

Determining the Needs of Small Acreage Owners

There are several levels of needs assessment that you might choose to perform in developing your small acreage program. Needs assessments done before events help to structure the curriculum you bring to the event. Needs assessments done during programs help to ensure the proper fit between your program design and the needs of your clientele. It is generally most effective to consider both styles of needs assessments before the start of your planning process.

Using Existing Surveys Or Needs Assessments

First, as justification for beginning or funding such a program, you may need to determine community priorities and support. This can be done by examining existing needs assessments, environmental scans, or other documents. This will often save time and money later. Such surveys are commonly performed:

- At the county or city level to justify county expenditures and determine direction in the face of growth,
- By state environmental departments to assess environmental quality,
- By the federal government, available as the Census or vital statistics records
- By private organizations such as United Way to direct programming, and
- By Cooperative Extension or Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) professionals to guide their work.

When reviewing existing sources of information, consider the following:

- Have local environmental concerns, such as contaminated surface or groundwater, soil loss, or air quality concerns affected local quality of life or regulatory thresholds? This often provides data to support grant proposals for program funding.
- Alternatively, is there a general desire to learn new land management techniques for natural resource protection?
- Or is the driving force for small acreage education a result of an influx of new and inexperienced landowners wanting to learn specific skills related to irrigation, forage production, or animal management?

Use these resources to help define the problems and direct your program to addressing the identified needs.

Conducting Your Own Needs Assessment

If existing information is not readily available or does not provide enough information that relates to your target audience (the small acreage owner), you may decide to conduct a general needs assessment of your own. Before starting, make sure you know:

- What you need to know (General community concerns vs. those of the small acreage landowner?)
- Why the information is needed (To justify a program? Write a grant?)
- How you will use the information (Only for your small acreage program? Or will it be used more widely?)
- How you will obtain the information (By conducting new surveys, focus groups, interviews etc., or simply by summarizing existing documents and sources?)
- Useful information sources
- Who should be involved in gathering the information (Just you? Your program collaborators? Small acreage owners? Volunteers? Others?)
- How you will use the information (Will it be released to the public, or only used internally?)

- If financial support will be needed (Will you reimburse volunteers for their expenses? Will you need funds for data analysis?)
- Who will coordinate the process.

Techniques to collect new information fall into three categories:

- Those that primarily depend upon observation and documentation.
- Those that involve questioning of individuals
- Those that gather information from a group of people.

The most useful needs assessment will use several methods of collecting information to strengthen the results. Below are a few of the more commonly used methods that you might choose to use in generating new information.

Observation Techniques

In observation techniques, the investigator spends an extensive amount of time observing the subjects during their daily activities. It may take some time before the observer can accurately assess the residents' perspectives. Information can be collected by watching, listening, and documenting what is observed; by asking questions and participating in discussions; or by sharing activities with residents and noting comments, behaviors, and reactions. Because the quality of the assessment increases with the amount of time spent observing, you may find that this method is too time-consuming for your purposes.

Interviews

Telephone or personal interviews are useful in capturing a "snapshot" of a whole population from a random sample. Interviews can be time-consuming unless a pre-determined questionnaire is adhered to strictly. On the other hand, interviews can be adapted as new issues arise. Be aware that people may be afraid to talk to interviewers, especially if recent "scams" have been in the news.

Written Surveys

A survey is based on information collected from a sample of the total population, for example, a segment of the small acreage owner. You may also choose to survey all small acreage owners, or all class participants. It is a relatively inexpensive way to gather information from a large number of people. A survey offers a great deal of flexibility in the types of questions asked, from yes/no/undecided type responses to open-ended responses. Be aware that there may be resistance to participating in yet another survey if the population is continually re-surveyed, or if those being surveyed fear the information may be used to "hurt" them or invade their privacy.

Tips on Designing Surveys

- Use simple words that have clear meanings. Don't use complicated terms, especially scientific words that people may not understand. Aim at a literacy level of about sixth grade.
- Make sure the meaning of your questions is clear.
- Don't cram too much information into a small space. Keep font point size at 10 point or higher. Make sure instructions are clearly visible
- Always pre-test your survey on a group of people that are from the same target group.
- On the basis of the pre-test results, make revisions.
- Include questions that have "open" answers (no choices), as well as some questions with choices.
- Get the advice of a professional if you want a statistically valid survey.
- Avoid offensive, threatening, vague, or biased language.
- Make sure your survey questions will provide the information you need.
- Follow-up when responses are not received.
- KISS: KEEP IT SHORT and SIMPLE.

Key Informants

The key informant method obtains information over time from a community resident who is in a position to understand community issues well. The appropriate key informant will have a broad knowledge of the community and its peoples. Key informants are often very useful in providing information about past events or customs. For a small acreage audience, a key informant might be a Farm Bureau or NRCS employee, a long-time county official, a farmer or rancher regarded as a leader in the community, or Cooperative Extension personnel. In order for this method to be useful, sufficient time is needed to develop an open and trusting relationship with the informant. You may choose to use a combination of methods with your key informants: surveys, observation, and interviews, for example.

Community Forum

A community forum consists of one or more public meetings to which residents are invited. At the forum, participants are given the opportunity to air their opinions about community problems and needs. If well planned and conducted, forums provide the opportunity to collect a large amount of information during a short period of time. It's important to publicize the event thoroughly so that participation is maximized. Forums may be useful to help build public awareness and legitimize the need for the program, or to test the waters to determine whether there is support for your program. Consider using a trained facilitator to conduct the meeting so that all may participate.

Focus Groups

Focus groups may be used in assessing the needs of a particular audience. This method involves identifying a small subset of the targeted population and inviting them to participate in a group discussion of issues pertinent to their assets and/or needs. Questions are formulated prior to the meeting. You may want to include a trained third-party facilitator to lead the question and discussion period. As with forums, focus groups provide the opportunity to collect a large amount of information during a short period of time, and are helpful to test the waters to determine whether there is support for your program.

Practical Tips for Assessing Needs

- Be creative when assessing needs. Use as many different methods as you can.
- Remember you should collect more than facts and figures.
- You can collect stories, as well as people's opinions and statements.
- Make sure that you don't collect all of your information from one source.
- Look for computer programs that can help you design surveys and analyze information.
- Collect information from all sides of the issue; don't just seek out information that supports your views and values.

Assessing The Needs of Class Participants

The final level of needs assessment you will perform determines the specific needs of class or event participants as a subset of your small acreage audience. Prior to arriving at the first class, have your participants fill out a simple survey instrument related to their land ownership. This will allow you to pick and choose from among the lessons provided those that best address the particular needs of your class participants. An example of such a survey is provided in the appendix.

During the classes themselves, provide opportunities for participants to give you feedback on what information they'd still like to learn. This can be added to your class evaluation form as an open-ended question. In this way you can continue to adapt the program to successfully meet the needs of the small acreage owner. Please refer to Appendix A for a sample needs assessment questionnaire.

Selected Advantages and Disadvantages of Methods of Collecting Information

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Observation Techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting is natural, unstructured, and flexible • Data are generated about actual behavior, not just reports of behavior • Developing a relationship with the subjects may add to trust level or depth of understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigator has less control over the situation in a natural environment • Data can be skewed by observer's biases • Can require an extensive amount of time as well as special training in observation skills • Data are not easily quantifiable
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very useful way to build rapport with participants • Can generate broad and deep data about system • Can be open- or closed-ended 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time-consuming • Can be expensive if a business is used to conduct the interviews • Data from open-ended interviews are not easily quantifiable
Written Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be inexpensive • A small, randomly selected sample can provide information about a larger population • Effective method when you need to quantify the data • Time-effective for use with large numbers of participants or the population as a whole 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be impersonal • Must be carefully designed to assure statistical validity • Questions may miss the true issues, especially behavioral patterns • Response rate can be low
Key Informants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides an opportunity to obtain the insider's view • Permits input from many different individuals • Provides continual clarification of ideas and information • Avoids the costs of printing, postage, and data analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can require a lot of time to establish Data may be biased by the relationship between researcher and informants • Informants may interject biases • Informants may not be able to sense all the needs and concerns of the community
Community Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides for the sharing of ideas and experience by a diverse group of people • Can provide a quick and intensive picture of community issues and concerns • Involves local citizens in planning the program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinions and issues are limited to those who attend and may thus represent a skewed picture of needs • If not well facilitated, discussion can be monopolized by vocal minorities • May raise expectations or frustrations on the part of the participants if objectives are unclear
Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps to identify ineffective plans and programs • Gives feedback on how participants may react to the program • Allows collection of a large amount of information in a short time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skilled group leaders may not be readily available • Does not provide a sample of the population as a whole – may be difficult to get a representative sample

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Stewardship for Small Acreages

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