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## Single Commodity Stakeholder Groups as Valuable Advisors to Comprehensive Extension Programs for Crop Production in New Jersey

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## Single Commodity Stakeholder Groups as Valuable Advisors to Comprehensive Extension Programs for Crop Production in New Jersey

### Abstract

Single commodity stakeholder advisory committees are valuable tools in planning, implementing, and delivering Extension education and research programs in New Jersey. Crop production is a vast topic area for Extension specialist and agricultural agents to work in to meet the needs of farmers. Direct farmer input assists in focusing Extension research and education to meet key needs for specific crops. Additionally, stakeholder involvement has increased resources for Extension programs. Participants of these advisory groups find the processes to be an excellent tool for communication and cooperation among farmers and Extension personnel.

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## Introduction

Extension programs and research related to crop production are often directed to solving a specific problem in the field or looking at one aspect of a crop. Often the cause of the problem is a complex mix of factors that needs to be investigated comprehensively and systematically and not for just one specific reason. In some circles this concept is labeled "holistic management." In plain terms for farmers it means, "what can I do to continue farming and have a profitable business". The most successful Extension programs are identified and planned using stakeholder input. In the case of crop production, this often means input from farmers.

Forming stakeholder groups to identify clientele needs and programmatic direction is key to a successful Extension program. In the field, farmers encounter many challenges and successes. Sharing this information with each other and with Extension personnel is one of the most valuable tools for developing methods to improve pest management, variety selection, cultural practices, and overall productivity of a crop. Because production techniques differ for each commodity, it is important to look at all factors when developing a comprehensive management plan for an individual crop. Additionally, investigating alternative production methods and adaptability of these methods to a region is key in solving questions that are raised by stakeholders.

## Methods

The Rutgers Cooperative Extension Vegetable Working Group (RCE VWG) team began a pepper advisory committee, lead by Dr. Wesley Kline, in 1998. Growers invited to participate in this single commodity advisory committee were chosen annually by agricultural agents from counties represented in the RCE VWG. The committee was comprised of 16 commercial pepper producers representing all regions of the state and members of the RCE VWG.

The meetings start with introduction of attendees and then move into a comment period for grower representatives. During the comment period, each issue presented stimulates a round-table discussion that addresses causes and effects of the problem and ideas to find a solution. Members discuss pepper production methods related to pest control, cultural practices, environmental conditions, and other issues that were either beneficial or harmful to the outcome of the crop. After the grower comment period, Extension specialists and agricultural agents give condensed presentations on recent and future pepper related research projects. Growers make suggestions for research and comment on project proposals that would be submitted for grant funding. Grower involvement leads to modifications in the direction of pepper research and educational outreach programs.

Through this advisory committee, growers have a venue to express their needs and are willing to share ideas and offer resources to assist with projects. The committee meets each winter for a formal advisory meeting to discuss issues from the season and informally throughout the year at related events. Growers participate directly during the season by sponsoring research trials in their fields and assisting with data collection and evaluations.

In 2001, the RCE VWG formed a tomato advisory committee, again led by Dr. Wesley Kline, as a result of securing funds for a comprehensive tomato research and Extension program. The committee was modeled on the pepper advisory committee, except that industry representatives were included, such as seed companies, supermarkets, and buyers. Discussions from this group have led to multiple research and Extension projects that include variety trials, disease control studies, insect control studies, season-extending research, taste preference studies, and a new Web site <http://www.rce.rutgers.edu/tomato/>. The Web site lists projects related to the RCE VWG comprehensive tomato program and targets the grower, food industry, and consumer audiences.

## Results and Discussion

The Rutgers Cooperative Extension Pepper Advisory and Tomato Advisory Committees are on-going groups and are viewed as important tools by growers and Extension personnel. A grower member stated after the initial pepper advisory meeting, "This is the first time I have been able to express my opinion in this format". Another member replied after 4 years of participating, "I look forward to these meetings and learn a great deal from the in-depth discussions."

The increased communication between stakeholder groups and Extension personnel has fostered more trust and teamwork among these groups. Additional resources have been found in the form of grants, research sites, Extension education sites, field equipment, and labor through cooperative efforts of these groups.

Conditions on commercial farms can be quite different from those found at the research farms. Therefore, conducting research where the problem actually lies is extremely important to the success of finding the solution. Other single commodity stakeholder advisory committees for growers and Extension personnel will continue to be developed in New Jersey as interested participants are identified and as research needs are assessed for individual crops.

## Conclusions

Through stakeholder participation in all aspects of the research and Extension education program planning and implementation, adoption of improved practices by farmers has increased and has occurred at a more rapid rate. Additionally, ideas for research and Extension education have been tailored to meet key grower needs. Utilizing the single commodity stakeholder group format to direct research and Extension programming has been and will continue to be an important tool in the advancement of crop production in New Jersey.

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