

2008 Extension Survey Summary

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Introduction

A short Organic Extension Survey was inserted into the conference package of the COABC Shades of Green Education Event held Feb 29 thru March 2, 2008 in Sidney BC. A pool of participants completed the exercise and the following information gleaned.

Access and Satisfaction

Thirty-five percent of those surveyed had already received assistance from the COABC Organic Extension Agent since creation of the position in Sept 2007, and 65% had not. Of those who used the Organic Extension Agent's service 100% were satisfied with the results. Of the negative responses only 2 were unaware of the service, but would have used the service if they had been aware of it.

Participant Makeup

Fifty six percent were organic farmers (none selected transitional), nineteen non-organic farmers; ten percent were academics and the balance an assortment of organic distributors or processors. Twenty-five of participants also served on Certification Committees.

Most Important Priority for the Extension Agent

The most important priority participants felt the Extension Agent should focus on was responding "One-on-one questions and answers (telephone, email, or in person) regarding salient issues about organic production systems, standards, and materials", followed closely by "Researching and providing information on organic production, standards, materials, and brand name products".

The next identified priority was to "Hold information seminars, workshops" then "Develop printed materials" and "Assist with On-Farm Research projects", followed by "Participate in standards development" and then "Visit operations"

The two least important priorities identified were "Complete field tours" and "Develop certification applications/forms".

One comment was collect with regards to priorities "of these marked med to med/high, I think the Ext. Ag. Should facilitate or be involved in those services but not necessarily have to be the one to deliver".

Areas of Greatest Benefit

There were a wide range of responses to question 6, from participants on what they felt "would benefit the most from greater extension support efforts?" with the two most common area of focus being weed management and soil fertility support for growers. Two participants mentioned "assistance finding crop amendment materials", two suggested crop selection, one person mentioned pest control, and one mentioned help finding beneficial insects. Only one person mentioned increasing local BC production to help meet market demand, another mentioned no till, another ecosystems, another mentioned marketing, another promotion, another farm markets, another sharing info successful models, another workshops and another educating public.

Greatest extension needs over the next five years, and how might the COABC seek to deliver such services

The greatest need identified was “helping get transitional/new farmers started” with one respondent specifically mentioning that this should be done in partnership with BC Universities and Colleges. Another person elaborated “assist conversion from conventional to organic i.e. educational forums, mentoring, and production manuals”.

About three participants used the word “promote” in their response and mentioned that “the Fresh Voices winning entries and their contributors are a great source of inspiration and suggestions and entrants are foremost on list for committee participation”.

One person mentioned it was important to support “long-time growers as they encounter challenges” and another said the greatest need was in building soil fertility. Others mentioned interpreting soil tests, dealing with on-farm management issues, possible research avenues and one person mentioned the need for an intro to poultry management.

Another suggested that COABC should continue to increase awareness of organic operations, and another added the need is to educate the public. One person suggested it was critical to secure continuing government support. One person listed “VO training, admin training, and developing standard forms” and “coordination of CBs”.

One of the most intriguing comments was creation of a council for transitional farmers.

Other comments about the COABC extension service & its future directions

Number one comment “we need more extension agents, more resources/delivery people”, and second most common was “utmost importance to secure future funding for this position”. An important comment made by one person was “if there was more than one agent, standards work would become a higher priority - it is very valuable, but too much for one person and can be addressed by others.”

Another person said “I think that the service should be as up to date as possible on compost production, analysis and evaluation. As Chad Kruger said, we will not be putting OM in the landfill for much longer. So how to use it.”

Two additional comments about future directions mentioned “community networking” and development and “using farmers to research organic issues”.

Lastly two additional comments made were “are you sure there are not 3 of Rochelle, because she sure seems to work hard and do lots of things at once!” and “I am really happy we have Rochelle”.

Conclusion

Awareness of the Organic Extension Agent services is excellent and those who have availed themselves of the service are satisfied with the service received. The consensus seems to be that Extension Agent should focus their time supporting new and existing organic producers with their various production issues on a one-on-one basis and offer extension sessions when and where appropriate.

As time permits the Extension Agent should develop written materials concentrating first on soil fertility and weed issues that would especially assist transitioning producers. If possible the Extension Agent should facilitate farm tours, on-farm research, and support VO and CB administrator training. Continued energy should be given to building partnerships with various educational institutions and supporting Certification Bodies.

It is most important that government continues to support and develop this service.