



Facilitating Positive Relationships with Farmers for On-Farm Research

Laura Johnson and Vern Grubinger. June 2025

On-farm research is a great tool for conducting agricultural studies under “real world” conditions. It is also a great way to engage farmers in the design, implementation, and interpretation of research. However, the success of on-farm studies depends on good communication with farm hosts. Here are some recommendations to achieve that.

Initial contact should clearly and concisely explain:

- The purpose and duration of the project
- Your role/activities and the role/activities of the farmer
- Specific farm resources needed (use of land, access to crops or equipment, etc.)
- Expectations of the farmer (managing crops, providing records, collecting data)
- Any compensation or incentives for participating farmers
- Any potential risks* (e.g. yield loss)

If the farm agrees to participate:

- Ask how the farm prefers to be communicated with and confirm use of that method.
- Schedule a site visit and make introductions before initiating the research. Include anyone who will be visiting the farm during the research period so people can meet one another.
- Review with the farmer, and any other employees that will be involved, exactly what will happen during visits, what data will be collected, and how it will be used and results shared.
- Clearly establish frequency of communication for on-farm research visits. Do they want you to call/email/text before every time you come? How much advanced notice do they want? Do they want reminders?
- Determine where researchers can park (so as not to block other vehicles, farm machinery, damage crop land, or impede customer parking). Where can one drive/not drive your vehicle? What should be known about fences or other farm staff who may not know your role?
- Ask permission to take photos, if they are of anything that seems personal or is something that could identify the farm.
- You may want to provide a MOU or similar document (e.g. a project welcome letter) so that you and farmers are on the same page about any or all of the items above.

* Collection of any data that is highly personal, creates certain kinds of risks for people or animals, or involves vulnerable populations (youth, seniors, etc.) may require approval of a special plan to protect participants, especially if the University is involved in the project.

Whenever visiting the farm:

- Don't be surprised if the farm forgets who you are, why you are there, or that you were coming. Erring on the side of overcommunication prior to visits may be advisable.
- Say hi to the farmer and staff that you may see on your way to the research site.
- Express gratitude for their willingness to work with you. They don't have to.
- Ensure privacy. Don't share information about other farms unless given permission to do so. You don't know the relationship between farm businesses.
- Err on the side of asking permission when doing anything with land and crops that may be perceived as different than what was agreed to (e.g. sampling a new area).
- When driving through fields, scout your route first. It can be difficult to see fences and expensive farm equipment, especially when there is no obvious farm road and when grass or crops are tall. This can help avoid damage to valuable farm tools (ex. irrigation pipe) and to your own vehicle.
- Valuable pieces of research materials in the field (ex. sensors or insect traps) should be placed in mutually agreed upon areas, outside of trafficked areas, and clearly visible for safety and to prevent the farmer or staff from damaging it during field operations.
- Be sure to open and close fences upon entering and exiting a field. If you turn off an electric fence, turn it back on. Fencing may be protecting valuable crops or livestock from wildlife or keeping livestock from escaping an area.
- When working on farms with livestock, use extreme caution. There may be protective or defensive animals, such as a bull, ram, or rooster that can cause serious injury. Cows or other livestock might also be curious or scared and approach you or react unexpectedly to your presence or the presence of research tools.

Biosecurity:

- When working on farms with livestock, determine any biosecurity measures that you need to understand and follow. Are plastic booties necessary or advisable? It is advisable to wash your boots between visits to livestock farms. Does the farm want you to use a bleach solution? Be sure to have the materials you need with you before farm visits. If you forget them, do not enter the farm.
- Some crop farmers may also have biosecurity expectations or needs, especially around plant disease prevention (e.g. virus transmission).

During and at the conclusion of the project:

- Share brief updates on project progress or findings with farmers in an appropriate, summarized format to keep them engaged and acknowledged.
- Alert farmers promptly if there are changes to the project that affect them. Let farmers know of any specific venues where their data will be shared. This offers them a chance to confirm if they do or do not want their name publicly associated with the data/findings.
- If payments or other incentives are due the farmer, check that they have been sent.
- Provide farmers with a copy of the project's final report or summary of findings or data generated at the farm; be sure it credits all farm cooperators.