Abstract

An agricultural survey to assess program needs of farmers in Riverside and San Bernardino counties was conducted in 2004. Demographics, production systems, farm management methods, and clientele issues and concerns were analyzed and program needs evaluated.

An Agricultural Survey Assesses Clientele Program Needs

By Etaferahu Takele, Peggy Mauk, and Ihab Sharabeen

Introduction

In California, particularly in southern California we are faced with a changing composition of agricultural producers and commodities. These changes are brought about by increasing competition for markets and resources, rapid population growth and urbanization, rising land and water prices, and increasing regulatory pressures. Farms have changed from conventional large to a diverse and dynamic industry composed of numerous small-scale operations growing a diversity of crops. In southern California, there are over 18,000 farms in the region according to the County Agricultural Commissioner reports 40 percent of which having less than 10 acres, making the region with the largest number of small farms in the United States. In addition to being small, more than 200 crops are grown.

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In this scenario, the viability and sustainability of agricultural producers in the region depend on their creativity and risk management capability. They must understand the economic, marketing, and production risks affecting their operations. They must acquire skills in the areas of business planning and effective resource allocation. They must keep up with the regulatory process and cope with rapid growth and urbanization. They must know how to access and utilize information to make decisions under uncertainty. And, most importantly, farmers must be adaptive and responsive so that they take advantage of business opportunities that may be present. Therefore, the Farm Management Program in the University of California Cooperative Extension is making an effort to address the concerns and needs of such a diversified clientele.

Clientele needs and program priority are usually determined in consultation with local commodity farm advisors as well as feedback from evaluations at seminars and conferences. In 2004, using funding we received from USDA, and in partnership with the California State University San Bernardino (CSUSB), we conducted a survey of our clientele and their needs. The purpose was for evaluating current programs to determine if they met their needs and for developing future programs to meet the needs and enhance the viability and sustainability of our clientele. The following is the results and the educational implications we gathered from the data.

Inland Empire Agricultural Survey

We mailed out 3,500 surveys to the farm clientele in the Inland Empire of Riverside and San Bernardino counties. The number of surveys included all those on our mailing list (2,433) developed from the Agricultural Census in 2002 plus others from our meeting sign-up sheets and program subscribers in both counties. We received back 205 (about 6%) responses.

The survey questionnaire contained 45 questions and was designed to gather information in the following categories:

1. Demographics (age, educational background, computer skills, ethnicity, and non-farm income)
2. Production systems (farm ownership, crop type, methods of farming, business organization, and land tenure)
3. Farm management (farm size, experience in farming, use of farm labor, financial and marketing means, gross income, and risk management strategies)
4. Concern areas (production, business, financial, post harvest, and marketing)
5. Information sources (agencies, individuals and institutions, and methods)

The responses were tabulated and summarized using percentages. The percentages analyzed the relative frequency of responses in each question. We also investigated if there were differences in the responses between minorities (Hispanic, African American, and Asian) compared to those of Caucasians to help us identify if there were differences in program needs. Following are the results from which we drew certain conclusions for purposes of future program development and delivery.

Educational Programs Identified

Overall, the results helped us to characterize our clientele and to identify program needs. Most of our farm audience is aging, average 55 (just about the same as in the 2002 Census with the average age of the principal operator at 58 years old) with 75 percent over 50 years old, with an average of more than 30 years of experience and 77 percent with full land ownership. These features indicate an overall stable nature of the agricultural business in the Inland Empire. However, with about half of the survey respondents being older and sole proprietor, there may be a possible decline of generational farming trends.

Rising resource costs induced by increasing water and land prices have become concerns of continuing agriculture in this region. However, speculation of further increases in value of land have on the other hand become the motivating factor for holding land ownership and keeping the stability of the farm. Therefore our risk management program would continue to deal with irrigation efficiency and management as well as the impacts of laws and regulations on water and land use for agriculture.

Seventeen percent of the survey respondents indicated being in a family owned business and most of them indicated not to have family succession plans, providing us with an opportunity for development and delivery of programs in business planning and family succession training. The fact that most in this group are minorities may require providing program translation or training in another language. This will be dealt on an as needed basis.

About 20 percent of the respondents are in organic, specialty crops, and sustainable agricultural operations. Despite relatively high input prices and national and international market competition, specialty crops provide opportunities for profit. However, there are also challenges as information is limited for many of the crops. Risk management education will continue to include production practices, harvesting methods and marketing niches.

This program has in fact already begun in 2005. We provided seven training sessions covering all the subjects mentioned above. Also we have had the opportunity to explore local marketing venues including the development of a co-op that will bring locally grown fresh produce to distribute to agencies that provide food and nutritional support to low income residents. Local sale of produce through the co-op is expected to reduce grower costs that would be incurred for shipping, brokerage, and selling to a conventional market.

Our audience, across ethnicity, is characterized by a high educational level and most using computers (78% of total responses and 83% of minorities) in their farming operation opens an opportunity for delivering programs and tools using electronic systems compatible to Windows operating system and software applications. In 2006-2007 we are planning to conduct training and program dissemination of a budget generator enterprise analytical tool. This project was funded by the Western Region Risk Management Education Program. The objective of this project is to equip growers with the ability to develop in-house enterprise budgets and analyze cost-benefit relationships of their enterprises so that they can increase their risk management capability through cost management, diversification, and selection and mix of profitable enterprises.

The results of the survey also confirmed that we have been on target in terms of programs that we have been delivering to our clientele. Our labor personnel management training programs in both Spanish and English have had great success in the past. Our survey showed that the majority of the respondents (80%) indicated their dependence on hired labor and given that almost 50 percent expressed laws and regulations to be of primary and secondary concern, the need for continued personnel and labor management educational programs along with environmental regulations and community development is obvious.

Many respondents reinvest private funds into their farming operation. Borrowing, especially for most minorities, is from private banks. It is likely that this group will benefit from financial management education that would include investment analysis and borrowing strategies and opportunities.

The following will be taken into consideration in our program planning and delivery. Efforts must be made to schedule meeting dates and times to suit our clientele. Most of the respondents prefer Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday mornings for educational meetings. Furthermore, choosing seasons for meetings to avoid busy field work is also important. Meeting location preferences for the Inland Empire included Indio, Moreno Valley, and San Bernardino. We are particularly encouraged by the fact that most participants (91%) do not mind paying for lunch. This in fact will provide an opportunity for our clientele to have time to discuss their questions in more detail with the speakers and also to have time for networking with each other. In fact, the lunch time can be used for growers' panels as about half of the farm operators expressed interest in participating in a forum with others involved in agriculture.

Special consideration requirements must be met even though only three percent required special consideration to get information or participate in meetings. It is important to have Spanish language translation (only 2% indicated preference) available at meetings. Labor management is an area where continued education in Spanish has been in great demand.

Most growers indicated other farmers as the primary source of information (Table 5) followed by Pest Control Advisors (PCA) and University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE). UCCE is also considered as the secondary source of information by 20 percent of all respondents. Given that UCCE provides information to PCAs and other farmers, we think that its contribution as a source of information is more than the percent indicated. Proportionally more minorities receive information from UCCE (30%). Newsletters, friends/personal contacts, and trade journal articles are considered as the primary means of getting information (50%). Therefore, we will expand the use of information dissemination through newsletters and trade journals.

Summary

The survey responses, though not as many as we expected to receive, confirmed our views of our clientele category, the diversification of their needs, and that the programs we have been conducting in the University of California Cooperative Extension were on target. This gave us confidence to build on programs that we have been offering as well as being able to identify new ones. We will be expanding on programs dealing with irrigation management as it relates to efficiency of water use and costs; laws and regulations related to water and land use; labor management; family succession plans; and specialty and new crops production, harvesting, and marketing. We will also be conducting programs and delivering computer tools for enabling growers to analyze and manage their enterprises so that their viability and sustainability will increase.

Table 1. Demographic information: age, education, business type and role of farm operators, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, 2004

Category	% of Responses
Age	
>70	32%
61-70	16%
51-60	27%
41-50	20%
31-40	4%
<30	1%
Educational background	
High school	23%
College (4-year degree)	22%
Graduate school	19%
Others (professional school, technical)	36%
Computer use	78%
Business Type	
Individual /sole proprietors	42%
Family-owned	17%
Corporation	21%
Partnership	8%
Others (estate/trust, cooperative)	12%
Activity	
Resident owners	57%
Grove managers	6%
Agricultural consultants	6%
Absentee owner	6%
Pest control advisor (PCA)	4%
Others (Wholesalers, retailers, etc)	21%

Source: Responses from Agricultural Program Needs Assessment Survey

Table 2. Production systems, crop information, gross sales, and land tenure of farm operators, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, 2004

Category	% of Responses
Production systems	
Conventional	68%
Organic or in transition	13%
Sustainable agriculture	7%
Others (non-farming, consulting)	12%
Crop information	
Subtropical	40%
Vegetables	12%
Field crops	11%
Grapes	6%
Livestock	11%
Others (dates, cut flowers, poultry)	20%
Gross sales	
<$250,000	56%
$250,000-$1,000,000	11%
>$1,000,000	33%
Off-farm income	62%
Land tenure	
Full ownership	77%
Tenant-lease or rent	15%
Others (Agric. consultants)	8%
Length of lease agreements	
One-year agreement	31%
Five-year agreement	33%
Others (two, three and ten years)	36%
Type of lease agreement	
Cash rent	71%
Share rent	29%

Source: Responses from Agricultural Program Needs Assessment Survey

Table 3. Management, financial, and risk information of farm operators, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, 2004

Category	% of Responses		
	1st Concern	2nd Concern	3rd Concern
Method of finance			
Private funds	53%	21%	12%
Loans	20%	46%	35%
Others (reinvestment of profit)	27%	33%	53%
Source of loans			
Private banks	56%	25%	10%
Credit associations	17%	19%	30%
Family/friends/relatives	15%	16%	40%
Others (producer and buyer associations, etc)	12%	40%	20%
Marketing channels			
Marketing coops	45%	7%	10%
Wholesalers	18%	24%	19%
Brokers	14%	12%	14%
Others (exporters, retailers, direct selling, etc)	23%	57%	57%
Risk management strategies			
Liability insurance	31%	23%	9%
Crop insurance	21%	7%	9%
Off-farm income/employment	15%	4%	5%
Crop diversification	12%	4%	13%
Personal insurance	12%	27%	33%
Property insurance	9%	35%	31%

Source: Responses from Agricultural Program Needs Assessment Survey

Table 4. Production and economic concerns of farm operators, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties 2004

Category	% of Responses		
	1st Concern	2nd Concern	3rd Concern
Business and financial concerns			
Laws and regulations	30%	26%	24%
Economic/cost information	25%	12%	11%
Business planning	16%	10%	8%
Financial management	8%	17%	24%
Labor issues	8%	24%	16%
Others (tax management, record keeping, etc)	13%	11%	17%
Production issues/concerns			
Water and irrigation management	27%	24%	12%
Conventional methods	23%	6%	2%
Organic/sustainable production	11%	3%	2%
Pests	17%	24%	39%
Others (soil fertility and crop selection, etc)	22%	43%	45%
Post-harvest issues/concerns			
Harvesting method	26%	15%	8%
Quality control	14%	22%	17%
Transportation/shipping	12%	16%	15%
Handling systems	8%	11%	8%
Others (standardization, packaging, etc)	40%	36%	52%
Marketing issues/concerns			
Trade and foreign competition	39%		
Marketing alternatives	25%		
Export opportunities	8%		
Marketing commissions	8%		
Others (value added and processing, etc)	20%		

Source: Responses from Agricultural Program Needs Assessment Survey

Table 5. Sources and means of getting information for farm operators, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, 2004

Category	% of Responses		
	1st Concern	2nd Concern	3rd Concern
Information sources			
Other farmers	39%	12%	7%
Pest control advisors (PCAs)	15%	12%	10%
University of California Cooperative Extension	13%	20%	24%
Producer associations (commodity groups)	10%	9%	8%
Input suppliers	7%	3%	3%
Others (trade and professional associations, etc)	16%	44%	48%
Means of getting information			
Newsletters	25%	15%	10%
Friends/personal contacts	18%	11%	7%
Trade journal articles	12%	8%	20%
Magazine articles	10%	17%	13%
Conferences	8%	9%	11%
Workshops	6%	8%	8%
Others (phone calls to farm advisors, newspapers, etc)	21%	32%	31%

Source: Responses from Agricultural Program Needs Assessment Survey