



Canadian Cow-calf Cost of Production Network Producer Networks

Engaging in a network of like-minded producers can be transformative. In today's marketplace, increasing importance is placed on networking with people in the industry and even outside it, working to uncover opportunities to connect with different types of producers and experts. Anyone in isolation is limited in their ability to learn about new and innovative management practices or to respond to changing market conditions. Networks create opportunities for engagement and connection without eliminating the autonomy of individual units within the network (Holmlund and Fulton 1999). Increased visibility and the opportunity to further develop areas of expertise can be hugely positive both for the industry and for individual producers.

A problem shared, is a problem halved ~ Unknown

Knowledge transfer does not necessarily have to be top down. It can, instead, be shared between those who are part of the production process. Michael Bohlje (1996) noted that, "Farmers have generally been eager to try new hybrids, new chemicals, new tillage practices, new feeding regimes and new equipment, but new ways of doing business have met with more resistance, possibly because they change relationships and frequently substitute interdependence for independence in the decision-making process."

Why join a network?

The "Dollars and Sense" report (2016) found that number one on the list of farm management practices that contribute to financial success was continuous learning. Part of what made some farms successful, was accessing networks to source new information. These networks included focus groups, educational institutions and conferences. Farms in the bottom quartile were found to be three times more likely to

not seek out new information, training or learning opportunities. Management equals financial success and part of good management is seeking out the expertise of others.

What makes a network effective?

Networking is not supposed to be a zero-sum game where one party takes all, at the expense of others. To be successful networking requires a degree of trust and commonality between participants (Holmlund and Fulton 1999). Creating the circumstances in which participants in the network can be open and transparent may require a facilitator who makes sure no one is continually sharing; but everyone has the opportunity to learn and benefit (Holmlund and Fulton 1999). A similar sentiment is echoed by Fulton and Sanderson who note that it is important to emphasize that the value that is created by a network is “by increasing the size of the ‘pie’ and then benefiting from this larger pie” (Fulton and Sanderson 2003,19).

By bringing together multiple producers, networks prevent the duplication of work and effort. They provide the critical mass needed for local and national – sometimes international – advocacy, action and change (Starkey 1996). This is echoed by Dunn (1997) who noted that in the case of the beef industry, the benefits of networking included: leverage, information exchange, mitigation of risk and greater opportunities for integration efforts across the production chain. The end result of these linkages is a framework with the knowledge and adaptability to support the long-term future of the beef industry.

Networks can address a broad range of topics with individuals raising opportunities or challenges and getting insight from the group. Networks can both be specialized and diverse in the topics they address, reflecting the different experiences and needs of a single member or group of members without excluding others (Holmlund and Fulton 1999). A member can be specialized in their production and serve a niche market; but still be able to communicate and exchange knowledge with another member of the network on a general topic such as business structure or succession.

There are several successful networks. For example, the Ontario Soil Network (OSN) is a farmer-led organization aiming to connect producers interested in improving their operations. Initiatives launched by the OSN such as the “Let’s Talk Soil” project work to bridge barriers between producers and help provide new ways for information to be shared. Successful networks such as the OSN help to create awareness, connecting like-minded producers and helping create a platform through which they can share their questions and insights. This platform can help foster a sense of community and assurance that the industry is moving forward and adapting to changes in technology and markets.

Collaboration

Bringing together producers can help researchers compare the performance and practices of different but comparable production systems even as it provides insights into management aspects or innovations to producers. Van Passel and Meul (2010) selected 14 dairy farms based on selected indicators to evaluate the ecological sustainability of the farms and as well as their economic sustainability. During the focus group discussions which included both farmers and experts, the authors noted that this created new opportunities for future dialogues between farmers and the potential for individual action plans to be discussed between producers and experts. In addition, Van Passel and Meul (2013) noted that awareness of issues around sustainability can be helped through integrated information sharing and the development of concrete tools for measuring and promoting achievements.

A forum for communication

A study done on Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) in the United Kingdom (UK) looked at how farmers engage with, utilize and share knowledge. It found that social contexts and relations were important in how farmers interacted and shared knowledge. It also noted that engagement with conservation initiatives such as the CSF were contributing to an integration of conservation-minded practices with traditional “symbols of good farming.” The authors noted that when producers were taken off farm through CSF related events, they were able to share “knowledge selectively and personal information could be filtered out as they felt appropriate.” This suggested to the authors that the use of collective meetings and carefully selected case study farms for observations helped create a “forum for communication.”

Changing weather patterns, regulations, changing technology and markets are contributing to changes in how farmers frame knowledge and determine what is legitimate. These forces are “increasing their receptiveness to, and reliance on, others’ knowledge.” In a rapidly changing world, farmers were receptive to the “know-how and know-who that advisors may offer, and advisor knowledge has become increasingly salient.”

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Summary of Key Points:

- i. Improve competence through the exchange of information, skills, knowledge, experience through meetings, publications, and cooperative programs. All members of the network will benefit, whether individuals or organizations (Starkey 1996).
- ii. Cost-effective way of sharing information – less duplication and potential for greater impact. Faster progress achieved more cost-effectively.
- iii. Linking people of different levels, disciplines, organizations and backgrounds can empower those who may feel isolated or marginalized. This allows producers to take better control of their industry and help shape the development process.
- iv. Raises awareness on issues that are affecting the agricultural community as a whole, while also providing a source of peer support, encouragement and motivation (Starkey 1996). This can help build a wider sense of community.
- v. Improve the effectiveness of research by linking producers to research institutions. In addition to generating and exchanging knowledge based on producers' experiences, networks can facilitate funding and technical cooperation. This can be hugely beneficial in tackling challenges and providing those in need with resources and support.

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