Farm Management

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The West Virginia IRM
(Integrated Resource Management)
Program

What is Integrated Resource Management (IRM)?
First let's look at the definition of the three words separately.

- Integrated - bring parts together, whole
- Resource - something for use, wealth, assets
- Management - to control, have charge of, direct
(Webster's NWD, 1990)

The idea is to always manage the entire business instead of focusing only on one enterprise or component of the business. IRM emphasizes management, looking at the whole (integrated) farm business and how to best utilize available resources. At the same time being aware of how farm business practices affect the on and off farm environmental relationships.

This approach is not new, in fact it is a good definition of what Farm Management should be. The focus of the program is on good stewardship principles with optimum production practices applied. Stewardship is [being] "placed in charge of a large estate; administrator, as of finances and property". (Webster's NWD, 1990) Good stewardship or management is doing what is right for the long term health of a farm business at the same time taking into account the affect to on and off farm environmental relationships. This approach addresses environmental concerns in a common sense manner.

The objective of the program is "to improve the management ability of the manager". By educating and encouraging the producer to manage all the available resources of the farm business to optimum, not necessarily maximum production or profitability. Optimum production is the "best or most favorable" level with regards to the available resources. These resources include all of the four major components of a business; management, finance, marketing and production. Management in itself is the ability to organize and control to an optimum, the other three areas. These four areas are like the four tires of a car, if one of them is deflated or not working to its best ability then the car doesn't move very well. The same is true for a farm business.

Management concepts that are addressed through the IRM program include; vision and goal setting, time management, strategic planning and the planning cycle, personnel management, resource (input) management, and holistic management. The bottom line is to find a way that will optimize production and profitability through the best utilization of available resources in-regards to the stated goals of the farmer while maintaining and/or improving environmental integrity.

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The program is producer "driven". The final decision is in the hands of the farmer as it very well should be. Extension and any other service (or support) organization (or individual) is in an advisory role only and is utilized at the discretion of the farmer.

The primary benefit to a producer is in improving the quality of life. To explain further, there are two major components that determine the quality of life one lives, time and money. Neither one nor both may be the most important to all people but they have a significant role to play. The objective of the IRM program, as stated earlier, is to improve the management ability of the manager. By doing this, the manager is able to manage the farm business more efficiently. By definition, efficient means "producing the desired result with a minimum of effort, expense or waste". (Webster's NWD, 1990) In other words, the best use of limiting resources to reach the desired goals of the manager. Money and time are both limiting resources, at least for most of us. By improving the management ability of the manager he/she becomes more efficient at optimizing limited resources, improving their quality of life. I know this is a somewhat simplistic view of a sometimes complicated arrangement but it is attainable.

The format for utilizing the IRM program in West Virginia is the formation of management groups or clubs. The management groups are made up of producers that share common interests. For example, they may all be raising beef cattle but it is not limited to this. The group agrees to meet on a continuous basis, usually once a month to share ideas, experiences and to provide a forum for continuing education. Common concerns and topics of interests are presented to the group as educational programs.

Each individual member may also form a personal advisory team made up of industry support, supply and service organizations. This team may include such people as an extension agent, vet, SCS and ASCS personnel, banker, accountant, lawyer, nutritionist and so on. These "advisors" are utilized at the discretion of the producer for addressing farm specific concerns.

The following flow chart may help in describing the format of the program. The option exists for a farmer to be part of a management group but not have an advisory team. The same is also true to have an advisory team without being a member of a management group. The decision is up to the farmer. We believe the best use of the program will be to have both.

Getting started is a simple process. First, decide what it is that you want from this program or what you want to accomplish by setting your own business and personal goals. Second, contact your local county extension agent or SCS or ASCS person to determine what level of interest exists in your area for IRM. This person may be able to direct you to an existing management group or to people also wanting to get started with similar interests. Third, join or form a management group. This is a great way to provide continuing education and an environment for sharing ideas and experiences. Fourth, determine who will be on your advisory team and get them organized in a way that will service your needs. Finally, set out to make the IRM program a great learning experience to meet your needs. You sure don't need another "chore" to do, so enjoy it and make it a worth while endeavor that will be beneficial to you and your fellow farmers.

Farming has never been an easy business. It has seen great technological changes over the years and will undoubtedly see many more in the future. We live in an ever changing world with limited resources. The American farmer has set the world standard for production agriculture by combining many different resources into a workable plan. No business has or will survive without a continuing education program that not only addresses current issues but prepares its members for the future. The IRM program offers such a continuing education program and can benefit those that are willing to get involved.