



Focus Groups: Farmer Perspectives on Soil Fertility & Water Quality

A focus group is a conversation with a purpose. Each session brings together seven to ten people who simply talk about their ideas, perspectives and opinions on a pre-selected topic. Two facilitators work to build a relaxed, comfortable atmosphere for the conversation, providing lead-off and follow-up questions. The facilitators encourage participants to share their full spectrum of views and engage one another in the discussion. The objective of a focus group is not to reach consensus or make decisions, but to simply gain the greatest possible understanding of the topic from the perspective of all participants.

With funding from the USDA's Initiative for Future Agriculture & Food Systems, Washington State University's Small Farms Program hosted three focus groups with western Washington farmers in early 2002. We selected the focus group methodology because it is particularly well-suited to assessing experiences farmers have had with farming systems and their impact on soil fertility and water quality. The methodology allows us to better understand farming practices while also learning about farmers' needs for resources and ideas for future improvements. As a non-directive, open-ended approach, the focus group shifts the role of expert from the facilitators to the participants, helping to create an environment where discussion is candid even on controversial issues like streamside buffers.

In two of the focus group sessions, participants were farmers who use organic farming methods. In a third session, most participants were farmers using non-organic methods. Here are the questions facilitators used to guide the discussion, along with themes that emerged:

I. Soil Fertility & Soil-Borne Disease Control

Questions: *What materials are you using for soil fertility? How and when are you applying them? What are the major issues or difficulties you are dealing with in maintaining soil fertility? What materials are available in your area? What are the major impediments to using them? Are you using any soil amendments to manage soil borne disease? Is it working? How do you know?*

Theme 1. Farmers use a variety of materials and methods to enhance soil fertility and control soil-borne disease.

Organic farmers used on-farm compost, poultry and other manures, cover crops, purchased compost, and commercial organic fertilizers as sources of nutrients.

Theme 2. For a variety of reasons, farmers must continually adapt their soil fertility programs.

Organic farmers struggled with shifting availability of nutrient sources. Conventional farmers no longer used manures because of loss of local sources and concerns about food safety.

Theme 3. Farmers disagree about the effectiveness of compost tea in controlling soil-borne disease.

Two organic groups had different takes. One group had several participants who said they are actively using and testing of compost tea. One farmer said she experienced dramatic results

with tomato plants that were severely blighted. In the second organic group, no participant spoke out in favor of compost tea. One farmer said not enough scientific research has been conducted and that compost tea arguments are based on myths and not facts. Conventional farmers did not discuss compost tea.

II. Cover Crops & Crop Rotation

Question: *Have you used cover crops and/or crop rotation in your soil fertility program? If so, what are you using and when? If not, why not?*

Theme 1. Most farmers say they plant cover crops despite challenges.

Farmers from all the groups said they plant a variety of cover crops including rye, snow peas, Austrian peas, Sudan grass, buckwheat, vetch, and white and crimson clovers. Farmers said they have trouble getting the cover crops planted in time for them to put out much growth before the weather turns cold and wet. Cover crops tended to delay spring planting, which was a problem for some farmers.

III. Soil Testing

Questions: *Have you found soil testing useful? Why or why not?*

Theme 1. Most farmers rely on third-party vendors to test their soils. This thread was common between both conventional and organic farmers.

Theme 2. Farmers disagree about the value of regular soil testing. Some farmers have their soils tested annually while others do so less frequently, irregularly or not at all.

Theme 3. Farmers expressed difficulty in understanding test results and applying information to their regimen.

None of the farmers said he or she believes third-party vendors do a good job of explaining the results of soil tests. Farmers said it seems like the test results are not geared to small farms.

IV. Farming Systems & Stream Bank Management

Question: *What kind of research needs to be done regarding farming systems and stream bank management?*

Theme 1. Farmers believe they now utilize farming practices that are better for the environment and water quality than in the past.

Conventional farmers said that they now cannot use chemicals that their fathers and grandfathers used. Organic farmers said their non-chemical approach is an improvement over previous cultural practices on the lands they farm.

Theme 2. Farmers are concerned about the impact of buffers and regulation on farm profitability.

Farmers said having land taken out of production seriously threatens their ability to survive economically.

Theme 3. Farmers prefer an individualized, farm-level approach to enhancing water quality over a “blanket” regulation.

Conventional and organic farmers both expressed a need to look at what's happening at the farm-level to harm or enhance water quality.

V. The Role of Washington State University

Question: *On the topics we have covered, is there any other information or assistance you could use from the University?*

Theme 1. Farmers would like to see WSU adapt to changes in agriculture by offering more resources and technical assistance geared specifically to small and non-conventional farms.

- Farmers expressed a need for technical assistance on building and maintaining soil fertility.
- Farmers would like to see a workshop on methods and protocol for conducting their own soil tests and interpreting and applying the data they collect.
- Farmers expressed a need for technical assistance on which cover crops to plant and when to plant them.

For more information and printout source go to: <http://www.soils1.org>.

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Online Research Brief