

An Evaluation of the University of Wisconsin-Extension Winter Grain Meetings Series Entitled: Grain Management in Low-Margin Years.

The Winter Grain Meeting series entitled: **Grain Management in Low-Margin Years** was a new focused series of outreach events that aimed to help grain farmers in Wisconsin increase their profitability and reduce their debt load. Since the current grain market is experiencing increased volatility, farmers have expressed high levels of anxiety about making management decisions. In 2017, UW Extension specialists, UW Madison staff, and county Extension educators delivered the program, which consisted of 12 meetings of 4-6 hours each. The program included educational presentations and a discussion session. Lunch was provided.

County Extension educators hosted the meetings locally, which were held in 12 locations throughout the state. Although many of the locations had similar speakers, each local UW Extension educator developed their own program based on perceived local needs. Meetings were held February 7-March 9, 2017. See the meeting schedule in Appendix A.

Survey methods

A group including evaluators and those who would be presenting at the meetings created the draft survey tool, which was reviewed by key members of the organizing team. Paper surveys were distributed to all 455 participants and collected at the end of each of the Winter Grain Meetings. A total of 245 surveys (54% return rate) were collected from eleven of the locations (no surveys were distributed at one of the locations). The largest group of respondents attended the meeting in Belmont (76 people, or 31% of the total), with the rest of the respondents relatively evenly distributed across the other locations (Table 1). Data was entered into a database, cleaned, and analyzed for frequency statistics. Qualitative data was grouped and summarized.

Demographics

Most of the people who attended the meetings and filled out a survey were producers (79%), see Table 2. There were also quite a few lenders (12%) and ag chem/seed dealers (8%). Some attendees were government agency employees (5%), consultants (4%) or involved in other agribusiness (4%). The producers managed 197,364 acres in total and an average of 1090 acres each (Table 3). The respondents who were not producers wrote that they managed 309,658 acres in total and an average of 6,881 acres each.

Summary

Survey respondents expressed a lot of positive feedback about the value of the meetings to help them gain new strategies for farm management and planning. Attendees commented particularly on information related to reducing on-farm input costs and improving marketing strategies, and complimented the quality of the speakers, handouts, new resources, and networking opportunities.

At future meetings, respondents suggested covering more topics related to marketing and profitability, cover crops, precision agriculture equipment and practices, soil health, and nutrient and pest management.

A number of respondents described interest in changing their management strategies based on the information presented. Regarding inputs, respondents described plans to increase soil testing and adjust

their fertilizer application rates, improve their documentation of labor and equipment costs, and try no-till or reduced tillage management strategies. Some respondents felt that the information would help them cut costs related to inputs, improve their marketing and pricing, use cover crops, and investigate new technology.

Almost all of the respondents thought that attending the meeting would help them see an increase in their profitability. Half thought that attending the meeting would help alleviate their stress level about their farm operation.

Detailed results on specific topics:

Were the presentation topics relevant to the audience?

All of the respondents felt that the topics covered were relevant, and 99% of the respondents said the topics were either “very relevant” or “moderately relevant” (Table 4). When asked “What additional topics would you like us to cover that we did not?”, 54 people wrote responses. There were six general topic areas that stood out as suggestions for future workshops. The most popular suggestions were related to (1) cover crops, (2) marketing, (3) precision agriculture practices, (4) soil health, (5) manure and nutrient management, and (6) pest and disease management.

The following is further discussion about what was suggested concerning each of these six popular topics. Topics related to cover crops included rotation scheduling of different cultivars, and areas such as residue management. Respondents who suggested marketing topics also included profitability, rental pricing, and contracts. Respondents who mentioned precision agriculture suggested topics related to equipment, precision planting, use of drones, and data collection. Suggestions for topics in soil health included soil sampling and testing, and suggestions under nutrient management included management of micronutrients such as zinc and sulfur alongside nitrogen and other fertilizers. Those who mentioned pest and disease management mentioned herbicide and fungicide application, strategies for recovering from scheduling setbacks, and specific pests such as rootworm.

There were a few other topics briefly mentioned including specific management practices such as tillage and grain storage or organic standards and certification. A number of respondents complimented the presentations they had heard that day and mentioned the depth of material and the handouts.

Do attendees plan to change their crop inputs or marketing?

A majority of the respondents (79%) intend to make one or more changes in their crop inputs as a result of attending the meeting (Table 5). They most frequently described plans to increase soil monitoring and testing and adjust their fertilizer application rates of soil nutrient levels (nitrogen, potassium and phosphorus) and pH more frequently. Others mentioned changes in labor inputs such as planting earlier in the season and changing tillage and row spacing, doing more research, and changing marketing strategies or crop insurance plans. When asked specifically about marketing, half (57%) said they will alter their marketing plans (Table 5). Respondents explained that they planned to increase documentation of their equipment costs or crop insurance, investigate early or forward marketing, and change their pricing. Others noted that they now knew what to research to change their plans, and that they would increase their attention to the market and policies.

Do attendees now think about input decisions in a new way?

The vast majority (80%) of respondents said that attending the meeting altered the way they thought about input decisions (Table 5). They described increased awareness of crop expenses and prioritizing input costs, amounts, and timing of their applications in their management decisions. They also mentioned implementing no till or reduced tillage strategies. Some noted that the information had confirmed or reinforced their current input decisions.

Do attendees think they will see an increase in profitability?

Almost all (94%) of the respondents answered yes to the question, “As a result of attending today’s meeting, is this statement true or not? *It will help increase my profitability.* Although most of the respondents answered yes to the question (Table 5), a large proportion of respondents expressed uncertainty about how the information would increase their profitability. They used words such as “hopefully” and “maybe”. Some explained that the meeting had given them different options to cut costs related to inputs, improve their marketing and pricing, use cover crops, and investigate new seed technology.

Did attending the meeting help alleviate stress?

Half the respondents (56%) said that “attending the meeting helped alleviate my stress level about my farm operation.” (Table 5). A number of respondents expressed uncertainty or asserted that farming would always be stressful, but some indicated that increased understanding of the degree of their control on prices, larger picture of the grain market, and improved information would help alleviate their stress. One respondent noted the value of the meeting to know that “we aren’t alone.”

Did attendees think the meeting was valuable?

With the exception of one individual, everyone who attended the meeting and filled out a survey thought that overall, the meeting was a valuable use of their time (Table 6). Respondents noted that the meeting topics were timely, both the new topics and the reinforcement of topics they were already familiar with. They mentioned that the content would help improve their bottom line with informed management decisions, refined budgets and marketing plans, and strategies to reduce inputs and improve their soil conditions. They also mentioned the importance of staying up to date with new technology and resources.

Other valuable aspects that respondents mentioned about the meeting included the value of networking, quality of speakers and handouts, the value of quality research, and motivation to consider new or creative practices on their farms.

What were some of the take-home messages?

The take-home messages largely emphasized marketing and input decisions, and the value of financial planning regarding yields, pest management, and labor inputs. A number of respondents also mentioned management strategies specific to soybeans; such as earlier planting, changing seed depth, and lowering the plant population. Table 7 describes the take-home messages and also any additional comments people wrote on the surveys.

Did holding this meeting help the county agent do their job?

One of the survey questions described an educational component as part of a county agent’s job. The question read: *One part of a county agent’s job is to bring research and unbiased, science-based information to the county. Do you feel this meeting helped fulfill that goal?* All of the respondents (100%) answered yes.

Conclusion

The new Winter Grain Meeting programming was valuable and beneficial for Wisconsin producers.

Table 1. Where did you attend the meeting?		
Location	Frequency	Percent
Belmont	76	31%
Arlington	24	10%
Jefferson	25	10%
Monroe	25	10%
Gays Mills	22	9%
Rice Lake	14	6%
Alma	11	5%
Melrose	11	5%
Sparta	13	5%
Bloomer	10	4%
Kewaunee	10	4%
Baldwin	4	2%
Total attendees:	245	100%

Table 2. What is your occupation? (Can choose more than one)		
Job title	Frequency	Percent
Producer	196	79%
Lender	33	12%
AgChem/Seed Dealer	19	8%
Government Agency employee	12	5%
Consultant	11	4%
Other Agribusiness	9	4%
Technical College Instructor	3	1%
Extension Agent	3	1%
Other: Research specialist (3), crop insurance (1), past technical college instructor (1)		2%

Table 3. How many field crop acres do you manage?		
Attendees	Average acreage	Total acreage
Producers (<i>n</i> = 181)	1090	197,364
Other (<i>n</i> = 45)	6,881	309,658
Total (<i>n</i> = 199)	2,254	446,284

Table 4. How relevant were the topics covered today, considering what you wanted to hear about?		
Relevance	Frequency	Percent
Very Relevant	155	66%
Moderately Relevant	78	33%
Slightly Relevant	3	1%
Not At All Relevant	0	0%
Total	236	100%

Table 5. As a result of attending today's meeting, are the following true or not?*		
Statement:	Yes	No
<i>I intend to make one or more changes in my crop inputs</i> -plus 55 written explanations	79% (157)	21% (42)
<i>This is altering the way I think about input decisions</i> -plus 33 written responses	80% (162)	20% (41)
<i>This will alter my marketing plans</i> -plus 35 written responses	57% (103)	43% (78)
<i>It will help increase my profitability.</i> -plus 43 written responses	94% (168)	6% (11)
<i>It helped alleviate my stress level about my farm operation.</i> -plus 29 written responses	56% (100)	44% (79)
*The number of respondents is recorded (in parentheses) under the frequency of those who answered 'yes' or 'no'. Respondents were also given space to 'please explain' their answers, and the number of those written explanations is recorded under each statement.		

Table 6. Overall, was the meeting a valuable use of your time?			
Yes	231	100%	Reasons: review, informative, cut costs, improve management practices, marketing, technology, hybrid selection, soil health
No	1	0 %	Reason: morning was good, afternoon was weak for my field

Table 7.
What was one of the take-home messages of this meeting for you?
Common responses: improve efficiency, consider inputs, lower soybean populations, profitability does not always equal yield, market aggressively, N not always most effective, scout, focus on return on investment, do more research
Any other comments?
Common responses: very informative, liked marketing, liked nutrient management, more in depth, enjoyed lunch

Appendix A. Schedule of the Winter Grain Meetings

Winter Grain Meetings			
County (Meeting Location)	Agent	2017Date/Time	Speakers Desired
Jackson Co. (Melrose) Melrose American Legion Hall 303 N Washington St. Melrose, WI	Trish Wagner	February 7, 11:00am – 3:00pm	Shawn, Damon, Carrie, & Paul (any order to fit Spec.)
Jefferson Co. (Jefferson) Jefferson County Extension Ofc. 864 Collins Road Jefferson, WI 53549-1976	LaVern Georgson	February 10, 9:00am –2:30	Full Program (working on agenda)
Chippewa and Barron Counties Wis. Indianhead Tech. College (WITC) Conference Center, 1900 College Dr. Rice Lake, WI 54868	Jerry Clark & Tim Jergensen	February 13, 10am	Full program (working on agenda)
Monroe Co.(Sparta) Jakes Northwoods 1132 Angelo Rd, Sparta, WI Buffalo Co. Courthouse (Alma) 407 S 2 nd St., Alma, WI	Bill Halfman Carl Duley	February 16, 10:00am- February 16, 10:00am-	Joe, Carrie, Bryan Francisco/Brian Francisco/Brian, Bryan, Carrie, Joe
St. Croix Co. (Baldwin) Ag Svc & Ed Ctr, 1960 8 th Ave Baldwin, WI (N of I-94@ Radio Tower)	Ryan Sterry	February 17, 10:00am-	Joe, Carrie, Bryan Francisco/Brian
Green Co. (Monroe) Green County Justice Center 2841 6 th St. Monroe, WI 53566	Mark Meyer & Nick Baker	February 20, 10:00am- 3:30pm	Brenda-video, Mark, Joe, Bryan, Damon Carrie-video, Shawn
Grant Co. (Belmont) Belmont Convention Center 103 W Mound View Ave Belmont, WI 53510	Ted Bay	February 22, 9:30am- March 7, 2017 9:30am-3	Ted, Joe, Carrie, Bryan, Damon Brenda, Shawn, Dan Francisco/Brian, Paul
Crawford Co. (Gays Mills) Community Building 16381 State Hwy. 131, Gays Mills, WI	Vance Haugen	February 24, 10:00am-2:30	Ted, Joe, Shawn, Carrie, Bryan, Damon
Adams Co. (SURVEYS MISSING)	Craig Saxe	February 28, 9:30am – 3	Dan, Carrie, Joe, Damon, Brenda
Kewaunee Co. Kewaunee County Hwy Dept. E4280 County Road F Kewaunee, WI 54216	Annie Deutsch (Door County)	March 6, 1:00pm – 4:pm	Joe, Shawn, Dan, Bryan Damon-video Paul-video
Columbia Co./Dane Co.(Arl. ARS) Arlington Ag Research Station N695 Hopkins Road Arlington, WI 53911	George Koepp & Heidi Johnson	March 9, 2017 9:30am - 3:15pm	Full Program Damon - video