

Building Successful Farmer-Researcher Collaboration

Lessons Learned from Organic Farmers and Researchers on What it Takes to Build Productive, Reciprocal Relationships

Farmers and ranchers are natural researchers, regularly using trial-and-error to address on-farm questions and challenges. Research shows that farmers greatly benefit when they lead on-farm research trials.

Programs like the Organic Farming Research Foundation's Farmer-Led Trials and the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education's Farmer-Rancher Grant put farmers in the driver's seat, allowing them to conceive and carry out research on their farms.

For research involving farmers and University scientists, successful collaborations between farmers and researchers can greatly enhance results. However, these collaborations take time to build. Read on for lessons learned from organic farmers and researchers about how to form these effective collaborations.



Seeds of Success: Farmer-Researcher Collaborations

OFRF's Seeds of Success Networking Sessions bring together panels of organic farmers. They are designed to empower organic producers and transitioning farmers through engaging peer-to-peer conversations. Each session acts as an interactive, informal space for farmers to share their challenges and successes, and will give farmers an opportunity to have open conversations on topics most relevant to them.

In a recent Seeds of Success session, participants highlighted key strategies for building Successful Farmer-Researcher Collaboration:



BUILDING TRUST AND LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

- Spending time with farmers helps build trust and form the reciprocal relationships that are key to success.

“Every good research idea I’ve ever had has come from being in community with farmers...so it [good research] is not my idea really. It really behooves researchers to be out with farmers.”
-Dr. Mary Hendrickson, University of Missouri

- Once earned, the trust of farmers must be kept. And that requires connecting after the conclusion of on-farm research.

“One of the biggest frustrations is not finding out the bigger picture that my farm or my participation has contributed to. I don’t think I’ve ever worked with a researcher who has sent me an extension publication or the final paper and said, “This is what you were involved in.” That would mean more to me than the stipend.”
-Meg Stuedemann, Derrydale Farm

COMPENSATION FOR FARMERS

- Panelists in the session reported a wide range of compensation for farmers. Paying farmers an equivalent to fees of other professional consultants was recommended.

TIMELINES CAN BE TRICKY

- Networking can ensure farmers can help generate ideas for new research, but involving farmers in research projects can be a whole other challenge.
 - Even after a good research idea has been identified, researchers may have to wait months for funders' Request for Applications (RFA's) to be released before they know the specifics for proposals and timelines. These can have very regimented procedures that researchers have to stick to throughout the project period (several years). And it can take months to write a proposal and then several more months before researchers find out if they got the funding.

 **Researcher Tip:** *To ensure farmer involvement in a project, it is advisable that researchers get to know several producers within an industry.*

 **Farmer Tip:** *There are many more farmers than there are researchers, so farmers may have to reach out to researchers sometimes rather than the other way around.*

TRANSPARENCY BREEDS TRUST

This insight came up in a related [panel with organic farmers on working with researchers](#).

- Develop clear data-sharing agreements with farmers outlining access and ownership rights. This strategy ensures transparency and builds trust throughout the research process. Present research findings in clear, concise language with easy-to-understand visuals and summaries as early as possible.

“Jargon can be a barrier. Researchers who can convey their findings in a way that resonates with farmers enable us to implement their knowledge in our practices.”

-Zachary Paige of North Circle Seeds

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