

CANADIAN ORGANIC EXTENSION NETWORK

By Brenda Frick

Extension is the link between scientific research and farm practice.

Researchers and farmers do not always speak the same language, or have time to keep each other fully informed. To help bridge this gap, extension specialists network with researchers and sift through research reports to share useful items with farmers. They also talk with farmers and share their concerns and research needs with scientists.

In 2010, Keri Sharpe from Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development invited a group of extension people working with government and organic organizations to come together to share successes, strategies and concerns about organic extension. They formed the Canadian Organic Extension Network (COEN). This group hosted an extension session at the Canadian Organic Science Conference to ensure that extension concerns were part of the science discussion.

At the workshop, Sharpe reviewed the situation for organic extension in Canada. She pointed out that the Maritimes and Ontario have had good financial support recently. Also, businesses such as Homestead Organics and Organic Meadow provide extension to their members/clients. In the past, the Western provinces had invested a great deal of time and energy to organic extension, but this investment has lessened in recent years. “We had good results with the organic coordinators, but times change. Now we have to figure out how to get the word out,” states Sharpe. As Dorothy Marshall wrote in the Organic Alberta newsletter, “If a scientist does organic research and no farmer is aware of it, is it worthwhile research?”.

There are many ways to connect farmers and researchers. National organizations have developed and provided extension. Canadian Organic Growers has a number of important grower manuals, as well as this magazine. However, today COG is facing serious financial challenges. The Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada once had extension coordinators

in both the east and west, but the primary focus of their current extension is on-line resources at www.oacc.info.

In conjunction with conference organizers, COEN arranged a session with two goals:

- 1) to learn from organic extension expertise outside of Canada, and
- 2) to encourage researchers and farmers to connect.

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COEN invited Frank Kutka* to review strategies in the U.S, where there is a substantial record of extension services. By the First World War, the extension service had an office in every county, bringing research-based information to the farming public. Public radio owes its inception to distance education courses for farmers as early as 1930. Innovation continues today through websites and YouTube videos. Despite tough times, and reduced funding, extension in the U.S. is still “Connecting people with practical research ... organic agriculture is being addressed.” In the face of the American financial crisis and declining farm numbers, funding to extension is declining in the U.S. as well.

*Frank Kutka is the assistant director of the Dickinson Research Extension Center and a coordinator for the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program in the Dakotas.



A meeting of farmers and researchers at a 2009 PEI Field Day.

COEN also brought together a panel of researchers and farmers to remind them of the benefits of working collaboratively. Dr. Martin Entz from the University of Manitoba shared that, for him, research begins with farmers. It is important, he says, “to listen to farmers, meet the people, find out what the problems are, then we can design research around it.” Entz’s thoughts were echoed by others on his research team who find working with farmers rewarding.

and Fran DeRuyck from Manitoba all found it beneficial to be part of research projects. They enjoyed seeing new techniques in action on

their farms and being able to “cherry pick” the research practices that they would incorporate into their operations.

Entz summarized that collaboration among researcher, farmer and extensionist is especially important in the systems research which is desirable in organic studies. “The farmer is the conductor of a whole symphony... we need to do more whole farm analysis.”

The COEN workshop was framed by the sharing of research results through posters and presentations and a day of strategic planning. The importance of extension was reiterated frequently throughout. The inherent value of extension, it seems, is recognized by researchers and farmers alike. Means of funding extension are not as obvious.

Photo credit: Joanna MacKenzie

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Organic farmers who have been directly involved in research projects shared their experiences. Martin Meinert from Saskatchewan, and Marvin Dyck and Dan