Increasing Collaborative Success Between American Indians and Agriculture Professionals

Steven R. Lewis, Extension Educator
Randy Emm, Indian Reservation Program Coordinator

Introduction

It has been recognized that American Indian populations don’t take full advantage of federal programs aimed at enhancing agriculture and natural resource management practices. Emm and Singletary (2009) claim that some of the problem stems from these programs not being designed with the American Indian in mind. They coined the term “Indian situation,” referring to the lack of understanding agriculture professionals have in regard to life on the reservation. Emm and Singletary also point to differing perceptions in agriculture and natural resources on reservation lands and obstacles of adopting new practices as some contributing issues. They published a curriculum, “People of the Land”, to help agriculture professionals better understand the Indian situation and to enhance collaborative success.

Evidence of this lack of collaborative success between American Indians and agriculture professionals is well known and a subject of concern. According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, 18.9 percent of all farmland in the state of Nevada is operated by 525 American Indian farmers and ranchers located on 438 farms. American Indian agriculture production typically mirrors that of all farms in the state and totaled $10.85 million in the 2007 Census of Agriculture. Livestock sales, the predominant agriculture commodity, accounted for 59.6 percent of products sold while crop sales accounted for 40.4 percent. Looking at the state of Nevada as a whole, according to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, livestock sales accounted for 57.3 percent, and crop sales accounted for 42.7 percent of total Nevada farm cash receipts in 2007.

Conservation payments made to operators located on the various Indian Reservations in Nevada totaled:

- 1.96 percent of available conservation funding in 2007 amounting to $102,383 from available funding of $5,214,962.
- 2.14 percent of available conservation funding in 2008 amounting to $140,234 from available funding of $6,566,237.
- 3.72 percent of available conservation funding in 2009 amounting to $248,270 from available funding of $6,677,778.
- 8.20 percent of available conservation funding in 2010 amounting to $809,624 from available funding of $9,756,797.

(Information taken from NRCS Protracts, 6/9/2011)

The primary issue addressed is that Nevada Indian Reservations total 18.9 percent of all land in farms in the state of Nevada, but received 1.96 percent to 8.20 percent of available USDA conservation funding for the years 2007 through 2010. The trend has improved over the last several years but we are still a great distance from reaching optimum participation in USDA programming from the traditionally underserved population. Attempts have been made to better understand this phenomenon and carve out solutions to bring these entities together for a more sustainable future.

The purpose of this publication is to describe the results of a two-hour facilitated session conducted during the 2010 Nevada Indian Agriculture & Rural Summit on May 24, 2010 in Fallon, NV. Participants identified ways Tribal entities and USDA agencies can be more effective partners, and left the session with a revised personal approach to enhance collaboration success. Thirty four participants (13 Tribal, 10 Cooperative Extension, 11 USDA) engaged in small group discussions and provided individual written questionnaire responses. The following is an account of the results.

**Factors Attributing to Collaborative Success**

It is important to recognize that even though successful collaborations are more rare than desired, they do exist. To better understand factors attributing to collaborative success, three speakers were invited to share success stories and identify the characteristics leading to their favorable results.

Characteristics of successful collaborative efforts shared by the speakers are categorized in three main factors: working together; project management; and Golden Rule. The working together factor implies that people are willing to collaborate and they are actively involved in the project. Stakeholders are brought together and people with decision-making authority remain involved in the project. Additionally, a common vision is shared among all involved. The project management factor entails the know-how to manage the entire project, including the implementation process and procedures. Project management includes the persistence to follow through until the project ends. Also, it is important for people and expectations to stay consistent throughout the life of the project. The Golden Rule factor consists of treating people as you expect to be treated.
treated – with honesty and respect. It involves an open-mindedness or willingness to understand project partner’s values and continually building relationships.

In the eyes of the summit participants, factors attributing to collaborative success were related but slightly different. Participants were asked, in a post-summit questionnaire, to identify what enhances project success more than anything else. Respondents indicated that cooperation and communication were the two most important factors of project completion and success (Figure 1). Tribal entities rated cooperation slightly higher than communication. Most cooperation comments related to the need for teamwork, willingness to collaborate, and working together. Communication comments dealt with all stages of the process and communication with USDA agencies. USDA participants rated cooperation and communication equally high. Their description of communication related to having a point of contact and keeping in contact. Communication also included goals, objectives, expectations and specific program information. Cooperation comments included the importance of people with similar interest working together. Cooperative Extension participants viewed cooperation slightly higher than communication. Their comments relating to cooperation were specific to mutual commitment and buy-in. Comments such as commitment to the issue, commitment without ownership and commitment with flexibility were noted. Communication comments were related to general, ongoing, and frequent.

Figure 1. Factors attributing to collaborative success as identified by Summit participants
Pitfalls to Successful Collaboration

When projects between American Indians and agriculture professionals do not succeed, what might be the reasons for failure? This was a question posed to five summit breakout groups. Each small group was composed of representatives from USDA, Cooperative Extension and tribal entities. The three most prevalent pitfalls to collaboration success identified by the breakout groups relates to lack of communication, negotiating change and lack of participation. Pitfalls categorized as lack of communication include communication breakdown, no clear understanding of program requirements, communication of time-sensitive information, lack of face-to-face contact, undefined roles, bad facts or lack of facts, unclear and complicated rules, vagueness, inconsistent interpretation of rules and not listening when others speak. Pitfalls categorized as negotiating change include change in personnel, changing priorities, changing technology, council/agency turnover, rule changes, changing partners, and fear of change. Another significant pitfall is lack of participation which includes lack of involvement, lack of staff dedication, lack of interest, people not showing up and low buy-in to the project.

Addressing the Pitfalls to Collaboration Challenges

During the summit, small breakout groups were asked to suggest solutions to a few collaboration challenges. Breakout groups worked on solutions to improve communication, to define roles, to address lack of resources, to improve relationships, to improve leadership, to address lack of tribal interest and to address interpretation of rules and agency applications. It’s interesting to note that most of the proposed actions have something to do with improving communication and facilitating information flow. Below is a list of actions extracted from various solution strategies.

Selected Actions to Address Collaboration Challenges

- Establish a preferred form of communication
- Designate meeting times and dates
- Gather input from everyone – Listen
- Create a positive/productive environment
- Respect everyone’s opinions
- Leadership education
- Publish frequently asked questions
- Improve oversight of decision-making and interpretation
- Use multiple learning technologies

Partner’s Role in Increasing Collaborative Success

In an attempt to delve into the subject deeper, summit participants were asked to identify the most common or frustrating challenge faced when working on projects together and to comment on how project partners could
make things much easier. Again, the predominant response related to improving communication. USDA participants felt that the tribal entities needed to build a relationship with USDA to create open dialogue. USDA suggested that appropriate key Tribal contacts should be established. One USDA respondent said, “tribal entities could make things much easier if they would seek guidance in completing their application to improve competitive scoring for grant funds, and if they better understood program requirements.” Another USDA respondent suggested that “things would be easier if they (tribal entities) responded to me in any form, phone, email, etc. and showed up to meetings and on time.” From the other point of view, tribal entities felt that USDA could make things much easier if they would provide information, and communicate without finger pointing. One tribal entity suggested USDA should “work more closely with the individual making sure contact is properly carried out and the paperwork is in order.” Another suggested to “explain the process thoroughly instead of sending a denial letter or indicating and/or approving a project not to my liking.” From a peripheral perspective, one Cooperative Extension participant suggested that both USDA and Tribal entities should “share more of their thought process and reasons for decisions.” Another Cooperative Extension person said “to communicate more frequently and directly regarding what are the obstacles and why projects haven’t worked in the past and how to do things better.”

**Personal Plans for Increasing Collaborative Success**

Finally, summit participants were asked to reflect on the information shared and to craft a personal plan to improve collaboration between tribal entities and agriculture professionals. Specifically, they were asked, “what do you need to do better or differently to improve project success?” Not surprisingly, the majority of the personal plans consisted of improving communication.

USDA participants shared plans to:

- Be persistent in establishing educational series
- Keep contact lists updated
- Ask tribal members what information they need
- Get to know the people I work with better and spend more time understanding where they come from
- Work on communication system, mailing lists, expand to new
- Build relationships
- Contact tribal personnel on a routine basis

Tribal participants shared plans to:

- Give better information – information input and output
- Communicate with stakeholders
- Share information with producers
- Build a relationship with agencies
- Ask a lot of questions and listen to the answers
- Get information out through a quarterly newsletter
• Receive input from all involved
• Make an appointment with our NRCS representative to make a visit without assignment holders to start this ongoing networking
• Start/keep monthly or bi-monthly meetings with NRCS
• Have a better understanding of the role USDA agencies play in regards to tribal projects and how we can collaborate
• Get more people involved to help with better promotion, outreach and participation through dedicated tribal liaison position(s)

Cooperative Extension participants shared plans to:

• Become more knowledgeable about cultural appropriate communication
• Become a better listener
• Communicate more clearly, develop and deliver a clear, concise message
• Listen
• Get out of the office and communicate
• Think, communicate and act with passion and flexibility
• Easy access to information and share information with everybody
• Establish lines of communication between tribal council, tribal members and funding agencies

Conclusions
The summit-facilitated session unveiled a host of challenges, solutions and personal approaches to increase collaborative success between tribal entities and agriculture professionals and ultimately enhance agriculture and natural resource management. Clearly, the challenge that demanded the most conversation was lack of effective communication. Communication challenges are recognized within and among all individuals and groups working to bring more sustainability to agricultural lands and natural resources. A number of excellent personal action plans were shared by summit participants. Individuals interested in increasing collaborative success should adopt at least one of these action strategies and give it time to enhance communications. It is also advised to think about how the strategy can be evaluated. How do you know you are making a difference, or how can you tell that your efforts are actually improving communication? Approach communication differently, measure the outcome and expect better results.

References


