

## **Small Farms Extension Programs in Southern States <sup>1</sup>**

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The U. S. Department of Agriculture funded a special project to review the administrative strategies to small farms extension programs in southern states and to examine the importance of various commodities to this clientele group. The 29 land grant institutions in 14 southern states were surveyed, current census data were reviewed and past small farms efforts on a national and regional basis were summarized. The following paragraphs provide an overview of the report and some of the conclusions and recommendations presented.

### **SMALL FARMS - DEFINITIONS**

The tremendous diversity in the agricultural enterprises referred to as small farms is reflected by the diversity in definitions for this sector of U.S. farms. The most common means of defining this sector is by gross annual sales, but the literature defines the small farm as one with annual gross sales of less than \$1,000 to less than \$40,000. The term minifarm has been coined recently to describe farms with gross sales of \$1,000 to \$2,499 a year. Limited resource farms have been described as small farms with gross sales less than \$10,000 and less than \$20,000 that provide the majority or a significant portion of operator income. While USDA, especially

the Economic Research Service, reports increasingly refer to farms with gross sales less than \$40,000 as "small farm", the only "official" definition is found in Section 507(c) of the Rural Development act of 1972 as amended: "Small farmer' means any farmer with gross sales from farming of \$20,000 or less per year." One important delineating character within small farm owners is their motivation. Some are motivated by profit while others are motivated by a rural lifestyle (1), farm as a hobby or seek to take advantage of tax breaks for agricultural real estate. Limited resource farmers are generally considered those producers who depend primarily on the farm for their livelihood, live below the poverty level and lack the financial or educational resources to better their situation. This category of small farms is sometimes called subsistence farms. Some small farms are operated by families that depend upon the farm to supplement their modest income. However, the same sized farms may be owned by families who farm by choice, not necessity.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture established a working "socioeconomic" definition of small farms in 1979. A small farm was characterized as follows:

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- Family net income from all sources is below the median non-metropolitan income of the state.
- The family is dependent on the farm for a significant portion, though not necessarily a majority, of their income.
- Family members provide most of the labor and management.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The small farms extension audience is diverse within the southern region and between geographic regions within southern states. Many programs are directed toward the general small farms audience, characterized by gross annual sales from \$5,000 up to \$40,000 in most cases. Administrators at 1802 and 1890 land grant institutions in Alabama, Kentucky, North Carolina and South Carolina indicated the farm population in their state or regions within their state consists primarily of small acreage farmers and the majority of Extension efforts can be defined as small farms programs. Although the traditional limited resource farmer is part of most Extension small farms audiences, this segment of the audience does not dominate the small farms efforts in most states.

County extension faculty awareness and informal assessment by county advisory committees of nature, limitations and potentials of small farm operators provide a base for extension programs. Formal audience characterizations have been performed in recent years by four of the 26 responding institutions. It appears that more thorough knowledge of the characteristics of small farms and their operators within states and regions could result in more effective targeting of extension programs.

One-on-one contact, demonstration plots and publications were perceived by responding administrators to be the most effective methods of information delivery to all segments of the small farms audience. This correlated positively with their assessment that the number of professional and paraprofessional staff is the most limiting factor in small farms program efforts.

Although the majority of institutions promote some degree of interdisciplinary cooperation in extension and extension/research programming, these teams are often loosely coordinated. Often such programs involved faculty from different commodity or discipline departments working independently on a common set of problems or opportunities. True interdisciplinary teams with a well-defined systems approach and team goals were less common. It would appear from examination of extension small farm programs in southern states that teams composed of commodity, farm management, marketing, family life and sociology specialists that focus attention on a system or group of systems are likely to provide the greatest impact on small farm families.

Follow-up visits and phone interviews with extension administrators and faculty indicate that success in initiating interdisciplinary system approaches depends on existing interpersonal relationships, team member abilities, the degree of mutual professional respect among the team and perceived administrative commitment to the team or system approach. Incentives for faculty involvement in system approaches must be provided. Faculty evaluation and promotion based on contributions to assigned teams could provide added incentive. Internal funding strategies designed to encourage development of an integrated systems approach to well-defined problems and/or opportunities could also be used. It has been suggested that this would allow initiation of projects by teams that have already expressed a desire to cooperate and had input in the direction and management of the effort. The abilities and interest of the team coordinator is extremely important and administrators could encourage selected individual(s) to coordinate the development of project proposals.

Vegetable crops are the most important commodity group for small farms in southern states and their importance is expected to increase, especially in states where tobacco, cattle and/or field and grain crops have been the major commodities. Fruit crops, goats and sheep, nursery crops, floriculture and foliage plants, Christmas trees and aquaculture are expected to increase in importance within the next five years. However, the degree of emphasis being placed on these commodities by

extension programs in some states does not reflect commodity shifts on small acreage. Program shifts are essential if Extension's impact is to be maximized. Extension must provide a broad education for the small farm audience and focus limited and declining resources on commodities with the greatest potential. Some of these commodities will be commonly grown; however, different packaging or a modified marketing plan could make significant differences in profitability. Commodities not commonly grown in the area or region should also be considered, giving adequate attention to marketing before committing to production.

Nine of the 25 responding institutions had established interdisciplinary teams to review the potential of various commodities for small acreage farms. Four other institutions are in the process of developing such a strategy. Review team activities include market assessment, production cost and capitalization estimation and determining cultural and managerial requirements. Resulting information is being disseminated primarily through demonstration plots, one-on-one contact and publications.

Market expansion for existing commodities and evaluation and development of enterprises that are not a major part of agriculture in an area, region or state appear to offer greatest returns on extension program investments for small acreage farmers. Teaching farmers to produce crops that are grown by other farmers in the area and for which the current markets can frequently not handle the supply may be an inefficient use of extension resources. Small acreage farmers must be innovative and capitalize on special opportunities to assess the options to small acreage farmers and present enough technical, economic and marketing information so farmers can make the appropriate decisions within their circumstances, limitations and expectations. Education of farmers to effective decision making will enhance the success rate of small farms.

Public awareness of the crises in rural America and the potentials for entrepreneurship in agriculture should result in public policy to assist small acreage farms. Cooperative Extension must continue to address the needs of small farms, and the impact can be greatly enhanced by additional resources channeled properly through the existing system.