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Lessons Learned: Communication and Outreach to Plain Communities about Organic Certification

Agricultural diversity matters. In the United States, farmers are becoming more diverse in many important ways: the number of young farmers, female farmers, and racially and ethnically diverse farmers is growing, and more government and nonprofit programs are specifically focusing on work with veteran farmers. Diverse cultural and religious groups also weave a portion of our agricultural fabric. Plain communities, the Amish and orders of Mennonites and Brethren, represent one thread of cultural and religious diversity in our agricultural patchwork. These groups are characterized by intentional community, simple living, and separation from modern lifestyles. Plain people use technology and mechanics selectively, according to decisions made at the local level by individual church groups, consisting of several families governed by a bishop. The Amish choose a life of cultural and religious separateness. Their participation in “modern” society is often through economic relationships with the “English,” the term Amish use for non-Amish Americans.

As a sustainable agriculture educational organization, and an U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) accredited organic certification agency, the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA) includes many Plain members and clients. We are honored to serve a large portion of the Plain certified organic community in the Midwestern and Mid-Atlantic regions, but we recognized opportunities for improvement in our service to Plain communities. We heard some groups asking for more face-to-face contact, and others asking for printed, not digital, resources. In light of these requests, we were pleased to partner with the National Organic Program’s Sound and Sensible Initiative, which has enabled us to develop resources and an outreach plan to better meet the needs of our current Plain clients and to make certification more accessible for the Plain community in general. The following is a reflection on a year of this work. We consider ourselves to be learners in this process, and we are happy to share our initial experiences with the broader organic community.

Embracing Diversity from the Start

It’s important to note that our work with Plain communities did not begin with a proposal for funding. Amish community members have been OEFFA clients and members for years, and we have tailored our largely paper-based certification system to Plain producers’ (and other selective technology users’) needs. We recognized the special communication circumstances of Plain community members from the onset, and learned to appreciate our similarities and differences. Some time ago, we engaged a formerly Amish colleague to train our staff in Amish cultural competency. We learned a great deal.

Practices among the Amish span a very wide spectrum from most traditional (old-order Amish) to more progressive (new-order Amish). The Amish learn English as a second language. “Amish,” or Pennsylvania Dutch, is a spoken dialect of German, used at home and with other Amish. English, used mostly for business and written communication, is learned at school, which typically consists of a one-room schoolhouse and a young teacher, recently graduated herself. Most Amish educate their children at exclusively Amish schools through the 8th grade. In some old-order Amish communities, students complete their formal educations prior to 8th grade, while a few new-order groups send their children to local public schools through the 8th grade, and may even allow them to complete GED requirements to better equip them for jobs.

The Plain community’s use of technology for communication also varies widely. Some Amish communities do not use telephones at all and communicate only via letter or in-person. Other communities may use an English neighbor’s phone, or a multi-family community phone, located in a phone booth rather than inside anyone’s home. In our work with Amish clients, this can present challenges, as often a client does not bring pertinent certification documentation with him/her when placing the call, so discussing certification compliance issues can be difficult. Because many Amish do not have a phone in their home, we cannot call them, whether to return their call or follow-up on some matter, and, except in a few cases in which Amish have cell phones and computers for work, we do not communicate with them via email.

These cultural norms relating to language, literacy, and communication preferences shape OEFFA’s relationship with Amish clients, in terms of the pace of communication within the certification process and the ways in which we can and should communicate.

Outreach Approach

Our timeline for this work ranged from September 2014 to September 2015. Our outreach plan was designed to create more opportunities for the Plain community to have face-to-face contact with OEFFA staff and to develop inspectors and consultants that would be more representative of the diversity of clients that OEFFA serves. This plan was molded by the messages we were hearing from our Plain community clients and members, and conversations with colleagues. Our outreach was focused on two primary opportunities: offering our participation at Town Hall meetings in Plain communities to share information, answer questions, and engage in dialogue about certification, and recruiting Plain community members for International Organic Inspector Association (IOIA) training to become organic inspectors or consultants.

Connecting with Plain Communities at Town Hall Meetings

We based our plan to conduct Town Hall meetings about organic certification in Plain communities on a request from an old-order Amish community in Ohio, which previously invited us to participate in such a meeting. We again conducted a Town Hall meeting with this group, and worked closely, via letter, with a leader in the community to set the agenda and make sure we came prepared to discuss and share resources on topics of particular interest to the growers. Seventy community members planned to attend, but due to a snow

storm, about thirty were at the meeting. We discussed topics ranging from organic vegetables starts and biodegradable mulch, to changes to Organic System Plans and the Cost Share program. We received positive feedback from those in attendance.

We soon found, however, that other communities did not seem to have the same need or desire for us to hold a Town Hall meeting to discuss certification. We advertised the opportunity via word-of-mouth, OEFFA's newsletter, and OEFFA's Certification Bulletin. We also reached out to co-ops and groups of organized producers and promoted the opportunity at many events, but we were not invited to do any other Town Hall meetings.

The blessing in this conundrum was that our lack of response from communities on this topic, made us all the more dedicated to participating in any face-to-face event taking place in Amish communities that we could. We attended vegetable grower meetings; grazing conferences; an Amish, self-organized organic farming conference, and an Amish family fair. At each of these meetings, we recruited for inspectors, and promoted the Town Hall opportunity, in addition to offering certification services and sustainable and organic education to anyone who stopped by our booth.

Lessons Learned from Offering Town Hall Meetings

- The meeting we participated in worked well. It was especially helpful to work with a community leader to draft the agenda and prepare for specific questions and needs. Both the participants and OEFFA staff commented on how helpful it was to have face-to-face contact, as the group of producers where the meeting was held does not use phones. The meeting closed with a lunch and informal conversation. That portion of the meeting was every bit as useful as the formal portion. Participants brought certification letters, raised questions, and shared opinions to which we would otherwise have not been privy.
- We are not certain why we were unable to schedule other meetings in communities, but we think it was due to a number of factors:
 - **Timing:** We think such meetings are best scheduled for producers in the winter, but not around the holidays. It may have been desirable to do more Town Hall promotion earlier in our contract.
 - **Specific Community Needs:** It seems that Town Halls might be most valuable in older-order Plain communities which do not use phones. It is also more challenging to do outreach and organize a meeting in such communities, as even identifying a potential leader can be tricky without having a previous, face-to-face experience to build from.
 - **Overall Need:** We took our cue to hold such meetings from one community, but it's quite possible that their needs are unique and do not translate to others. We may have missed the mark by thinking this need was more broad than it actually was.
 - **Building Relationships:** We hope that by offering these meetings, and promoting them in myriad ways, Plain community members will invite us in the future, should they have something they'd like to discuss face-to-face.

Connecting Plain Community Members with IOIA Training

We were struck at the lack of Amish inspectors, given the large number of certified organic Plain community members. Inspections can be an uncomfortable experience in the best of circumstances; for certified organic Plain community farmers, the language and cultural differences could accentuate this. In recruiting Plain community members to become inspectors, we expected that qualified individuals would bring strong production experience, cultural competency, and Amish language skills, to create a positive organic inspection experience for certified organic producers.

We used something similar to what social scientists would call a “snowball” approach to finding interested potential inspectors. This means that we started calling and writing people, and then called or wrote others whom they recommended. Eventually, we were able to connect with the potential inspectors themselves. Sometimes we spoke over the phone, and other times we were able to meet face-to-face at events. We had frank conversations about what the training entails, its rigor and significant time commitment, and the value we think it affords organic inspectors, and in turn, certification clients. We also explained how the potential relationship would work after the training. We outlined the mentorship process and how inspection assignment and payment works with OEFFA, and broadly, with other certifiers.

If the potential inspector was interested enough, he then chose to write a brief statement about why he was interested in the training, and filled out the IOIA application materials. Based on the applicant pool, available funds, and IOIA training schedule, two inspectors have been trained and are now working as contract inspectors for OEFFA. Additionally, we have two more people ready to participate in training this fall. We look forward to seeing how the new inspectors enjoy the work, and how our clients respond to working with Amish inspectors. It is too soon to tell, but in the meantime, we can reflect on what we learned through the training process.

Lessons Learned from the IOIA Training

Two Amish participants took part in the IOIA Basic Crop Training that took place in October 2014. Based on the participants’ feedback, and the insight of trainers Margaret Scoles, IOIA Executive Director, and Jonda Crosby, IOIA Training Services Director, we offer the following takeaways:

- **Overall Positive Feedback**
 - Both trainees stated that the course went well, that they learned good information, and that they felt it was a good use of their time.
 - Despite the tight timeline between recruitment and training, they were able to meet deadlines and complete pre-course webinars and assignments.
 - One trainee was pleasantly surprised at the intensity of the course.
 - Only weeks after the training, each had already had the opportunity to apply what he learned in his own community.

- One trainee was immediately interested in conducting an apprenticeship to begin inspecting. The second soon followed.
- **Cultural Differences**
 - Most IOIA trainings begin early on Monday mornings. Plain participants needed to remain at home for the duration of the Sunday Sabbath. They chose to travel very early Monday morning (4 a.m.) to arrive on time for the training, rather than to travel on Sunday and miss spending that day with their families. This may or may not be possible, depending on the location of the training, and acceptable modes of transportation by a given church group.
 - Although we made efforts to prepare Plain trainees for the training, some details were missed and led to confusion. For example, Plain trainees thought they were responsible for arranging their own transportation to IOIA inspection field trips, though this transportation was included as part of the cost and organized by the trainers.
 - Gender roles and acceptable dress are also different in Amish communities. The team of IOIA trainers, all women in this case, made adjustments to their dress and communication throughout the training out of respect for Plain participants.
- **Technology**
 - Both participants completed the course without the use of a computer, hand writing all assignments, reports, and the final exam. This takes more time than typing, though both trainees completed all work on-time.
 - The pre-course webinar needed to be completed online, prior to the training. One of the two Plain participants had difficulty with the technology, and some Plain participants might not be able to use the internet at all, depending on the rules of individual church groups.
 - Some pre-course preparation materials are typically available online. The participation of the first two Plain students prompted IOIA to make them available on paper for future Plain students, as needed.
 - It is common for photographs to be taken by IOIA trainers. Plain people often do not want to be photographed. IOIA trainers were aware of this difference, and after remembering, made an effort to alert trainees of photographs and give them the opportunity to opt out. One participant's hat took his place in a group photo as a symbol of his participation.
 - It is common for IOIA students to email group questions to a trainer and fellow trainees following the mock inspection, as they begin writing reports. The trainers made a special effort, printing answers to group questions and sharing them, on paper, with Plain participants.

Take Home Lessons for Working with Plain Communities

In summary, having engaged in this outreach work for a year now, we have drafted a few overall good ideas.

- Start early. Slow down. Build in extra time to allow for a different communication pace.

- Before even fully writing or submitting a proposal for work to do, vet it with community leaders in several representative communities to see if the plan and language used resonates. In other words, ground-truth what you thought you heard were community needs.
- Show up. Visit in-person and one-on-one, or in small groups, if possible. Ask for opportunities to speak briefly at meetings or field days where plain people are already gathered. Make yourself available.
- Reach out to known leaders within or allies of various plain communities with whom you already have an established relationship or mutual connection.
 - Ask for recommendations of people who might be interested and have the necessary skills and background.
 - Contact the people on this list and work from there, following-up on promising recommendations from each conversation.
- Strive for diversity of representation within the group depending on the role you're trying to fill. Representation might include geographical, gender, and socioeconomic diversity, as well as diversity among orders and church groups.
- Keep a record of conversations, contact information, and dates for follow-up.
- Ask for feedback on the process as you go. Keep notes and improve for next time.

Moving Forward

We are continuing to absorb the lessons we've learned, and intend to continue this work with a slightly better understanding of how to go about it. We share this insight as learners, not experts, in the spirit of continuous improvement in serving a diverse and vibrant organic community. We hope you found our lessons helpful in some small way. We are thankful to have had the opportunity to engage in this work, and for the many different colors and threads that the Plain communities -- the Amish and orders of Mennonites and Brethren -- bring to our agricultural quilt.