The 2005 Western SARE Farmer/Rancher Grant Program Survey

Western U.S. farmers and ranchers are reducing their costs for pesticides, herbicides, fuel and fertilizer. They're reducing soil erosion and improving soil, water and air quality. And they're increasing gross sales and net income, all with the help of grants from the Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program, or Western SARE. Those are among the findings of a survey designed to gauge the impact and reach of the Western SARE Farmer/Rancher grant program, one of several competitive grant categories it administers. The University of Arizona, selected through a competitive call for proposals, conducted the survey. Western SARE provided oversight and coordination through a staff team led by Al Kurki.

Farmer/Rancher grants allow individual producers to apply for up to $10,000; three or more producers can apply for up to $20,000. Each grant has a technical advisor. Funded projects – nearly 300 since 1994 – range across the spectrum of Western agriculture. The survey response rate was 73% for grant recipients, 71% for technical advisors. Here are some of the impacts the survey revealed.

Overall:

- 84% of grant recipients surveyed achieved the results they hoped for
- 82% are still using the idea, approach or technology they tested
- Nearly half applied the approach to other parts of their operation, 43% changed their operations, 28% added a new enterprise and 32% obtained new markets
- 86% said the project spurred new ideas, and 73% tested those ideas

Many grant recipients are "early adopters" of new ideas, technologies or approaches.

- 72% said that when they learn of a new idea that might be of <u>financial value</u>, they try it right away
- 71% do the same with new ideas that might provide <u>environmental benefit</u>

Early adopters have high profiles among their agricultural peers – people watch them to see how their "experiments" turn out. Indeed, project successes have <u>reverberated through the ag community</u>, spurring other producers to test them or try new ideas of their own. An average of nearly <u>six other farmers or ranchers</u> tested project approaches on their own operations. Most who tried the new approaches sustained their use.

Grant recipients reported <u>economic benefits</u>

- 41% of recipients said their Western SARE project increased net income
- 64% reported higher gross sales
- 39% reduced costs for fertilizer, 37% reduced costs for fuel, 43% reduced costs for pesticides and 38% reduced costs for weed control
- 49% reduced feed costs and 30% reduced veterinary bills
- 56% increased their yields per acre
- 54% increased annual animal production

Western SARE grant recipients reported environmental benefits:

- 79% increased soil quality
- 69% increased the quantity of wildlife habitat
- 58% decreased soil erosion
- 54% improved water quality
- 47% improved air quality

And they liked Western SARE's service:

- 49% rated the staff service as "excellent," 37% called it "very good" and 11% said it was "good"
- By the same token, 63% said their technical advisors were "very helpful"
- 89% said they'd apply for another grant; 97% would recommend others do it

Grant recipients and their technical advisors expressed interest in obtaining more information about several subjects related to sustainable agriculture:

- 67% of grant recipients and 74% of technical advisors would like more information about ecologically based weed management strategies
- 55% of recipients and 61% of advisors would like more information on ecologically based insect and disease management strategies
- 59% of recipients and 54% of advisors want to know more about soil-building crop rotations, including cover crops
- 44% of recipients and 54% of advisors would like to know more about alternative marketing approaches
- 50% of recipients and 56% of advisors want to know more about organic agriculture
- 46% of recipients and 52% of advisors want to know more about on-farm processing of agricultural products

Fifty percent of recipients get new information on farming or ranching approaches from extension educators or agents, 42% from the Internet, 37% from ag publications, 30% from a sustainable agriculture group, 10% from farm or commodity groups and 7% from ag broadcasts. Technical advisors get such information from the Internet (64%), professional journals (34%), other ag professionals (26%), ag publications (22%), sustainable ag groups (21%), farm or commodity groups (2%) and farm broadcasts (2%).

Recipient respondents are older (91% are over 40, 61% over 50), and their operations are diverse in size, commodities produced and market outlets.

To assure accuracy and validity, the University of Arizona survey team used the following strategies:

- They extracted only the information intended by vetting and testing the survey questions.
- They avoided eliciting "socially desirable" responses by ensuring response confidentiality.
- And they avoided non-response bias by using follow-up letters. This approach achieved a response rate of 73% for grant recipients (145 completed surveys) and 71% for technical advisors (126 completed surveys), rates that meet established standards of "good" to "very good."