

RISA Unites Farmers, Regulators, Consumers To Ensure Ag's Future

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Schettini and associate core team member Jonda L. Crosby, RISA project associate at the Berks County Cooperative Extension, are helping to guide a \$2 million (\$1 million from Kellogg and another \$1 million in matching funds), 3 1/2 -year, 23-member project to its ambitious goal — that of setting up contacts with farmers and community leaders to ensure that agriculture remains a viable, powerful economic force in the 10-county southeastern Pennsylvania region.

"What is the common language of all the groups?" said Crosby. "It's there. You just really have to dig for it."

Crosby, Schettini, and others in the 23-member group, including a consortium involving SANRUE and PASA, Atlantic Dairy Cooperative, League of Women Voters, and the Reading Terminal Farmers' Market Trust, have held a series of meetings involving 120 people from various industries and associations. Included were marketing professionals, policy makers, support professionals, and consumers. Forty-seven of those attending were farmers.

One of the purpose of the meetings is to assess the needs of farmers.

One survey conducted by RISA measured some of the long-term

concerns and goals of dairy farmers. With the help of the Atlantic Dairy Cooperative, 1,400 questionnaires were mailed out. About 500 were returned.

"That's a phenomenal return rate," said Schettini.

"The key is to get them to tell you everything they possibly can," said Crosby. "Once they are comfortable and start talking, you wouldn't believe the similarities between the focus groups."

Crosby spoke about how much "passion" the responses contained. The information, according to Schettini, is still being analyzed, coded, and documented. It will be available, according to Rochelle Kelvin, project leader with Rodale's Metro-Farmer Networks, in early August this year.

Also, a vegetable survey, sent to about 400 producers in the state, is under analysis. The results will be available in a few months.

For now, the focus of RISA is on obtaining information about farmers' needs and to focus information-gathering on what the public's perceptions of farming are.

For that, a survey was conducted to examine consumers' attitudes about "farm-fresh" produce. Information about product availability and impressions was also provided by more than 1,400 people at 23 different supermark-

ets in the region. Data will be released by RISA later this year.

One of the ways RISA has made its presence known and has had an immediate effect on local farming is through the creation of additional outlets throughout the city of Philadelphia from one of the RISA partners, the Reading Terminal Farmers' Market Trust. The Trust has created direct marketing agreements with produce farmers in the region.

"There are certain neighborhoods in Philadelphia, particularly around housing projects, where there is not adequate access to fresh produce," said Schettini. Two more locations were added in the city, home to about five million people, to bring fresh produce to inner-city residents.

In the long run, according to the core team members, RISA will help focus attention on the huge market available here for produce and other farmers.

RISA wants to find out "why the market is being served disproportionately from California or Mexico or Florida or wherever," Schettini said.

The "master report" of all the RISA activities, including what influence the information has had on planning community reaction and regulations, will be documented and made available to the

public. The format, according to Schettini, will be "user-friendly."

And finally, at the community level, the information has to be accessible and used, said Crosby.

"We're asking the community to guide us on how we should best use the money that Kellogg has given to us, rather than us saying this is the way it should be done," said Crosby.

RISA is also looking for proposals from dairy and vegetable farmers for on-farm research or demonstrations "that address an aspect of sustaining agriculture," said Leon Weber, Rodale Institute. Issues such as nutrient management, marketing, intensive grazing, water quality, soil improvement, pest control, farm management, and alternative crops will be considered.

RISA will provide some technical and financial support to the project, according to Weber. Deadline for proposals for projects to begin this fall is July 20. Proposals for projects that begin in 1995 are due by October 1.

Proposals can be obtained from Jonda Crosby at the Berks County

Extension Office, P.O. Box 520, Leesport, PA 19533-0520, (610) 378-1135.

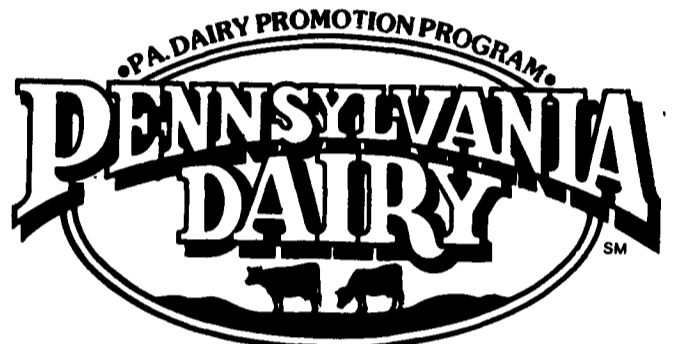
According to the core team, the spirit of the RISA project, once the research and documentation are complete, will continue in the relationships fostered.

"They'll probably continue to talk," said Crosby. "It's not going to stop. The rings will stay in place."

One result could be a farm changing from one commodity to another to meet the needs of the community.

A potential use of the RISA information is about how legislators make regulations, such as regarding nutrient management, how agencies create water use fees, or how townships create ordinances. The more the lawmakers know about farming, in general, according to the core members, the better the laws could be for farmers.

"If that is the only thing it does, then it will be successful," said Crosby. "If that one single thing happens, I would be ecstatic."



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