Profiling the Evolving Characteristics and Needs for Risk Management Education of Commercial Agricultural Producers in the Intermountain West

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The Project

This project aimed to gain an understanding of Extension programming needs of larger producers in the Intermountain West, focusing on identifying the risk factors that affect their vulnerability and to identify effective methods for delivering outreach education. The project also aimed to identify the risk management needs of Extension clientele and their learning preferences. In 2006, a mirror image of the current study focused on the growing small farm sector ($50,000 sales and below) with the principal objectives of the study to assist in the discovery of new extension clientele in the West.

Agriculture operator demographics are changing; large operations are becoming larger and the number of small operations is increasing. Managers in the middle are under increasing pressure to become more competitive as a result, simultaneously elevating the risks they face. Educators and administrators may gain a better understanding from these results of what educational needs exist so that programs may be created that are of value to changing rural populations. Complete results are forthcoming and are available at RuralFamilyVentures.org.

Key Insights

- **There are 63,760 farms in Wyoming, Colorado, and Arizona (USDA-NASS, 2007).**
- **Making a profit was the most frequently stated reason for engaging in rural family enterprises.**
- **Respondents overwhelmingly expect to manage their property “until I can no longer do the work.”**
- **Production risk was ranked as the most important source of risk; legal and human risk were ranked as least.**
- **The highest level of education most often reported was high school.**
- **A total of 92 percent indicated at least one member of the primary operators’ household currently holds an off-farm job.**

The Survey

To better understand the characteristics and needs of larger agriculturalists, the Rural Family Ventures Team conducted a survey of farm operations in Wyoming, Colorado, and Arizona in the spring of 2008. The target population was operations with annual sales greater than $50,000.

The eight-page survey instrument was developed by the Rural Family Ventures Team. The National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) conducted the survey with the Wyoming and Colorado Field Offices completing the project. The survey was mailed to farm operators selected by NASS from various data bases. A follow-up postcard was mailed two weeks later. Finally, telephone interviews were conducted with operators to obtain the desired 50 percent return rate.

The Survey Instrument had seven sections:

1. **Reasons for Involvement**
2. **Information Preferences**
3. **Resource Management**
4. **Resource Management – crops**
5. **Resource Management – livestock & poultry**
6. **Income issues**
7. **Demographics**

The Respondents

- **The majority of larger operations indicated their operations were completely rural or mostly rural.**
- **Most large operators live in a residence located on property (79 percent). Those with off-farm residences are most often located 5 miles from the property.**
- **Respondents most often reported the distance to the nearest metro area as 20 miles.**
- **A total of 92 percent indicated that at least one member of the primary operators’ household currently holds an off-farm job.**
- **The most commonly reported number of operators involved in day-to-day decision making was one, with Operator #2 indicated a 4-year college degree or more.**
- **The primary operator age was most often reported as 65 and over, with 45-54 years of age for operator #2.**
- **A majority of the large agricultural operations in Wyoming, Colorado, and Arizona are operated as sole proprietorships.**
- **They are almost always family owned or closely held operations.**
- **The highest level of education most often reported was high school for all operators, with 37 percent of respondents reporting they held a high school degree.**
- **They are about as likely to have crops as animals – mixed operations are common.**
- **The animal kept most frequently is beef cattle.**
- **Most crop land is planted to small grains, but together, hay and alfalfa represent a larger total acreage.**
- **They typically graze pasture 7.5 months each year and lease none or almost no grass left.**
- **They primarily raise their own animal feed. If purchased, it is typically from a local grower.**

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Acknowledgements

We thank the Western Center for Risk Management Education for providing us with financial support to carry out this project. The survey data for this research was originally collected as a part of a multi-state Extension project in collaboration with Rody Weigel (University of Wyoming), Jeff Transeau (Colorado State University), Trent Tegelstrom and Tachilvar Rahmat (University of Arizona). We have benefited from working with them.