

Peer to Peer

Iowa project promotes sharing among peers.

by **Troy Smith**, field editor

By tradition, U.S. farmers and ranchers are an independent lot. A few may carry the independent spirit to the extreme. They may be reluctant to seek advice. When they make mistakes, they are too embarrassed to talk about it. Regarding money matters, they play their cards close to the vest. Perhaps most American agricultural producers are hesitant to reveal too much about their business finances.

Colin Johnson thinks more sharing of information and experience could be beneficial, especially for operators new to production agriculture. He also thinks U.S. producers could learn a thing or two about sharing from their Scandinavian counterparts.

Johnson spent a year living in Denmark, and he has accompanied Iowa State University (ISU) students on agricultural tours of northern Europe. He was impressed by the European producers' willingness to network.

"They meet in self-led groups to talk about their businesses," explains Johnson, an Iowa

grain and livestock farmer. "They're very transparent about their production practices and even their financial records. They discuss their experiences — the challenges and successes — very openly. That's what I'd like to see happen here."

Success network

Johnson wears another hat part-time, working as an ISU Extension program coordinator. He's currently coordinating the Beginning and Young Livestock Producer Success Network (BYLPN). The project targets livestock producers under the age of 35 years, as well as aspiring livestock producers. The objective is to develop a network of producer peer groups across Iowa to educate and mentor participants.

According to Johnson, ISU Extension and Outreach is spearheading the effort to

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establish regional peer groups and develop the program. Partners include the Iowa Cattlemen's Association, Iowa Pork Producers Association, Iowa State Dairy Association, Western Iowa Dairy Alliance, Northeast Iowa Community Dairy Foundation and Iowa Farm Bureau Federation.

The management team includes ISU Animal Science Professor Dan Loy, who calls BYLPN different from most programs aimed at young or beginning producers.

"There are other programs, and good ones, too. Most are conducted by commodity organizations, and they emphasize leadership development. They provide great opportunity for the select few who can take advantage. However, because of the travel involved or time constraints, many young producers find it difficult to participate. So [with BYLPN] we're trying to take educational resources to the local level," says Loy.

He emphasizes that in no way does BYLPN attempt to compete with the commodity organization leadership programs.

"Actually, we hope we can make people more aware of those programs and recruit into them," Loy adds.

Local resources

Resources available to BYLPN groups

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— **Colin Johnson**

include ISU, the supporting organizations and private industry. In addition to expert speakers, veteran livestock producers address local producer meetings as individuals or panels addressing specific topics. The more-experienced producers serve as mentors, but the beginning and young producer participants also learn from one another.

"Peer-to-peer learning is an important goal," adds Loy. "There is a social element involved too, and that enhances the sharing and learning."

According to Johnson, the program was officially launched in July 2012, and several local

groups convened their first meetings last fall. Each group determined its focus, whether that is cow-calf, dairy, swine or general livestock production. Organizers suggested groups meet quarterly and schedule dates around seasonal workloads.

"We're getting things started by helping organize programs for local meetings, but we're encouraging the participants to tell us the direction they want to go," says Johnson. "Eventually, we want to hand it off to them and have each group be self-led. We'll take a step back, but be there for support."

Johnson says that along with local extension personnel, progressive young producers have been instrumental in bringing peers together locally. To date, six area groups have been formed.

Cow-calf and grain producer Vernon Knaack of Correctionville is enthused about participating in the Northwest Iowa Group. Membership is composed of about 25 producers representing a mix of beef, swine and dairy operations.

"I think most of our group's participants are most interested in learning and talking about the business side — economics and financial management," says Knaack, explaining how the group first met at the fairgrounds to determine its direction.

"As for me," adds Knaack, "I really want to get better at

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marketing. I think most of the others want to sharpen their marketing skills.”

Knaack says it will help to learn more about the influence of oil production and prices, and other drivers of grain markets. He wants a better understanding of how the general economy and worldwide markets affect beef prices and, therefore, cattle markets.

“I think many of us forget to see the big picture. We forget things outside our own little area, but there are many outside

influences on our businesses,” states Knaack.

Besides gathering to hear speakers address topics ranging from production practices to risk management and credit access, local groups organize tours of allied industries. Knaack’s group toured a meatpacking facility and a feedmill. Other activities include workshops at various locations. The Southwest Iowa Group visited an area veterinary clinic to discuss health issues, cattle-working facilities, and evaluation and development of replacement heifers.

Randy Dreher of Audubon is a member of the cow-calf-oriented Southwest Iowa Group consisting of 20-some young producers. The group doesn’t rely on outside speakers only, but encourages group members to give educational presentations. An Angus seedstock producer, Dreher has given a talk on expected progeny difference (EPD) values and their use.

“I like the concept of peers actually leading the educational experience. There’s nothing wrong with bringing in well-known experts

with PowerPoint presentations and printed handouts, but I see a lot of value learning from my peers. They aren't paid advocates, and they face challenges similar to mine," states Dreher.

"We also visit group members' operations. They're all different, and we discuss what each producer is doing and why. It makes you think, and I usually come away from each farm tour with something I can apply to my own operation," he adds.

Dreher says the social component of the BYLPN group is valuable, and a significant

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driver of participation by producer families.

"We're trying to emphasize the social experience, as well as education. Our next scheduled function is organized around a potluck meal. That's not your typical

producer education meeting," grins Dreher.

It is, however, an example of what Colin Johnson, Dan Loy and other BYLPN proponents hoped would happen.

"We want to see these local groups grow into useful networks. We think they can help to build long-lasting and beneficial relationships," says

Johnson. "Hopefully, they will serve as models for development of producer networks in other areas." 

Editor's Note: *Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman located at Sargent, Neb.*