

The Revolution and Evolution of On Farm Research in Montana

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AERO Farm and Ranch Improvement Clubs
Montana

In 1990, the Alternative Energy Resources Organization (AERO) started a program designed to help agricultural producers in Montana learn how to farm more sustainably in this semi-arid region of mostly small grains and beef production. The land grant universities didn't seem very interested in helping prepare people for a sustainable future, and the farmers in AERO's membership already knew what questions they wanted answered. So AERO put the word out in the general agricultural community that it had money to give local groups of farmers and ranchers for projects they would design to help them learn about sustainable agriculture.

AERO* farmers took charge of on-farm research when agricultural institutions and organizations in Montana refused to support sustainable agriculture and communities. These farmer visionaries created a program (Farm and Ranch Improvement Clubs) that is a state and national model. AERO's program began with six farm improvement clubs made up of about 35 families. Today about 175 farm families in 17 clubs spread across Montana are learning about different aspects of sustainable agriculture that they have chosen.

Over and over club members report a shedding of their feelings of isolation, and sometimes embarrassment, that often come with breaking from convention. As Clint Peck, editor of the Montana Farmer-Stockman observed, "I think a lot of that has to do with people sharing ideas and realizing you're not a fruitcake if you're out there trying to do something from a standpoint of conservation, because people are working together. It is a lot easier to do things if you've got two or three people to support you."

Besides providing a sense of community, the program is a catalyst. The grants of up to \$800 each are enticing producers to move from thinking about an experiment to doing it. AERO also provides each club with technical and organizing assistance, farm tour organizing and publicity. Staff also serves as the hub of the club network, facilitating inter-club communication and learning. AERO hosts an annual face-to-face gathering of all the clubs

where they describe what they're doing and learning, what problems and barriers they've run up against, and what new questions are emerging.

The program is able to accommodate tremendous diversity - in people, geography, and project goals and activities. On-farm research or demonstration is only one approach clubs are taking. Some clubs are pursuing market research and development; one formed a marketing cooperative in 1992. Another club is teaching itself and the local community about Holistic Resource Management.

Over the past 10 years, 150 clubs involving over 500 farm and ranch families have done research on-farm practices, marketing, processing, consumer education and ways to add value to their crops.

Clubs are self-initiated, organized and led. They have proven to be a powerful way of promoting institutional, social, policy, and leadership changes. Many of the clubs are providing opportunities for the public to see and learn from what they are doing. Public events hosted by clubs include farm tours and field days, workshops and seminars. We'd have never started our group if it wasn't for this AERO project, and we've acquired some fairly useful data that we've collected ourselves," said grain and cattle producer Bud Barta, from Lewistown, Mont. "We know how [a practice] actually works on our own farm, rather than how it works at the university or at the experiment station. We have direct hands-on experience with the data so we have more confidence in it, I think. I'm real happy we've been able to share and learn from everyone else, too," Barta added.

Each club is as unique as its research ideas but designed to discover local solutions to problems participants have identified that are related to farm and community sustainability. This program demonstrates how the hope and vision of a relatively small group of individuals can change their lives, farms and communities.

* Alternative Energy Resources Organization