

Unique Multiorganizational Collaborative Proves Effective in Delivering 2014 Farm Bill Education

Abstract

The Agricultural Act of 2014 is critical to the economic safety net for U.S. producers. This act represented a major change in philosophy, requiring producers to make key decisions about their options on the basis of risk management. To add to the complexity of the issue, the time period for delivering applicable education to landowners before sign-up deadlines was relatively short. This article highlights a unique multiorganizational statewide approach to delivering the applicable education. It involved University of Minnesota Extension, the Center for Farm Financial Management, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and banks and resulted in substantive evaluative outcomes.

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Introduction

The Agricultural Act of 2014 (Farm Bill) is a critical part of the economic safety net for U.S. crop and dairy producers through 2018. Passage of the Farm Bill marked a change in philosophy regarding producer and landowner decisions about program choices. The shift was away from nearly 20 years of fixed annual payments based on historical production to decisions based on risk management for producers. This change created the most complicated set of decisions producers have had to make in recent decades. Because of these changes, Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack (2014) indicated the need to establish an educational effort to enable all producers to understand their options and make informed decisions related to both the 2015 crop year and the various program choices. The primary focus of the educational effort is on agricultural producers' needs and program outcomes

and impacts. This article highlights a unique multiorganizational statewide collaboration that addressed the Farm Bill educational effort in Minnesota.

Educational Need

Title I of the Farm Bill includes both crop commodity program provisions and the Margin Protection Program (MPP) for dairy producers. Both programs required that producers make decisions involving multiple choices. For crop commodity choices, selections made remain in effect through 2018. Landowners had to decide whether to update payment yields and base acres on their land. In addition, producers had to select from three major program choices. This decision was complicated by the fact that producers could mix and match programs by crop and by farm. Dairy producers were presented with similar complexities. If dairy producers chose to sign up, they had to select the amount of milk production they wanted covered by the program and the coverage level. Considering all the options related to percentage of milk covered and coverage level, dairy producers were presented with a total of 126 option combinations from which to choose. Lastly, the time frame for delivering the educational material was the 6-month period before program sign-up.

Educational Approach

The Farm Service Agency (FSA) within the U.S. Department of Agriculture was charged with the responsibility of educating producers regarding their Farm Bill decisions. Due to budget constraints, FSA staff did not have the ability to deliver Farm Bill education by themselves. Similar budget and personnel constraints also prevented University of Minnesota Extension or Center for Farm Financial Management (CFFM) staff from delivering the program education alone. The director of CFFM and the Minnesota State FSA director met and discussed approaches for delivery of Farm Bill education. During the process, the Independent Community Bankers of Minnesota joined the collaborative. As a result, a multiorganizational collaborative was formed to address the educational need. A collaborative team, as described by Walker (2003), is a coordinated effort in which people work together to achieve common goals and a shared vision not attainable through individual efforts. Nall (1998) states that collaborative teams make better decisions and tend to be more innovative and productive. Franz (2004) agrees by stating that self-directed work teams result in increased organizational effectiveness.

Members of the collaborative worked together to develop a Farm Bill educational curriculum. FSA took leadership for the development of the rules and guidelines segment. CFFM and University of Minnesota Extension led the effort to create the decision strategies and online decision tools segment, in addition to creating three online courses. The collaborative team utilized both the logic model and backward program design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006; McTighe & Thomas, 2003; Tyler, 1949; Polya, 1945), starting with the program end in mind. This approach involved clarifying program goals and objectives with the primary focus on the learner, focusing on program outcomes and impacts, and identifying and addressing learner needs.

FSA, University of Minnesota Extension, CFFM, and the bankers' association worked jointly to market the workshops. Each workshop teaching team included an FSA representative presenting program rules and a University of Minnesota Extension or CFFM staff person presenting decision strategies and information regarding online decision tools and courses. An independent community bank

representative and a local University of Minnesota Extension educator hosted participants by handing out materials and supplying refreshments. A total of 18 MPP workshops ($N = 942$) were held from October through November 2014. A total of 74 crop commodity workshops and five professional workshops ($N = 12,957$), six wrap-up workshops ($N = 624$), and five privately requested commodity workshops ($N = 202$) were held from December 2014 through March 2015. Six workshops for Native American producers in Minnesota ($N = 87$) were delivered in March 2015. The effort was successful because the collaborative used backward program design and elements deemed key to such a process, including common objectives and outcomes, strong communication, stakeholder involvement, and shared decision making (Borden & Perkins, 1999; Franz, 2003; Huxham, 1996; Rodewald, 2002; Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007; Smith, Carroll, Ashford, 1995; Tjosvold, 1984; Zoller, 2000).

Program Outcomes

Participants were asked to complete a postmeeting evaluation. One key question was focused on participant knowledge gain of program choices. Figure 1 shows producer and landowner knowledge gain, Figure 2 shows agriculture professional knowledge gain, and Figure 3 shows dairy producer knowledge gain. Results show substantive increased understanding and knowledge gain on the part of participants as a result of attending one of the workshops.

Figure 1.

Price Loss Coverage/Agriculture Risk Coverage (PLC/ARC) Producer/Landowner Knowledge Gain

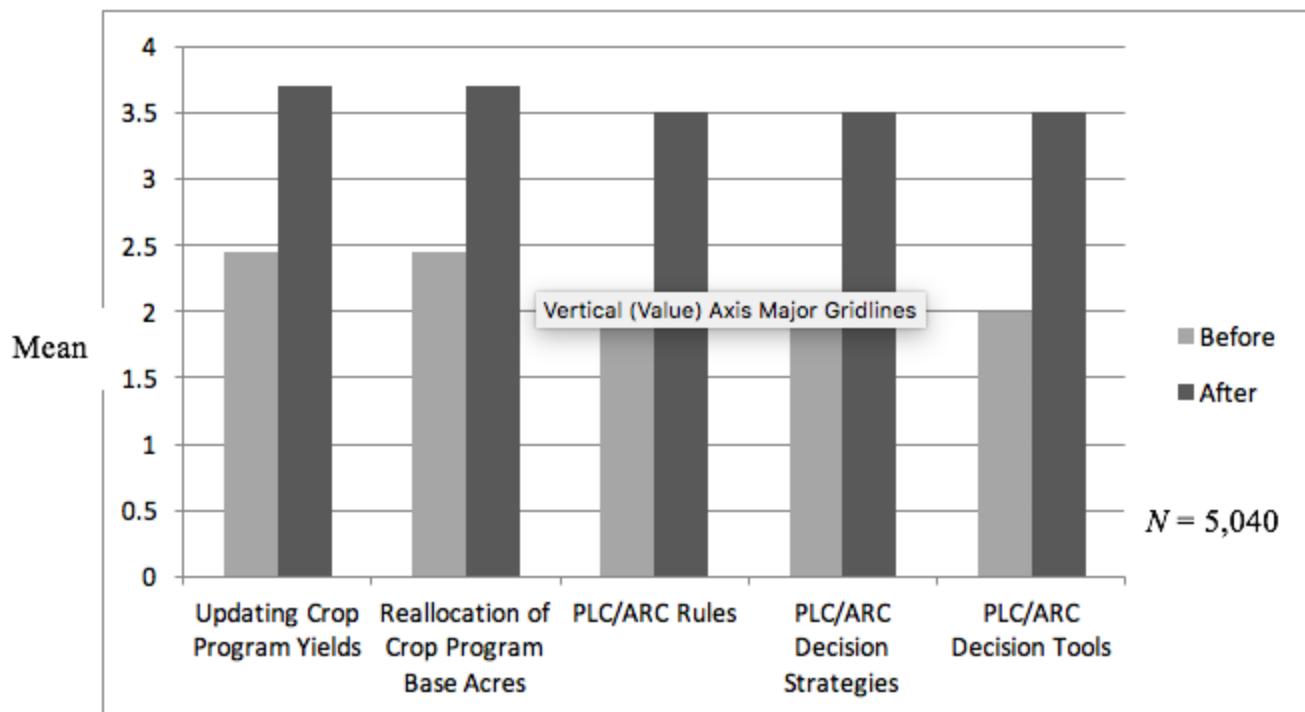


Figure 2.

Ag Professional Knowledge Gain

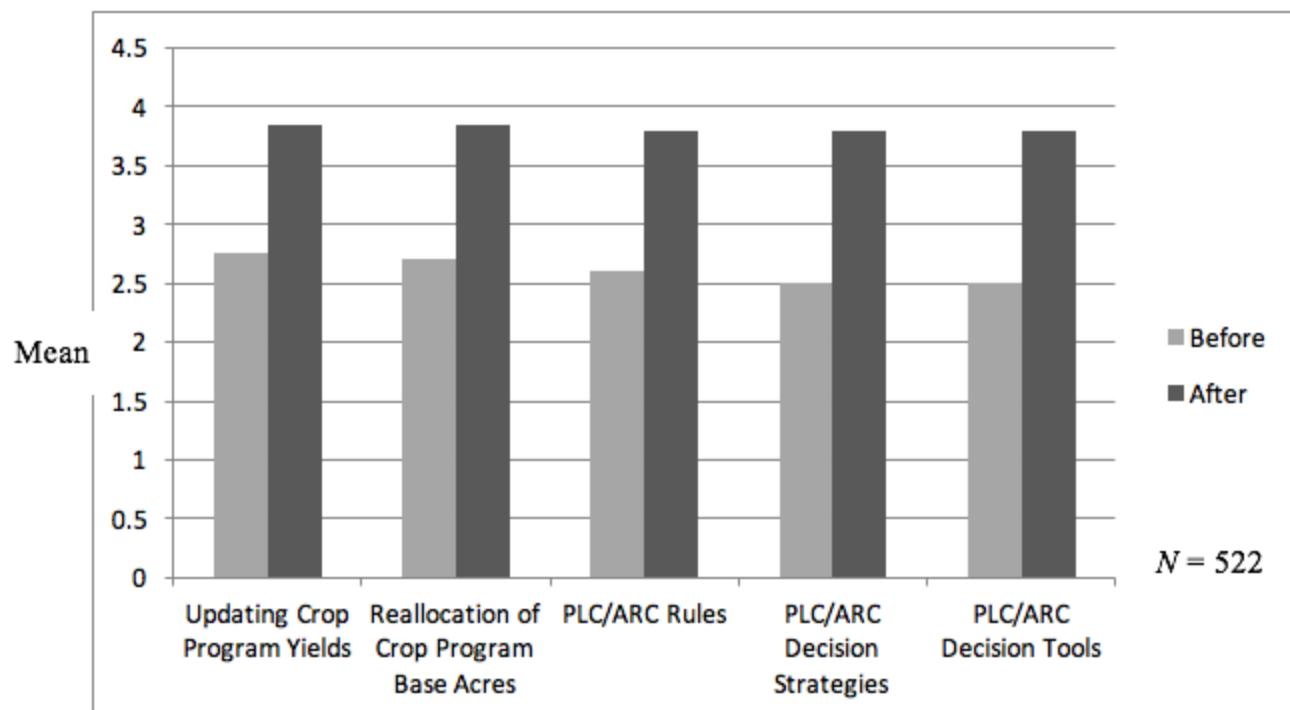
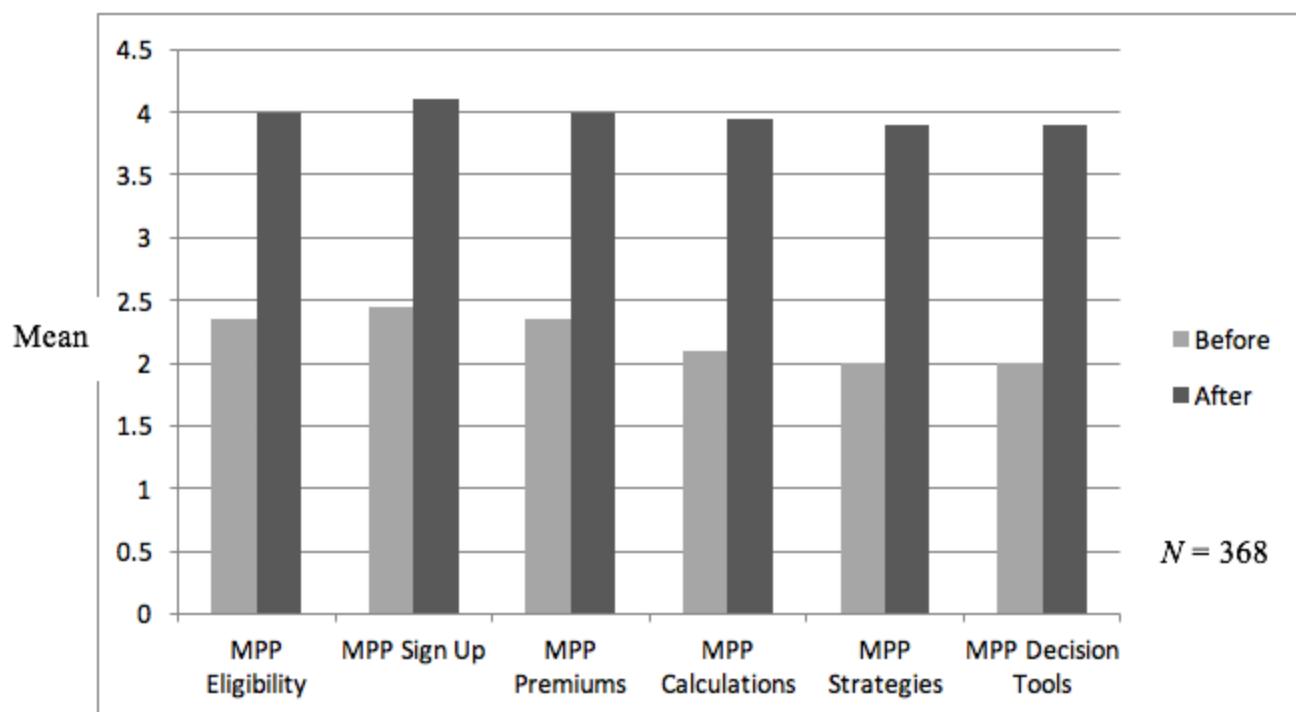


Figure 3.
MPP Producer Knowledge Gain



Summary

Research supports the utility and outcomes of using collaborative teams. Doing so as a method of delivering Farm Bill education has shown that producers and landowners gained knowledge around the various educational points critical to the decisions they were required to make. Agriculture

professionals also reported substantive gains in knowledge around the program educational points, enabling them to assist their clients with Farm Bill decisions.

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