

Agricultural Management Institute Think Tank Symposium

*“Farmers Working in Small Groups
for Improved Profitability and Quality of Life.”*

Ottawa, September 6 & 7, 2007

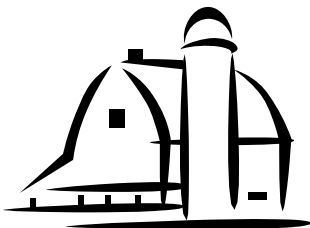


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Welcoming Reception Thursday, September 6, 2007	3
Mr. Peter Vander Zaag, Chair AMI.....	3
Mr. Jean-Denis Méthot, Manager, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.....	3
Mr. Clarence Haverson, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs	4
Mr. Ron Bonnett, AMI Panel member.....	4
David Sherwood, Panel Organiser and Facilitator	5
Think Tank Symposium - Friday, September 7 – Morning	6
Farmer-led Groups: Panelists’ Success Stories.....	6
Overview of Comments: “What is your sales pitch?”	13
Overview of Comments: Definition, Trust, Confidentiality, Supply-Managed	15
Think Tank Symposium Friday, September 7 – Afternoon.....	16
Overview of Comments: Pitfalls to avoid – Factors to consider	17
Overview of Comments: Group size, Value Chain, Virtual vs. Face to Face Meetings, The Future (20/20).....	20
Overview of Comments: Roles.....	23
Think Tank Symposium Wrap-Up.....	24
Mr. Ron Bonnett, AMI Panel member.....	24
Mr. Pierre Glaude, AMI Vice-President.....	25
Mr. Peter Vander Zaag, AMI Chair.....	25
Symposium Evaluation	25
Conclusions	26

Introduction

The Agricultural Management Institute (AMI) organized the Symposium following a series of think tank sessions held across Ontario in the fall of 2006. At those sessions, many farmers communicated an interest in working in small peer groups to tackle issues surrounding farm business management. These interests were reaffirmed at a follow-up conference hosted by AMI in December 2006. AMI decided to invite a panel of speakers with experience in small farmer-led groups from other provinces or states and from Ontario to make presentations. AMI's vision of the symposium was to exchange knowledge, experiences and ideas, so that more Ontario farmers benefit from small peer group structures to help manage their future and help them remain competitive. A group of observers were also invited. They would join the discussions during the afternoon open mike plenary.

The Planning Committee was composed of Pierre Glaude (AMI Vice-President), Peter Vander Zaag (AMI Chair), Ryan Koeslag (Program Coordinator, Agricultural Adaptation Council) and David Sherwood (panel organiser and facilitator). Isabelle Paris (event coordinator) and Claire Mazuhelli (translator, note taker and report writer) were hired to support the Committee's work.

A discussion paper was produced by AMI, entitled "The Power of the Group"¹. It was sent to the participants in advance. The invited experts were asked react to it, by sending a short document that would comment on the AMI paper and/or include case studies describing the group or groups they had worked with and/or contributed in setting up. In a show of commitment that characterizes the agricultural sector, each and every expert who joined the panel discussion sent in a paper, prior to the Symposium.² Those documents were also sent to participants in advance: this served both to inform participants about others' specific circumstances and opinions, and as a means of circumscribing the content of Friday's discussions.³

The Symposium welcomed 15 panelists, 18 observers and a dozen representatives from AMI, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA). Participants came primarily from the different regions of Ontario, with a few from Quebec, one from Manitoba and one from Wisconsin, USA.⁴

This report summarizes comments made during the Thursday night reception and the discussions that took place on Friday morning and afternoon. It is meant to highlight the most essential aspects of working with and for farmer-led peer groups, as seen by participants. As expected, discussions, rather than leading to a consensus, tended to reflect a variety of views and ideas. However, participants' experience and perspective allowed for many commonalities to be identified. It is hoped this report accurately echoes both the diversity of comments and the commonalities in the suggestions made during the exchanges, and in so doing, that it provides impetus for small farmer-led management groups to evolve and grow in accordance with the needs, requirements and aspirations of Ontario farmers.

¹ Please see Appendix I, for the Discussion Paper.

² Please see Appendix IV, for a Synthesis of the case studies and commentaries submitted by the experts.

³ Please see Appendix II, for the Symposium Agenda.

⁴ Please see Appendix III, for a list of participants.

The AMI would like to thank the Symposium's sponsors for their support: Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs and the Agricultural Adaptation Council.

Welcoming Reception Thursday, September 6, 2007

Summary of Presentations

The Welcoming Reception was meant to provide participants with an opportunity to meet each other and engage in informal discussions that would set the stage for the Friday Symposium.

Mr. Peter Vander Zaag, Chair AMI

Mr. Vander Zaag welcomed everyone to this very important conference. He indicated that the idea of farmer-led management groups has recently come to the fore. Amongst other developments, the 2002 Odyssey Report had recommended that the agricultural sector focus on such groups. In addition, the think tank sessions held by AMI in 2006 and a subsequent conference held in December, confirmed this interest. He indicated that one of the leading comments made by farmers was that they needed help in the development and promotion of farm business management. AMI decided to take up the challenge. Mr. Vander Zaag then made reference to his father's experience, as a member of a potato coop that failed; the reason for this failure was largely due to the ethnically diverse membership where participants could not find ways of working together, and the absence of a leader that could override these differences between members.

Mr. Vander Zaag then talked about the Canada Food and Graif Bank (FGB), where for the last ten years, 25 farmers have donated more than \$100,000 to the FGB. He attributed the success of this group to members' commitment to helping those in need and to the leaders' experience in working overseas. He stated that this year, local production would be 10 bushels/acre, which is not a very good result, but he insisted on the fact that generosity persists even in times of gloom. He then talked about a group of potato farmers, of which he is a member, which joined together as potato chip growers, forming their own marketing board. Through benchmarking and other methods, the group members share a common goal, which is also their strength: to get a fair price for their product.

Mr. Vander Zaag then acknowledged the sponsoring agencies for this event: the Agricultural Management Institute, the Agricultural Adaptation Council, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

Mr. Jean-Denis Méthot, Manager, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada

Mr. Méthot stated that he was pleased to have been invited to this event. He mentioned Deputy Minister Edwards sent his best regards to AMI for sponsoring the Symposium. He reiterated Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's support to AMI. He recognized the organization's evolution from funding projects to initiating its own endeavours. He acknowledged AMI's leaders as they creatively find ways of meeting needs related to farmer-led management groups. In light of the Agricultural Policy Framework (APF) expiring in March 2008, Mr. Méthot indicated that AAFC is now in the process of developing new agri-food and agriculture policies. This process includes national consultations with stakeholders and it is recognized that changes are needed to ensure

sustained growth. As part of the “Growing Forward” vision, the plan will build on the best of APF and on suggestions and ideas from farmers.

Mr. Méthot then talked about the Farm Business Assessment initiative by the Canadian Farm Business Advisory Services that indicated an 80% satisfaction toward management programs. These programs are focused on farmers helping farmers to become better managers through peer help. Mr. Méthot indicated he was at this Symposium because he is interested in knowing how to foster a culture of small management groups and their development. He mentioned that he hoped the outcomes of these discussions would inspire the next agri-food and agriculture generation of programs.

Mr. Clarence Haverson, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs

Mr. Haverson stated that he was pleased to attend the Symposium, adding that Deputy Minister Archibald sent his best wishes for a successful meeting. He recognized Mr. Méthot's instrumental role in creating the AMI.

He congratulated the AMI for its work and also mentioned the organization's evolution in raising the level of discussion around farm management. He stated that the AMI is one of the APF's success stories. He indicated that the organization worked to find out from the grassroots, what is needed to drive the sector forward, through entrepreneurship and innovation.

Mr. Haverson said he was particularly interested in more specific areas of the Symposium. First its title, which in his view, highlights that all it is not only about profitability, but also about a way of life. The other interesting aspect is the value chain factor needed to drive commodities. He indicated it might be interesting to form management groups that include more than farmers, but also producers, retailers, processors, etc., so that these groups reflect a whole value-chain representation. He stated that he was pleased to see Gerald Renkema, from the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA), was participating in the Symposium, as an example of an organization promoting farm management groups (FMG).

Mr. Haverson mentioned that more and more farmers are working on farm management planning and looking at transformational projects. However, the concern is that after a farm business assessment plan is set up, people will do one or two things, then give up. This, according to Mr. Haverson, highlights to need to foster continuous learning and improvement, as well as the importance of carrying the momentum further.

In closing, Mr. Haverson stated that it might be useful to look at ways of meshing farm management groups with farm assessment business planning and other areas, so as to foster a continuum of services that would benefit farmers.

Mr. Ron Bonnett, AMI Panel member

Mr. Bonnett said that although he is a late comer to AMI, as former president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA), he was very enthused by the Symposium and acknowledged the presence of both levels of government. He wanted to comment on the fact that the APF will expire in March 2008 and that it was of the utmost importance to convey the message to governments that the sector needs to know very quickly how and when the program will be renewed. In Mr. Bonnett's view, it is crucial that this information is provided as soon as possible so projects and programs can continue to progress.

“The Agricultural Management Institute is one the APF's success stories.”

*Mr. C. Haverson,
OMAFRA*

David Sherwood, Panel Organiser and Facilitator

Peter Vander Zaag introduced the facilitator, David Sherwood. He also took the opportunity to acknowledge Pierre Glaude's work as AMI Vice-President, and as the visionary behind the Symposium.

David Sherwood invited everyone to participate and learn from this experience. He added that simultaneous translation would be provided on Friday; he also reviewed the agenda and logistics. He mentioned that since the case studies and commentaries written by the panellists had been made available in advance, the discussions would be held with a view to gaining understanding and insights about the challenges and impact of farmer-led management groups in different settings. David then proceeded with the introduction of expert panelists who attended the reception.

Think Tank Symposium - Friday, September 7 – Morning

Summary of Discussions

At the Thursday Welcoming Reception, David Sherwood had asked panelists to start off with stories and anecdotes that illustrate the nature, purpose or characteristics of small farmer-led groups. These stories could be related to the case studies experts had provided, but not necessarily so.

Farmer-led Groups: Panelists' Success Stories

The following summarizes the topics and issues that emerged from panelists' "success stories".

Laura Paine, Wisconsin Grazing Networks (USA)

- Farmers can learn from one another as much as they do so from academics or government representatives.
- Group dynamics are extremely important in setting the stage for group work.
- The Wisconsin Grazing Networks are composed of a diversified group of dairy and beef producers, organic crop farms, graduate students; they all bring new perspectives to solving problems.
- Group work is a two-way street: you give to the group and the group gives to you.
- Ms. Paine then quoted a surveyed farmer: "Pasture walks involve other graziers. They serve as constructive critics, extra sets of observing eyes, fellow commiserators, question-raisers, and most importantly, these people are genuinely interested—dedicated to making grazing work even better on everyone's farm." (Dave Gneiser, 1999).
- Ms. Paine herself is a member of a successful multi-sector group of farmers producing different commodities.

"Farmers can learn from one another as much as they do so from academics or government representatives."

*Laura Paine,
Wisconsin Grazing
Networks*

Roger Mills, Manitoba Dairy Farm Management Group (former member)

- Member of a group that has been together for 10 years, now the consultant to the group.
- Went through some rocky times in 2000-2001, where members decreased to less than 10; however, since then the group has regained momentum and now totals 25 members.
- Important to recognize that people cannot be made to join a group. The fact that members have to provide numbers (regarding finances, production) will not happen without commitment.
- Members are often apprehensive in the first year, but after getting benchmarking reports and information, their commitment level increases.
- The farmers' wives often help with data entry and accounting, so they are aware of the business. Their role must be recognized.
- People know about the group through a newsletter that is published every three months and distributed through the Dairy Farmers of Manitoba mail-outs. Meetings are also held, where everyone is welcomed to participate. The group has managed to overcome the "negative publicity" surrounding its difficult times. The leader is also important for a group to be successful.

Richard Robert, President, Fédération des groupes conseils du Québec

- The Federation has been in existence for 25 years.
- For the first 10 years only two groups were operating. Then it grew from 2 to 40, between 1980 and 1982, due to a movement toward farm management groups, encouraged by the *Union des producteurs agricoles* (UPA) and MAPAQ (*Ministère de l'Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l'Alimentation du Québec*).
- An analogy could be drawn between the sudden popularity of environmental issues that have come to the forefront, now it is normal for farms to be engaged on that front. It may be useful to create such a movement regarding farm management.
- Ongoing financial support is not essential; the most important aspect is for the producer to be validated by his peers, his milieu and the media.
- The Federation sponsored groups in Ontario and Manitoba.

Luc Gagné, Farm Business Management Advisor, Eastern Ontario

- In reading the experts' papers, he observed that "leadership" comes up quite often.
- Many diverse groups do exist: 4 X 4, where couples from four farms are paired to focus on key issues; CUMAs (machinery coops; in Quebec, there is also *Gesthumain*, a group that focuses on human resources); since 1998, three local producers joined forces to create a stable for 400 to 500 heifers.
- For a group to operate successfully, it must rely on producers who "believe" in what they want to achieve, who are entrepreneurs and who are surrounded by people who have expertise.

"There needs to be a catalyst, an issue that triggers interest for a movement to build."

Chantal Fortier, AAFC

Chantal Fortier, Manager, Canadian Farm Business Management Council (CFBMC)

- The CFBMC develops management resources.
- In the last four years, attempts have been made to set up management and mentoring groups.
- There needs to be a catalyst, an issue that triggers interest (such as a financial crisis) for a movement to build.
- It is difficult for producers to see the value of group membership without a trend being perceived and adhered to.
- Management is not an "exciting" topic; we must make it exciting and worthwhile.
- The CFBMC, which has a national scope, is here to see how it can collaborate with AML in moving forward.

Brian Boyle, OMAFRA, Resource Person and Coordinator

- Has worked with 15 different farmers groups and clubs.
- Learnings come from both positive and negative experiences.
- A catalyst does speed up the group process because producers realize they need not act alone.
- Important to look for people who do have answers and to make the experience personal and hands-on (e.g. develop a marketing plan).
- Important to record progress, to document what is happening.
- The Lambton Future Feeders is made up of 50 members, who contributed to a total budget of \$100,000 per year. It has now gone through eight feed trials. The group published a report after each trial. These reports were beneficial: firstly, they came to have a market value and secondly, they depicted farmers' hands-on experiences in the trials. For both these reasons, producers were even prouder to be part of the group. Important to share information with other groups, to help them grow.
- Maturity is inevitable: sometimes it is better to end a group with a "bang" than to go on with less commitment and drive.

Margaret Appleby, Durham Apple Growers Study Group and OMAFRA

- The Durham Apple Growers Study Group emerged after a crisis arose when a pest caused 20 to 50 % losses to many orchards.
- The growers realized they could not solve the problem individually: they would succeed or fail collectively.
- The group meets on an informal basis to share information about pest control and other issues. As the group grew, pest control became one of the discussed topics, but not the sole subject that motivated participation.
- Important to know that not one grower, OMAFRA representative or consultant can solve a problem.
- Other members came to be seen as allies in the same production sector and everyone benefits from the group.

Jean Gour, Dairy farmer, President of St. Albert Cheese Cooperative

- The St. Albert Coop was formed in 1894. The greatest challenge it recently faced was to increase its sales.
- Focus groups were organized with consumers. These groups helped identify that one of the factors that was lacking was attractive packaging; consultants were hired to help find the right packaging formula.
- It was very difficult to come up with a package that members of the board could identify with AND that could be attractive to consumers.
- It was a long and costly process, but finally a new packaging was created.
- The new packaging indicates that St. Albert cheese is made of 100% pure milk (a move that was not supported by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, nor the Dairy Farmers of Ontario).
- The new packaging was introduced last May and the response has been positive.

“One factor is most important to the success of a group: to combine lifelong learning with lifestyle requirements.”

*John A. Anderson,
Farm Business Advisor*

John Anderson, Farm Business Advisor, Agri-Business and Farm Succession, KPMG LLP

- There are various approaches to farm management groups. Some of these groups are composed of very large producers who treat their operations as a business. In that context, like-mindedness is not tied to geographical areas.
- Other groups rely more on consultants (accountants, machinery experts, etc.) than on peer help.
- For example, Ron Archibald's group that travels all over the world and in which members maintain contact by phone.
- There is also the C-TEAM (Canadian Total Excellence in Agricultural Management), that is a fairly costly program but it is one where producers who participate have a hunger to learn. They have sessions that last from Friday to Sunday, where producers and their wives share knowledge and experience.
- The Canadian Association of Family Enterprises is an example of a group where members form their own Personal Advisory Groups.
- One factor is most important to the success of a group: to combine lifelong learning with lifestyle requirements.
- It is important for all groups to benefit from one another, whether they have an international, national, regional or local focus. It is also important that the information is channelled downwards (to local groups).
- Consultants or leaders do not tell producers what the answer is but rather provide knowledge so as to empower producers to make decisions on their own farms.
- Important to seek “like-minded” or “like-thinkers” to associate with.

Ken McKewan, College Professor, University of Guelph, Ridgetown Campus

- Was involved with a group of swine producers that came from Manitoba, Western Canada and the United States. They worked within three different jurisdictions and producers were very aware of trade issues and politics surrounding their business.
- They hold two-day intensive sessions on techniques, financial information, production costs, etc.
- Producers are expected to be computer-literate and to provide accurate information.
- Many services are very expensive and all the producer gets out of them is a wad of paper which he cannot thoroughly understand (“What does it mean on a per-pig basis?”). But the real power is in meetings that help farmers distil the meaning of the data they provide and receive.
- The group’s work brought on many changes regarding bio security, health protocols, profitability, etc.
- The size of the group is less important than having members who are at the same or slightly higher levels for producers to see the added value of a group.
- Producers are asked to sign a confidentiality agreement and the steering committee is very “tight” about this issue.
- Group dynamics, the facilitator and trust are important factors to the success of a group.

“It is important to recognize that what worked five years ago may not work today and that a need that was there five years ago may not exist anymore.”

*Dick Keunen,
Herd Mgt. Specialist*

Marlene Werry, Rural Economic Development Officer, Region of Durham

- Was coordinator for the Durham Region Beef Management Club.
- Important to have face to face meetings for group members to learn.
- One of the key factors is members understanding where each farmer is coming from.
- Group greatly benefited from farm visits; helped in building trust and members being more inclined to “open their books”.
- Essential to build trust, to keep the group relatively small.
- Even though communication technologies are available, getting together is very important.

Gerald Poechman, Farmer and Facilitator, Organic Meadow Farmers’ Co-op

- Appreciates that representatives from both levels of government are present.
- In group activities, it is important to involve spouses and to include social activities that become the glue holding the group together.
- The economy is set up for growth; businesses tend to grow for their own benefits, parasitizing others. The context does not conduce to sustainable cooperation. A group had managed to obtain a farmer-owned national brand only to see the “big players” put their resources to work and manipulate the Marketing Board to take over.
- In all businesses, there is a “sweet spot” where a business invests a minimum input and obtains a maximum amount of benefits. However, growth for growth’s sake can lead a business to outgrow this “sweet spot” and the next generation not being sufficiently equipped to get to the next one.
- Works within an organic coop that adopts a holistic approach to the marketplace; they market collectively for each member’s benefit.
- Farmers are close to their spiritual roots; as they grow, business priorities tend to trump religious and family values.

Alain Lavigne, Co-Owner, Ferme Lavigne Inc.

- Producers know how to take initiatives, but need access to expertise and/or organizations that can tell them where and how to access such expertise.
- The machinery coop (CUMA), after facing a difficult situation, called upon a consultant and the problem was resolved, which contributed to increasing the level of enthusiasm among members.
- Leadership is extremely important. It is crucial that leadership skills are taught in colleges and universities so that the younger generation is trained in group work.

Dick Keunen, Herd Management Specialist, CanWest DHI

- All farmers are experts. Farmers have a lot to share with their peers; even though you can bring in an expert, a lot of learning happens amongst them.
- Chose to limit the size of a dairy management group to about 25 members.
- The social aspect is very important because life moves so fast, people need time to interact. The group organizes at least two functions per year where the spouses are invited.
- The new information and communication technologies do not allow for social connections.
- Dairy producers have different limitations.
- Almost all members of the 40 groups have made changes to their farms and saw it worked.
- Important to recognize that what worked five years ago may not work today and that a need that was there five years ago may not exist anymore.

“One large producer started by saying he couldn’t afford to come to the meetings. After he participated, he said he couldn’t afford not to go to meetings.”

*Margaret Appleby,
Durham Apple Study
Group*

Maury Bredahl, Professor and Chair, Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of Guelph

- The University worked with farmers in trying to access international markets. Seven steps were identified in this process.
- In the same way, there are distinct steps in moving to different levels of management skills.
- First, there was quality management that was institutionalized through Marketing Boards. Then there was a move toward quality assurance, meaning that a worker could stop production if the product did not comply with a given norm.
- In Ontario, 83% of the economy is focused on services, while 17% relies on the production of goods. The service sector is not limited by soil fertility or the vagaries of weather. The question is: How does a farmer access the “services side” of the economy?
- In Holland a program was developed to creatively answer this question. A farmer who produced half a million litres of milk per year could: produce 250,000 litres and build 10 vacation cabins; produce 200,000 and form an alliance with mental health providers to offer facilities to their clients; or produce 150,000 litres and offer services to urban youth.

David Sherwood thanked panelists for their comments and stated that after the break, they would be asked to talk about ways by which they convince people to join a group, whether at start-up or as it is growing.

BREAK

“What is your sales pitch?”

The following summarizes the comments made by panelists in answering the question.

- Show them some facts. For instance, at the International Succession Conference “Where we’ve been, Where we’re going”, held in Ottawa on August 6 to 8 2007, David Khol (Virginia Tech) surveyed a sample of producers who had a succession plan in place and a sample of those who didn’t have such a plan. The research indicated that return on assets for those who had planned succession was 8%, whereas it was less than 6% for those who did not.⁵ For a dairy farmer who brings in five or six million dollars a year, it represents quite a lot of money.
- Testimonials from growers themselves. One large producer had started by saying he could not afford to attend meetings because of time constraints; later on, he said that he could not afford not to attend.
- Meeting individual needs; important part of getting a group started.
- Name dropping. Important to say that among the members, this one has been selected because he is an innovator, a well-respected member of the community, etc.
- Importance of validation: producer’s confidence that what he is doing is also being done elsewhere (production, techniques, etc.).
- It varies a lot from group to group. For instance, 90% of farmers now use the Internet for market intelligence. Internet groups do exist and function efficiently. The bottom line is a group must create value and that varies a lot across different groups.
- Positive results from other producers, testimonials. Share production information and numbers anonymously with permission from producers.
- Don’t oversell the value of group membership. Producers need to want the services and to network, otherwise they will not be an effective group member.
- If a producer mentions farm management groups or expresses interest, then you meet with him and provide information. Isolation is an issue: sometimes it can take up to three hours to get to meetings; producers who attend first meetings then ensure ongoing contacts by phone.
- Self-selection seems to be the most efficient way, especially where tradition does not include cooperative movements such as it does in Quebec and Ontario. The way in which you approach producers makes a big difference. In grazing networks, some farmers prefer pasture walks and socially-oriented activities are very efficient. On the other hand, some farmers may prefer a field day at a research station or older farmers may want to discuss estate planning; it is important to focus on issues that are on a producer’s mind.
- Value of lifelong learning; “post-secondary education taught me how to learn”.
- Never argue, but convince. Visit with interested parties to ask questions about their challenges and problems, then ask whether they would be interested in talking about these issues with other farmers. Invite potential group members to social events; “shop talk” occurs naturally, which can lead to joining a group.
- Use one-on-one approach; know about a farmer’s operations and present value of farm management groups; “drop names” of well-respected farmers who are part of the group. Important to look up to peers. Also important to be clear about the focus and time commitment involved.

“One participant started off as the worst producer in the group. Now, ten years later, he is one of the ten best and next year, he will probably be among the five best. It worked for him because he was open to comments and because he truly believed in his own ability to grow.”

*Luc Gagné,
Farm Business Mgt.
Advisor*

⁵ The document “The Evolution of Transition Management in Agriculture” by Dr. David Kohl, Professor Emeritus, Agricultural and Applied Economics, Virginia Tech, can be found at:
<http://www.farmcentre.com/EventsAnnouncements/Events/FarmSuccession/2007/pdf/080707OttawaON.pdf>

*AGRICULTURAL MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE – THINK TANK SYMPOSIUM
OTTAWA, SEPTEMBER 6 & 7, 2007*

- Need to be very aware of producers' needs. After a survey was conducted among groups, the need for a development club was identified whereas the leaders thought the need for accounting services was more prevalent.
- Producers must feel free to attend. When they are "pushed" by credit institutions, producers come with less enthusiasm and commitment.
- Make participation attractive, interesting and motivating so producers are enticed to become closer to the members of a group. Important that the group is sound and efficient.
- Word of mouth between producers is very efficient but the producer must feel validated by other farmers, the government and farm organizations.
- Financial crisis that swine producers faced was the catalyst for their collaboration in establishing production costs that ultimately improved their position. Important to have numbers, ratios, etc, to support their participation.
- Essential to have a well-defined goal. A producer must see his own benefit.
- Value the input of a prospective member: make the point that the producer, in becoming a member, also becomes a partner to all others.
- One way is to survey all members and ask them what they need and what information they want.
- One participant related the story of a producer who joined a group ten years ago and was the worst producer among the group. He is now among the ten best and next year, he probably will be among the five best. It worked for him because he was open to comments and because he truly believed in his own ability to grow.

Overview of Comments: “What is your sales pitch?”

- Statistics, documented results
- Testimonials
- Direct approach, one-to-one
- Create and promote value
- Sharing positive results with permission
- Normalizing operations (this is what others do)
- Producers have to show first interest, followed up by one-on-one meeting to ask questions, find out needs
- Word of mouth
- Visits and social gatherings
- Clear goals
- Make new participants “partners”
- Recognize and value role of spouses
- “Worse than can happen is that you get better”
- Publicity (newsletter, reports, notice of meetings, booths at events, etc.) to maintain visibility and repeat the message
- Assessment of producers’ goals and vision to ensure it fits with the rest of the group.
- Identify what the ultimate goal is and meet the needs of local producers
- In view of the constant evolution of groups, find ways to deal with confidentiality issues.

After the morning break, some observers expressed their wish to join in on the discussion, to react to comments made by panelists. The discussions touched on group similarities and differences and some specific issues that may represent a challenge.

The following summarizes comments made by observers and panelists.

Definition: a group, a club?

- One participant stated that the issue was the definition of a group, or a club: What are the objectives? Who is involved and why?
- There are many differences among groups: some may be joined only by invitation or when a member recommends a producer.
- There are also different purposes: some are more technical (tech transfer, etc.) where groups tend to open up fairly easily, while others are based on other areas of management where issues such as confidentiality and trust come into play.
- The group's goals need to be clearly defined: Is the goal to improve self using benchmarking and other methods or is the goal to improve the whole industry?

Trust and confidentiality

- Some participants feel it is important not to change the membership because it takes a long time for trust to come, to reach a certain level of basic skills to build on and also to overcome the confidentiality issue.
- Regarding confidentiality, one participant mentioned that group members can share information pertaining to production and efficiency, without touching on personal finances such as debt load, etc.
- Others share financial information on an anonymous basis to present some examples of different situations.
- It was mentioned that the facilitator plays an important role in establishing trust among group members. When producers face issues such as debt load and other financial challenges, it takes time for them to see the value of sharing such information.

Supply-managed vs. non-supply managed and commodities

- There is a big difference between groups that are formed within the supply-managed sector and non-supply managed sector. The trust level within supply-managed groups tends to be higher.
- It was mentioned that one group that produces non-supply managed goods functions very well: in a global marketplace, producers tend to believe they are "in this together" and band together to face competition.
- "Information for the public good" is not as valued as information that "will make me more profitable".
- Commodity is also an important issue. Most groups in Canada seem to be more successful if they share one commodity. After a while, the focus is broadened to include such topics as way of life, economics, the environment, etc.
- When a group is more diversified, there needs to be a conscious decision to do so: members are then ready to celebrate diversity and differences and benefit from innovative solutions.
- A majority of participants believe that the two approaches can work, whether a group is formed around one commodity or multiple ones.

Just before breaking for lunch, the facilitator stated that the afternoon discussions would be focused on two themes: the mistakes or things to avoid in setting up or operating a small farmer-led management group, and the roles of government, different farmers' organizations, the AMI, etc. in promoting and developing farmer-led management groups. He invited the observers to approach him over lunch with suggested topics or questions.

Overview of Comments: Definition, Trust, Confidentiality, Supply-Managed

- There is not one definition of a group or club: they exist under diverse structures and for a variety of purposes related to producer members' needs.
- It is important to clearly state purpose and goals of a group.
- It takes time to establish trust among group members.
- The facilitator can have a major influence in establishing trust among members.
- Confidentiality: producers can begin with exchanging information about production techniques, before sharing more "risky" data about debt load or financial results. Some groups have members sign confidentiality agreements.
- Farmers working within a supply-managed context share financial information more readily than those who work within a non-supply managed sector.

Think Tank Symposium Friday, September 7 – Afternoon

Summary of Discussions

As previously mentioned, the facilitator invited participants to talk about the things that need to be avoided and factors to consider in order for a group to operate efficiently.

The following summarizes participants' comments and ideas.

- Avoid covering too large a geographical region, especially with a one-commodity group.
- Numerous staff turnovers impede a group's progress.
- Governments should fund groups for start-up and guidance services, but not necessarily on an ongoing basis. Some participants disagree and believe that ongoing funding is necessary.
- One common error is to coax or accept just about anybody in a group; it is important for a group to establish a protocol for membership.
- The choice of facilitator is extremely important; for instance, producers would turn to university or college extension offices but the extension workers are not trained to "facilitate". They tend to see their role as "teacher-student", which doesn't work. The staff person needs to be trained in facilitation.
- Problem with finding a part-time facilitator who had enough knowledge. A contract was given to an accounting firm that had an agriculture advisory team; in the end, producers did not get their reports.
- Avoid having one "wrong" person in a group, who is not comfortable or confident enough to actively participate; ensure a good screening and that you group dynamics are talked about from the onset.
- Important not to deviate from initial goal to "please everybody".
- If a member is unsatisfied, let him go and do not insist on him staying on.
- It is important to stay in touch with members because needs change very rapidly. Services that were offered five years ago may not be currently relevant, and new needs may arise.
- Important to establish a partnership between the consultant and group members, rather than an employer-employee relationship.
- Important to find outside resources that are trained in agri-business but also in group work.
- The emphasis on comparability can become a "straightjacket". It is important to use different key performance indicators, to foster flexibility.
- Keep the group focus, otherwise members will lose interest and it will leave them with bad memories.
- Meeting location and timing is crucial. One group wanted to start another in a different region but the critical mass was not there, so it ended up being the first group nurturing and reporting to the second one.
- Consider forming groups that do not solely include farmers (add accountants, bankers, etc.).
- AMI must be cautious about being the "Silver Knight"; one suit does not fit all.

"It is important not to deviate from the initial goal while trying to please everybody."

*Alain Lavigne,
Ferme Lavigne Inc.*

Overview of Comments: Pitfalls to avoid – Factors to consider

Pitfalls to avoid

- Hiring a facilitator who lacks training in group work.
- Recruiting members who are not ready or not committed.
- Excessive “comparability” as a norm.
- Deviating from initial goal while trying to please everyone.

Factors to consider

- Caution when hiring consultants: if they do not deliver, group members will lose motivation.
- Staff turnover has a major impact on a group’s progress.
- Consider establishing membership criteria.
- Inform potential members about the purpose and goals of the group AND ask about their own point of view.
- Timing (time of year, of day) and location (geographical proximity) of meetings are very important factors.

Before breaking for lunch, the facilitator had invited observers to identify questions or issues they would like to have the panel address during the afternoon discussions. The facilitator went through these topics, asking panelists to comment.

Group size

- The need and purpose must be targeted: some groups are composed of 10 members, while others regroup 200. Some are closed and others have an open membership.
- As an example, one group is composed of 60 farms that are located far away from each other. They identified themes and formed sub-groups around these more specific interests. They hold the same activities but in different regions.
- There is such a thing as a group becoming too big, but the threshold cannot be defined by a formula. The facilitator must be flexible enough to adapt activities and process to the number of people, the topics and the interests.
- In groups who don't have enough resources to hire a facilitator, members often facilitate in rotation. But it is more efficient in smaller groups.
- Hiring a facilitator involves relying on a critical mass that allows for the expense. It is important to keep costs as low as possible.
- Single commodity groups are less oriented toward competition.
- It is possible to focus on how producers can make better business decisions, across all commodities.

Value Chain

- One participant related the example of New Zealand. The government eradicated subsidies but supported farm improvement clubs that would monitor agricultural businesses. These projects involve a group of producers who, every three years, appoint one farm to be the focus of their discussions: during that time, every aspect of the farm is discussed and examined. Members doubled and tripled their productivity.
- Important to consider including the whole value chain. An example of tomato growers who include six levels: seeders, nurseries, growers, packers, retailers and marketers and at the end, logistics and transport. This approach is very effective.
- In Europe, the horizontal value chain (for groups) is as important as the vertical value chain.
- The issue of trust is central to the efficiency of such groups; one example is a group of potato producers who met with processors and finally arrived at some mutual understanding that was non-existent before they met and discussed issues from their own points of view.
- Regarding the value chain, there are different possible outcomes: increased productivity, move up or down the chain, shift and share to have effect on the end price, capture markets from other producers and/or processors. This last approach is not beneficial to society: small groups have a more holistic perspective and meet a need to share information and a vision.

Virtual meetings vs. Face to Face

- Virtual meetings will be more prevalent in the future. It is a generational question. Forefathers had a higher level of social activities; their children are learning new technologies and the next generation have had access to new communication technologies since birth.
- Because they are so busy, farmers feel a different but as important a need for social interaction as they did a couple of generations ago.
- Virtual meetings are efficient after people meet in person and get to know each other: personal contact is required to nurture the group and make it grow.

- In the context of a mentoring program, virtual contacts were established after the mentor and mentee had a first meeting.
- When young producers access information on the Internet, they still need help to interpret, explain and apply the information. In that sense, face to face meetings are useful and important.
- Groups function at different levels. For instance, one succession group meets every five years. There are various communications tools that will be more and more prevalent (chat rooms, Listserves, etc.).
- One participant mentioned that a group had tried to meet through conference calls but that it only lasted one year and it was not very successful. He believes that faxes and emails are not sufficient and that members tend to lose contact.
- Sometimes OMAFRA staff facilitated conference calls, particularly during the growing season when frequent contact was required.
- One group has members in the North, it works because although they can't come to meetings the consultants visit them twice a year; they need the face to face contact.
- Many participants are proponents of regional/local groups; although the issues tackled may be broad, meetings bring solidarity within the group.
- Important to remember that High Speed Broad Band Internet is not available to everyone, many rural areas are on dial-up over the phone lines.

The Future (20/20) – Where are groups going?

- There will always be a need to bring people together. As farms become more specialized and/or find niche markets and even though technologies improve, producers will still need to meet because expertise and knowledge are required.
- Successful groups will have to adapt quickly to changes in their sector as well as adjusting to the different needs of producers. In that area, as in others, leadership is seen as very important.
- Two “suspicions” are in the air: one is that the government will reduce its support to agriculture and the other is that some portions of agriculture in Ontario are under-performing. The question will be: What roles will clubs/groups play in making the transitions to an agriculture that performs better?
- With regards to funding, there seems to be a two-pronged evolution: one is self-funding and the other one is to form alliances with commercial partners (e.g. John Deere).
- The trends in the UK, New Zealand and Australia are “to innovate because you have to”. Producers will want to develop closer ties with end markets (for example producers organized under a marketing supply structure or in a producer network organized by processors). The question is to find ways of balancing power when it comes to determining and managing the determinants of value.
- Compartmentalization in the industry seems to decrease synergy and producers tend to lose sight of why they are farming.
- See possible collaboration with programs such as the Canadian Federation of Independent Business.
- Might be useful to consider models from other sectors (e.g. Centre for Manufacturing Excellence, which is a provincial body that has local chapters; the provincial body provides services such as tech transfer, etc.). Beef and dairy producers do have provincial bodies that provide direction.
- In Hamilton, the bio-tech industry banded together to create the “Golden Horseshoe”.
- Collaboration is important: for example, in Quebec, goat cheese producers are helped by processors who provide technical and management support that they need.
- Important to identify pre-existing groups in a region (church or community-based).
- Important to have members share limited resources to sustain long term viability. From member contributions, “create a large pot” for a major thrust.

Overview of Comments: Group size, Value Chain, Virtual vs. Face to Face Meetings, The Future (20/20)

- While groups can become too large, there seems to be no “effective” formula for the “right” group size. There are groups of all sizes which operate successfully.
- The leader takes on a major role in the group. He must be able to adapt the activities and the process to the number of people, their interests and their needs.
- Some participants believe that groups including the whole value chain or some portions of it are beneficial, although there was no consensus on this issue.
- A great majority of participants, while recognizing the usefulness of virtual communication, still believe face to face contacts are extremely important. In that, virtual communication is seen as a mechanism that takes place between, or after, in person meetings.
- As producers tend to want to get closer to their end markets, the future may hold new forms of cooperation, for instance between producers and processors.
- Funding may move toward greater self-sufficiency and alliances with commercial partners.

Roles of AMI, AAFC, OMAFRA, farm organizations, etc.

Both panelists and observers contributed to this part of the discussion.

- Agriculture is fragmented; there is talk of farm management everywhere. AMI could take on a coordination role.
- There needs to be a catalyst.
- Can you force the issue or make tools available to groups and producers?
- Farm organization leaders are too “hung up” on safety nets from governments.
- Role of government: lacking in benchmarking data; there is a need for Canadian/provincial benchmarking data adapted to producers’ needs.
- Must avoid “throwing money” at the issue: for instance, a government program that paid beef producers \$25 per calf weighed resulted in producers asking “When is my cheque coming?” instead of “When can we meet to compare and evaluate?”.
- There is a need for tools.
- Becoming a group member means costs for producers: governments should fund these groups at least for the first two or three years, until trust and confidence are built.
- There needs to be long term funding; also a need for competent people so producers trust them.
- Government funding needs to be treated as an investment. Funding that allows producers to be more efficient is a good investment and will return tax revenues and other economic and social benefits to governments.
- Within a “holistic resource concept”, AMI could assemble a strong team of facilitators who have training and leadership, that would pull resources together and leave the producer to make his own decisions.
- Sharing is the glue that holds groups together. Through conferences and meetings, people build trust and really get to see how it works on different farms.
- The government is too slow to respond at a time that is critical.
- One producer mentioned that he feels insulted that AMI asked him to “volunteer” his time as an “expert” during the Symposium; to him it shows a lack of respect toward farmers, while others who came to the event are on salary.
- It is important to be sensitive to cultural issues.
- Some provincial programs function very well. The Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association partnered with government to run programs for farmers who asked for it. It was a non-invasive way of reaching farmers.
- Governments are partners.
- One participant mentioned that there are a lot of diverse needs and he wonders how AMI will manage to work with all those results.
- We all work to make farmers more productive. To generate benchmarking data, we need producers and they have to pay consultants to obtain comparable data; the government needs to recognize our work in improving the agricultural sector.
- The reality among cow-calf producers is that 75% of them have their own scales; they implement health programs, use covered-squeeze chutes, etc. We largely deal with very sophisticated people in the technical area. However, the “management part” of their work needs to be addressed. Need to create value for farmers by solving problems.
- Need to focus on the top 30%. The others will either realize they need to develop skills or they will be squeezed out through competition.
- AMI should focus on two areas: the development of tools (e.g. producing detailed case studies) and train-the-trainers sessions.
- One participant talked about a survey of producers that was conducted, which revealed that roughly one third were looking at expansion, one third were remaining the same and one third were looking at leaving the industry. This emphasizes a need for different management tools, which are adapted to each of these realities.

- Within the grazing networks, disenfranchised farmers got together. There needs to be a strong motivating factor. Must ask them what they need and for them to take responsibility for their own well-being, otherwise it is easy to relinquish because of quotas, restrictions or whatever reason.
- Studies show that farmers who operate multi-commodities are the most successful on the global market.
- The Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Association is a unique organization, with a focus on agri-entertainment, agri-bus tours; realized that most of the learning occurs on the bus or while visiting farms. The membership is very diverse, including pick-your-own operations, fruit growers, etc.
- Need for universities and colleges to train young people in facilitating farmers; need for technicians and competent people; must create interest among younger generations.
- Facilitators need technical expertise as well as leadership skills. Could work with Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program.
- In groups, facilitators are often producers. Producer groups should be supported by governments since they invest time and energy to improve the agricultural sector's competitiveness, therefore contributing added value to Canadian agriculture.
- There is a huge need for facilitators that are also experts in management, economy, etc. This competition for resources and expertise creates a funding need to allow producers to hire such advisors.
- Investment in time and energy differs from one group the next; the purpose of the group will determine the level of skills the facilitator needs to help it move forward.
- In Quebec, any person who provides agricultural advice has to be an agro-economist. Only five of them will graduate from Laval at year-end. Governments need to invest ongoing funding for collective advisory services and also to support organizations that provide guidance to advisors (for example in accessing research and data; universities also have a great role to play in that area).
- The facilitator mentioned that in organizing the Symposium, the Committee realized that a lot of information (proof, research, documentation) regarding farm management groups is either not on the radar or not packaged to be readily available.
- Have to make governments aware of the necessity to rely on certainty regarding funds and involvement. Governments must be partners that farmers from all sectors can count on.
- In the international development field, there are hundreds of NGOs, however very few focus on agriculture.
- One participant visited the village of Steinbach, where there is the largest number of millionaires in Canada. It is an Amish community and they enjoy an excellent quality of life; they meet weekly to discuss finances and marketing; they are at the leading edge of the agriculture business. They do it all without special advisors. Increased profitability comes from weekly exchanges.
- In order to move forward, there needs to be a catalyst, cooperation and commitment. AMI already has a train-the-trainer project. Must look at gaps/opportunities to provide advisors with relevant tools.
- 4-H has been in existence for 93 years; need for an emphasis on developing skills for life; work with youth aged 12 to 21 years old; Internet is a learning tool; must remain open-minded towards technology such as computers and adapt program delivery methods to new technology; use the Internet to bring people along toward meeting and sharing.
- There needs to be clear definitions of what is a small group and a long term targeted approach: who do you help and why?
- In Wisconsin, the University of Wisconsin-Madison set up the Dairy Business Innovation Centre, which contributed to revitalize the industry. The organization awards grants to producers and uses a team of consultants from the private sector to provide assistance to groups.

Overview of Comments: Roles

Governments

- Provide provincial or sectoral benchmarking data and resources.
- Funding: some participants believe there is a need for ongoing funding, while others think seed funding and subsequent money for two or three years and in difficult times is sufficient.
- Governments need to invest ongoing funding in collective advisory services.
- Governments are too slow to react in critical times; hence, they should support “intermediary” organizations and groups who can and will offer services.
- Governments are seen as partners.
- Important for governments to recognize the work that advisors do in the improvement of management practices among producers, which in turn creates value-added resources for the whole country.

Colleges and Universities

- Need to train younger generations in group work.
- Need to facilitate access to data and research.

AMI

- Play a coordination role.
- Assemble a strong team of facilitators that could provide services to groups.
- Should focus on two areas: develop and distribute tools for groups and their facilitators as well as designing train-the-trainer sessions.
- Look at gaps/opportunities to provide relevant tools.
- Cooperate with various organizations and governments.

Think Tank Symposium Wrap-Up

Summary of Presentations

Facilitator David Sherwood thanked observers and panelists for their active participation in the discussions. Mr. Ron Bonnett did a wrap up, identifying common threads, while Mr. Pierre Glaude emphasized what these discussions would lead to in relation to future steps.

Mr. Ron Bonnett, AMI Panel member

Mr. Bonnett started by thanking all participants for their presence at the Symposium and their contribution to the exchanges. Mr. Bonnett summarized discussions as follows:

- There is clear value in group activity, whether it is linked to finances, family life, return on assets, profitability or confidence. However, the value and benefits are often limited to people who are close to the group or belong to it.
- The secrets of successful groups include: group dynamics (common goals, interested participants, clear focus, confidentiality and sharing of information). Face to face encounters are important. Some groups work on very specific issues while others tackle broader issues. There needs to be a local champion. Groups also need access to information and expertise. Producers have to see value for their investment. It is useful to “think outside the box” and innovate when looking at different ways things can be done.
- Future directions (20/20): The increase in groups will be driven by needs, which are the catalyst for their formation and ongoing operations. There needs to be quicker response to emerging trends. There also needs to be core leadership skills at the local level.
- Role of governments: sharing information; invest seed money, establish benchmarking programs, provide expertise, information and training.
- Role of AMI: clearly define who we will help: all groups? Certain types of groups? Facilitators need a strong group of skill sets. The information is scattered; need to identify sources and disseminate this information. Could develop a toolbox for facilitators and groups. Build linkages between people and raise awareness regarding the value of groups.
- Role of producers: need for producers to recognize the problems; ensure they are committed to identifying needs and assume responsibility for solutions. Existing groups seem to focus on similar topics (grazing, feeders, etc.). Groups should be long term and there is no “one solution”.

Mr. Pierre Glaude, AMI Vice-President

Mr. Glaude began by stating that as president of the planning committee for the Symposium, he was there to listen and to identify possibilities: the “So what?” aspect of the exchanges. Mr. Glaude identified some future steps for the AMI, following the discussions that took place.

- The first step will be to produce the Symposium report, which will be completed fairly quickly.
- The second one will be to meet the need for a manual or a resource book that, among other topics, would touch on success stories, failures, possible models for groups, lists of resource persons and pitfalls to avoid.
- A network needs to be established, composed of resource people, of which the panelists will be asked to be the first members. AMI needs to find ways of nurturing and maintaining this network.
- AMI will work on train-the-trainer sessions designed for specialized facilitators that have expertise in agriculture but also need to rely on strong group work skills. Different possibilities will be explored, for instance with the Advanced Agriculture Leadership Program.
- AMI will work with governments in order to develop training programs and to find ways of funding group start-ups and maintenance.
- AMI will work with existing networks and with the Ontario and federal governments, to set up groups where the need emerges.
- AMI will work on pooling resources: a lot is being done elsewhere that is not well-known. AMI will conduct research on what is happening in other parts of the world that may be useful or applied to the context of agriculture in Ontario.
- AMI will work on identifying local groups who form naturally to see how they can help in moving farm management groups forward.
- In concluding, Mr. Glaude insisted there will be a follow-up to the Symposium and all participants will be asked to be part of it.

Mr. Peter Vander Zaag, AMI Chair

In his closing remarks, Mr. Vander Zaag recounted his experience in Bangladesh where a group of farmers in one village had an excellent group leader. The farmers went from 0 to 50% return on assets. But they were so successful that it created jealousy and the leader was eventually killed. However, the group is still operating. Although recognizing this as an extreme example, Mr. Vander Zaag indicated that it illustrates that a group/club process, if it works efficiently, will stand out and encourage people to want to do the same.

He expressed confidence that AMI, with governments and partners, could work toward the development and growth of farm management groups in Ontario. He concluded by wishing everyone a safe journey back home.

Symposium Evaluation

An evaluation form was distributed and 32 participants completed it. On a scale of one to ten, respondents' evaluation averaged 8.3/10. On all topics, from discussion papers, to facilities and Friday discussions, participants overwhelmingly indicated they were very satisfied.

Conclusions

1) Value and benefits

The symposium has demonstrated that there is a clear value for farmers in group activity, whether it is linked to finances, family life, return on assets, remaining competitive or capturing opportunities in the value chain.

Farmers, throughout their working lives, develop invaluable expertise, especially about “what really works” on the farm. In small peer groups, they share that experience. The group context also greatly enhances their ability to learn from outside experts, published reports and government advisors. In many groups, their quality of life is also addressed. Therefore, although it is under-reported in the literature, it should be no surprise that farmers in self selected peer groups improve their return on investment, the competitive edge of their production sector, and engage in innovation. There is no doubt that small, farmer-led, peer groups contribute to the maintenance and creation of wealth in the industry and the community.

2) Local and isolated

The symposium revealed that there is much more farm business management group activity in Ontario than one would think. However, it is very diverse. Small farmer led peer groups in Ontario are mostly local, action oriented, autonomous and self funded. For these reasons, they are not well known by governments and the industry at large. In fact, nobody seems to know how many there are, where they are, and what objectives they are pursuing.

This also means groups are not learning from each other. Small farmer led peer groups in Ontario do not network with each other and their leaders or facilitators seem to hardly know each other. There are missed opportunities to augment both the number and the successful functioning of groups.

3) Lack of support

Farm organizations, governments and teaching institutions (with some exceptions), do not actively support or encourage small farmer led peer groups. Governments in Ontario have no program to support small farmer led peer farm business management groups. Some government field staff are providing some facilitator support in some instances but it appears that these are mostly personal initiatives rather than the result of an articulated program.

Ontario could learn from the Quebec experience in networking, supporting and encouraging farm business management peer groups and providing a framework that fosters the development of small farm business management groups. It is not the only model, for example the symposium heard about examples from New Zealand, the UK and other provinces. That may not be a perfect model, but it is the most successful one in Canada and could be adapted to Ontario.

4) Great diversity

Small farmer led peer groups in Ontario (those that we know about) are highly diversified. They range from a farm business management francophone Club with full time professional staff based on the Quebec model, to informal non facilitated groups that focus on technology transfer and best practices, to groups exchanging benchmarking data, to groups focused on gaining access to new markets. Other groups were created as a result

of a crisis: farmers having a specific problem and getting together to identify solutions. Some small marketing co-ops, which of course are well structured, began informally as peer group joint efforts. It has been observed that dairy farmers seem to have a greater capability to work together, perhaps because they are not competing with each other for market share.

As a corollary to the above diversity, the experts at the symposium did not seriously attempt to “define” small groups. While this was a source of frustration to some participants, it has to be kept in mind that most of the participants were “field” experts with extensive action oriented experience. They were more anxious to exchange views on results and on “what works or does not work” than to arrive at some kind of an all inclusive or exclusive definition. In any event, this was not one of the symposium’s objectives as such.

5) The winning conditions

Throughout the symposium, there was a clear consensus on what were some of the essential elements of success common to all groups, irrespective of size and purpose.

These are as follows:

- **Peers**

It has to be a peer group, however that is defined (e.g. : from the same production sector, similar challenges or needs, somewhat similar farm size or structure, similar business goals or similarity of participants as the group matures). Each peer must be considered as an expert in his own right and contribute in the exchanges among producers. Exchanges are the glue that holds the group together.

- **Leadership, vision, and a local champion**

The initial leadership usually comes from a dedicated local chairman or a champion who is a respected producer and has skills sets in group dynamics. Typically, the leader has a vision and contributes to recruitment. It is important that the group be farmer-led. Most good leaders seem to ensure that every member of the group provides a creative or knowledge contribution to the entire group. In that way, the longer term group direction and sense of priorities comes from the farmers. Groups that have access to external supports are better able to maintain momentum and find a new leader from within the group when the founding leader moves on.

- **Support in the form of expertise or facilitation**

The most successful and long lasting groups are almost always supported by full time or part time professionals that have technical expertise and contacts in the area that is of interest to the group, and who have facilitation type skills. The professional(s) should remain in a support role and not lead the group. They are in constant search for new information to meet group needs, they conduct analysis, take care of logistics (arranging meetings, field trips, documentation, etc.) and network with other relevant stakeholders. It is very difficult for producers to volunteer the time for these support functions.

Such support comes from various sources, primarily consultants, government staff, and colleges. In some cases, usually where the group is more focused on technology transfer and best practices than financial benchmarking and management, an experienced group member with the necessary skills can become the convener and there is no support staff.

- **Clear focus, goals and objectives**

The definition of the group’s direction and purpose has to come from the producers / members and the goals and objectives have to be clear, well articulated in writing and agreed to by all members. Over time, goals and objectives may have to be modified, but only after a sound debate and with the consent of the members.

- **Clear rules of governance**

The group needs to have clear rules on how it functions, as producers want to know what they are getting into when they join. However, the exact nature of the rules can vary significantly from one group to another and the symposium participants have not provided any one model.

- **Membership and recruitment**

All members must have a form of “buy in” and some form of a membership fee is often part of that “buy in”. Members who have little interest in the group or who lose interest should not be “arm twisted” to join or to stay. There are many ways to foster interest, but it seems the best recruitment tactic is still word of mouth. Group members must see personal value for their investment in time or money. Benefits from a group are a fulfillment of a personal need.

- **Trust and face-to-face encounters**

Trust means getting to know each other and this is achieved at best by face to face local encounters, even in this new virtual age. Successful clubs organize meetings and sometimes field trips or farm visits. There may be clubs where the members are not from the same geographic area, but the symposium participants were not aware of any fully virtual peer groups or clubs. They believe that it may eventually happen in the future as the generation that was born with the Internet gradually takes over. Achieving trust in a group is imperative and it takes time. This is especially true where personal financial information is being pooled. Involving farm family members in social activities, especially spouses, often helps build the trust relationship.

- **Confidentiality**

This is a key element according to all participants. Groups often conduct some benchmarking activities and farmers want to make sure that the data that they provide remains confidential. Successful groups are those that have provided the necessary safeguards in that respect, to a level that farmers are comfortable with.

6) The pitfalls to avoid

The flip side to the winning conditions is the pitfalls to avoid. When asked, participants quickly concluded that the following situations are dangerous:

- Hiring a support person who lacks skills in group dynamics.
- Recruiting members who are not committed or who join for the wrong reasons
- Moving away from the initial goal while trying to please everyone
- Trying to cover too large a geographical area or calling meetings at the wrong time of the year or the day

7) No “one size fits all”

While it is possible to establish a number of guidelines and “best practices”, the participants clearly indicated that there is no single operating model for small peer groups in Ontario. Success stories are a source of inspiration and should be widely promoted. Farmers may want to replicate a success story with which they identify.

There does seem to be such a thing as a group which becomes too large, but the threshold cannot be defined by a formula. The notion of an ideal size was addressed by the panelists, with no consensus. Some groups had 10 members while others had 200. Some larger groups formed sub-groups. The two critical factors may be: a large enough group to engage at least part-time support professionals; a small enough group to maintain personal contact.

8) On governments' role

There was a clear consensus that the government has a role to play in promoting and supporting small farmer-led peer groups. Governments are seen as essential partners and participants pointed to the role of sharing farm business management information and helping to develop and monitor small group benchmarking programs. There was also a consensus that governments need to invest ongoing funding in farmer-driven farm business management collective services because these are viewed as an effective way to change mindsets and extend information and tools.

Some government field staff have been providing some non-invasive facilitation and this appears to have been an important factor in the success of some small groups in Ontario, which shows it is a formula that works.

There is a cost to being a group member, especially in financial management groups, and the information they produce as well as the management improvements they make have a value to the society at large. In other jurisdictions, government support helps compensate for this.

Where governments provide related programs to individual farmers, groups provide a favourable support network that enhances the effectiveness of the governments' own programs.

Some participants believe that there is a need for ongoing government funding. Others think seed funding, with transitional funds over a two to three year period, plus access to special funds for difficult situations, would be sufficient. It is clear that the first few years are critical to the building of trust among members and farmers will not invest significantly in a group until this sense of trust is achieved and they see results. Therefore government support would greatly multiply the number and success rate of groups.

Finally, governments could offer supports to encourage groups to engage in new orientations, such as those described below.

9) On the future of small peer groups in Ontario

There will always be a need to bring people together. Information exchange is the key to innovation and the ability to cope successfully with change. During the whole symposium, participants referred to stories and examples in the UK, Holland, France, USA, New-Zealand and Australia; instances where farmers have collectively organized to establish horizontal value chains; or to better capture opportunities in vertical value chains. Ontario has few examples of this and could benefit from further studying these models and looking at their applicability here.

Farmers will also increasingly work in small groups to cater to the new trend for local foods in metropolitan areas. Ontario is presently acquiring a "wealth of experience" in this area. There will always be a need for farmers to work together, peer to peer, to hone their skills in traditional farm business management and particularly with regards to farm business medium and long term planning.

A great majority of participants, while recognizing the usefulness of virtual communication, still believe that face to face contact will continue to be extremely important. Virtual communication is seen as a mechanism that takes place between and after the personal meetings that are necessary for building trust.

10) On the role of AMI

It was the general view that there are a lot of diverse needs out there regarding small farm peer groups and that AMI has quite a challenge in advancing and facilitating the expansion of the concept. There was a realization that there is a lot of information regarding farm business management groups in Canada and abroad but that the information is scattered and either “not on the radar” or “not packaged to be readily available and used”. It was suggested that AMI develop a specific tool box for farm groups and facilitators. It was also the view that AMI should be involved in the training of facilitators.

There was also a consensus that AMI should continue to play a central coordination role in:

- Helping to provide relevant tools
- Defining and identifying types and categories of groups and their needs
- Raising awareness regarding the value of groups
- Building linkages and networking between small groups and other stakeholders

In closing, the Ottawa Symposium clearly demonstrated the power of small groups in changing mind sets and unleashing creative power that leads to a culture of excellence and innovation.

Appendices

APPENDIX I – DISCUSSION PAPER

“THE POWER OF THE GROUP”

for the 2007 Think Tank Symposium
“Farmers Working in Small Groups for Improved Profitability and Quality of Life”
Organized by the Agricultural Management Institute (AMI)

Introduction:

The individual human brain has awesome capabilities and yet, we know that “two heads are better than one”. No matter how smart CEOs are, they will surround themselves with a group of advisors, and the ultimate decisions rest with the Board of Directors. There is power in a group: creative power, knowledge-based power, experience-based power. Corporations know this approach results in increased profitability, the ability to compete, to manage information, to forecast the future or implement change.

Farmers also seem to understand this, or at least that’s what a series of recent Think Tanks revealed. The Think Tanks were organized throughout Ontario in the Fall of 2006 by the Agricultural Management Institute (AMI). AMI provides funding for projects to develop business management tools, products, information, resources and training for farm families, farm managers and farm business advisors. Farmers repeatedly said that they felt a need to work together, in small structures, to exchange advice, review information, contract professional skill sets, and arrive at solutions. They mentioned subjects like business management, long term planning, farm transfer, marketing, innovation and even how to maintain their quality of life. These interests were reaffirmed at a follow-up conference hosted by AMI in December 2006.

This leaves us with the following question: if Ontario farmers think they should engage in small peer groups with a management focus, why aren’t they doing more of it already? For this reason, the AMI has decided to host a small symposium, in Ottawa, to investigate this issue.

It’s not as if farmers don’t have a history of working together. After all, rural Ontario has over a hundred years’ worth of experience with soil and crop associations, ploughing matches, county fairs, cattle clubs, and cooperatives, just to name a few examples.

But the foregoing examples arose and became institutionalized in the previous century. The social, economic and environmental conditions of the 21st century have almost nothing in common with “the good old days”.

The 2006 Think Tanks seem to indicate that farmers are thinking about the utility of small peer groups in new ways. Most of the foregoing examples are based on what we might today call the sharing of best production practices. The current needs seem to place more emphasis on a diversity of management techniques, on reacting quickly to evolving markets (or developing new ones), on finance and optimizing human resources; and quite often the solution will be implemented on an individual farm. This may have been anticipated by the 2002 Agricultural Odyssey Group, which deliberately set out to be ahead of its time, to chart the unknown waters of the future and to attempt a complete strategic re-think of the agricultural sector in Ontario. One of their recommendations was that “Ontario farm organizations support/organize farm management clubs on a local basis”.

But that hasn't happened yet. The other thing that was evident at the 2006 Think Tanks was that the farmers who stated the need for small peer groups didn't seem to have a model or a mechanism for acting on their need. Success stories of farmers working together in small groups to capture niche markets or seize opportunities higher up in the value chain are too few (or perhaps not well known). Ontario does not have enough examples of small groups of farmers giving themselves a local structure or network whose focus is farm business management, financial analysis or long term planning.

Many of the older organizational examples also had a social component that farmers benefited from. This may or may not be the same thing that the 21st century Think Tank participants referred to as "quality of life". Nonetheless, the younger generations of farmers seem to have the notion that the management mix has to provide for quality time as part of a sustainability strategy.

Other parts of North America and Europe have more examples of small group dynamics. Ontario needs to understand and learn from that experience, as well as the examples that exist in our province. This can lead to the identification of the elements of a model or models that could foster farmer led groups, which would provide greater benefit to the agri-food value chain.

Vision:

AMI's vision of the symposium is to exchange knowledge, experiences and ideas, so that more Ontario farmers benefit from small peer group structures to help manage their future and help them remain competitive

Questions:

Through this symposium AMI would like to discuss such things as:

Case studies of what types of groups have succeeded, and why.

What seem to be the key indicators for success?

What are the catalysts for group initiation?

What hurdles and failures have been identified?

How do we measure the benefits of small groups, in a form Ontario farmers will accept?

Why haven't more farmers in Ontario participated in management groups?

What inhibits them from getting involved?

What can cause established groups or small organizations to lose their momentum?

What are some additional components/benefits which can be communicated? (i.e. value-chains, quality of life, revenues)

AMI invites the Ottawa participants to be thoughtful, analytical, critical or even provocative. We can learn from failures as well as successes. Here are some ideas to stimulate reflection...

Is it possible that new information technologies are changing expectations with respect to groups, or can facilitate them? Or is the best way to motivate a group still word of mouth, meetings, farm visits, and similar personal contacts?

Does the recipe for success rely more on the initial champion, or on the second generation of leadership? Is part of the success the person selected as the employee or consultant? Are communication skills equally important? How do we nurture the best skill set?

Are farmers instinctively moving away from what they perceive as "heavy" structures, which might be described as those that are incorporated, hold elections, have a board of directors, and carry the weight of an implicit expectation that the organization will go on indefinitely? Are farmers instinctively becoming more attracted to "light" structures, which could be described as purpose-built, short term, with an implicit expectation that the group could be disbanded once the solution to their problem has been found?

What allows some groups to get beyond the initiation phase, while others don't? Are government funding and/or other forms of government assistance a pre-requisite, or not? Should such funding or assistance be short term or sustained?

Are there cultural or less tangible reasons that explain why this seems to work better in some provinces or states? Or are financial considerations a universal concern that crosses all languages and local customs?

What are -or should be- the roles of: government, financial institutions, and the OFA (Ontario Federation of Agriculture) / CFFO (Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario) / NFU (National Farmers Union) /UCFO (*Union des cultivateurs franco-ontariens*)?

Conclusion:

In conclusion, farmers have told us that they know they are having to pay more attention to the detailed management of their operations and to the very long term planning of their business. They also expect to become more involved in the value-added chain in the future, and they know that it is more difficult on their own. Many now seem ready for a culture shift, from a highly individualistic approach, to sharing of information and analysis based on collective outcomes.

The challenge to the AMI, and other agricultural organizations, is to facilitate small networking group development by supplying success stories, adapted models and effective mechanisms. We see this think tank symposium as the first step.

AMI invites anyone reading this Discussion Paper to react to it. You can send us your thoughts, or a document, or refer us to a Web site, or put us in touch with a success story you are aware of. We are considering establishing an electronic discussion forum or ListServ. Would you be interested in such an initiative?

APPENDIX II – SYMPOSIUM AGENDA

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2007	
Time and Location	Event
6:45 – 7:30 PM Panorama Room	Registration
7:00 – 8:30 PM Panorama Room	Welcoming Reception Welcoming Speeches by AMI and the sponsors Review of the Friday Agenda Introduction of the Invited Experts Informal discussions with hors-d'oeuvres and cash bar
FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2007	
Time and Location	Event
7:30 – 8:30 AM Panorama Room	Breakfast A full breakfast will be served.
8 :45 AM	Doors open in the meeting room, please be ready to start promptly at 9 AM.
9:00 AM Pinnacle Room	Opening Plenary Session Facilitated discussion among the panelists on themes that have been raised in the AMI Discussion Paper and in the short papers submitted by the panelists.
10:00 AM	Break - Coffee and Refreshments served in the Foyer
10:30 AM	Plenary Session Continues
12 Noon Panorama Room	Lunch A buffet style lunch will be served.
1:00 PM Pinnacle Room	Afternoon Plenary Session Facilitated discussion among the panelists on themes that have been raised in the AMI Discussion Paper and in the short papers submitted by the panelists.
2:30 PM	Short Break - Coffee and Refreshments in the Foyer
2:45 PM	Open Mike Plenary The Observers will have an opportunity to join the discussions in this session.
4:00 PM	Wrap-up What have we learned, what might be done next.
4:30 PM	- End -

APPENDIX III – LIST OF PARTICIPANTS



Farmers Working in Small Groups for Improved Profitability and Quality of Life: A Think Tank Symposium” in Ottawa, September 6 & 7, 2007

« Les agriculteurs travaillent en petits groupes pour améliorer la rentabilité et rehausser la qualité de vie : Un symposium de réflexion » à Ottawa, les 6 & 7 septembre 2007

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS / LISTE DES PARTICIPANTS

Panelists / Panélistes

Anderson, John	Farm Business Advisor -Agri Business/Farm Succession	KPMG LLP Kingston, ON
Appleby, Margaret	Durham Apple Growers Study Group	Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Brighton, ON
Boyle, Bryan	Regional Information Coordinator	Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Wyoming, ON
Bredhal, Maury	Professor and Chair	Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics Guelph, ON
Fortier, Chantal	Project Manager	Canadian Farm Business Management Council Ottawa, Ontario
Gagné, Luc	Conseiller en gestion	Groupement de gestion agricole de l'Ontario St-Lazare, QC
Gour, Jean	Président	Co-opérative de fromage St-Albert St-Albert, ON
Keunen, Dick	Herd Management Specialist	CanWest DHI Moorefield, ON
Lavigne, Alain	Co-proprétaire	Ferme Lavigne inc. Ste-Anne-de-Prescott, ON
McEwan, Ken	College Professor	University of Guelph – Ridgetown Campus Ridgetown, ON
Mills, Roger	Dairy Business Consultant	Manitoba Dairy Farm Management Group Steinbach, MB
Paine, Laura	Grazing & Organic Agriculture Specialist	Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection Madison, WI, USA
Poehman, Gerald	Farmer and Facilitator	Organic Meadow Farmers' Co-op Walkerton, ON
Robert, Richard	Président	Fédération des Groupes Conseils Agricole du Québec St-Eugène-de-Guigues, QC
Werry, Marlene	Rural Economic Development Officer	Officer Region of Durham Whitby, ON

Observers / Observateurs

Name/Nom	Title/Titre	Organization/Organisation	City/Ville, Prov.
Bartolic, Cathy	Executive Administrator	Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Association	Aurora, ON
Blais, Pierre-Alain	Rédacteur en chef	AGRICOM	Clarence Creek, ON
Bourdeau, Denis	President	L'Union des cultivateurs franco-ontariens	Embrun, ON
Clement, John	General Manager	Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario	Guelph, ON
Gooch, Martin	Senior Research Associate, Value Chains	George Morris Centre	Guelph, ON
Goodman, Patti	Program Manager	Business Development Centre, University of Guelph-Kemptville	Kemptville, ON
Haverson, Clarence	Manager, Business Management Unit	Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Guelph, ON	
Lammens, Brenda	Chair of Board of Director	Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association	Guelph, ON
Methot, Jean-Denis	Manager	Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada	Ottawa, ON
Morin, Luc	Liaison provincial	L'Union des cultivateurs franco-ontariens	Clarence Creek, ON
Renkema, Gerald	Program Manager- Farm Business Planning	Ontario Soil & Crop Improvement Association	Guelph, ON
Riddell, Bruce	Renewal Regional Manager - Ontario	Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada	Guelph, ON
Séguin, Patrick	Président	Groupement de gestion agricole de l'Ontario	Saint Albert, ON
Shook, Michael	Program Manager	Farmstart	Guelph, ON
Stewart, Dave	Executive Director	Ontario Cattlemen's Association	Guelph, ON
Stewart, Lyndon	Executive Director	4-H Ontario	Guelph, ON
Van Kessel, Jeanine	Administrator	Bluewater Agriwind	Forest, ON
Young, D.E. "Ted"	General Manager	Indian Agricultural Program of Ontario	London, ON

Agricultural Management Institute / Institut de la gestion agricole

Name/Nom	Title/Titre	Organization/Organisation	City/Ville, Prov.
Bennett, Jim	Advisory to the President	Canadian Federation of Independent Business	Willowdale, ON
Bonnett, Ron	AMI Panel Member	AMI	Bruce Mines, ON
Coverdale, Susan M.	Advisory Panel Member	AMI	Guelph, ON
Dowling, Peter	AMI Panel Member	AMI - NFU	Ganonoque, ON
Glaude, Pierre	Vice-président	Institut de la gestion agricole	Clarence Creek, ON
Koeslag, Ryan	Program Coordinator	AMI - Agricultural Adaptation Council	Guelph, ON
Kush, Rick	Program Officer	AMI - Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada	Guelph, ON
Lewis, Karen	Project Coordinator	AMI - AdFarm	Guelph, ON
Mazuhelli, Claire	Traductrice/Scribe	Mazuhelli & Assoc.	Gatineau, Québec
Paris, Isabelle	Coordonnatrice du symposium	Isabelle Paris et Associés inc.	Ottawa, ON
Sherwood, David	Symposium Facilitator	Brunet Sherwood Consultants	Ste-Anne-de-Prescott, ON
Vander Zaag, Peter	Chair	AMI	Alliston, ON

Total 45

APPENDIX IV – SYNTHESIS OF EXPERTS’ DOCUMENTS

Consensus Points in the Papers submitted by the Panellists prior to the 2007 Symposium

“Farmers Working in Small Groups for Improved Profitability and Quality of Life”
by Pierre Glaude and David Sherwood

Opening Observation:

There is more farm business management group activity than one would think.

Perhaps because farmer-led peer groups are action oriented, and are autonomous, they tend to be under represented on web sites and in the published documentation of governments and general farm organizations.

Summary of Consensus Points in Case Studies and Commentaries

The precise nature of each farm management group (FMG) in the case studies varies widely.

The following seem to be the common elements of successful groups:

1- Peers

It has to be a peer group, however that is defined. (e.g. from the same production sector, similar challenges or needs, somewhat similar farm size or structure, similar business goals, or similarity of participants experience as the FMG itself matures)

2- Leadership / Vision / a Champion

The quality of leadership usually comes from a chairman or a champion who is a respected producer. The definition of the group’s direction almost always comes from the producers.

3- Expertise / Support / Facilitation

The producers are almost always supported by professionals with expertise and/or who provide facilitation type support. The professionals should remain in a support role, and not lead the group. The expertise also comes from exchanges among the producers.

4-Clear Rules

The group needs clear rules on how it functions and what its purpose is. Producers want to know what they are getting into when they join. (Note, however, that the exact nature of the rules can vary significantly from one group to another.)

5- Membership Fee or Cost Sharing

This is a tangible and literal form of ‘buy-in’. If there are costs, membership cannot be free.

6- TRUST means meetings, or hands-on, or social opportunities... and TIME

Groups only work when the producers trust each other. That takes time. It requires face-to-face meetings. (This may also include hands-on activities, farm visits, or socializing.)

Other Common Qualities or Requirements of Groups

Facilitation Skills / Prior training in group dynamics

Many papers noted that facilitating a group is not like chairing a meeting, and that not all farmers have these skills. Luckily, some are 'naturals'. However, training in group dynamics, leadership and related skill sets has an important influence on success. Since this is required from the outset, perhaps especially in new groups, the training has to have happened in advance, not in the specific context of the FMG group.

All members participate

This is related to the facilitation skill. Lively, active groups seem to arise when every producer is welcome to participate, and does.

Geographic Proximity

The human factor and the distance to meetings is easier when the producers are from the same area. (In some cases, however, it raises confidentiality issues.)

External Support to Get Beyond Start-Up

Many papers mentioned that it can take two years to get a group well established, in a trust relationship, with tangible results. Many groups need some form of external support during that period. This could be financial, training, newsletter, access to government staff, networking with similar established groups, or other.

The group must evolve if it is to continue beyond the medium term

Member needs will change over time. The group can either evolve – or dissolve.

Other Observations on the Panelists Papers and the Discussion Paper

1. The issue of "heavy" versus "light" structures in the Discussion Paper was perhaps a false dichotomy. The answer is, "It depends." There does seem to be a trend toward "light" structures, but there are many which organize with traditional so-called "heavy" structures. We can at least say that we should be more open to "light" structures in future.
2. The issue of "large" groups versus "small" is real, but the cut-off size is a question of judgment. Most agree "a group should not be too big" but the cut-off point is hard to define.
3. If a group meets its initial goals and then ceases, that is a form of success, it should not be treated as a failure.
4. Beyond the initiation phase, some form of ongoing support from governments or farm organizations is definitely a welcome enhancement, and will help a group continue or get through difficult periods, but it must not be the "driver".
5. Some panelists noted a new trend, where some producers see themselves as "business managers" and rely more on their own informal "board of advisors" that can include their spouse, the professionals they hire, or their farm employees.
6. Farmers have no 'spare' time. They need to be persuaded of the utility of joining a group. In particular, they have trouble finding the time to fill in paperwork, which is a limitation for some groups.