

## **Association for Temperate Agroforestry 2009 AFTA members' opinion survey report - summary**

To help guide the AFTA's strategic planning process and to assist the Board of Directors identify areas for improvement, AFTA launched a survey in September-November 2009. The survey provides information to the Board of Directors related to AFTA's current activities, future directions and membership needs. The Board believes that there are many opportunities for AFTA to become a stronger organization. The survey questions asked for members' input about what they expect and would like to see from their AFTA membership.

All current and past members were invited to participate in the confidential, online survey. Fifty seven responses were received and analyzed. A summary of the results are presented below.

### **A. AFTA membership check:**

Currently, 81% of the 57 respondents are active AFTA members. Out of the active members (41 responses), 14% have been members for less than 1 year, 39% for 1-4 years, 27% for 5-10 years and 20% for more than 10 years. Eighty-three percent of active members have regular membership, 15% have student membership and 2% are sustaining contributors.

Only 32% of the members with active paid membership are actively involved in AFTA (volunteer their time). They are involved as present or past board or committee members, attended or presented at the conference(s), participated with articles for the Temperate Agroforester, or advocate the advance of agroforestry. The other 68% don't consider themselves active participants in AFTA because of lack of time or opportunity but some of them are willing to start volunteering some of their time in AFTA.

To be able to provide better value to the membership of AFTA members, the survey asked respondents to rate a number of membership benefits on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important). According to the survey results, respondents are largely interested in: updated news in the agroforestry field (average rating 4.45), contacts and networking opportunities (4.33), professional development (4.18), and tools and resources that AFTA could provide (4.12). Members also value technical support and/or advice (3.68), discounts to books and magazines (3.23), and discounts to conference participation (3.18). Members are less interested in employment opportunities as a benefit of their AFTA membership (2.77).

About half of respondents consider their membership in AFTA very valuable (12% excellent and 37% good) while the other half are not extremely satisfied (40% average, 8% fair and 3% poor). The average rating was 3.5 on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5(excellent).

The comments provided by respondents showed the Biennial conferences as a part of the value of the membership and the fact that belonging to AFTA provides opportunities of developing contacts and sharing ideas. Outdated items on the web, lack of a printed journal and lack of interaction among members were mentioned as disappointments.

## **B. The role of AFTA**

The second set of questions inquired about the role that AFTA should have in better accomplishing its mission.

In an open ended question, the AFTA members who responded to the survey considered that AFTA should help promote agroforestry, should facilitate networking and be a source of information on agroforestry topics, and a source of professional development for members. More detail is presented below:

- **Promotion of agroforestry; agroforestry advocate**
  - Promote agroforestry to producers, scientists, agencies and policy makers. Each potential user group has concerns, questions and needs specific to not only the individuals but to the larger group as a whole. (E.g. Work with federal and state organizations to use agroforestry as a mitigation option for conservation concerns/problems.) Highlight working agroforestry models which address specific needs or issues. Engage with policy makers, federal agency administrators, non-profits, professional groups, etc. and work with these organizations to ensure that agroforestry is considered in state/provincial and federal programs, legislation and policy statements and interagency agreements.
  - Promotion vehicles: conferences, networking, discussion groups, program/policy forums.
- **Networking and source of information**
  - Disseminate: research, economic analyses and management information. Communicate information relating to practical field programs & education.
  - Provide networking opportunities for people interested in temperate agroforestry.
  - Disseminate information on agroforestry topics to membership and the public.
  - Provide a forum for exchange and advancement of agroforestry science and technologies.
- **Professional development for members**
  - Provide professional improvement activities and opportunity for scholarship in agroforestry.
  - Professional development and capacity development - research publication, teaching and technical support network.

In addition to the open ended question, the respondents ranked the importance of a list of potential activities and services they would like AFTA to engage in. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 was the least important and 5 the most important. The average of ratings for each of the activities and services are provided below:

### **Activities:**

- Improve contact with producer groups and resource professionals (**3.89**)
- Partner with other agencies at biennial conferences to broaden attendance base (**3.77**)
- Create interaction with sustainable agriculture (**3.67**)
- Create AFTA subcommittees to address current issues/opportunities (e.g. local food movement) (**3.48**)
- Lobby ability, suggest policy directions (in both Canada and the US) (**3.48**)

### **Services:**

- Update the design and content of AFTA website, develop website as a clearing house for information (**3.98**)

- Collect case studies and make them available for field tours, news articles, etc. **(3.81)**
- Provide a volunteer agroforestry expertise list available for questions **(3.63)**
- Revisit and improve content and appearance of the Temperate Agroforester newsletter **(3.48)**
- Develop AFTA presentation materials for members (e.g. posters, banners, flyers, factsheets) **(2.64)**

To help the Board better assess AFTA's role, and formulate a strategy, respondents were asked to identify AFTA's greatest strengths and weaknesses.

Uniqueness (only organization of its type; the only advocator of temperate agroforestry), small size, versatility and diversity, AFTA's members (key members with strong interest and expertise in the field; forward thinking members), collaboration (ability to bring agroforestry practitioners and researchers together; linking agroforestry programs in Canada and USA), networking among agroforestry practitioners and researchers, synergies among stakeholders in Agroforestry, the biennial conference and the newsletter were mentioned among the greatest **strengths** of AFTA.

**Weaknesses** mentioned include low visibility at the top level (not visible to decision makers; not well publicized), low membership, lack of permanent secretariat, lack of a clear direction at the moment, lack of communication- especially with other like-minded or related groups, and under-utilized network. Other respondents considered that AFTA has not used the potential of its members to the extent that it could and that communication with members could be improved.

Respondents also provided suggestions on how AFTA can be more active in promoting Agroforestry:

- Lobby activity -e.g. have a presence and voice in policy decisions and activities where agroforestry can make a contribution to society; lobby for tax incentives (e.g. property tax rebates for keeping land as productive open space); development of info about regional markets for forestry products; get involved in Farm Bill development; engage with policy makers; partner with other organizations.
- Broaden the audience - connect with the local food movement, and urban and community forestry groups; work with agronomy and forestry departments at land grant universities to create outstanding classes on agroforestry.
- Communicate more effectively with sustainable agriculture and forestry groups
- Become more visible and attract more people who are working or who have an interest in agroforestry e.g. participate in local food, permaculture, and sustainable agriculture conferences.
- Organize local chapters
- Increase outreach e.g. promote agroforestry as an essential element of climate change initiatives; promote agroforestry degree programs as sustainable agriculture/forestry; increase geographical coverage of focus, and collect case studies from different regions; provide more training materials and demonstrations to natural resources professionals and agencies working with landowners; encourage the creation of a degree in agroforestry in regions with differing climates, vegetation types and topographies.
- Improve AFTA's publications

Temperate Agroforester, the AFTA's publication can provide information on:

- Funding sources, strategic information

- Ongoing research on temperate agroforestry
- Applied research, case studies
- Database for small farmers and fellow agroforesters
- Contact information for other groups

### **C. AFTA Website**

The third set of questions dealt with the AFTA website. Respondents' input and suggestions will help improve the website.

Nine percent of respondents visit the website weekly, 18% monthly, more than half (53%) a few times a year and 20% even less.

Information on the website that respondents consider useful include: resources, what's new, AFTA publications, newslines, quarterly newsletter, newsletter archive, organizational news, meeting minutes, description of agroforestry and membership benefits, books, AFTA conferences information, members contact information, technical information, links to other sources, events to come, information about current research, links to research or researchers, agroforestry practice.

Some respondents considered that the website needs updating (e.g. the policy briefs). Duplication of information that can be found on the National Agroforestry Center website and enterprises and services are considered least useful by other respondents. The activities database is potentially very useful, but was found to be cumbersome and difficult to use.

When asked to rank on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being the least important and 5 being the most important) the changes that can be done to improve the AFTA website, the most important activity is considered Catalogue of demonstration sites by region (4.51), followed by Include a place where people can submit new thoughts (3.33). Respondents didn't consider linking to local food databases (2.68), Videos (2.67), or a history of AFTA and its national and international context (2.31) as priority items.

The AFTA board would like to thank the membership for taking the time to provide feedback. The members' comments and recommendations are a valuable resource for improving AFTA's offerings and becoming a stronger organization.