

Title:	Cultivating the Next Crop of Northeast Organic Farmers from Apprenticeship to Independence		
Sponsoring Agency	NIFA	Project Status	COMPLETE
Funding Source	Non Formula	Reporting Frequency	Annual
Accession No.	225715	Grants.gov No.	GRANT10769660
Project No.	NYW-2011-00974	Proposal No.	2011-00974
Project Start Date	08/15/2011	Project End Date	08/14/2014
Reporting Period Start Date	08/15/2011	Reporting Period End Date	08/14/2014
Submitted By	Anne Ruffin	Date Submitted to NIFA	10/02/2014

Program Code: BFRDP

Program Name: Beginning Farmer and Rancher

Project Director

Anne Ruffin
585-270-5278
director@nofany.org

Recipient Organization

NORTHEAST ORGANIC FARMING ASSOCIATION
591 LANSING ROAD
Fultonville, NY 120722628
DUNS No. 135200124

Performing Department

{NO DATA ENTERED}

Co-Project Directors

{NO DATA ENTERED}

Departments

{NO DATA ENTERED}

Non-Technical Summary

The "Cultivating the Next Crop of Organic Farmers" BFRDP Standard Project will support the next cadre of beginning farmers in the Northeast by strengthening the support they receive from seven Northeast organic and sustainable farming organizations. Our long-term goal is to increase the mentoring, apprenticeship, and shared learning opportunities to organic and sustainable beginning farmers in every Northeast state. Specific project objectives and methods in support of this goal include: (1) Providing a diverse, supportive, and cohesive formal apprenticeship program and resources to beginning farmers in each Northeast state; (2) Implementing pilot Journeyperson programs in each Northeast state to better serve beginning farmers in the startup and re-strategizing phases; (3) Supporting beginning farmers who have begun farming independently through a formal mentoring program; and (4) Delivering comprehensive shared learning opportunities to beginning farmers through on-farm workshops and winter conferences. Additional methods will include web-based resource development including apprenticeship and mentoring matchmaking tools, webinars, regional meetings, capacity-building, and resource sharing. In doing so, project partners will collaboratively build a successful generation of Northeast farmers.

Accomplishments

Major goals of the project

Our long-term goal of this project is to better serve the six stages of beginning farmer development by increasing and improving apprenticeship, journeyperson, mentoring, and shared learning opportunities to organic beginning farmers in every Northeast state. As a result of this project, we will reach over 1576 beginning farmers, up to 340 farmer-mentors, support the creation of at least 105 new farm enterprises (2 Journeypeople and 3 start-ups/state/yr), and strengthen the support for beginning farmers so they stay, purchase land, and become active participants in sustaining vibrant NE agricultural economies. The objectives and outcomes that move us towards our long-term goal include: Objective 1: Support NE prospective farmers at the recruit, explorer, and planner stages by providing a complete and supportive formal apprenticeship program. Outcomes: Each NE partner organic organization offers a formal apprenticeship program that matches prospective farmers with established farmers looking for apprentices to train as the next generation of farmers; online apprentice-to-farmer match-making; apprentice social-networking opportunities; learning tools to support apprentices and on-farm mentors; coordination of apprenticeship support services; increased understanding of the legal requirements of on-farm apprenticing; and mentor workshops on effective on-farm education. Objective 2: Develop a pilot Journeyperson program in in each NE state for organic beginning farmers in the startup or re-strategizing phases. Outcomes: MOFGA developed the effective Journeyperson (JP) program to fill the education gap between apprentice and independent farmer, and to provide resources, opportunities, and skill development for new farmers who have achieved the core competencies needed to progress to the start-up level. Project partners will gain knowledge, tools, and training needed to implement pilot JP programs in each state

beginning in YR 1 with 2 farmers per state, reaching 36 farmers by the end of the BFRDP. Objective 3: Support beginning farmers in the start-up and re-strategizer stages through farmer-to-farmer mentoring. Outcomes: Each NE state offers formal mentoring programs to support beginning farmers during their first years of farming by linking them with expert mentor farmers. Program development will include mentor matching; annual evaluations; and workshops on effective mentoring. Because the JP program will have limited funds during the pilot stage, this mentoring initiative will support a larger cadre (35/yr for a total of 70 mentees) of start-up and re-strategizing farmers as they begin their own enterprises. Mentors trained will be candidates for supporting future JPs as the programs grow. Objective 4: Create shared learning opportunities for prospective and beginning farmers through annual winter conference workshops and on-farm skills workshops. Outcomes: Each NE state partner delivers targeted training to prospective and beginning farmers on practical, technical, marketing, land access, and business skills through on-farm workshops, winter conferences, and online resources.

What was accomplished under these goals?

From 2011-2014, seven Northeast organic farming organizations (Northeast Organic Farming Associations of Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, New Hampshire, and Vermont; and Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association) collaborated to address training and support gaps that are holding back a new generation of farmers from successfully starting and maintaining organic or sustainable farm businesses in the Northeast. At least 3,702 aspiring, new, and advanced-beginner farmers and at least 544 experienced farmers participated in farming education and support programs, resulting in a strong and well-connected group of beginning farmers who can confidently continue on their path toward long-term farming success. The project generated best practices, new resources and documents, and processes for training and supporting beginning farmers. The Northeast is an even better region to learn to farm and to establish or take over farms that are healthy for the environment, enriching to the community, and viable for the farmer.

Objective 1: Support Northeast prospective farmers at the recruit, explorer, and planner stages by providing a complete and supportive formal apprenticeship program.

Each organization created or improved a match-making directory for potential on-farm apprentice-like employees and the farms who host on-farm worker-learners, for a total of 6 online databases or directories and 1 paper-based matchmaking process. Information about labor laws and how to provide high-quality education to on-farm worker-learners was provided through annual in-person trainings (15 workshops), one-on-one communication, and through published information available to the general public.

423 beginning farmers engaged in training through apprenticeship-like arrangements on 257 hosting farms. It is not possible to know the conversion rate from directory user to successful match, or from successful match to change in knowledge or condition among users of these directories. However, surveyed beginning farmers confirmed that on-farm training programs are the important first step for an organic farmer's career. Experienced farmers confirmed that they rely on plain-language information and in-person education from our organizations in order to provide high-quality education to on-farm trainees. Aspiring farmers encounter more and improved opportunities to receive career-focused agricultural training while gaining hands-on experience in the field.

Objective 2: Develop a pilot Journeyperson program in in each Northeast state for organic beginning farmers in the startup or re-strategizing phases.

126 newly-starting farms entered the Journeyperson Program in the state where they farm. Each participating new farm (sometimes represented by more than one beginning farmer) engaged in one-on-one mentorship with an experienced farmer of their selection; 125 mentors were involved in the program. All 126 farms in the program improved their business skills and engaged in education to increase their knowledge of production. Of the 80 farmers who have already completed or exited the program,* 68 (85%) continue to farm with changed in knowledge, condition and behavior, that they are more prepared in the areas of farm production, marketing and business skills.

Each Northeast organization learned ways to best assist new farmers in this stage of their career. These new farmers rely on individual support from the sponsoring organization, plus a dedicated and proactive experienced farmer to answer technical questions. We observed that a mentor in their local community is best, because that mentor experiences the same climate challenges, the same marketing pressures, and can point out local resources of value to the new farmer. Advanced-beginner or highly specialized skills and business training are not always available or accessible to Journeyperson Program farmers, though they have the financial support to pay for and attend trainings. Thus, several organizations convened daylong trainings that provided education and peer-to-peer networking for the Journeyperson farmers. Journeyperson farmers attended conferences and field days open to the general community, but often struggled to find the time to fit in these activities. Consultations with experts, either at the farm of the expert or at the Journeyperson's farm, emerged as a favorite way for Journeyperson farmers to receive needed education. A roster of organic farming experts and agriculturally-minded legal/business consultants would be of high value to beginning farmers, even those without the additional financial support of the Journeyperson Program.

* The program supports farmers for two years, so while grant activities have ended, each organization continues to support the remaining 46 farmers who have yet to finish two years of training and mentorship.

Objective 3: Support beginning farmers in the start-up and re-strategizer stages through farmer-to-farmer mentoring.

Six organizations created a process by which beginning farmers could find an experienced farmer to be a technical advisor

during the beginner's first years of farming on their own. This process begins with each type of farmer posting their information to a directory, as with the apprenticeship program, but the mentorship program in each state has built-in feedback and data collection steps to ensure that service providers are aware of each partnership. Identifying information about potential mentors is hidden from the beginning farmers until they have decided to contact certain mentors. At that point, the service provider provides contact information to the beginning farmer, while notifying the experienced farmer of a potential match. 97% of 167 mentor farmers and 61% of 264 beginning farmers who enrolled in the program were paired up for a total of 162 matches. Mentors and beginning farmers are provided with best practices documentation and a template mentorship agreement to guide their conversations about creating a formalized mentorship relationship. Prior to this type of guidance, mentorship relationships had a tendency to fail due to a lack of communication. Beginners and experienced farmers are more satisfied with the mentorship experience when they have a clear understanding of frequency of communication, of the type of guidance to be given, and of the duration of the mentorship. There is a high demand among newly independent farmers for a reliable and constant guide, and the focused approach created in each state provides a process for more farmers to engage in mentorship, ensuring that new farms continue on a path toward success.

Objective 4: Create shared learning opportunities for prospective and beginning farmers through annual winter conference workshops and on-farm skills workshops.

Each Northeast state provided on-farm skills workshops each year, for a total of 214 events (40 in year 1, 86 in year 2, and 88 in year 3) with an attendance of 2097 farmers with 10 or fewer years' experience (attendance reflects attendance in years 2 and 3 due to inconsistent data collection in year 1). Ninety percent (90% or 732 out of 815 evaluations) of on-farm workshop attendees increased their knowledge of farming production, marketing, or business practices due to these events.

21 annual organic farming conferences held in each state provided specific classroom learning opportunities identified for beginning farmers. 894 beginning farmers received scholarships to attend these conferences, gaining knowledge during 73% of the workshops attended. "Interactions with farmers of a different experience level," "Interactions with farmers of the same experience level (peers)," "Interactions with NOFA staff and service providers," and "Visiting the trade show/vendor area" were top ways (aside from workshop attendance) that conferences impacted future successes.

What opportunities for training and professional development has the project provided?

All programs in this project are focused on the training and development of skills to become a more capable and confident organic or sustainable farmer. Twice-yearly meetings among participating organizations (NOFA chapters and MOFGA) provided a total of 6 trainings that built organizational capacity to address the challenges faced by beginning farmers and their experienced-farmer hosts and mentors. Each organization built its capacity to field questions regarding on-farm labor laws in their state, through the assistance of an agricultural law firm, Law for Food.

Core Competencies Tracking:

A self-guided assessment tool of farming production and business skills is available to any farmer via each participating organization, as well as online at www.nofany.org/progress.

Business Planning Capacity-Building:

At least 150 beginning farmers created, improved and/or implemented a farm business plan through activities in these programs.

Events:

Winter conferences with beginning-farmer applicable workshop tracks or listings provided professional development along with networking and socializing activities. On-farm tours and provided additional topical training and networking opportunities.

Apprenticeship Program:

Our apprenticeship matching methods include online apprenticeship listings in 7 participating organizations; this is combined with word-of-mouth and introducing or facilitating matchmaking by skilled staff and volunteers at 7 of 7 participating organizations.

Mentor Program:

Mentorship programs in 6 northeast states (CT, MA, NH, NJ, NY and VT) match newly independent farmers with an experienced farmers who mentor and advise the beginners in their daily and seasonal production, marketing and whole-farm planning needs.

Journey person Program:

High-potential new farmers are provided a paid mentor and educational and business planning stipends to use at their discretion, over the course of two years. During these two years, NOFA and MOFGA staffs maintain a close relationship with these new farmers to guide and support their development as farmers and leaders in their farming communities.

How have the results been disseminated to communities of interest?

Each participant organization writes articles for publication in online and printed publications which are distributed to members of the organizations as well as the general public. Websites explaining the varied programs and services of each participant organization are maintained and visible to any aspiring or beginning farmer.

What do you plan to do during the next reporting period to accomplish the goals?

{Nothing to report}

Participants

{Nothing to report}

Target Audience

These programs educated and served aspiring and beginning farmers, and involved the expertise of experienced-farmer mentors and teachers in the Northeast United States, specifically Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, New Jersey, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont.

Products

{Nothing to report}

Other Products**Product Type**

Databases

Description

Our apprenticeship matching methods include online directories (one per state in 6 states) that function as databases to collect and display information about available on-farm workers who want to learn to farm and the farms that offer on-farm work and learn education opportunities.

Product Type

Evaluation Instruments

Description

Conference scholarship application form and evaluation are standardized across states and provide demographic, knowledge-gain and related impact data.

Product Type

Educational Aids or Curricula

Description

Mentorship plan and agreement for use in Journeyperson and Mentorship Programs requires that beginning farmer and mentor develop and commit to a plan for education and communication for one year.

Product Type

Educational Aids or Curricula

Description

A self-assessment and progress tracking tool for beginning farmers and their teachers and mentors is available for any interested party to download or request from NOFA chapters or MOFGA.

Changes/Problems

{Nothing to report}