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Program: New York FarmLink
Organizations: New York FarmNet and Cornell Dept. of Applied Economics
Dates: 1996 to present
Target Audience: Planners and startups, as well as exiting farmers

Needs Addressed

Transferring management responsibility and farm assets to the next generation or a non-family member is a critical, but often confusing, process. In addition, exiting farmers often face limited choices for retirement, and new farmers can struggle to obtain the necessary knowledge, skills and financing.

New York FarmLink was created to assist exiting and entering farmers with this important and difficult task. Program organizers determined two resources are needed: human resources such as consultants and easy-to-use printed materials. An assessment of available materials revealed that the majority of literature on farm transfers was so technical that it intimidated farm families as well as FarmNet consultants and Cooperative Extension personnel working with them.

Recognizing the need for assistance and materials, Cathy Sheils, New York FarmNet director, sought support from Cornell University's Department of Applied Economics. It funded one half of a new position, with responsibilities for FarmLink, within the FarmNet program. She also convinced the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets to increase FarmNet's operating budget by a third. With funding, New York FarmLink could begin to meet the needs of new farmers (explorers, planners and startups) and retiring ones.

Response

Increased staff and budget allowed FarmLink to evolve into a program that provides educational resources, consulting and opportunities that enable more farms to be transferred and joint ventures to be developed.

FarmLink created two farm transfer workbooks – one each for the junior and senior generations. These easy-to-use, step-by-step guides clarify the transfer process, breaking it into smaller segments. The program created a facilitator’s guide to accompany the two farm transfer workbooks.

FarmLink held a two-day training on transfers for Cornell Extension educators and FarmNet consultants in September 2002.

FarmLink scrapped the entire database of farm transfer information. It obtained new legal and financial articles by purchasing permission to reprint copyrighted articles under the FarmLink name and logo.

FarmLink expanded its database to include options for beginning farmers who are not ready to own a farm. Options include apprenticeships, management opportunities, partnerships and farm rental.

FarmLink held 17 regional workshops for farm families and FarmLink participants from October 2002 to March 2003. Participants received the farm transfer workbooks and were teamed up with a facilitator from either FarmNet or Extension.

Funding

In addition to funding from Cornell University’s Department of Applied Economics and the state’s Department of Agriculture and Markets, New York FarmLink received a financing grant for a new producer milk-marketing contract. The mentor/apprenticeship SARE grant proposal by Ora Rothfuss and Cathy Sheils also provides funds. FarmLink also raises funds through participant fees, publication sales and grants.

Partners

NY FarmNet consultants, Cornell Cooperative Extension Farm Management Educators and agribusiness professionals make the majority of initial contacts with FarmLink.

Outreach

Early in 2003, FarmLink launched an advertising campaign targeting trade shows and agricultural business meetings. The program made more than 1,000 direct mailings and scheduled 10 trade show exhibits. The program received invitations to five agricultural business meetings.

FarmLink has an accessible website: <http://www.nyfarmlink.org>. It provides a wealth of information about farm transitions and numerous links to other helpful sites.

Analysis

Successes: New York FarmLink can point to six major accomplishments:

- 1. The farm transfer workbooks** and the facilitator’s guide. Cooperative Extension educators and FarmNet consultants give these resources rave reviews for their usefulness in helping families with business transfers.
- 2. Effective regional programs.** FarmLink held meetings in every region of the state in 2002. As of this writing, FarmLink appears to have scheduled even more meetings in 2003.
- 3. Recognition statewide** that FarmLink is a resource for farm transfer information. Cornell Cooperative Extension, FarmNet consultants and agribusiness professionals make the majority of phone calls to FarmLink.

4. **Heightened farmer awareness** of FarmLink and farm transfers. The New York FarmLink name has gained high recognition across the state because of its expanded service – it’s more than a “matching service” – and a valuable product to accompany that service.
5. **Increased awareness** of farm transfer issues among agricultural service providers. The program accomplished this by launching an aggressive marketing campaign directed to agricultural businesses and trade shows early in 2003. As previously stated, FarmLink mailed more than 1,000 information pieces, scheduled 10 trade show exhibits and received five invitations to agricultural business meetings.
6. **Facilitated matches.** FarmLink facilitated at least six matches between 1996 and 2001 and nine successful ones in 2002. These matches serve as high-profile promotional pieces in magazines and newsletters. A participant in one of these “matches” serves on the FarmNet board of directors.

Challenges: We see six major challenges for the New York FarmLink program as it attempts to secure its future and to assist farmers:

1. **To help** new farmers (planners) reach a skill level necessary for them to start farming.
2. **To develop** a mechanism to handle new farmers labeled as “dreamers.” These are people who need exposure to basic farming. Providing that experience requires a lot of resources and time. And successes are few.
3. **To increase** farm owners’ capacity to think of – and implement – innovative options to bring the younger generation into agriculture. They need to explore flexible business arrangements and methods to help their successors develop management and business skills.
4. **To secure** continued funding of FarmLink through state funds and grants.
5. **To research**, then publish materials on, various farm transition approaches such as partnerships and joint ventures. FarmLink plans to publish more workbooks on areas such as exiting farming, beginning farming and alternative approaches.
6. **To reach** farm families who do not attend workshops sponsored by Cornell or FarmLink.

Next Steps

To meet the six challenges, to discover and prepare for new challenges, and to increase the capacity of FarmLink’s staff, consultants and cooperators to address the transition process.

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