

## **I Methods brief**

### **Introduction, background**

This document reports the results for the project evaluation component of a two-year effort. In 1999, the University of Minnesota, Water Resources Center was awarded a '319' grant (Minnesota Pollution Control Agency) for a project titled 'Education to improve feedlot, manure, and nutrient management.' The overarching purpose of the project was to reduce environmental impacts from animal agriculture, particularly impacts to water quality. The major project activities were the development of educational materials, regional workshops for agricultural professionals, and county workshops for producers. The collaborating institutions were the University of Minnesota Extension Service, Minnesota Department of Agriculture, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, Board of Water and Soil Resources, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

A meeting with project staff and collaborators was held in early 2002 to determine the general parameters of the evaluation component. The decision was made to emphasize future educational needs, rather than evaluate project activities and assess outcomes. The results reported here help to characterize farmers' practices, especially, their changes in practices over time, relative to the implementation of the 'new feedlot rules (Minn. Rules, Ch. 7020). The results also indicate their preferences and suggestions respecting the topics they are interested in for educational programming and the formats in which they prefer to obtain information or participate in educational programs, along with related suggestions and opinions to inform Extension education efforts.

A second meeting was held to further refine the content and format of the Pre-discussion questionnaire and discuss ideas regarding the questions used in the Focus Group. The resulting questionnaire (see Appendix D) and Focus Group 'Question Route' (See Appendix E) was tested first, with a Douglas County farmer (who is also an Extension Educator) and second, with a group of three producers in Dakota County. The first pilot effort (done via telephone) did lead to some minor changes. The second test session (conducted in person) did not reveal the need for any further revisions in the two instruments.

### **Focus group sessions**

Two Focus Groups were conducted in each county. The first session in each county consisted of participants who had participated in the winter 2001-2002 producer workshops on land application of manure ('Attender' group or 'Attendees'). The second session in each county was conducted with producers who had not participated in the workshops ('Non-Attender' group or 'Non-Attendees'). The counties were chosen primarily on the basis of three criteria:

- geographic representation
- importance of animal agriculture in the county
- local interest in hosting the sessions.

All of the counties chosen were personally recommended by the respective participating Regional Extension Educator, Dennis Busch or Phil Nesse. They made the original inquiries to the prospective local cooperators. Then, project consultant, John Vickery, contacted each local cooperator to further discuss the effort. A detailed, email letter followed these telephone conversations. See Appendix A, for an example. Each pair of sessions in a county was organized by a local cooperator, a county Extension Educator:

- Pope County, Robert Stommes
- Waseca County, Juergen Peters
- Fillmore County, Jerrold Tesmer
- Benton County, Daniel Martens.

The local cooperators made initial contacts by telephone with the prospective farmer participants, usually about two weeks prior to the planned dates. Cooperators were provided with a telephone screening script/form to guide their approach and to record the results of the calls. This document is available as Appendix B. The method used to create ‘call lists’ varied by county and group. In general, they started with the event sign-in list for the land application of manure workshops the previous winter for the Attenders group. For Non-Attenders, cooperators consulted with or obtained a list of the county’s animal operations from the County Feedlot Officer. The local cooperators were asked to use a systematic procedure for building the participant groups. General guidelines for such were provided. Two additional criteria were specified: A) participants should be representative of the county with respect to size of operation and types of animals raised (exceptions: poultry raisers were not a target group, but could be included if they had other livestock; and see ‘B’); B) participants should have 100 to 999 animal units. It was deemed acceptable to have one or two participants per session with more than 1000 animal units, if such was representative of the county (This occurred only in Waseca Co.).

A reminder letter was sent from the county Extension offices to each invitee. This letter reiterated the purpose of the meeting, provided details on the location, and re-mentioned the cash incentive. Cash incentives generally ranged from \$40 to 50. The incentive was first mentioned during the initial telephone query/invitation. The cash payments were extended at the end of each session. The local cooperators were provided with a ‘reminder letter template’ to adapt or customize. Generally speaking, these follow up letters were to be received a few days after the phone call or a few days before the Focus Group session. An example is given in Appendix C. The participants were given a reminder telephone call, nominally the day before the session.

A total of 51 farmers participated in the sessions—27 Attenders and 24 Non-Attenders. Session size ranged from 4 to 7, with a mean of 6.4, a median of 7, and a mode of 7. The number attending from each of the four counties ranged from 11 to 14. The number of producers participating in each session is given below:

### **Focus group participation**

<u>County</u>	<u>Group</u>	<u>Number of participants</u>
Pope	Attenders	7
	Non-Attenders	5
Waseca	Attenders	7
	Non-Attenders	4
Fillmore	Attenders	7
	Non-Attenders	7
Benton	Attenders	6
	Non-Attenders	8
Total	Attenders	27
	Non-Attenders	24
<b>Total number of participants</b>		<b>51</b>

All of the sessions began with a meal, followed by the questionnaire and then the focus group proper. In Pope County, the meal was preceded by or held concurrently with a farm management update seminar by a guest speaker. The Pope and Benton County sessions were held at local restaurants. The Fillmore and Waseca County sessions were held in local government/county Extension offices. Again, the three-page questionnaire was given to the participants before beginning the Focus Group session. Participants retained the questionnaire until the session was over—they were asked to refer to the Questionnaire during the course of the discussion. Consultant, John Vickery, moderated the sessions.

Two Extension staff members were present at each session—the local cooperators and the respective Regional Nutrient Management Extension Educators’, Phil Nesse and Dennis Busch. In Benton County, Mark Hauck from the Conservation District served in Mr. Nesse’s stead. These Focus Group team members or associates staff members played important roles during the sessions. They:

- 1) served as experts to answers questions or address technical or legal/regulatory issues that arose during the sessions
- 2) presented a review of the sensitive area rules on setbacks, buffers, and incorporation (preceding a Focus Group question set on that subject)
- 3) gave an oral ‘verification summary’ at the end of the session (see next paragraph)
- 4) participated in post-Focus Group debriefing sessions (which were recorded)
- 5) operated the sound recording equipment.

The ‘verification summary’ is a brief oral summary, covering all the major points made by the participants under each of the post-introduction and preliminary questions of the question route. After the summary, the participants were asked questions such as “Is that a fair summary?,” “Did we leave anything out?,” and “Is there anything else you would like to add?”. The purpose of the ‘verification summary’ is two-fold. It gives the participants the sense that their input is important—that staff was really paying attention and that the information obtained that day will be used. For staff, it is an opportunity to obtain verification that what was heard was properly understood and that what was heard was all that needed to be heard (and said).

A summary report was developed for each Focus Group. These reports are based on the Focus Group team’s notes (including the notes used as a basis for the end of session ‘verification summary’), the post-session debriefing, as well as a review of the recordings of the end-of-session summary and the debriefing. They do not reflect an analysis of the transcripts. The two focus group summary reports for each county were combined into a single, preliminary report for each county. See Appendix G.

## **Transcripts**

The tape recordings from the sessions were transcribed using a Panasonic Standard Cassette Transcriber. The prepared documents are partial or abbreviated transcripts. Only the more central or important portions of the sessions were transcribed. Off-topic remarks and digressive discourse were omitted, as were the responses to the preliminary questions at the beginning of ‘question route’. The transcripts are typically 12-13 pages each, but range from 10 to 19. They are presented in Appendix H.

The transcripts were analyzed using the ‘long table analysis’ procedure describe in Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey, *Focus Groups: a practical guide for applied research*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., 2000, pages 132-137. The results are summarized in detail in Chapter III, B. “Combined transcripts summary”. This summary was used to identify eight key messages or findings. These findings are given in part A of Chapter III, along with the supporting farmer quotations. All eight are also presented in the Executive Summary. For five of these key findings—those that are most relevant with respect to Extension action and follow up—the Executive Summary also includes a sample of the supporting farmer quotes. Recommendations that address the key findings are offered in Chapter IV.

## **Questionnaire**

The results for each session were first hand tabulated on an individual, questionnaire form. They were then transferred to tables in Word software for analysis, calculations, and presentation. Preliminary reports were prepared for each county (Pope and Waseca were combined). The preliminary reports are available in Appendix G. A summary of the results for all four counties is given in Chapter II. This version of the questionnaire results reports statistics for all participants combined (all 8 sessions), along with comparisons between Attenders and Non-Attenders and between counties.