

The Natural Farmer

Farmer Research Opportunities: Resources to test your ideas on your farms - Summer 2002

Special Supplement on On-Farm Research

By Sue Ellen Johnson and Tom Morris

The Southern New England Farmer Research Group Network:

Farmers in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island, are working together to improve farm economic and environmental sustainability. Farmer Research Groups cultivate the exchange of ideas and perspectives among farmers and create a network of progressive innovative farmers. Farmer Research Group projects are conducted on farms by farmers, which increases the validity and meaningfulness of the research. The concept has been used to great advantage by farmers and scientists in Europe, the midwest, and in many developing countries. The Network's projects range along a continuum of nearly traditional on-farm research trials to a new paradigm of farmer-led and implemented research. Research projects and trials may be broad systems investigations, simple demonstrations, or comparisons. The farmers determine the research agenda and implement the research.

What are Farmer Research Groups currently investigating in Southern New England?

- An alternative low labor, low cost, grass silage system
- Better methods of manure stacking and composting
- Yield of corn fertilized with chicken manure or commercial fertilizer
- A new soil nitrogen test
- Feasibility of methane production for power generation on dairy farms

Farmers have proposed numerous other ideas and regularly call with new ideas- so the list of possible research group topics is growing all the time. When a critical mass of farmers is interested in a topic, we connect the interested individuals, form a group and start evaluating the idea and planning a project.

What benefits are provided by the Farmers' Research Group Network?

- Opportunity to make rapid and practical progress towards economic and environmental sustainability
- Limited risks and costs of evaluating new practices and technologies
- Better access to grants, equipment, and expertise for farmer research
- Another way for farmers to guide the research agenda and investments in research
- Facilitation of communication and logistics for research groups

- Research materials and laboratory costs
- Honorariums to farmers participating in a research group
- Scientific guidance and structure for systematic inquiry
- Credibility, validity, and legitimacy for farmer's own research

How does the Farmer Research Group Network define "Research"?

Farmer Research Groups can compare new practices with traditional practices, test new technologies, evaluate innovative, but financially risky ideas, adapt existing practices, or simple demonstrations. The research can be conducted in the field or the marketplace, in the library or on the Internet. The research does not have to include an experiment on farms; some projects just gather and share information among a group of farmers.

Why work in groups?

Working in groups or teams makes it easy for farmers to learn from one another. It allows scientists to work with more farmers. It increases the overall efficiency of innovation. Multi-farm research is an effective way for researchers and farmers to allocate and develop their expertise, and increase support for farming and innovative agriculture in our region. Overall, this will result in more sustainable farms throughout southern New England.

Is the Farmer Research Group Network useful for organic farmers?

Two of the active groups currently include organic producers. The Network welcomes both organic and conventional producers. We work with all commercial farmers who want to increase the economic and environmental sustainability of their farms. Currently, there are no groups researching topics exclusively related to organic production.

What's is expected of me when I join a Farmer Research Group?

The extent of your commitment is up to you. Most projects involve talking with other farmers, either at face-to-face meetings or on conference calls (using a toll-free number). Depending on the topic, you may only share information or you may plan and implement a comparison, evaluation or test on your own farm. Most groups usually commit to some type of an experiment on their farm, (a comparison, a test or evaluation of some technique or practice), but some may only gather information and discuss ideas.

Why should I become active in a Farmer Research Group?

- Knowledge gained from a Group project will increase the efficiency of your farm
- Participation in a Group will increase the return on the time you spend testing new ideas
- Participation in a Group will provide objective facts which you can use to make fact-based decisions.
- A Group provides a systematic way for you to test new ideas on your farm, which is better than the traditional "trial and error" method of testing ideas.
- Data is power!
- A Group allows you to include the ideas and experiences of other farmers into your operation and decision-making
- Groups can influence the agricultural research agenda and investment in the region
- Testing new ideas in a Group limits your risk when evaluating new technology
- It's a fun, productive way to get to know and work with other farmers

How do I become involved with a Farmer Research Group?

Talk to us! Contact the Farmer Research Group Network by phone or email (see below), or complete an information form (available at the NOFA summer conference or other workshops). We will tell you if other farmers in Southern New England are already working on a topic that interests you, or a new group may start based on your idea.

How can I start a Farmer Research Group?

Talk to us! We'll start a group whenever we have a "critical mass" of farmers interested in a topic. The farmers in the groups may be people you know, - or they may be farmers you have never met, who live and farm in our region and have similar concerns and interests as you. The critical mass for a group is up to 10 farmers. Five to eight farmers seems to work best

What kind of research is performed by Farmer Research Groups?

Projects fall along a continuum from rigorous scientific investigation and comparisons to less formal adaptations or demonstrations of well-known or recommended practices. Any idea, new or old, with a critical mass of interested farmers who are willing to commit to a research group can be supported by the Network.

Contact us with questions or ideas: Sue Ellen Johnson, 413-323-4531; Tom Morris, 860-486-0637; Steve Herbert, 413-545-2250. (or email: sejohnson@smallfarm.org)

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