

Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program: 2010 Progress Report and Recommendations

Land Stewardship Project
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BFRDP Background

At the urging and with the support of sustainable agriculture organizations, Congress established the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) in the 2002 Farm Bill and then, in the 2008 Farm Bill, provided it with \$75 million in mandatory funding for Fiscal Years 2009-2012. Administered by the USDA's National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA), the program is now in its third year of operation. Demand for the program has been extremely strong as communities respond to the needs of thousands of new agricultural producers looking to enter farming or ranching.

We applaud the responsiveness and dedication of USDA and NIFA personnel in improving and strengthening the BFRDP through the 2010 Request For Application (RFA). Numerous recommendations stemming from the analysis¹ of the 2009 program by stakeholders that are part of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition were incorporated in the 2010 RFA and related processes, which have resulted in changes that better reflect the intent of Congress. These changes included:

- A requirement to clearly identify project partners in the proposed management plan and budget;
- A stipulation that only applications with at least 25 percent of the project budget allocated to community based or non-governmental organizations will receive the priority status required by law;
- Creation of a new "development grant" category;
- Clearer, more specific language related to the minimum 25 percent of funds set-aside for projects targeted to limited resource, socially disadvantaged and immigrant farmers; and
- The addition of multi-year experience in successfully training new farmers as one of the project evaluation criteria.

While significant progress was made, additional analysis and feedback from 2010 of BFRDP applicants demonstrates that challenges continue to exist in the program's delivery, focus and administration. Addressing remaining obstacles for community-based organizations (CBO) to successfully access the program will further improve program effectiveness and increases successful new farm startups across America. Recommendations for further improvements are included at the end of this report.

¹ "Analysis and Recommendations for the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program" available at <http://sustainableagriculture.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/NSAC-2009-BFRDP-Analysis-and-Recommendations.pdf>.

2010 BFRDP Review

On February 5, 2010, NIFA released the 2010 BFRDP RFA. Applications were accepted for 60 days, with a deadline set for April 6, 2010. Following the review process, grant awardees were notified in late August and the announcement of funding and awardees was issued by USDA Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan on October 18, 2010 on a farm in Longmont, Colorado.

To better understand the BFRDP grant process and outcomes, the Land Stewardship Project has conducted a review of the 2010 program results. Our analysis is consistent and similar in scope to a review done in 2009. The analysis was conducted by a study of program data, review of grant abstracts, and telephone interviews with all 40 principal investigators.

Program aspects we evaluated include:

- grant distribution;
- the role of partners and collaborators, especially regarding sub-grantee status;
- regional distribution of funded projects;
- the type, scale, and duration of funded projects;
- the focus and usage of the 25 percent set-aside for socially disadvantaged producers within the program;
- challenges that grant recipients faced, either programmatic or administrative; and
- noticeable trends or consistencies.

In addition to the review of these factors, special attention was paid to the usage and distribution of the program across two grantee groups – CBO/nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and universities/colleges/other academic institutions. The analysis of these two grantee groups was done in order to better understand how the priority² established in statute was interpreted and the extent to which it was addressed.

In conducting this review, we aspired to have the most accurate and instructive assessment possible. We welcome additional insight or analysis from awardees, program administrators, or outside observers to help us arrive at the clearest picture of how the BFRDP is working and can work even better in the future.

Quantitative Analysis

According to the NIFA National Program Leader, 117 applications were submitted in response to the 2010 RFA, with a total funding request of nearly \$65.1 million.

Of those 117 submitted, 40 projects were awarded funding for a total of \$18,140,803.

Of the 40 grant projects funded:

² “PRIORITY — In making grants under this subsection, the secretary shall give priority to partnerships and collaborations that are led by or include non-governmental and community-based organizations with expertise in new agricultural producer training and outreach.”

- 25 (62.5 percent) were awarded to CBOs /NGOs.
- 15 (37.5 percent) were awarded to universities/colleges and/or academic institutions.

(See Appendix 1 for a graphic comparison of the two types of categories funded.)

Further review of the second grantee grouping found that 11 1862 land grant universities, one tribal college, one 1890 land grant institution, one technical college, and one private university received grants in 2010.

Of the \$18,140,803 in awarded grants:

- \$9,076,176 (50 percent) in grants were to projects led by CBOs and NGOs.
- \$9,064,627 (50 percent) in grants were to projects led by universities/colleges or other academic institutions.

(See Appendix 2 for a graphic comparison of how grant totals for the two groups compare.)

Of the 40 grants, 34 were standard grants and 6 were development grants, a new award category added in 2010. No educational or clearinghouse grants were awarded. Clearinghouse grants were not offered in the 2010 RFA, and educational grants were offered but none were funded.

Overall, 30 grants were 3-year projects, 7 were 2-year projects, and 3 were 1-year projects. Development grants were all funded as 1- or 2-year projects.

(See Appendix 3 for details on grant types and duration.)

In terms of the grant size distribution, a large number of projects fell in the top two ranges of funding percentiles. Nineteen of the grant projects (over 76 percent of the funding) were awarded to grants greater than \$500,000. Of the 19 largest grants, 9 were awarded to CBO/NGOs and 11 to university/college/academic institutions.

(See Table 1 below.)

Table 1

Grant size	Number of grants	Total funding per range	Percent of total funding	CBO/NGO.	Academic
Up to \$100,000	4	\$267,829	1.5	4	0
\$100-\$200,000	7	\$973,508	5.4	5	2
\$200-\$300,000	2	\$499,068	2.8	2	0
\$300-\$400,000	5	\$1,761,402	9.7	4	1
\$400-\$500,000	2	\$838,177	4.6	1	1
\$500-\$600,000	5	\$2,828,909	15.6	5	0
\$600-\$750,000	15	\$10,971,910	60.5	4	11

Partnerships or Collaboration

Partnerships and collaborations are an important part of the program and therefore how they are working in practice is critical to understand. Exactly partnership relationships and roles are outlined is up to applicants, but considering that the statute specifically includes a priority for partnerships led by or including CBOs/NGOs, some guidelines and parameters are required.

The 2010 RFA made substantial improvements in providing direction to applicants as to what constitutes a partnership or collaboration. This is especially important for those projects not “led by” CBO/NGOs but that strive to meet the BFRDP “priority” in grantmaking. Priority guidance provided on pages 3-4 of the 2010 BFRDP RFA states:

*As required by the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-246), priority will continue to be given to partnerships and collaborations that are led by or include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) with expertise in beginning agricultural producer training and outreach. Partnerships should be clearly identified in the abstract, management plans, supporting letters and reflected in the budget. **Applications with a minimum of 25% of the budget allocated to partner organizations will be given priority consideration for funding.***

Sub-Grantees

Sub-grantees are perhaps the most concrete measure in ascertaining a genuine partnership or collaboration. Overall, 25 grant projects included sub-grantees, 12 did not, 3 said they have sub-

grantees but didn't list them in the abstract or have them clearly identified. Further analysis of the two grant groups is detailed in Table 2 below.

Table 2

	CBO/NGO	Academic	Total
Included sub-grantee	15	10	25
No sub-grantee	9	3	12
Unspecified*	1	2	3
Total	25	15	40

Note: Unspecified are projects that reported to have sub-grantees but didn't list them in the abstract or have them clearly identified.

Nearly all projects provided some examples of partners or collaborators, but understanding the degree or levels of participation for those not specified as sub-grantees was difficult to determine. Despite definitions provided in the RFA,³ during interviews awardees often used the terms partner or collaborator interchangeably, and reviewing abstracts provided no additional help. The offering of a sub-grant was the clearest way to identify a partnership or collaboration. In this overview, we do not attempt to ascertain the degree of project engagement of partners or collaborators who are sub-grantees, but rather just recognize that it exists. Other documentation such as budgetary information or letters of intent would be necessary to provide additional insight into the functioning of these relationships.

Socially Disadvantaged, Limited Resource, Immigrant and Refugee Farmers & Ranchers

In the authorizing language for the BFRDP, direction is provided that a 25 percent set-aside of funding shall be provided for limited resource and socially disadvantaged farmers. As a constituency within agriculture that is growing and has faced structural discrimination, this guidance was included to ensure strong program participation by diverse stakeholders, especially farmers from communities of color, Native American, and immigrant/refugee communities.

In reviewing the funded projects, we found that 24⁴ projects targeted socially disadvantaged communities (SDA) in some form and to some degree. Through telephone interviews we learned that at least 7 grants (which were awarded a total of \$3,358,913, which comprised 18.52 percent

³ 2010 BFRDP RFA. Part VIII – OTHER INFORMATION. E. Definition Page 35 and 36.

“Partnership” means a relationship involving close cooperation between parties having specified and joint rights and responsibilities in the management of the project.

“Collaborator” means the person or an organization that cooperates with the applicant in the conduct of the project but is not immediately connected to the management of the project.

⁴ In checking with the national program leader we are informed that 28 grant projects indicated some attention to the set-aside populations. It is perhaps the case that the difference reflects the fact that it is a minor part of some projects and not captured in telephone interviews.

of awarded funds) focused 100 percent of their efforts within this constituency. Other projects ranged more widely in terms of focus on SDA, limited resource, immigrant/refugee producers.

Regional Distribution of Awarded Projects

Congress intended the BFRDP to be offered and awarded in all regions of the country. Geographically, the South had the lowest number of awarded projects and grant funding in 2009, but the greatest number of awarded projects and grant funding in 2010, a turnaround for which the program leader’s outreach efforts deserve a good deal of credit. The Midwest and West had comparable program usage and the Northeast ended up with just under \$3 million in funding for the region.

(See Table 3 and Appendix 4 for an additional breakdown of how grants were awarded by region.)

Table 3

Region	Number of grant projects	Funding allocated	Percent of grants	Percent of funding
South	12	\$6,371,510	35.1 %	30 %
Midwest	11	\$4,481,096	24.7 %	27 %
West	11	\$4,330,978	23.9 %	27.5 %
Northeast	6	\$2,957,219	16.3 %	15.5 %
Total	40	\$18,140,803	100%	100%

In terms of grants awarded to CBOs or universities/land grants, the regions saw relatively equitable use of the program, except for the West where universities/colleges and academic institutions secured 3 times as much funding as did CBOs/NGOs in the region.

(See Appendix 5 for details on the regional comparison by grant groups)]

Service Area

The diversity of grants projects and variable service areas in terms of size and focus made any quantification of this aspect impractical. Numerous awarded projects focused in a specific county or counties or regions of states. Other grant projects were specific to a metropolitan area or Native American communities, while a handful were multi-state in reach.

Summary

The 2010 BFRDP outcomes and processes were enhanced over that of the 2009 granting period. Learning from year one of operation and incorporating stakeholders’ input resulted in an RFA that:

- Provided applicants with improved guidance.
- Ensured better program distribution.

These improvements resulted in the better fulfillment of the program priority to fund projects led by or with strong participation from CBOs/NGOs. In our view, this also led to the funding of stronger, more relevant projects. The Evaluation Criteria was also improved in 2010. In general, awardees reported a clearer, more straightforward 2010 RFA compared to the previous year.

There was a 37 percent increase in the number of grant awards in 2010 relative to 2009. There was also a better distribution of grant projects and funding across CBOs/NGOs and the university/college/ academic institution groupings. In 2010, standard grants continued to be the most dominant grant type awarded and submitted by applicants, although a small number of development grants (with modest funding) were awarded in 2010.

In 2010, there were an increased number of awarded grants with sub-grantees. Guidance provided by the RFA led to more applicants structuring partnerships and collaborations in projects. To better achieve the statutory priority, two approaches were used—the project must be: 1) led by a CBO/NGO, or 2) include sub-grantees that met the criteria provided on pages 3-4 of the 2010 RFA, quoted above.

Evaluating regional distribution of awarded projects showed some changing trends compared with 2009, but overall regional participation was relatively equitable, except for the West, where CBOs received significantly fewer grants and much less funding compared to universities/colleges/other academic institutions. In subsequent years, it may be important to look comprehensively at the regional distribution over a 3- or 4-year period of grantmaking. This would provide a better picture of the regional distribution of grants across the country, and help trigger any changes in program operation needed to ensure effective usage.

Service reach by awarded projects related to size and scope varied significantly and was difficult to quantify. Improvements were made to the socially disadvantaged set-aside component outlined in the 2010 RFA. Over half of all projects assisted socially disadvantaged producers or limited resource producers in some form and to some degree. Yet, understanding the degree of focus in grant projects with socially disadvantaged communities in some cases was unclear. In interviews with awardees, we found 7 projects that dedicated 100 percent of their efforts to assisting socially disadvantaged, limited resource, or immigrant/refugee producers. In other funded projects, which stated they were working with socially disadvantaged communities, the engagement with those populations was sometimes very broad or undefined.

While applicants' time varied in creating proposals, on average they spent 105 hours on developing, writing and submitting applications. On the high end of the spectrum, some applicants dedicated over 200 hours on proposals; on the low end it was 50 hours. Many applicants noted grants.gov as a significant impediment to a more efficient use of time preparing proposals. A major concern voiced by some awardees was ongoing administrative demands that took extra time, some of which they viewed as unnecessary.

Recommendations

This review, coupled with our interaction with USDA personnel, Congressional leaders, and stakeholders working to assist beginning farmers, informs the recommendations below.

With a clear aim to strengthen and ensure the resilience of the program in 2011 and beyond, we look forward to engaging and working with all parties invested in supporting new farmers and ranchers hoping to start their own agricultural enterprises.

Recommendations are broken out by two themes: *programmatic* and *administrative*.

Programmatic:

1. Achieve CBO and NGO statutory priority by awarding 65 percent of BFRDP grants to principal investigators who are CBOs or NGOs (roughly achieved in 2010), and by awarding 65 percent of BFRDP funding to CBOS or NGOs. Community-based beginning farmer and rancher programs are very effective in delivering beginning farmer/rancher education, training, and support.
2. Continue the use of standard grant as the primary grant type.
3. Maintain the partnerships and collaboration guidance as established under PART V-APPLICATION REVIEW REQUIREMENTS: B. Evaluation Criteria.
4. Encourage applicants to specify the numbers of beginning farmers and ranchers to be assisted.
5. Enhance the Target Audience guidance so that applicants desiring to be considered within the socially disadvantaged set-aside context indicate the degree in which their project focuses on those populations. It should be understood to be considered for this set-aside category not less than 75 percent of efforts must focus on socially disadvantaged, limited resource or immigrant/refugee producers. In addition, instruction should be provided to review panel members in how to appropriately consider applicants working with those populations in order to maintain the integrity of the set-aside.

Administrative:

1. Provide more advance warning and better notification and outreach regarding when an RFA will be posted.
2. Improve grants.gov and/or the application process — it is hard to follow and is a major impediment to many potential applicants as well as a major cost of time and resources to organizations that have applied.
3. Limit the demands made by NIFA administrators on grantees following the awarding of the grants and the announcement of grantees. While some follow-up is necessary, these demands have varied widely among grantees and have created significant burdens for community-based organizations in terms of additional time and resources spent. A clearer step-by-step process as well as clear upfront expectations would be helpful.
4. Adjust matching requirements in such a way that they facilitate project success, rather than exclude certain potential project participants. Matching requirements are a major impediment to community-based organizations.

5. Denote in the project abstracts if a project was awarded through the 25 percent SDA set-aside.
6. Continue webinars, which grantees considered helpful.
7. Require awardees list partners, collaborators, and sub-grantees (including those supporters who provide in-kind contributions) in a clear fashion in the abstract under “APPROACH”. If practical, reformat the CRIS template to include a relevant field that could capture this information.

The **Land Stewardship Project (LSP)** is a farm and rural membership organization based in Minnesota with the mission of fostering an ethic of stewardship of the land and organizing for a more sustainable agriculture and sustainable communities. LSP’s three major action programs are Policy and Organizing, Farm Beginnings and Community-Based Food Systems. If you have questions or suggestions, contact us at 612-722-6377.