The South West Florida Small Farmers Network - a Participatory and Regional Approach to Sustainable, Diversified Agriculture Extension

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**ABSTRACT**
The successful models across the nation for sustainable, small farms include highly diversified production and marketing systems. These agroecosystems require increased knowledge of different crops, enterprises and marketing compared to past limited commodity-based operations. To address these emerging needs, farmer-to-farmer networks have been formed to provide information, research and support that are farmer-driven and locally-based. In Florida such a needs assessment was concluded in the report of a 2007 Small Farms Study Tour by UF/IFAS and FAMU extension faculty. To this end, the South West Florida Small Farmers Network (SWFSFN) was formed in July 2007. To date, there have been 13 events with a cumulative attendance total of over 450. To date, these meetings have achieved the following objectives:

1) a regional network of beginning and experienced small farmers interested in diversification
2) meetings at local small farms with farmer-led tours for sharing of information on production/marketing
3) discussions of events/organizations/issues on small farming and local food systems
4) promotion of UF/IFAS/FAMU Small Farm & Alternative Enterprise Program resources
5) extension presentations on farmer-identified topics
6) initiation of onfarm research trials
7) award recognition with the 2009 SARE Search for Excellence National Award – Southern Region

**BACKGROUND**

Challenges & opportunities for small farmers:

- Surveys indicated a 95% preference in learning in a farmer to farmer, mentoring type situation
- Feedback statements of “isolation”
- Unique needs due to highly diversified farms of vegetables, fruits, crops and livestock are common
- Underseverd by institutions & agencies
- Overcome knowledge gap
  - New farmers not from a farm background
  - Lack of experience with new alternative enterprises

**APPROACH**

- **Planning**
  - South-central Florida regional small farm workshops experience and feedback
  - Institutional partnerships and support
  - Small Farms Study Tour In-Service Training
- **Execution**
  - Farmer-to-Farmer Model
    - Effective grassroots networks to help farmers share & distribute information & resource leads
    - Offer moral and social support
    - Assumes that each person has valuable knowledge and experience to contribute
  - Farm tour led by farmer
  - Educational program w/ farmer & agent presenters
  - Participatory extension activities (e.g., onfarm demonstrations & research, grower cooperatives, train-the-trainers, etc)

**IMPACT**

- 450 small farmers participated
- 2009 evaluation results
  - 73% level for exceeding expectations
  - 90% level for knowledge gained
  - 38% level for increased total production
  - 67% level for increased production diversity
  - 43% level for increase production sales
  - 36% level for increased local market sales
- Identification of topics for general, production, business/marketing, alternative enterprises and regulation/policy Extension programs