Implementing Area of Expertise (AOE) Teams

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Changes in Agricultural Producers’ Informational and Educational Preferences

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Michigan State University Extension (MSUE) constantly strives to better serve Michigan citizens. In 1992, MSUE initiated a process to determine current and emerging local, regional and statewide issues of greatest importance to the Michigan citizens. In 1994, MSU Extension identified six “area of expertise” (AOE) teams to plan and deliver educational programs for Michigan farmers and agribusinesses. The transition to the self-directed AOE team approach led to a statewide study to establish a baseline of information on how agricultural producers view MSUE and to determine the value of MSU Extension to Michigan’s agricultural community. A second study has recently been completed to allow for comparisons with the baseline data.

Two statewide studies were conducted in spring of 1996 and 1999 to determine changes in agricultural producers’ perceptions about the AOE teams and their major educational needs. The 1996 study used a survey mailed to a stratified random sample of 1,534 people. The sample was drawn from Michigan Agricultural Statistics Service records of dairy, livestock, swine, cash crops, fruit, vegetable and nursery/greenhouse producers. The study had a usable response rate of 58 percent. The 1999 study involved the same survey mailed to a sample of 1569 people drawn from the same population. This mailing had a usable response rate of 51 percent. The key findings included the following:

- In 1996, 91 percent of Michigan farmers were familiar with the programs and services offered by Michigan State University Extension. By 1999, this increased to 95% of farmers reporting that they are familiar with MSUE.

- In 1996 three-fourths (74 percent) reported visiting a county Extension office. Similarly, in 1999, 73 percent of farmers visited a County Extension office over the last year. Over two-thirds (71 percent) mentioned utilizing Extension through the mass media as compared to 64% in 1999.

- In 1996, more than 42 percent of farmers and agribusiness operators reported visiting the Michigan State University campus to participate in educational events such as Ag Expo and ANR Week. This number decreased in 1999 to 36 percent of farmers reporting that they attended these activities.
• In both 1996 and 1999 over one-third of the respondents indicated a local agricultural Extension agent or team of agents had visited their farm/agribusiness during the past year.

• In 1996, most Michigan farmers were not yet taking full advantage of the electronic information technology offered by MSU Extension. Only one out of 10 indicated receiving electronic information via DTN or Farm Dayta systems. This number decreased slightly in 1999 (9.2%). Likewise, in 1996 only one in 20 had used electronic software packages, as was the case in 1999. Only 1 percent of farmers in the 1996 survey reported receiving information via the World-Wide Web. In 1999, this number increased substantially with 10% of farmers reporting accessing information via the World-Wide Web.

• Overall, print sources of information were most frequently used by farmers for obtaining information, followed closely by personal sources of information such as Extension personnel, sales people, and family or friends. However, overall, the 1999 farmers report using fewer sources of information than the 1996 respondents.

• In 1996, full-time farmers with no off-farm employment tend to participate more in MSU Extension educational programs and services than part-time farmers. This was also the case in 1999, full-time farmers participated in more programs than part-time farmers as did those farmers who do not have employment outside of farming.

• The 1996 data indicated that marketing agricultural products and agri-chemical use were indicated as the major areas of educational need of Michigan farmers. These feelings were voiced again in 1999, indicating that there is still a need for Extension to provide information on these issues. A need for educational programs on marketing was consistently emphasized by the 1999 respondents. Also emphasized in both years was the need for more educational materials in the areas of business management, environmental issues, sustainable agriculture and organic farming.

• When suggesting improvements that Extension might make in delivery of services, many people in the 1999 survey mentioned having more appropriate and informational meetings, engaging in more on-site visits in order to get to know the farmer, and educating the public about what the farmer does.

• Both the surveys indicated that as annual gross sales increase, the need for specific research-based information and the willingness to engage the services of private consultants increased.