

Meeting Summary

Agribusiness Incubator Project Mentoring System Work Group

11:00 AM – 1:00 PM
March 17, 2006

1. Review of February 6, 2006 meeting: The February 6th meeting was largely devoted to final travel arrangements for the trip to the New England Small Farm Institute. The Group also had a discussion on conflict styles and how different styles can influence relationships. There were no additions or corrections to the Meeting Summary.
2. Slide presentation of trip to visit the New England Small Farm Institute: For the first 45 minutes of the meeting those who went on the tour covered some of the different things that they saw and did while on the tour.
3. Observations and Ideas from Tour: At Noon Steve Stevenson, UW-Madison Center For Integrated Agricultural Systems, and Judy Gillan, New England Small Farm Institute, joined the meeting via conference call to help in the debriefing from the trip. The Group started out reviewing some of the Notes and Observations that were discussed during the trip. Those notes and are at the end of this Meeting Summary. The Group then added several other observations:
 - After watching shoppers at Whole Foods and other stores, they were impressed with how educated people seemed to be about different food production systems.
 - It was very noticeable how old agriculture is in the Northeast compared to Wisconsin. Because of that age there have been many negative things that have occurred:
 - They have lost many farms and the number continues to decline.
 - Because of that loss much of the agricultural infrastructure has fallen apart making it difficult to get many inputs.
 - Farmers are also being seen as an endangered species and it has been difficult to propagate them. The attrition rate of apprentices is very high.
 - They don't have a vibrant agricultural community so there is a long way between farms. They envy what Wisconsin still has, but probably don't appreciate.
 - It was obvious to the Group that trying to resurrect agriculture is a huge task. One that is best avoided if possible.
 - There does appear to be one positive outcome. The scarcity of farmers had helped in creating a buy local effort that has helped in marketing locally produced products.
 - The difficulty of bringing new people into the business and providing them with a support system to successfully start their own farms was the reason the New England Group decided to invest time and money in the development of a mentoring system.

- Until The New England Small Farm Institute began working with mentoring there had been virtually no structure to the labor and learning experience. Farmers have shared some great experiences and some terrible. There has been lots of variation.
 - The mentoring guide and worksheets that have been developed should be very useful.
 - The challenge for the Agribusiness Incubator Project Mentoring System Group is deciding what ideas from the New England mentoring effort best fit the North Central Wisconsin farming environment.
 - The Group also discovered that everyone is struggling with some of the same issues and it is important to share information and experiences.
 - Although there is some on-farm formal mentoring going on most of the mentoring is informal. Farmers desiring to learn still need to seek out willing mentors.
 - At one point during the trip they noted some apprehension about Wisconsin dairy farmers learning about the market potential in the Northeast. Where Wisconsin farmers worry about California, Massachusetts worries about the Wisconsin “juggernaut”.
 - The trip was not entirely successful in meeting some of the information goals that were set out at the January 3, 2006 meeting. Much of it comes from the early stage of development in the mentoring work in New England, and likely elsewhere in the country. On the other hand the trip was very successful in that the Mentoring System Work Group had a chance to meet and talk with farmers in a different area of the country who were wrestling with some very similar and some very different issues.
4. Next steps: With spring calving just beginning for the seasonal dairy farmers in the group, pastures starting to green up in 6 weeks and then first crop hay, the Group decided to wait until mid or late June to meet again. In that time Cadwallader will work with Stevenson on reviewing the mentoring materials the New England Small Farm Institute has developed and developing some implementation options for the Group to consider.
 5. Next meeting date: To be determined later.

OBSERVATIONS, IDEAS and A FEW THINGS LEARNED

Notes taken during New England Small Farm Institute Tour – February 14-18, 2006

- The farms we saw were increasing their dependence on direct marketing. A big reason was the access to customers who were willing to pay a premium price. This also brings in a different set of skills that need to be learned.
- The beef enterprise discussed by Ridge Shin of the Bakewell Reproduction Center reinforced the possibility of marketing a perceived higher end product.
- The dedication of the people was evident.
- At Hampshire College the noticed the following things:
 - The hands-on work the students could be involved in.
 - The students were free-thinking.
 - What they are learning as they grow, pick and market the vegetables are life skills and appreciation for agriculture that they will take with them as they become consumers.
 - The possible spin-offs of the CSA concept.
- The importance of getting people who are making tough decisions on change connected with visionaries who can see what is coming along.
- They never met anyone on the trip who actually took on one mentee after another.
- The difficulty of matching up the personalities.
- Mentoring has little to do with an employee-employer relationship. A mentor takes on the responsibility of transferring the ownership of knowledge; ownership of an idea.
- Mentoring is so important during the transfer phase of a business. Although some will make the adjustment, not having a good mentor makes it that much more difficult.
- The cost of starting a business is a huge barrier for many, having a mentor during that time is critical.
- The Wisconsin Department of Commerce has been involved in helping those interested in starting a business do a business plans by cost sharing in their development either by a consultant or by taking part in a business planning course. It would be nice to see what happened to these businesses after 3 years.
- One idea that was brought up was the creation of development accounts for mentors and mentees. A system that could possibly compensate farmers for their time and also offer a mentee the opportunity to earn equity.
- Another idea that was discussed was having several farms work together with a mentee so they are exposed to variety of situations.

- The trip to the Whole Foods Market was an eye-opening experience. The group saw their potential customers and how they shopped for food. Much different than rural Wisconsin.
- In discussions with Dr. Sue Ellen Johnson from NESFI,
 - NESFI works across several states in New England
 - In New York, the RC&D Councils have taken the lead in the mentoring that has gone on with dairy grazing.
 - Vermont had developed Farmer Learning Circles.
 - Maine and New Hampshire have gone together to do organic dairy research.
 - Right around NESFI, the vegetable growers have an apprentice program where they bring apprentices together to visit other farms. Apprentices also have an opportunity to get together and learn from each other.
 - There is also an active group of farmers in New York who have been working with mentoring programs.