in starting a discussion group.

• A steady membership that attends all or most meetings is key.
• A variety of types of farmers in the group often adds to the dynamics. (Some very successful groups include vegetable, sheep, dairy, and beef farmers.)
• Farmers depend on each other to find answers and solutions to problems and only call in a guest speaker/“expert” when they feel they need a different perspective or information they can’t find within their own group.
• The next group meeting time and location is set before the end of the meeting. This may also include some discussion of what the agenda will include.
• An agenda is set, but stays flexible. For example, at one meeting, as group members addressed the agenda for the day, a short item at the beginning of the meeting for each farmer to update to the group on how they (and their farm) were doing changed the flow of the day. One farmer said, “I’m feeling really stressed out and tired because my hired man quit last night and the drain in my milking parlor froze up.” The group decided to discuss some of the agenda and have their lunch.
early in order to spend some time helping their
neighbor fix his milking parlor.

- The farmers decide the importance of socializing
and eating a meal. Some groups have a meal as
the center point of the meeting, while other
groups spend most of their time on a very “busi-
ness-like” agenda.

- The meeting format may change from winter to
summer. Most Vermont groups meet once each
month. Some, however, meet only in the winter,
and the time and frequency of meetings can be
changed with the seasons.

- Flexibility is essential for good group dynamics.
Each and every one of the Vermont groups has a
completely different structure and meeting style.

- Easier topics are chosen for the first few meetings.
It makes sense to save topics that make people feel
uncomfortable—like finances, family, or spiritual-
ity—until later.

- At least some of the group members should get
training in facilitation skills. These are often
offered through the Extension system or nonprofit
organizations.

- It’s best to invite people who get along with each
other. Avoid bringing together folks who are
having a feud!

- It’s helpful to invite a farmer who is a member of
another discussion group to come share his or her
experiences with starting and running a farmer
discussion group.

Help to Start a Discussion Group

Discussion groups are a great way for farmers to
learn from each other, and make the most use of
informational resources, such as advisors, specialists,
researchers, and farmers from away. They spark
tremendous creativity and help build community.
For more help, contact a few neighbors and discuss
the idea. Your local Extension or NRCS field repre-
sentative could be helpful organizers, facilitators,
resource seekers, and guest presenters.

Resources

Barrett, Kathy, in collaboration with D. Merrill Evert,
Farmer to Farmer Learning Groups (Gpp UVM
NT79407), Northeast Region SARE/ACE Project,

Farmer-to-Farmer Networks: Effective Grassroots Sharing
(Research Brief #23), Center for Integrated Agricul-
tural Systems, College of Agriculture and Life Sci-
ences, University of Wisconsin- Madison, 1996.

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