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**An Examination of
Concerns of
Alberta Pork Producers**

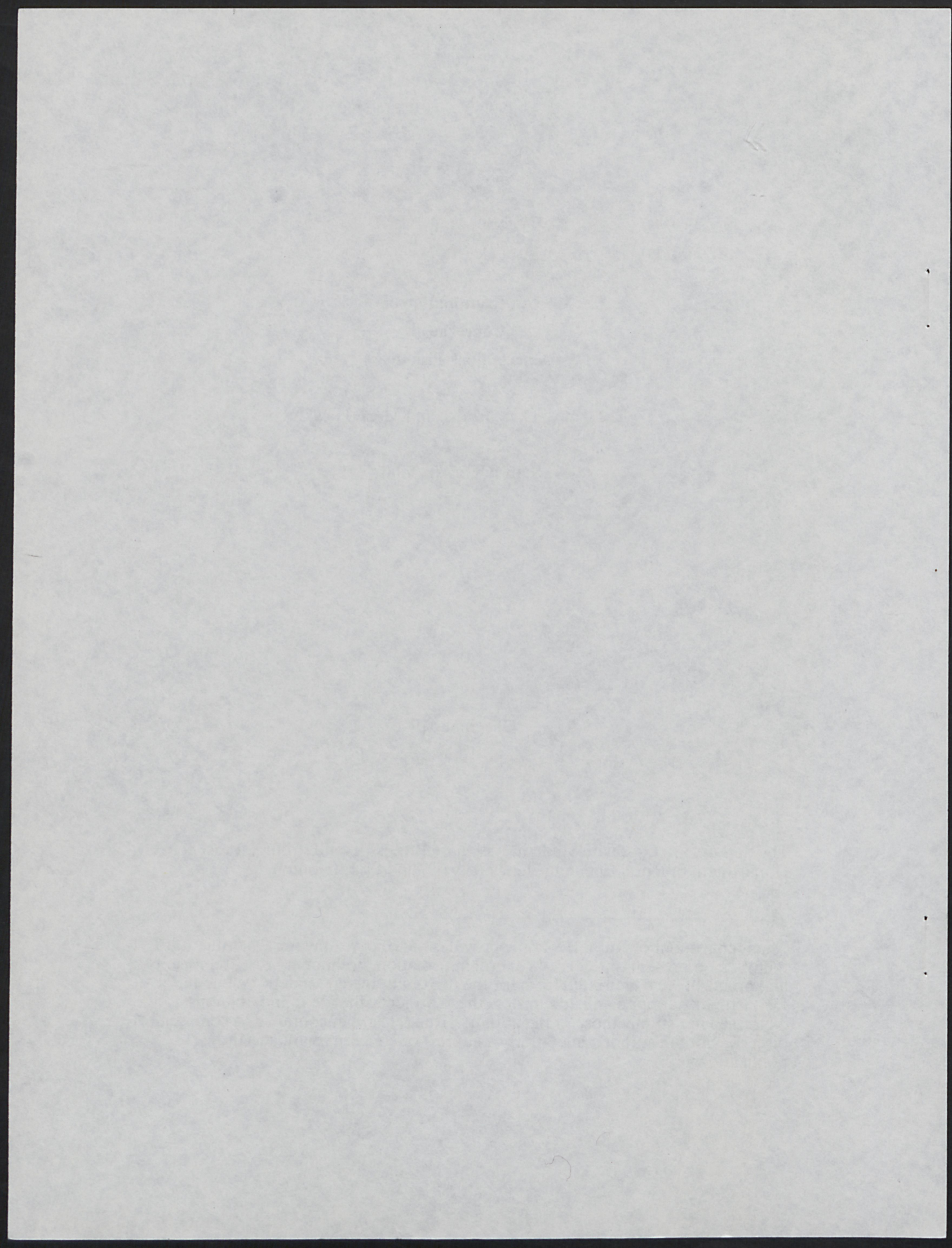
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Staff Paper No. 90-07

December 1990

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Concerns of Alberta Pork Producers

Abstract

This document represents a report on the findings of the focus group meetings held in Edmonton, Red Deer and Calgary, conducted by University of Alberta researchers. The method used to conduct these meetings was the Nominal Group Technique.

There were similarities in the issues and concerns generated at the respective meetings but differences arose in their priority ratings. The Edmonton focus group stressed technical and business management concerns. The meeting held in Red Deer emphasized a communication gap between the parties generating research information and the Alberta pork producers. The Calgary focus group revealed problems with the reliability and timeliness of specific sources of information which are currently available to producers.

Introduction

The objective of this study was to examine the range of concerns which are important to Alberta pork producers¹. Three focus group meetings were held in December 1988 for this purpose. Focus group meetings invite opinions and stimulate creative exchanges; moreover, the structured context gives equal time to all members, and equal weight to all contributions. Focus group coordinators at these meetings relied on the Nominal Group Technique (NGT),² a strategy described in the section of this report on Research Methods.

Research Method

Three focus group meetings were conducted in December 1988. The participants were selected from a list of APPDC delegates and directors, past and present. All participants were current pork producers. It was assumed that delegates and directors would be up to date on the current issues in the Alberta swine industry and willing to share their ideas. Nine representatives from APPDC Districts 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 met in Edmonton. Nine representatives from Districts 3 and 4 met in Red Deer. Six members from Districts 1 and 2 gathered in Calgary.

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) strategy was used to obtain the data from the groups. NGT requires a structured meeting which follows a sequence of problem-solving steps. It helps identify elements of a problem situation, explore possible solutions, and establish priorities. In this study a quantitative voting system was designed to reduce errors in aggregating individual judgments. The structure of NGT allows each person to participate equally in the decision making. The goal is full idea creation and exploration in a non-threatening atmosphere.

The three focus groups followed the same format. The participants were first briefed on the objectives of the focus group and on the correct procedures to follow during the course of the session. For example, one important rule was that there would be no discussion while participants' responses were being recorded. After the

1 The focus group meetings and report represent Stage I of the Informational Needs of Alberta Pork Producers Study. The findings of this report were the foundation on which subsequent Stages II (mail-out questionnaire) and III (telephone survey) of this study were built. The investigation into the concerns of Alberta pork producers was initiated by the Alberta Pork Producers Development Corporation. Additional funding was provided by the Alberta Agriculture Research Institute.

2 Delbecq, A.L., Van de Ven, A.H. and Gustafson, D.H. Group Techniques for Program Planning: A Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Processes. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foreman and Co., 1975.

briefing, the first objective was to prepare individual contributions to the meeting. The groups were asked to list the concerns of Alberta pork producers. The producer representatives were instructed to write down their ideas in brief phrases or statements, and to work silently and independently.

The next step was to map the group's thinking by asking the members one by one to present an item from their list until all of the ideas had been recorded on the flip chart. Once again, there was no discussion permitted. The flip charts were then placed so that all focus group members could view them and think about the issues during a short coffee break. The objective was to stimulate further ideas and to guide the discussions which were to follow.

After the break, a serial discussion of the items was encouraged in order to clarify the meaning of the ideas presented, and to allow explanations of reasons for agreement or disagreement. However the focus group members were reminded that the purpose of the discussion was not to resolve differences of opinion, because final judgments were to be expressed by a general vote. The facilitators structured the discussion by pointing to each item and asking if there were any queries or statements of clarification, agreement or disagreement.

The next goal was to aggregate the judgments of the focus group members regarding the relative importance of the issues. The producer representatives were asked to decide individually which were the ten most important items on the list of concerns, and to record these items in order of priority on score cards. The item considered to be their first priority received a score of 10, while the least important item of the top ten priorities received a score of 1. The score cards were then collected, shuffled and counted. The scoring method made it possible to associate the highest priority item of the group with the highest aggregate score, and in turn the lower priority items of the group with the lower aggregate scores. The results of this tally were recorded on the flipcharts. Discussion of the preliminary vote followed.

In the discussion, the focus group members examined the voting pattern for inconsistencies or unexpected results. The goal was clarification, not pressure toward an artificial consensus. The delegates were invited to question or discuss the results, and they were given an opportunity to clarify their positions.

After the relative importance of the pork producers' needs had been quantified using the Nominal Group Technique, further discussion was solicited on two or three of the highly-ranked issues. To accomplish this, sub-groups were formed to work independently on one of these issues for a specified period. Each sub-group selected a chairperson to report generated ideas to the main group after the deliberation period. The ideas that emerged during these discussions, as well as the results of the NGT vote, are presented in the following "Detailed Findings" section.

Focus group research is not intended nor should it be interpreted as a quantitative analysis. Therefore, findings from this type of research can not be extrapolated to be representative of the perceptions, viewpoints or opinions of the general population of Alberta pork producers or hog producers in general.

The intent of this type of research is to explore the range of attitudes, opinions, and concerns that exist on a given subject, in this case relating to the informational needs and concerns of Alberta pork producers. It is intended to supplement information which will be collected in future quantitative surveys to provide a broader perspective on the subject.

Detailed Findings

A. Edmonton Focus Group

The Edmonton focus group generated a list of twenty four (24) concerns. The list could be categorized into basic production based issues along with industry infrastructure areas (laws regarding waste disposal and labour, environmental issues, current industry affairs, hog boards, etc.). Three (3) top priority items were discussed in detail. They were:

1. Marketing and Producer Awareness
2. Research and Technological Change
3. Product Quality

The focus group members generated more supporting than inhibiting factors when discussing the development of marketing and producer awareness in the industry. Some ideas suggested in support of market development were the futures market, the price spread between the farmer and retail level, the existence of a high quality product, and the existence of a controlled central marketing

structure. Items that were perceived to inhibit the progress of market and producer awareness were lack of knowledge of the futures market, government policy procedures, political boundaries, and distance from major market outlets.

The second item discussed was that of research and technological change within the industry. Among the factors perceived to support the development of the issue were disease control, computer technology, new feed materials, and new market development. Potential difficulties were seen as time constraints, consumer education (re: antibiotics), research facilities, and timeliness of results.

The final issue discussed by the Edmonton group was product quality. Here, the producers felt that supporting factors were leanness, fast growth, low temperature cooking, marketing, and product destination. Factors hindering the issue were the fine line between lean and overly lean, the fact that carcass quality is not consistent between gilt, barrow, and boar, different cooking habits of the consumer, and drug residues.

The Edmonton Focus Group rated marketing information as the most important concern, accordingly this issue was selected for further discussion after the NGT vote. Sub-group members felt that they had the advantage of a quality product but stressed that they needed more information on reducing transportation costs and on raising the capital required to develop new markets. They thought that the controlled marketing structure and the existence of the central selling agency were beneficial, but that political boundaries (Canada-U.S.) continued to pose a problem. It was thought that the futures market offered interesting opportunities but the producer representatives felt at a disadvantage because of their lack of knowledge in this area. Sub-group members indicated that they would like more information on the price spread between the farm prices and those at the retail level, on vertical integration in the Alberta swine industry and on government involvement in hog marketing. The producer representatives also wanted to study the cost structures of other hog-producing areas but considered that government policy would be an obstacle.

Information on research and technological change was another highly ranked concern. It was agreed that research and development of new technology were important to the long-term competitiveness of pork products--both in developing markets and in established ones--but focus group sub-group members felt that it was discouraging not to see immediate results from this research, and that it was

difficult to attach a dollar value benefit to the individual producer. Similarly, members expressed an interest in information on disease control, but were concerned about the time and cost required to implement the new technology.

Sub-group members were interested in the results of research on the use of new feed products used in swine production, however they stressed the importance of educating consumers about new production practices. Consumer opposition to the use of antibiotics was given as an example. Sub-group members wondered further if information on new technology might help them deal with any new required production practices imposed by the Animal Rights Activists.

Producers wanted all information on research findings and new technology to be accessible by computer, but they acknowledged that the support infrastructure was not available at present and that many people would resist the change.

Information on product quality was the final subject discussed at the Edmonton meeting. It was voted the third most important issue. Producers wanted information on increasing the leanness of carcasses in order to improve the rate of return, while also avoiding the problem of overly lean hogs. Consumer demand for leaner meat is seen as strong, but heavily muscled swine are more susceptible to stress, and Porcine Stress Syndrome (PSS) greatly increases the chances of undesirable characteristics in the meat: the meat from a hog with PSS is usually pale, soft and exudative (PSE) and occasionally dark, firm and dry (DFD).

Pork producer representatives wanted reliable advice on achieving better market penetration through improved product quality--they wanted to know how to package the product properly, and how to lower the amount of antibiotic residues and other drug residues in the meat.

The twenty four (24) concerns generated by the Edmonton focus group (see Table 1) covered a wide range of specific topics. In general terms however, the group stressed business management and technical information needs.

Table 1
Edmonton Focus Group
Concerns in Order of Importance

1. Marketing information
2. Research on equipment and animal health
3. Product quality
4. Credit and cash flow
5. Information on new technology
6. Labour laws and waste management laws
7. Minimization of production problems
8. Structure of the industry
9. Role of the APPDC
10. Industrial integration (vertical)
11. Environmental issues
12. Maximization of human resources
13. Hog welfare
14. Future trends
15. Current affairs in Alberta hog industry
16. Cost-effective information generation and dissemination
17. Current information releases
18. Production, nutrition, and herd health
19. Amalgamation of western hog boards
20. Producer rights
21. Information seminars
22. Influence of location on marketing
23. Diversity of producers
24. Drug residues

B. Red Deer Focus Group

In the **Red Deer focus group**, twenty seven (27) concerns were listed. Once again, there was a mix of production based and industry related concerns. The three (3) priority items were ranked as follows:

1. Need for current information
2. Research - practical dissemination
3. Coordination of Alberta Swine Specialists

While exploring needs for current information, the participants generated the following supporting factors. Market information was perceived to be very helpful in evaluating production decisions; as well, results from current research (eg. new feed varieties) need to be timely in order to be useful. Problems identified were out-of-date information, and the lack of infrastructure for quick information dispersal in the industry.

The second priority issue was research-practical dissemination. Supporting factors were that research results should be delivered in layman's terms, not scientific jargon, that there should be a coordinating body to gather and evaluate findings, and that there should be a data bank with readily accessible research information. In addition, more contact with the Alberta Agriculture Swine Specialists was regarded as a research development promoter. The restraining factors were time, cost, and lack of present structure for a mechanism like research dispersal to work.

The final issue explored by the Red Deer group was the coordination of specialists. The producers felt that although the structure was theoretically in place for an efficient information transfer channel, there is a lack of coordination and liaison between regional, provincial, and national levels.

Producer representatives at the Red Deer focus group meeting discussed the need for current information. This issue was considered the first priority out of 27 in the NGT vote.

Producers stressed the need for current information on issues in the swine industry. They held that the usefulness of recent data compensated for its high cost. However, the absence of a suitable infrastructure for rapid distribution of information was seen as a serious obstacle. Specifically, producers were not satisfied with their source of market information: they complained that it was usually at least three weeks out of date.

The second issue considered by a sub-group was the need for research that is practical and accessible to Alberta swine producers. The producers proposed the creation of a coordinating body to gather and evaluate the findings of recent research. But the potential cost and ineffectiveness of such an organization discouraged some producers. Another proposal was for a research information data bank to be established. Again, the problem was cost--the computer

Table 2
Red Deer Focus Group
Concerns in Order of Importance

1. Need for current information
2. Need for research that is practical and accessible
3. Extension delivery system (Alberta Agriculture)
4. Coordination of Alberta Agriculture's Swine Specialists
5. Producer advisory group
6. Information group
7. Farmer pooling of information
8. Information exchange to prevent duplication of services
9. Animal welfare
10. Pricing information for inputs and outputs
11. Breeding stock information and research on associated problems
12. Swine specialists need more personal contact with problems
13. Individual producer participation in information gathering process
14. Awareness programs
15. Information should be aimed at leading producers
16. Finance and budget information
17. Research information group should be established
18. Marketing information - consumer to producer feedback
19. On farm testing of breeding stock
20. Information dissemination system to producers
21. Channeling producer information
22. Need for current P.A.M.I. information
23. Format of information should be attractive
24. Same day protein testing
25. V.I.D.O. information should be available to all producers
26. Continuity of Alberta Agriculture's services
27. Information on alternative feeds

C. Calgary Focus Group

In the Calgary focus group, a list of twenty (20) concerns were compiled. It appeared that a large proportion of the concerns were in the business/financial spectrum. The two items selected for further discussion were:

1. The sources of financial information

infrastructure is not currently in place. Some members of the group felt that results of research should be described in layman's terms. However, others pointed to the problem of research results being delayed in the process.

The tests on effectiveness of new feeds were debated. Producers felt the high cost of these tests was not justified by the results, and that the tests were often repetitive. The example of tests on field peas was discussed.

Members thought that Alberta Agriculture's Swine specialists could do more to communicate the findings of recent research. The system was felt to be costly and ineffective. This concern is associated with another issue the producers considered important: coordination of the Alberta Agriculture Swine Specialists. The producers argued that the structure for information to be fed down to the regional level and then to the producers is in place, but that the system fails because the personnel is fragmented at the regional level. Focus group members believed that there is a lack of communication among Alberta Agriculture Swine Specialists. Producers were not satisfied that there is adequate liaison between the regional, provincial, and federal levels.

The prioritized list of concerns drawn up at the Red Deer focus group meeting (see Table 2) shows that participants in Red Deer felt that communication should be improved.

2. The sources of production information

Supporting factors for the marketing issues included computer technology, Code-A-Phone, cheque stuffers, hog/corn price ratios, statistics, USDA reports, supply and demand curves, and overviews of marketing potential. Restraints to these aspects included the fact that many farmers are on a party line, thus inhibiting the potential of Code-A-Phone, time constraints in cheque receipt, and outdated information transfer.

While the delegates were discussing the sources of production information the following factors were uncovered. In support of the development of better information sources were the Alberta Agriculture Swine Specialists, Farming for the Future Projects, seminars, and cost/return analysis on the industry. Problems pertaining to these developments would be lags between informational need and actual informational transfer. In addition, the participants felt that raw research has a tendency to be too technical as well as not being readily accessible.

Sources of financial information were discussed by the Calgary focus group. The Alberta pork producer representatives suggested computer tie-ins for information and data transfer, but it was pointed out that many farms do not have private telephone lines: modems cannot function properly using a party line. Other members proposed that financial information be offered on a special hotline, using the new telephone touch-tone code technology. Including special pamphlets or bulletins with the producer cheques was judged to be a poor method of delivering financial news as the material would usually be delayed a minimum of two weeks in the process.

Producers asked for a better source of information on the ratio between daily hog prices and corn prices. They also found that information on feed grain levels of supply and demand was difficult to obtain.

Producers wanted information on market trends in the United States: USDA hog/sow slaughter data and USDA quarterly reports should be made available to Alberta Swine producers. Producers also wanted easier access to Statistics Canada publications.

The second issue discussed by the Calgary focus group was sources of production information. Sub-group members suggested the Farming for the Future projects and other current swine production research. The problem with these sources of information is that data and findings are not readily available. Further, if the information is made available it has a tendency to be too technical in

nature. The Banff seminar was mentioned as a good source of production information but it is expensive and has only limited enrollment by Alberta pork producers. Alberta Agriculture Swine Specialists were also mentioned, but it was suggested that there could be delays in responses as well as limited effectiveness in some cases. Finally, sub-group members suggested that information derived from cost and return studies conducted on the Alberta swine industry would be useful but there was limited access to the results of these studies.

The twenty (20) concerns of the Calgary focus group listed in Table 3 generally stress a need for sources of financial and production information.

<p>Table 3 Calgary Focus Group Concerns in Order of Importance</p>
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|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Financial information 2. Information retrieval system 3. Accounting and bookkeeping information 4. Production information 5. Business training for producers 6. Employee training 7. Management advice 8. Coordination of information available to swine producers 9. Availability of current research information 10. Direction of Fletcher's packing plant 11. Marketing information 12. Restructure extension services available to producers 13. Farm model development 14. Hedging information 15. Farmer information exchange 16. Market structure information 17. Air quality information 18. Management - employee/labor relations 19. APPDC must have direction 20. Pricing and cost structure of hog industry |
|---|

Conclusion

There were many concerns generated at the three focus groups. Of these, many were common to the three focus groups. There were, however, different priorities that emerged from each meeting. The Edmonton focus group stressed business management and technical information needs. On one hand they wanted information on: marketing; credit and cash flow; labor laws; the role of the APPDC; and vertical integration of the Alberta swine industry. On the other hand they wanted information on: research on production equipment; research on hog welfare; product quality; and production, nutrition and herd health. The Red Deer focus group emphasized a communication gap between the parties generating research information and the Alberta hog producers. They tended not to stress a need for specific information on particular topics, but instead it emerged at the meeting that producers felt the information was not readily accessible. They wanted delivery of information in layman's terms and a coordinating body to provide access to results of all research; and information data banks. The Calgary focus groups revealed problems with specific sources of information, particularly emphasizing the lack of current (and reliable) statistical information. Generally, the Calgary focus group listed problems to which solutions can be readily found. Focus group members were not asking for a government body to be created, just reliable information on the hog price/corn price ratio for example. They also wanted better access to USDA reports; Statistics Canada information; and overseas statistics relating to the Alberta swine industry.

All groups shared a common desire for more current and accurate information. Furthermore, it was felt that coordination among the various agencies that supply information to producers would result in a more efficient and effective method of bringing information forward. It was suggested that producers could have a role in bringing information to other producers. Producer input into the development and presentation of information would enhance the potential adoption and utilization of information by producers.

A feeling that information could be presented with producer input was also high on the list of concerns of producers. Information that has passed the test of other producers and has their input is viewed as superior to other information. Producer adoption and reactions to new information would be most beneficial to other producers.

With the number and variety of sources of information competing for the producers' attention it was felt that some effort was needed to identify the various sources where information for pork producers originates. It was hoped that somehow this would lead to some attempt to coordinate the presentation of information which would result in information being presented to producers in a more timely fashion and reduce the degree of duplication that currently exists.

To facilitate these objectives it is recommended that the Alberta Pork Producers Development Corporation together with selected pork producers and other groups that supply information to pork producers strike a task force to examine the issues and concerns confronting pork producers and explore the possibility of coordination of presentation of information to pork producers.