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RESEARCH REPORT

Small Farms & Alternative Enterprises

Small Farms Focus Groups



Center for Public Issues Education
IN AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES
UFIFAS

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Introduction

In order to strengthen the Small Farm Industry in Florida, it is important to understand the programmatic needs, concerns, and resources of small farmers. A recent study completed by the Center for Public Issues Education in Agriculture and Natural Resources (PIE Center) in partnership with the University of Florida and Florida A & M Extension's Small Farm and Alternative Enterprise division provides valuable information concerning the needs, challenges, and frustrations of small farmers. This research was funded by a grant provided by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS).

Participants were asked about their challenges, current business practices, business needs, food safety, accessing needed information, and Extension programs and services. Overall the information provided by the participants will aid Extension in serving the small farm population.

This report discusses the study's methodology, research findings, strategic recommendations, and recommendations for further research.

Methodology

To conduct this study, three sets of two (6 total) focus groups were held in Marianna, Sarasota, and Gainesville, Florida. Participants were recruited from the counties in which these towns were located as well as neighboring counties. All participants were small farmers in the state of Florida. Participants were identified as small farmers through a list provided by Extension. A total of 59 small farmers participated in these focus groups. The small farmers in the focus groups raised a diverse array of fruit and vegetable crops, livestock, tree and nursery products, and row crops. However, the participants demonstrated a fairly even distribution across the five USDA subcategories for small farms. The majority of participants were between 40 and 70 years of age, with two-thirds of the participants being male. A large portion of participants were either first-generation farmers or came from families who had farmed for more than three generations.

Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions throughout the focus groups to guide discussion. The discussion was recorded and transcribed. To analyze the discussion major themes were identified using the constant comparative method. Themes were analyzed across all six groups and findings are based on agreements across four or more groups.

Results

Challenges of Small Farmers

The small farmers participating in these focus groups identified eight major categories of challenges.

Cost of Expendables

QUOTE: "I have the cost of expendables, and I have in parentheses; feed, fuel, power, things that are outside of our control."

Grants and Funding

QUOTE: "The ability to get funding when you need it. As a small farmer, some of the larger scale places do USDA grants and those kind of funds. I've been going through that for the last several, last year and a half, trying to get grants. In my previous job, I had some experience with some grants and you find out that they are 18 months out before the calls come in or the paperwork is voluminous or you have to have a grant writer. Some of those things are accessible through USDA,

like grant writers, for instance, but that is something that you have to aggressively seek and when you work on a small farm and you are a 'mom and pop' and you do everything, you know, you are already running like a 16 hour day, it is difficult to have time to sit down and help somebody word your grant for you. Or you keep hearing that, "Oh there is plenty of money out there for the small farmer, for the small business." But you try to access that. It is not as easy as they make it sound. I have tried to tap into every one. There is about 200 on the list and I have tried to tap into every one, and getting close to one. You know? It is very difficult for the small farmer when you don't have a big lobby group behind you to get that. I am starting to learn ways to get those groups to help me, but to just to reach out there, make a phone call, fill out a form, get the money, it's not that easy. You know?"

Regulations

QUOTE: "The biggest problem, the most aggravating problem I'm working with right now is wrong size regulation. A lot of regulations that farmers deal with are written for large scale operations and if you're not a large scale operation then there's a mismatch. Specifically one that I've been dealing with for the last couple of years is eggs. To sell one dozen eggs, under current Florida regulations, I've gotta build a 15 thousand dollar facility to wash them in. And that makes sense if you've got 10 thousand hens in one house, you should build a place separate that you are gonna work the eggs in. But, you know, I've got 50 chickens and I just want to sell a few dozen eggs and I've got to build a 15 thousand dollar facility. So the state studied that for a year and made recommendations to fix it and then somebody in the department of agriculture advertised the report and it's not gonna happen. So, I'm very frustrated by that."

Economics

QUOTE: "Citrus, we were feeding the cattle citrus pulp. The citrus companies, they turn the rind and the skin into a pellet for the cattle and for the goats. And it was very economical to feed that last year. This year it is more than double."

Organic Guidelines/Rules

QUOTE: "The organic guy is the one who pays attention to what your neighbors are doing. And we have wonderful neighbors so we, it's nice, but again it is a little bit of a concern there. And it is labor intensive when one of you said that. When you are the only one working, just he and I, and my son-in-law comes and tries to help us some too, and when you are organic, it is labor intensive. You have lots of pests and lots of things and you have to know, you have to read the labels to find out if this can be used for that. And sometimes everything in it is organic, but it won't be approved for you to use.

(Another participant's response) Yeah, in the organic outline, I mean the products on the NOP, there is no list of products. There is nothing. They give you clues. It's very klugey. I looked at it too. (Agreement heard) Just to see if I should transition..."

Weather

QUOTE: "I'd say the last two years it has been the weather. It has been an extreme challenge, and we going to more protected agriculture. We are building hoop houses, even for the small kid's gardens that we have, we bought one of those benders from Johnny's Seed Catalog and we are building these hoop houses and we are conducting these studies on covering them with different colors of shake moss as well, but that has been a real challenge. We are in Pinellas County, supposedly Zone 10, but we have had some extreme winter conditions here the last two years."

Marketing

QUOTE: “Marketing is a big problem with us. The big fish always eating up the little fish. Small farmers don’t have good access, cannot get in on a lot of the larger good markets and all of the conditions that goes along to explore that particular issue.”

Competition

QUOTE: “The flip side of that is that the fear of what comes in from overseas creates a market and we sell a lot of trees to backyard people who want to grow their own fruit. And that is the same with everybody buying locally, but that is the opportunity. And they are willing to pay more. It still doesn’t stop the cheap competition, we don’t face imported competition but we face it from the large mega-nurseries that sell to the chain stores. And people expect us to match the chain store price and to have a guarantee. “Well, you don’t guarantee that?” It was in good shape when you picked it up here at the farm, what you did with it afterwards, I can’t control. (laughter)”

Business Decisions

How do you make business decisions about your farming operations?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups identified three things that aid them in making business decisions.

1. Market Awareness

QUOTE: “What I did my second year was, I had already gotten an individual clientele of household people that either come by and did their own picking or I would see if I could meet them at the farmer’s market. Well, we come up with this idea, people say, “Can you grow this, can you grow this?” So last year, I had a questionnaire at my stands, we had four produce stands set up. And they wanted certain things so my wife, she should be sitting here, the brain. She put that together versus the cost of how much we would have to plant, with a half of a commitment. Almost like a CSA, almost like that, but nobody committed. And we based some of our decision on if we were going to plant a quarter acre, a half acre or just a couple hundred foot rows or whatever. That is keeping it simple and we did very well doing that. We didn’t over plant, in fact, a few things we under planted.”

2. Cost

QUOTE: “And what can you afford to try? You try so many things that you run out of money and you think, “Omigosh I should have tried something else.” Too late now”

3. Personal Acquaintances

QUOTE: “For our rabbit production. We learned from the first small farmer’s conference we attended, we met Beth Sealy down there and she, that’s why we decided to get into it, because we knew we had a market. I can’t imagine getting into some of these things and then making your own market. People that are getting into the business, and then going out to make their own market, that is two or three jobs right there, a marketer and a...(sentence trails off)”

Do you feel you could benefit from information about business skill development?

Five of the six groups of small farmers agreed that they could benefit from information about business skill development. However, it was also discussed that they needed “fresh” information pertaining to business skill development.

QUOTE: “I have been to a lot of those, how to market products and how to, in reference to your question, and after you have been to 7 or 8 of them, they seem to be regurgitating the same information and a lot of this sounds good, but you know, a lot of it is not really useful. You can only hear it so many times and, on my scale, I can only use so much of it. It may be different for a big corporation but, after a while that stuff is kind of the old tricks kind of thing. If you had no knowledge at all, it might be important to sit through a few of those, but after you sit through a couple of them, personally, I don’t get any more benefit out of them after I have seen it two or three times.”

Goals

How do you feel about setting goals for your farm?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups indicated that unpredictable circumstances impacted their goals and that goals must be realistic.

1. Unpredictable Circumstances

QUOTE: “It’s really hard to set a goal because, take if you growing corn, if you contract your corn for, say \$5 a bushel, okay, if you don’t contract your corn you won’t own the contract for \$5. I know a farmer, this is true, I know a farmer, contracted 10,000 bushels of corn for \$4 a bushel. He had to make the contract. Now corn is \$7.60 a bushel. He got to fulfill that contract before he can sell any at \$7.60 a bushel. That’s \$3.60 more a bushel lost. And then if you don’t have a contract, if corn \$5 a bushel, he’ll start off paying you maybe \$4.95. For two or three days then it’s gonna hit the bottom and stay there until you get all the corn in and then the price will jump back up again. That’s the truth.”

2. Realistic Goals

QUOTE: “Well, you have to know where you are going. You have to know where you are going so you have to set goals on a five year basis and you have to have a plan on how to get to your goals. You have to know what you want in order to get there. You have to be able to see it to get it.”

How do you set goals?

The participants discussed that their goals are driven by market needs.

QUOTE: “It really does seem to be consumer driven. We get a lot of requests from LocalHarvest of people saying, ‘Are you open to the public, do you have a farm stand?’ They have gotten pretty savvy, they come to a farmer’s market and there is not a farmer to be found. At least in our area, they are all produce peddlers. And so people really want to know the farmer. If they have been a member of a CSA in another area, they find us through LocalHarvest or what have you. We aren’t set up that way, there is only four of us who could possibly man a produce stand and wait for someone to come and buy vegetables. But it is consumer driven, and we were naive enough early on, that we gave our CSA members and all of our chef’s seed catalogs so then they came back with all these wonderful ideas of things we can grow. (agreement heard) Bad idea.”

Marketing

How do you market your farm products?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups mentioned several different ways that they market their farm products including farmer's markets, selling directly off of the farm, directly marketing to consumers, wholesale, retail, restaurants, schools, CSAs, and pre-sale orders. However, only four marketing outlets were used by participants in four or more of the groups.

1. Farmer's Market

QUOTE: "Oh, so my original concept when I opened was, since I am downtown, and I'm only growing a few thousand plants, literally, a few people from the neighborhood is all I really need as customers. Well, that never happened, so I finally threw up my hands and said, "the hell with this", and I went and joined the farmer's market downtown and that's interesting because you have to build a clientele. Against not only the crop vendors at the end, but then you've got a (name omitted) who has been growing amazing product forever and been there forever, that has a loyal following that I can't dent. But..... (sentence trails off)"

2. Selling Directly off the Farm

QUOTE: "Primarily two varieties. The rest of them I convert to the olive oil. But I sell right at the farm."

3. Direct Marketing

QUOTE: "I'm trying to have it direct marketing so I know what I'm doing. That's the best way, but sometimes you have to go to the market."

4. Wholesale

QUOTE: "Well, with this wholesale co-op we have a person that do market. That's what they do, they go out there and make deals so it's sold before it's put into the ground. Good thing about the co-op."

How do you get the word out about your product? How do consumers find you?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups identified three main ways that the word gets out about their products and how their consumers find them.

1. Word of Mouth

QUOTE: "Word of mouth. Everybody knows who I am."

2. Email

QUOTE: "We started out just taking products to the market and selling them and that kind of evolved into people wanting the same thing over and over again and so we developed a customer base. And one of the most helpful things we did, and I didn't realize it, we started putting out an informal newsletter once a week. We collect, you know, let them sign their name on the sheet at the market. We started putting out this little, started out as just an email and then we took our letterhead and then we started putting out a little newsletter, and talking about products. Reminding them which market we would be at on what day, and maybe little pictures. Start dropping a

little picture on there and on our farm, the goat farm, there is always some funny story. Every day there is a funny story of something that the goats did. So I started putting those little funny stories on there and come to find out those would get forwarded to people that weren't even on the list. And then we have a following and then we started getting emails and then some of our regular customers, our products are in high demand and sometimes we sell out, so they started sending us an email. "Hey can I get you to bring this to the market?" So then we started taking orders from that. And then we had some illnesses and deaths in our family and I didn't put that email out for about a month. And our sales dropped. I couldn't figure out why, but I didn't relate it to the email. Then I started sending the newsletter out again, and our market picked up again. So, I'm like, okay, it is directly related to the newsletter, so now I never forget to put the newsletter out. It always goes out, no matter what, even if it's one in the morning, the newsletter goes out because it keeps selling. And sure enough, I'll hit send, and in just a few minutes, I'll start getting some orders. And it reminds people, oh yeah, the market is Friday, I'd better get my order in. So when we got to the market, probably a third of the stuff we take is already spoken for. So we know we have those sales committed. And then the rest of the stuff we just sell are just spontaneous buys, people walking up to our booth."

3. Online Media

QUOTE: "I want to say one thing, we are living the direct sales of produce. You would be surprised what you get out of a website, Facebook page, the whole nine yards. We rolled out the whole social media, all the cliches, we are in this deep into all of it. And you would be surprised the business it drums up. You can build that reputation, you can really, there is liability there, but man, there is a ton of opportunity. Particularly when people want small farmers, want small farm operations. They want fresh produce, local stuff, they've gotta know how to find it. You have to meet them, you ain't gonna meet them halfway, you are gonna have to meet them most of the way."

Training

Do you participate in any kind of training programs on your farm? Do you or your workers attend any training programs off of your farm?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups identified three general groups of trainings that they participate in.

1. IFAS/Extension Training Programs

QUOTE: "And then that connected us with the Master Tree Farmer Program. We went to the Extension office in Quincy once a month or I don't know, anyway, it was over a period of time and the thing was televised and there were people in Clemson and Gainesville and all these different experts and that was a real help. Yeah, getting hooked up with Extension and available programs has been real important for us. We learned a lot about long leaf pines."

Other IFAS/Extension training programs mentioned throughout this discussion included Project Annie, IFAS blueberry information training, food safety training, Chicken 101, and the small farm network (based out of Sarasota County).

2. Trainings at various Expos, Seminars, Conferences, and Trade Shows

QUOTE: “I go to most trade shows, especially since I made a shift in industries. I went to almost every trade show that I could and Small Farms, in particular, for me was a really good training for me.”

Other expos, seminars, conferences, and trade shows mentioned throughout the discussion included Florida Organic Grower events, Georgia Organics events, Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, Florida Forest Stewardship Program, SARE Conference, Florida Ag Expo, Small Farms Conference, and Range Forage Seminars.

3. Trainings specific to Certifications/Licenses

QUOTE: “We do. We have to have HACCP training and GAP training. You’ve got to keep everything legal and on the up and up. Food handling. So we go and we send our employees. We make sure at least one person knows something about something. You know?”

Accessing Information

When you have a question, need more information about something, or are looking for advice on a topic that affects your farming operation, who or what do you turn to for this information?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups identified three main sources of information.

1. Social Acquaintances

QUOTE: “That seems to be the more trusted source is if you have somebody you know who is already doing it. And you go to them. That seems to be far more trusted.”

2. Internet

QUOTE: “First, Google.”

3. Local Extension Agent

QUOTE: “There’s times where I’ll ask Mr. Brasher something or an Extension agent a specific question about what is going on. Week before last, I had snap beans coming up with a white leaf. I had never seen that before. Mr. Brasher asked me, “did you daylight ‘em?” Yeah, I daylighted them. That’s what happened. The roots hadn’t gotten out to be fertilized yet. Well, that made sense because they was turning green in two days. You need to have your Extension agents and your people that you are supposed to be able to trust, they need some practical knowledge too. And I can guarantee a lot of the PhD’s out in Gainesville and Knoxville and Tallahassee and Athens and Baton Rouge and all that they don’t know what daylighting means.”

Do you feel that accessing needed information comes easily?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups indicated that it was situational whether needed information would come easily or not.

QUOTE: “It depends on which information that you are looking for.”

Extension Programs and Resources

Do you use extension programs or resources?

Affirmative “yes” was heard from all groups participating in the research. Several programs and resources were mentioned. However, none were mentioned in four or more groups. Those that were mentioned include

- Seminars
- Publications
- Newsletters
- Meetings
- Programs/Trainings
- Extension agents
- Online extension resources, including the small farms website
- EDIS
- Other state’s extension services
- Small Farms Conference
- Handbooks

Food Safety

What do you think when you hear the word food safety?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups identified four categories triggered by the word food safety.

1. Regulations

QUOTE: “One of the things I wrote down was regulations. To hear that the health department is going to come out and inspect you, will scare you to death. But you also got to know what the regulations are. They will tell you that they want you to have a fully enclosed building to shell peas and beans in. I don’t know if you all know how loud a pea sheller can get, but you couldn’t stand it inside an enclosed building. In Florida, all you got to have is a cement floor and a roof. You don’t have to have fully enclosed. So we passed our inspection, but you have got to know your regulations, and you have got to be able to show that person that comes out there that we are safe, this is our HACCP plan. Now they want you to have your name and address on every product you sell, especially to stores and stores don’t like that, but they are not the ones dealing with them.”

2. Safety Concerns with Imported Food

QUOTE: “I think it is important. I mean, I want our food to be safe. But what I worry about, I worry about the safety of the food that comes into our country. A lot more than I worry about the produce and the food that is grown here. (agreement heard and crosstalk)”

3. Lack of Consumer Education regarding Food Safety

QUOTE: “People cooked their food and they understood that you shouldn’t have your chicken juice running around with your lettuce, you know? And I think a lot of the issue in food safety is at the end consumer level, they are so dumbed down by going to get chicken nuggets all the time that a lot of them have no idea, any idea how to

cook. I am giving a class in Gainesville called Chicken and Egg 101 and we are going to learn how to cut up chickens and cook eggs. (laughter) You know? But anyway.”

4. Food Safety not an Issue on Small Farms

QUOTE: “Bad micro-managing, industrial agriculture. Usually not the small guys who are at fault.”

Do you feel that food safety is an important issue?

Five of the six groups agreed that food safety was an important issue. In addition, it was also indicated that the government has too much involvement with food safety or is out of touch with the realities of food safety.

QUOTE: “I think having to do anything like that is ridiculous! I hate government intrusion in my life! I hate the government standing between me and my customer and telling my customer he can’t buy from me and I can’t sell to them! If a customer wants my stuff and knows how I raise it, then I ought to be able to sell it to them, it’s not their business!”

What do you identify as sources of on-farm contamination in your operation?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups identified several sources of on-farm contamination. However, only one source was mentioned in four or more groups.

1. Animals or Pests

QUOTE: “Vermin. Bugs, Rats.”

Other on-farm contamination sources mentioned include

- Water
- Bacteria
- Zoonotic diseases
- Storage containers
- Manure/composting
- Packaging
- Employees
- Pesticides or other farm chemicals
- Dirty equipment
- Neighbors

Do you feel that you minimize food safety risks on your farm?

Five of the six groups participating in this research agreed that they minimized food safety risks on their farm. Several ways that these small farmers minimized food safety risks were mentioned. However, only one minimization of risk was mentioned in four or more groups.

1. Food Safety Training Courses and Certifications

QUOTE: “One thing about HACCP, it makes you think about what you are doing and how you are going to fix the problem if a problem creates.”

Other ways to minimize food safety risks that were mentioned include

- Wearing gloves
- Keeping things organized
- Hand washing
- Proper irrigation
- Clean equipment
- Sanitary conditions
- Limiting visitors
- Paying attention
- No animals
- Testing the well
- Not allowing employees to work when ill

How could UF/IFAS and FAMU help you improve your knowledge of food safety principles?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups provided several suggestions to help small farmers improve their knowledge of food safety principles. However, none of the suggestions were made by four or more groups. Those suggestions mentioned include

- By including courses similar to those offered by the National Restaurant Association
- By offering free training
- By focusing on the farm instead of the restaurant
- By not insulting our intelligence (reference to a training they attended that they felt covered elementary topics)
- By focusing on the details
- By continuing to offer classes/workshops
- By conducting on-site visits
- Small Farms Conference
- Books, bulletins, brochures
- Put it in simple terms & be able to define the regulations
- Hold trainings in local areas
- Online resource
- By offering a kitchen training
- They already are
- Nothing – it scares us and there are some things you can’t avoid

Would you be interested in attending food safety training designed specifically for small farmers?

Five of the six groups participating in this research agreed that they would be interested in attending food safety training designed specifically for small farmers. The group, which was not in agreement, indicated that they may be interested. Stipulations of attending training were given throughout the discussion. However, the same stipulations were not mentioned in four or more groups. The stipulations that were mentioned include.

- If it was web based
- If there was a certification
- If it was free or reasonably priced
- If it was production method specific
- If they didn't have to travel far
- If there was a clear cost vs. benefit
- If they knew about the training well in advance
- If it was on DVD

Perceptions of Small Farmers

What do you think consumers think about farmers like yourselves?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups discussed three areas concerning consumers and small farmers.

1. Consumers think Small Farmers are Great

QUOTE: "I think for a growing segment of the population there's a tremendous respect and appreciation for farmers that there wasn't even 10 or 15 years ago. It has really grown a lot, I've noticed. And that's really a welcome development, I think. That they see all these things that have entered our lives like disappearing bees, and food safety and reasons for them to really respect and appreciate the small grower and the healthy food that we produce. I get people at the market on a regular basis that just come up and say, 'Thank you for what you are doing.' It's become pretty common to hear that."

2. Consumers need Educated about Agriculture

QUOTE: "Consumers come in different ages, too. Children don't know who farmers are. And then you have the older, the adults who just, I don't know what they think. They pretty much think we are out of our minds. People don't really understand where their food comes from...(sentence trails off)"

3. Consumers are Unaware of the Money and Work that goes into Farming

QUOTE: "Yeah, you don't know what time I start in the morning with doing everything. A lot of it, I think they look and it's really cool because I have all sorts of animals and gardens, but I don't think that they really realize what we put into it and why we ask the prices that we do, because my time is worth something. You know? The hours and hours that I put into it is definitely worth something. (Agreement heard all around)"

What do you think corporate agriculture thinks about farmers like you?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups discussed three main topics related to corporate vs. small agriculture.

1. Corporate Agriculture sees Small Farmers as a Threat

QUOTE: “They actually see us as a threat.”

(Another participant adds) “Not specifically to our farm or an individual farm, but small farms in general.”

2. Corporate Agriculture Tries to pass for things Small Farmers are known for, like Organic and Local

QUOTE: “To give you an example of how the impact of a small farm can be, I can’t really tell you the name because I don’t remember if you can give the name or not, (crosstalk) but in Los Angeles, California every morning, there is 10 pickup trucks sitting and waiting on a semi to get there from out of the Valley. And that semi is bringing produce and breaks it up into the small pickup trucks. And that’s a large farmer, one of the major producers, Dole or somebody like that, who is really doing this and they are sending their culls out to the local markets and they don’t care about the small farmer, but they certainly are trying to push him out and take their spot. They said they was making more money off them, 5 semi loads of produce a week, then they was some of the other stuff, big stuff.”

3. Corporate Agriculture pushes for Regulation that only Benefits Themselves

QUOTE: “I think some are, the feedlot for example. When this natural thing on beef was being pushed, the decision on what could be labeled as natural was held up while the feedlots lobbied to get their definition of natural. (crosstalk) And their definition was, and that is what happened, the feedlot could be natural and all they have to do was to open the gate to the next pen to have more room to walk. (crosstalk)”

What do you think higher education (land grant) thinks about farmers like yourselves?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups discussed several ideas. However, none of them were present in four or more of the groups. The ideas discussed include

- They are surprised by our roadblocks
- They realize the importance of agriculture
- They like small farmers
- They want to support small farmers
- They only fully support what they get money from (i.e. research money)
- They don’t care about us

Small Farm Organization

Do you think that small farmers need to create their own organization?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups focused on three main areas when discussing the creation of a small farm organization.

1. Strength in Numbers

QUOTE: “There is power in numbers and then we can influence legislation a little bit.(Agreement heard) We can actually get some of this crap out of our way so we can do what we should be doing.”

2. Good Idea

QUOTE: “It wouldn’t hurt.”

(Another participant adds) “They should have their own organization.”

3. Concerns

QUOTE: “It is doable, but I’d say if it was a state wide organization, the things that would benefit Live Oak and Gainesville and Alachua and Bradenton and Manatee may not benefit Marianna and Difuniak Springs. You could have a state wide organization, but it has to have a regional theme to it.”

Other concerns mentioned included

- Time commitment
- Diversity among farmers
- Already involved in several organizations
- Cost

Advice to Extension

Assume the Dean of Extension came into this room right now and asked for 30 seconds of your advice about the best way to help small farmers? What would you tell them?

The small farmers participating in these focus groups gave many suggestions. However, none of the suggestions were present in four or more groups. The suggestions include

- Extension agents need to get back out on the farm
- Focus on water
- Improve knowledge of funding and grants
- Lobby to coordinate regulations across local, state, and national governments
- Establish a political stance/representation
- Get organized, make information easily accessible
- Offer more cross-disciplinary services (i.e. marketing & business)
- Promote farmer to farmer education
- Let me talk to someone who will listen, get out of the way
- Talk to your extension agents, they know what is going on
- Educate the public
- Conduct more research (i.e. organic, aquaculture, worm castings, more research money).
- Help us with marketing & advertising
- Free gas, kill white flies, give us money (unrealistic responses)
- They are doing good

Recommendations

Based on the results from this study, the PIE Center recommends the following:

- The small farmer population in Florida represents a diverse array of individuals with vastly different communication requirements. The demographics collected on the participants suggest that small farmers in Florida represent a broad age range, as well as a diverse length of farming involvement. Just as different generations of individuals require different communication methods, those with little farming experience need communicated with differently than those with many years of farming experience. To research this possibility further, it is suggested that extension continue to monitor program effectiveness via follow-up surveys in each county. This will allow for a comparison between counties to be conducted and analyzed. Additionally, it will identify the suite of tools that could to be used in each county in order to communicate and educate as effectively as possible.
- Due to the diversity of responses on programming delivery, small farms team should continue to seek avenues to deliver educational programming and information via multiple and new channels (social media, for example) in order to comply with the cultural, geographical, and agricultural needs of different parts of the state.
- Participants in these focus groups indicated that they like to learn from others in their social environment. This validates the small farms conference approach, but also suggests opportunities to build on this success via development of additional social learning platforms, such as mentoring programs, “master farmer” type program, etc.