TOBACCO PRODUCTION PROGRAMING IN THE SUWANNEE RIVER VALLEY OF NORTH FLORIDA

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1920's, the Suwannee River Valley of North Florida has been known for producing premium quality tobacco. Over the years a Tobacco Extension Program has evolved which assists local producers with current production practices, governmental regulations, and industry demands. Objectives: To (1) increase knowledge of improved cultural and production techniques and (2) encourage producers to incorporate new tobacco cultivars and pesticide spray programs. Methods: The Tobacco Extension Program consisting of an annual tobacco production meeting, an on-farm trial, and the Georgia-Florida Tobacco Tour provided tobacco producers the opportunity to gain knowledge of the most current and researched production methods. The success of this Extension program was due to the long-term culmination of traditional classroom Extension trainings with on-farm demonstrations, field consultations, and small group learning experiences. Results: For the past three years, approximately fifty tobacco producers, farm managers and stakeholders from North Florida and South Georgia have attended the annual tobacco production events consistently. Each year, program evaluations demonstrated that producers increased their knowledge after attending meetings. Exit evaluations showed 87% of the attendees (n= 26 of 30) evaluated at annual tobacco production meetings showed an increase in knowledge of disease management and best management practices. At the conclusion of the Georgia Florida Tobacco Tour, 94% (n = 61 of 65) of attendees who completed exit evaluations reported an increase in knowledge of cultivar selection. Impacts: Adopting recommended cultivars have increased yield while reducing the amount of required pesticide applications. This has generated an additional $50.00 per acre in saved production cost and increased yields resulting in $55,000 in the Suwannee River Valley. Conclusions: It was observed that producers attending the tour were more likely to interact with presenters when compared to the traditional classroom meetings. By executing the objectives through program activities, the Extension team was able to contribute to the sustainability of tobacco in the region. Producers have been eager to provide personal feedback on the impact the programs have had on their operations and engage with the Extension team regularly when faced with production problems.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

80% of producers will increase knowledge of improved cultural and production techniques required to remain sustainable in an ever-changing industry. Knowledge gain will be measured by post meeting evaluations.

75% of producers will incorporate new tobacco cultivars and pesticide spray programs that will reduce disease pressure. Behavior change will be measured by post season evaluations and interviews.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

The Tobacco Extension Program provided tobacco producers the opportunity to gain knowledge of the most current and researched production methods. The success of this Extension Program was due to the long-term culmination of traditional classroom extension trainings with on-farm demonstrations, field consultations, and small group learning experiences.

RESULTS AND IMPACTS

At the conclusion of the preseason Extension Florida Tobacco Growers' Meeting & Working Luncheon, exit evaluations showed 87% of attendees (n= 26 of 30) that were evaluated annually showed an increase in knowledge of tobacco disease management and best management practices. At the conclusion of the Georgia Florida Tobacco Tour held during the growing season 94% (n=61 of 65) of attendees that completed exit evaluations annually reported an increase in knowledge of cultivar selection.

Producers have incorporated new cultivars that possess disease resistance in their production areas which have a history of disease. Adopting recommended cultivars have increased yield while reducing the amount of pesticide applications needed. This has generated an additional $50.00 per acre in saved production cost and increased yields resulting in $55,000 in the Suwannee River Valley.

By executing the named objectives through program activities, the Extension team was able to contribute to the sustainability of tobacco in the region. Producers have been eager to provide personal feedback on the impact the programs have had on their operations.

Each year qualitative and quantitative evaluations were used to determine the tobacco programs' significance and was used to determine topics for discussion at future meetings. Adoption and implementation are continually evaluated through producer farm visits, post-season evaluations, interviews and follow-up conversations. Knowledge gain was assessed with traditional exit evaluations using a Likert scale.