Engaging Growers and Agricultural Service Providers in a Diverse Advisory Panel on Organic High Tunnel Research

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Expert input from the end users of research provides valuable information that engages and empowers project stakeholders and steers future research in directions informed by those end users. These are primary functions of advisory panels, which are important components of a multi-institution, interdisciplinary research study of organic vegetable production in high tunnels in the Southeastern U.S. The advisory panel also plays an active role in project decision-making and in identifying challenges to organic high tunnel production distinctive to the Southeastern U.S. Recommendations that emerge from the advisory panel can be particularly important in assessing the potential viability of organic high tunnel production systems in this region. The members of the advisory panel include growers and agricultural industry professionals, such as representatives from the United States Department of Agriculture and University of Florida Cooperative Extension.

We conducted three advisory panel meetings in March 2019, 2020, and 2021. Project researchers and advisory panel members interacted during a facilitated semi-structured discussion. Researchers presented their findings from the previous year and pose questions to the panel members based on their research objectives. Panel members then provided recommendations for changes in the current research project, which may include changes in focus, protocol and nature of data collected. The panel is also charged with helping craft future research.

The content of the discussion varied in the three advisory panel meetings held, although there were consistently identified areas of focus for future research. Pest and disease management was a common theme in panel discussions, likely due to the warmer climate in the south that lends itself to considerable pest and disease pressure. Panel members expressed interest in more research about temperature control during periods of high temperature. Crop rotation, including type of crop and timing, was another focus area repeated in the advisory panel meetings. Finally, nutrient management remained an important area of discussion throughout the meetings. Growers and agricultural service providers that served on the panel agreed these are the critical areas of focus for future efforts investigating organic high tunnel production systems in the Southeastern U.S.