Soil Health Café Talks Result in Farmer and University Collaborations

Public Value Statement
The Soil Health Café Talks create opportunities for farmers with similar interests to interact and elevate their farming practices while at the same time facilitating cross-discipline discussions of NDSU Specialists and Researchers resulting in research project development.

The Situation
Opportunities for “information transfer” are increasing based on organized meetings and other digital outlets like social media. The concept of “information transfer” is much different from the concept of “discussion”. Most of us learn from interactions or discussions – where we can both share information along with our personal experiences and receive information through a conversation. Farmers learn in this manner and so do NDSU Extension specialists and researchers. Discussions may also lead to personal connections and future collaborations for research and Extension activities. With hectic schedules, it is sometimes difficult to take the time to have these discussions, but when we do, the potential for impact occurs.

Extension Response
The NDSU Soil Health Café Talks were originally developed to facilitate discussions for farmers by using a laid back environment like a café. They created an opportunity to ask questions and share ideas repeatedly and to tap into the minds of multiple people with differing perspectives. There has been evidence of success as we evaluate on-farm adoption of soil health building practices and look at the knowledge networks developed using this approach. There is also evidence of the interactions occurring amongst NDSU faculty and leading to cross-discipline research and Extension activities.

Impacts
With the Café Talk program, we have reached 500 farmers, industry, consultants between 2014 and 2018 using 67 Café Talks in 31 locations. Our total attendance (many are repeated attendees) was 1,118. This has led to 222 hours of discussion and face-time with NDSU, other farmers and consultants over the five seasons.

In the course of five years, there have been 11 NDSU departments participating in the program with 17 research and Extension faculty. In addition, there have been three REC scientists and five independent crop consultants who have actively participated in discussions.

Ideas generated during the hours spent driving to the Café Talks (as specialists and researchers travel together) and time spent during the Café Talks sharing ideas has impacted the collaboration amongst university faculty. This, in turn, has produced higher quality agricultural research projects in North Dakota. Ten collaborative proposals have been written by faculty participating in Café Talks (where Wick was listed as a co-PI). Each of these projects had a strong tie to soil health and has cooperating farmers who have attended several Café Talks. This resulted in a total of $6,121,273 worth of funding where discussions during the Café Talks influenced the project objectives. It’s amazing that a mini-grant for the amount of $4,800 which started the Café Talk program has influenced millions of dollars of research. In 2019, we will formally evaluate the influence the Café Talk program has had on university faculty.

Feedback
“This is a novel approach to getting information to farmers and getting ideas from farmers for our research” – Marisol Berti, plant sciences

“The feedback we get from farmers is essential to both our extension and research programs into the future” – Dave Franzen, soil science

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