Development of Sustainable Producer Forage Study Groups

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ABSTRACT: Grazing and forage management are complex topics that require comprehensive learning and ongoing education for successful application. Unfortunately, our current agricultural education system is designed primarily for young adults who don't have decision-making roles in their farms or family responsibilities. These are the people who can leave the farm for undergraduate college education or extended short courses. Adult producers generally rely on the Extension Service, which, currently strapped for funds and personnel, is often unable to deliver the complex, in-depth training needed by professional graziers.

In western Oregon, we have addressed this problem by developing two interrelated private-sector programs that are financially sustainable: (1) multi-week evening courses entitled "Forage & Grazing Management," and (2) fee-based producer study groups that meet on an ongoing basis to develop skills, obtain information, and share experiences.

The forage courses are ten weeks long. Classes meet once weekly for three hours beginning at 6 p.m. Each course includes a comprehensive syllabus and also optional tours, study sessions, and guest speakers. Registration fees are currently $90. Local businesses help co-sponsor courses with matching funds. Since 1994, I have conducted eleven forage courses in five counties in western Oregon, enrolling a total of 272 students. Participants include ranchers raising all types of livestock, agribusiness personnel, agricultural instructors, and government employees.

The Producer Forage Study groups evolved directly from these courses. Graduating ranchers enthused about intensive grazing formed three Forage Study groups in western Oregon. These three groups began meeting in 1995, 2000, and 2002, respectively, and have conducted a total of 145 meetings as of December 2003. Each group collects membership fees semiannually, maintains a bank account, and hires a facilitator to coordinate meetings. Groups contain 10-20 operations. Local Extension agents are invited as courtesy guests. Membership is limited to operations with a prerequisite background, either through courses or appropriate experience. Meetings are held either monthly for 3 hours or bimonthly for 5 hours, at sites rotating among member ranches. Each meeting includes a pasture walk, an in-depth discussion about a focus topic, and announcements.

Forage Study Groups serve many roles. They give members ongoing information about forages, grazing, and nutrition. They also provide support for new ideas, facilitate cooperative arrangements for purchases and marketing, and serve as important venues for coordinated on-farm research, trials of new techniques, special workshops, tours, and guest speakers. As fee-based organizations, these Forage Groups are also relatively insulated from the vagaries of public budgets.

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INTRODUCTION

Grazing and forage management are complex topics that require comprehensive learning and ongoing education for successful application. Unfortunately, our current agricultural education system is not designed to provide such complex information to decision-making producers. Specifically, these producers are the adults who actually own or operate farms and ranches. Our current agricultural education system is primarily designed for young adults. In general, young adults don't have family responsibilities, or extensive business experience, or decision-making roles in their farms. Young adults, however, are the people who have the time to leave the farm for years of undergraduate college education or extended short courses.

In contrast, adult producers generally rely on the Extension Service for technical information and integrated advice. For basic information, the Extension Service can be quite effective. However, currently strapped for funds and personnel, the Extension Service is often unable to deliver the complex, in-depth training needed by professional graziers. As an alternative to local institutions, producers now often turn to the Internet for information and guidance. Although the Internet is filled with an overwhelming amount of information, it also contains a vast amount of material that is unscientific, confusing, or misleading. From a professional perspective, the Internet is not a substitute for good training and in-depth education. Producers in the complex business of forage-based ranching and farming need better sources of information and advice than the hit-or-miss fact sheets and sales literature online.

In western Oregon, we have addressed this problem by developing two interrelated private-sector programs that are financially sustainable: (1) multi-week evening courses entitled "Forage & Grazing Management," and (2) fee-based producer study groups that meet on an ongoing basis to develop skills, obtain information, and share experiences.

In this article, I describe these programs and discuss this private-sector model for transferring information and providing producer support. This article contains three main sections. In the first section, I describe the 10-week Forage courses. These courses are self-supporting private activities that are conducted independently of the producer study groups. These courses, however, have effectively acted as the germinating seeds for the development of the producer study groups. In the second section, I describe the history, organization, and meeting structure of the producer study groups. In the third section, I discuss why these groups are successful and why producers are willing to pay fees for membership.

PRELIMINARY ACTIVITIES – THE 10-WEEK FORAGE COURSES

Remember those physics and history courses we took in school? Week after week we'd trudge to class, listen to the teacher, take notes, write papers, and suffer through those dreaded exams. It was an old-fashioned method, step-by-step, but we learned the principles of those topics, sometimes in spite of ourselves.

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As adults, we can't do this any longer. We're too busy running our farms and ranches. Of course we still try to learn, but our information now comes in snippets — from evening workshops or Extension meetings, from educational sessions at annual conventions, from the Internet. But where can we go to learn the principles of comprehensive topics like forages or nutrition? Production agriculture is more complex than high school physics. Our agricultural system has no provisions to teach adult farmers about these topics. The ag schools and short-courses are really designed for young people — people at the beginning of their careers with the luxury of time, who don't have family responsibilities or equity in their farms.

To address this situation, over the last decade I've developed some multi-week courses for ranchers. Although these courses are stand-alone activities that have been quite successful in their own right and have affected scores of producers all across Western Oregon, they — particularly the *Forages* courses — have also acted as the crucial underpinnings for the development of sustainable producer forage study groups. In this section, I'd like to tell you about these courses.

These are no-nonsense courses, and they cover critical topics — *Forage & Grazing Management*, *Feeds & Feeding Livestock*, *Sheep Production*, and *Beef Cattle Nutrition*. The basic arrangement is simple: each course is ten weeks long. We meet one evening each week for three hours, usually beginning at 6 PM, with a coffee break halfway through the evening. That's 30 hours of formal class time — as much as many college courses. In addition, I conduct review sessions prior to each class and also some optional tours. Occasionally we'll have guest speakers or telephone hookups to distant presenters. Also textbooks and readings and handouts, group discussions, completion certificates, and a potluck during the last class.

But no academic tests. One delight of these courses is that we don't fool with collegiate concerns like extra credit or grading curves. The real world is the testing ground, and that's enough.

Financially, these courses are self-sufficient. Ranchers pay registration fees, and a few private businesses become course sponsors. Some businesses consider it good business to support education, especially a private course that runs itself like a business.

Years ago, I began teaching these courses through a local community college, but I discovered that going independent gave me more freedom to organize and teach. Also, moving courses off campus seemed to make them more attractive to farmers. So now, rather than answering to administrators, I answer to my students — the ranchers who pay the bills — and I'd rather face *their* evaluations any day.

Physically, these courses don't need much. Just a meeting room with chairs, tables. light, and heat. A microwave and a sink would be nice, and of course a coffeepot. I supply the white boards and other audiovisual equipment. In the room, we prop the white boards up against the wall, arrange the tables, put on the coffee, and *voilá*, we have a classroom! Modest, but effective. A few years ago, I held one course in a high school library. Before each class we shifted the tables, and at the end of the evening everyone helped move the tables back and even piled books on them. The librarians were pleased.

But those are only the physical details. Now for essence of the thing — depth and time.

The first concept is *depth*. Multi-week courses allow me to cover complex topics in a comprehensive depth that no workshop can match. For example, during my 10-week *Forages* course, we cover basic topics like soil fertility, pH, and enough inorganic chemistry to understand cation exchange capacity, buffers, and soil compaction. Then genetics for evaluating species and varieties, diploid, tetraploid, and even cloning. Then intensive practice at identifying grasses and legumes during their young, vegetative stages, when they are still green and manageable. Then nutrition for understanding mineral, energy, and protein strategies on pasture, nutritional problems with forages, and when to supplement grain. Then the principles of making hay and silage, and why the Maillard Reaction is so important. And finally forage management strategies like MIG, plant competition, weed control, fence design, and the biochemistry of some poisonous plants.

These are all important topics — topics that any forage manager must understand — but how could they be covered effectively in anything shorter than a long course? Evening and one-day workshops aren't long enough to cover a fraction of these topics. Some organizations approach this problem by conducting weekend retreats or intensive short-courses of one or two weeks. These venues do cram much into a few days, but they run into the very human problem of information overload. No one can absorb six straight hours of non-stop information. Especially day after day in rapid succession. We couldn't do it in high school or college, and we can't do it now.

Intensive campus-based short courses (i.e. lasting one or two weeks) also entail another issue — who is their market? These short courses tend to appeal to young folks who can leave the farm for weeks at a time. How can working adults get away for that long? Who is going to do the chores? In contrast, my courses do attract adult ranchers — the persons who actually make the management decisions for their operations. Even people who are incredibly busy with family and community can still manage to juggle free one night a week.

My courses also appeal to people with smaller operations, or those with more modest goals, who may be reluctant to invest a large chunk of time to a single topic. A weekly course allows them to "get their feet wet" without committing their entire two-week vacation to that topic. Some even enjoy the course as a way of spending quality time with like-minded people. Sort of like the weekly card game with textbooks instead of cards.

The second concept is *time* — the length of these courses is important. Ten class sessions spanning ten weeks sets a relaxed rhythm to the learning. Each week unfolds at its own pace. There is time between classes — for reflection, reading, and synthesis of material. Between classes, students have the luxury to observe things on their own farms and come to the next class with questions about those things, which leads to further discussion and learning. And just like those college physics courses we all remember, these courses build from week to week. The first few classes lay the groundwork of principles and terminology, which we then apply to the more complicated topics later in the term.

One thing that I've observed in every course — by the fourth or fifth week, students begin to ask insightful questions about topics that, at the start of the course, they could not have articulated.

Intellectual growth is not a straight line. We need time to sort through the mass of small things. Time is an ingredient that only comes with time.

My courses don't answer *all* the questions about a topic. They can't. No course can foresee all situations. I try to design these courses to provide a framework — of solid scientific principles and vocabulary and facts — so that students can return to their operations with new skills and understanding. These 10-week courses give them a depth of knowledge and the time to learn it. So when they make their own management decisions, they can avoid serious errors and have a better chance of finding the best economic options. That's the final exam.

PRODUCER FORAGE STUDY GROUPS – DEVELOPMENT & ORGANIZATION

The producer forage study groups started in 1995, after I had conducted a couple of 10-week forage courses in Douglas County, Oregon. A few ranchers who took these courses wanted to continue their education and build on that information, but they didn't want to repeat the formal course structure again. Instead, they wanted to try something different, a type of regular meeting where they could learn from each other and try new forage techniques on their own ranches. So in July of 1995, these producers held their first meeting on one of the ranches. We took a pasture walk, and then we came back to the house and went through an exercise of choosing fertilizer options, which included detailed calculations about the economics of each option.

Then we got down to the hard stuff — how could we best organize this group and, most importantly, fund it? We were on unknown territory here, at least with our experiences in the U.S. But by the end of the evening, the ranchers decided to approach this problem in a businesslike way. It was clear that the group would not be a social club. It would be a professional organization of forage-based ranches, and this took money. So they created an organization that required members to pay dues. *A private, self-funded study group.* The money would primarily pay a facilitator (my role), who would take care of the organizational details, arrange for guest speakers, provide some instruction, and facilitate the meetings.

And so the first group was formed — the *Umpqua Valley Forage Study Group* (UVFSG). Five years later, after nearly 60 monthly 3-hour meetings, the members decided to make some changes. They decided to extend each meeting to five hours for more in-depth discussion time and also to meet every other month rather than monthly. (This was influenced by our knowledge of Argentinian ranch groups, which hold full-day meetings.) We have followed this pattern ever since. As of this writing, the UVFSG has been meeting regularly for more than eight years.

Two additional groups have formed during the past three years, similarly evolving from forage courses that I had conducted in their respective areas. In March 2000, a group of ranchers on Oregon's beautiful south coast formed FANG — the *Forage and Nutrition Group*. The south coast is a rugged area covering two large counties, and some members must drive through mountain passes to attend FANG meetings. In May 2002, ranchers in the southern Willamette Valley formed WVGANG — the *Willamette*

Valley Grazing and Nutrition Group. This group draws members from across five counties in western Oregon. Both groups meet monthly.

You might ask, are clever acronyms *required*? Well, the name selection process is, uh, an industrial secret. But here's a hint: it may involve a contest and a vote. (You should see the names that were *not* selected.)

A few words about organization. Each group consists of 10–20 member operations. Dues are paid every six months, and all group members pay the same amount. Membership is quite varied. Members include veteran and novice producers, raising all species of livestock: beef cattle, sheep, horses, alpacas, and even pastured chickens. Some sell hay or other products, and marketing goals vary from commercial to purebred to organic. Ranch sizes range from 20 animal units to over 800.

One thing: membership is *by operation*, not by person, which means that *everyone* from a member ranch can attend meetings, including family and hired help. Essentially, membership is a place at the table, and an operation can fill that place with everyone on the ranch. And membership is not limited to livestock ranches. Members also include feed stores, seed companies, and even government agencies. Some folks who work for these places also operate their own ranches, so they are particularly happy with this arrangement.

Each group has its own bank account and treasurer (usually one of the members), who sends out bills and keeps track of finances. The bookkeeping is simple, just a few transactions each year. This arrangement means that each group owns itself. They hire their own facilitator and, if they choose, they can also apply for outside grants.

The relationship with the Extension Service is a special situation. Since county budgets aren't exactly loaded with money, no one expects county agents to pay membership fees, but the groups usually ask them to come as invited guests. In fact, ranchers have specifically requested this for two reasons: (1) so agents can share their official information, and, equally as important (2) so agents can interact with and learn from the group. Meetings often involve cutting edge material discussed in very practical and economic terms, and members see their meetings as opportunities for agents to gain information to share with others in their counties.

Think about that second reason for a moment — it represents a *complete reversal* of the traditional one-way flow of information from Extension to the ranchers. This concept can be a challenge to those accustomed to the traditional methods of information exchange. In these groups, information flows in many directions.

The meetings themselves are usually held at member ranches, rotating through the membership over the years. But locations are flexible. Some meetings are held on nonmember ranches or at schools or other facilities — wherever is appropriate for the group's goals. One practical criterion for limiting membership size is the on-farm meeting venues — a group larger than 15–20 people will not fit comfortably in most living rooms.

What happens at these meetings? Well, we generally begin in the late afternoon. We gather near the barn and start with a pasture walk, although the weather influences our exact timing. Lots of intense discussion occurs in those fields, especially about soil fertility, forage species, grazing techniques, irrigation, etc. — the myriad ongoing details of a forage-based operation. And economics. Lots of economics.

Then we go inside and have a no-nonsense discussion on a focus topic. This is important. Each meeting has a focus topic, a technical issue that is pertinent to the host operation. Some example topics include new equipment for irrigation systems, livestock nutrition during fall and winter, a detailed evaluation of perennial ryegrass varieties, an in-depth evaluation of direct marketing, or methods for improving labor efficiency. Sometimes we'll have a guest speaker, either in person or by telephone (speaker-phone); sometimes we will show slides or work on computers; and sometimes I'll conduct a short lesson or lead a discussion.

These meetings are not social clubs. There is no potluck. People bring their own brown-bag suppers, and it's quite common for people to munch their sandwiches during our pasture walks or indoor discussions. The host ranch may provide coffee and cookies, always appreciated, but we have purposely refrained from requiring anything of the host. This policy encourages members to host meetings by alleviating those social trappings. These are working meetings. Of course there is always *some* socializing — how can we *not* talk about the Chicago Cubs — but in general, the technical conversations are intense and directed. Part of my role as the facilitator is to keep it that way. Finally, we end our meetings on schedule, so members can depend on getting home when they expect to.

So why are members enthusiastic about their groups? Why do they keep coming back month after month, and why are they willing to pay for it? See the next section.

PRODUCER FORAGE STUDY GROUPS – WHY THIS MODEL WORKS

In this section we'll go under the hood — why members join and continue to come back year after year.

One obvious attraction is the valuable information. Month-in, month-out, we hold detailed discussions about technical issues. Groups select their own subjects. As examples, meetings during the past twelve months have focused on topics such as autumn-fall forage growth, young ruminant nutrition, selenium in fertilizers, irrigation system design, new concepts in parasite control, winter feeding strategies, warm-season grasses, compost tea, bar-coded eartags, an economic breakdown of the wholesale cuts of lamb and beef, and turfgrass management in golf courses.

Presentations and presenters come in assorted flavors. Presenters may be outside guests or group members or me (as part of my facilitator role). Sometimes we'll use a blackboard or slides or a computerized PowerPoint presentation; sometimes a guest will join us by speaker-phone. But regardless of the details, these meetings do not resemble the classic "educational workshops" where a speaker stands up in front of a crowd, gives a formal presentation, answers a few polite questions, and then goes home.

No, each group meeting resembles a roundtable conversation with rapid-fire questions and explanations and technical descriptions moving back and forth between everyone in the room. Information flows two ways, three ways, multiple ways, sometimes in bits and starts, but in the end, everyone gains, and after many of these meetings, the gains can be considerable indeed.

An important feature of these sessions is that members sometimes discuss confidential information — like certain details about their operations — which can help the other members understand a situation and formulate good suggestions. This reveals two very important and attractive aspects of these groups: closed membership and trust.

Closed membership is absolutely critical. Closed membership provides a common experience that over time, allows for information to build and people to grow.

All three study groups in western Oregon are closed organizations. *Closed* means, simply, that meetings are only for members and their guests, not the general public. These groups also ask a reasonable prerequisite of potential new members: that new folks should have either taken courses or have equivalent background knowledge. During our meetings, we don't want to go backwards and explain to a new person basic things like the meaning of legume inoculant or a fertilizer specification. Members already know that information; they don't want to rehash it. Since membership assumes a common body of knowledge, conversations can build on this knowledge and include greater depth and detail than is possible in open, public meetings.

This is no small thing. Increased knowledge carries a sense of professionalism and pride. Let me illustrate this with an example from music. If you've ever listened or danced to fiddle music, you'll appreciate that good fiddle playing doesn't come overnight or from some mysterious genetic process. Good fiddling takes years of training and also lots of practice with other good musicians. When a person first learns the fiddle, he usually joins "slow jams" where musicians play basic tunes s-l-o-w-l-y, thus allowing everyone to contribute and learn. But once he masters the basics, he wants to expand beyond simple tunes like "Oh Susanna" and "Old Joe Clark". To improve his fiddling, he needs more complexity, faster tempos, more melody and texture. Soon, he locates advanced jam sessions with other, better musicians, where the tunes are challenging and complex, where he can learn and perfect new techniques.

Let's come back to agriculture. In our increasingly complex world of farming and ranching, where can a producer go for advanced sessions? Not to open, educational clinics. For an experienced rancher, those sessions are kind of like musical slow jams, where elementary material is repeated over and over. Not to a government agency that administers regulations and subsidy programs. And not to the Extension Service, with its declining public funding, because Extension is constrained to work with *all* producers and does not have the time or resources to provide direct service to a select, closed group of advanced producers over a long period of time. *But there is an alternative*: our private study groups in western Oregon. *These* are the advanced jam sessions for graziers, where we build on knowledge and work on advanced techniques. And, as in music, the interactive process helps everyone because everyone can keep up and contribute.

The second aspect of a closed organization is *confidentiality*. This means *trust*. As folks meet together month after month, over time they can develop a sense of understanding and empathy for each other — a group of like-minded people in the same profession who get to know and respect each other's situations. This understanding helps people discuss things at a level that is impossible in open meetings. But these discussions also entail a tacit agreement among members — that private details discussed at meetings are for each other's benefit and are confidential to the members. New Zealand farmer study groups have a succinct way of describing this: "What's said in the shed, stays in the shed!"

Speaking of New Zealand, I should note that private farmer discussion groups have been an established feature there for more than twenty years. And for good reason: they work. New Zealanders have found that private farmer groups are one of the most effective methods of transferring information and improving production. If one of us from Oregon were suddenly transported into a group meeting in New Zealand, we would definitely feel right at home — three-hour meetings, pasture tours, a coffee pot, and even a facilitator with a white board or flip chart. This is not a case of one country copying another; rather, it's an example of *parallel development* — Oregon ranchers formed their study groups for the same reasons that New Zealand farmers formed their groups, and the organization and meeting details are impressively similar.

Here in Oregon, another value in these groups is their membership. Members come from *all* types of livestock operations and backgrounds. There is great strength in this diversity. Everyone brings a wealth of experience to share, and some members may also have specialized skills like engineering, accounting, or marketing. Each group becomes a kind of a support network — for evaluating new ideas, for cooperative marketing or purchasing arrangements, for sharing equipment, for conducting on-farm trials, even as a convenient venue for outside speakers. As one member once said (to paraphrase), that he couldn't live long enough to make as many mistakes as all the members have already made, and the study group allows him to learn from those mistakes.

Finally, let's talk money. Ranchers pay membership fees to join these groups. A fee-based structure accomplishes two fundamental things: (1) the money allows the group to hire a facilitator who takes care of administrative details and makes sure things run smoothly, and (2) membership fees inherently put a monetary value on the experience, which encourages everyone to take it seriously and conscientiously. It's really a business decision. Members feel that money spent joining the group can save them many times that amount in timely evaluations, new opportunities, better information, and avoided mistakes.

It's all economics, and here are just a few examples: Quite a few members, after many in-depth discussions about forage varieties, have tried new types of forages with good success. Forages like plantain, forage brassicas, and Italian-type annual ryegrasses have allowed them to utilize fields more efficiently and graze animals longer into the season with better gains. Members have trimmed feed costs by using alternative feedstuffs like cull peas; they have increased forage availability by changing their fertilizer strategies; and they have improved labor efficiency by redesigning their internal fencing.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Although the concept of producer study groups is not new, the ongoing success of *closed, private-sector, fee-based groups* is a novel model in the United States.

One critical principle is that *these groups support themselves through paid membership.* In effect, these Producer Forage Study Groups in Oregon are professional, self-help organizations.

A second principle is that these groups are also self-contained. These groups are limited-membership organizations that have no formal relationship with the Extension Service, Oregon State University, or the local community colleges. Don't get me wrong — these other institutions are highly respected — it's just that they didn't have programs that met our needs. For example, the Extension Service was never designed to provide professional, long-term, highly-specialized service to individual ranches, and this was precisely the type of service that these ranchers wanted ... and were willing to pay for.

Forage Study Groups serve many roles. They give members ongoing information about forages, grazing, nutrition, and other timely topics. They also provide support for new ideas, facilitate cooperative arrangements for purchases and marketing, and serve as important venues for coordinated on-farm research, trials of new techniques, special workshops, tours, and guest speakers. And as fee-based organizations, these Forage Groups are also relatively insulated from the vagaries of public budgets.

We've done something special here in Oregon. These private study groups are serious, professional organizations with members working to survive in a complex and unforgiving agricultural world. It's like playing lead fiddle in a good band. This is group effort at its best.

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