

# **PRACTICAL FARMERS OF IOWA ON-FARM RESEARCH PROGRAM**

Stefan Gailans, Senior Research Manager  
Practical Farmers of Iowa, Ames, IA

## **ABSTRACT**

Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) has been leading and conducting on-farm research since 1987. The organization has staff scientists to help design experiments based on questions from participating farmers. Farmers are cooperators in research and they often collaborate with other farmers on the same project. Ideas for projects are considered at the annual Cooperators' Meeting in December each year. Cooperators describe what was done on their farm, why they did it, and what they found. They also make plans for future projects based on previous results and new questions raised. Farmers are responsible for planting, tending to animals, and taking measurements throughout the trial, based on experimental design and protocol developed with PFI staff. Summaries of results are also published each year.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since 1987, the Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) Cooperators' Program has helped direct curious farmers to conduct successful on-farm experiments that answer their production questions and guide their future decision-making. This program is unique in that farmers have always been at the helm – they are the ones brainstorming projects, setting on-farm research priorities and gathering the data on their farms.

## **DESCRIPTION OF PROGRAM**

While PFI staff guide farmers through the process of setting up the on-farm trial, farmers are very much partners and leaders in the process. No prior research experience is necessary from the farmer, just their willingness to conduct the experiment. Most of the on-farm research trials take place on the farms of participating farmers. In addition, the Cooperators' Program research agenda is developed with the input of the farmers and the research is conducted by the same farmers.

In this program, the farmer-researchers are referred to and interacted with as cooperators because the first experiments in the program were done in cooperation with agricultural researchers, such as those from Iowa State University and USDA. Today, on-farm research trials are collaborative efforts between farmers and PFI staff scientists who guide the design of experiments based on questions posed by the participating farmers. On-farm research projects are also often collaborative endeavors among several farmers. So "cooperator" applies on many levels.

The farmer does not need a research or science-based background to participate. All that they require is an idea that they want to test on their farm and PFI's staff scientists help with the rest. That said, just like scientists, the farmers are making observations on their farm regularly through cropping season and they tend to make future decisions based on these observations and yield measurements. So many farmers function similar to scientists already. What the Cooperators' Program does is to

increase the ability of farmers to answer pressing farm questions using simple yet rigorous tools of scientific research.

Each year, farmers who have conducted on-farm research and those interested in conducting on-farm research and communicate this to PFI are invited to the annual Cooperators' Meeting. Held in December, this gathering connects on-farm researchers as a community where results and observations from on-farm research performed over the past year are shared. During the meeting, cooperators are encouraged to describe what they did, why they did it and what they found. Cooperators also generate ideas and make plans for future projects based on previous results and new questions. Before the onset of spring, cooperators and PFI staff mutually agree on project plans and commitments. When the time comes to conduct the trials, farmers are ultimately responsible for planting seeds, tending to animals and taking measurements throughout a trial.

Participating farmer cooperators will gain:

- Experience and data from useful, reliable research that helps one understand what works and what doesn't on their farm.
- A connection with a community of curious farmers to exchange ideas and experiences, which can expand knowledge of what's possible with on-farm research.
- The chance to become a leader who inspires improvements to agriculture.

If someone cannot participate, but would rather just see the results of past on-farm results, the results of our Cooperators' Program research provide relevant, unbiased and science-based information that farmers can trust about new practices. The summaries of 2021 research and previous years' results are available at <http://practicalfarmers.org/research> .

To learn more about the Cooperators' Program, visit [practicalfarmers.org/research](http://practicalfarmers.org/research). Have questions or want to get involved? Contact PFI through Stefan Gailans, senior research manager at (515) 232-5661 or email at [stefan.gailans@practicalfarmers.org](mailto:stefan.gailans@practicalfarmers.org) .