

Whole Farm Planning course reaches new on-line audience of beginning farmers

AT A GLANCE

On-line courses with live webinars can meet the educational needs of geographically isolated and/or time constrained beginning farmers seeking to explore their small farm dream.

The Situation

University of Idaho Extension Small Farm Team has been offering the introductory level Cultivating Success™ whole farm planning course since 2001. This course focuses on sustainable small farming and ranching for beginning farmers who have limited or no experience in whole farm and business planning. Traditionally, these courses have been offered as a 10-12 week series, meeting in-person once a week for 3-hour sessions. In response to request from geographically isolated and/or time constrained producers, we began developing on-line courses in 2010 that could be offered to producers in Idaho and bordering counties of eastern Washington. Our 2010 pilot Whole Farm Planning on-line course filled up quickly with a total of 60 participants, and we had a waiting list of 15 producers. The need for more online courses in Whole Farm Planning have been consistently indicated in regional producer meetings, conversations with clientele and program evaluations conducted by the project team.

Our Response

Taking the lessons learned from our 2010 pilot course, UI Extension educators and experienced farmer mentors teamed up in late fall of 2013, to offer a second online course in Whole Farm Planning (WFP). The 8-week course was enhanced by adding weekly 'real time' webinars and streamlining the



Produce farmer Jessica McAleese shared tips with beginning farmers based on her experience building LadyBird Farms.

on-line curriculum content. Topics in the WFP course included: development of goals, resource evaluation, site-specific best management practices, and market analysis.

The online WFP course was advertised broadly using local producer email lists, press releases, and local radio announcements. A total of 51 participants (from 34 farms/ranches) enrolled. Participants connected to course materials using a Moodle platform, through the eXtension Online Campus. The weekly webinars complimented the online weekly topic, reading and worksheet assignments. The online platform included a discussion forum where course participants could discuss assignments and ask questions. Numerous supplementary video resources were included on the website so participants could tailor their content.

Program Outcomes

End-of-course evaluation results: The online end-of-course evaluation using Survey Monkey indicated respondents had started to develop or improve their whole farm plans by assessing the feasibility of producing a new crop or livestock species, assessing the economic feasibility of a farm enterprise, evaluating the market potential of one or more products, and/or assessing different marketing strategies.

Increase in knowledge: Of those who responded to end-of-course evaluations, 88% indicated that their knowledge increased in principles of small farm sustainability, techniques for developing farm goals, innovative marketing strategies, and ways to improve farm profitability. More than 62% responded that their knowledge in ecologically-based insect, disease, weed and soil management practices increased. Seventy-five percent of respondents said their knowledge increased or greatly increased in sustainable livestock production systems.

Implementing a whole farm plan: More than 85% of respondents said they assessed the production feasibility of a new crop or livestock species, compared the costs of production with the estimated income potential to assess the economic feasibility of a farm or ranch enterprise, and began to develop or complete a whole farm plan.

Rating the course: More than 70% of participants who responded rated the course of great value for increasing their knowledge and/or skills in sustainable farming and ranching, and more than 85% of respondents said they would recommend this course to others. Participants greatly preferred live webinars, recorded webinars and independent readings as methods for learning the course topics, but also highly rated discussion forums, communication with instructors and assignments as greatly beneficial for their learning. More than 85% of participants felt the online platform was easy to navigate for accessing reading materials, assignments, online discussions. More than 85% of the participants felt the length of the course was just the right amount of time, while the other participants would have liked the course to continue a bit longer. Topics that were rated as the most beneficial included: steps for developing a whole farm plan, resource evaluation, sustainable livestock production, and evaluation of equipment and facilities. When asked what they would like to have learned more about, participants responded they would like more information about niche markets, soil health, how to manage a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, and vegetable crop production.

Other gleanings from the evaluation: One farm/land-owner couple mentioned that after going through the process of developing a whole farm plan they realized their goals were not to produce for commercial sale, but instead realized that

with their limited time they just wanted to learn how to better manage their land in a sustainable manner and provide food for friends, family and neighbors. They felt that by taking this course and coming to this realization was extremely valuable.

The Future

There is additional interest in having more on-line courses for beginning farmers. UI Extension Educators and partners are looking at new formats that involve combining an on-line course with webinars and in-person regional workshops. Participants and instructors are aware of the importance of 'building community' with other farmers as a critical element of building a successful farming business.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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