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Program Code: BFRDP

Program Name: Beginning Farmer and Rancher

Project Director

Hilary Otey Wold
651-433-3676
hilaryotey@yahoo.com

Recipient Organization

MINNESOTA FOOD ASSOCIATION, INC
14220-B OSTLUND TRAIL N
Marine on Saint Croix, MN 550479539
DUNS No. 163688976

Performing Department

{NO DATA ENTERED}

Co-Project Directors

{NO DATA ENTERED}

Departments

{NO DATA ENTERED}

Non-Technical Summary

Minnesota's population demographics are changing rapidly. Our state leads the nation in several areas of immigration: the largest population of Somali immigrants (over 25,000), the largest concentration of Hmong immigrants/refugees in a single city (St Paul, over 25,000, with over 45,000 in the State) and the fastest growing communities of Karen/Burmese (now over 10,000) and Bhutanese refugees (now over 1,200). All of them come from agrarian backgrounds. While MFA has been training new immigrants since 1999, in the past 2 seasons we have worked with Somali, Bhutanese and Karen farmers who have exceptional farming skills and background. The new immigrants who want to farm in MM very quickly learn the basic production aspects and are very keen on organic production. But the business and marketing aspects of operating a viable farm, together with all the rules, laws and administration is a large barrier. Minnesota farm business practices, record-keeping, finding or creating a markets, attending to food safety and organic practices, and access to farmer support programs are all new and different. While they are highly motivated, the search for resources can be discouraging. The existing immigrant and refugee resettlement programs do not address agriculture as a legitimate educational or career opportunity, and direct the immigrants to low wage service jobs, whereas they are really interested in agriculture. MFA is changing this perception and practice at both grassroots and institutional levels. We see significant increases in interest in farming from more and various immigrant communities in MN each year. The most common request we have from farmers is for more market opportunities. We have found that using new market opportunities is an excellent mechanism for training in other farm business aspects. While MFA has excellent experience in doing this, we recognize the need to have a specific staff person focused on this, working with individual farms, in order to be most effective. Based on our experience and the farmers' feedback over the past 4 years especially, their needs can be summarized as: production skills, , markets and skills in developing markets, farm business management, land for practical cultivation, regular one-on-one support and mentoring, initial risk protection and lower cost and longer term risk management tools, physical and cultural safe space to explore, experiment and learn farming and how to develop their operations, increasing gross initial revenues and yields per acre, more exposure to other farms and farming ideas and techniques, and relationships with other resources that can support them in the future. Farmers are involved in the design and priorities of the project by providing both input and assisting with training. This is the only training program in MN and our area that focuses on immigrant farmers with a practical on-site farm, practical application and plots for each farm, built in markets (CSA and wholesale) and developing markets, organic certification, and intensive individualized mentoring and consultation for each farm.

Accomplishments

Major goals of the project

1. Provide farm enterprise development training to at least 10 socially disadvantaged farms, representing up to 30 farmers) each year including farm business planning, organic production and certification, financial management, soil fertility, pest management, post harvest handling and food safety and seed saving. This is through group workshops and individual mentoring. Result: All farms in the training program will have completed business plans (includes production, marketing and food safety plans), record-keeping books, file crop reports, cost of production calculations and file Schedule F. All farms will be Certified Organic. At the end of 3 years, 20 independent immigrant farm enterprises will be established. 2. Provide technical assistance to at least 10 socially disadvantaged farms (representing 30 farmers) each year in developing and establishing existing and new direct and wholesale markets for their specialty crops channels, including but not limited to CSA, wholesale, farmers markets, coops and stores, restaurants, schools or other institutions, and public events. MFA will hire a specific Marketing Coordinator to lead this work in cooperation with our Farm Manager and Training Coordinator. Result: At the end of 3 years, 30 farms will have established 3 or more regular market channels, have direct grower/buyer relationships, and know how to diversify and develop new markets. All 30 farms will be achieving gross revenues of at least \$8,000 per acre, aiming for \$10,000+ as a goal.

What was accomplished under these goals?

Impact Statement

Minnesota has a strong agricultural tradition and vibrant, growing markets for local and sustainably-grown foods. However, socially-disadvantaged (SDA) farmers continue to be underrepresented as farm operators in this state. According to the USDA 2012 Census, there were 109,349 farm operators reported in Minnesota in 2012. Of those, only 798 (0.7%) were from non-white SDA groups, including women and individuals from Latino, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, or African American backgrounds.

Individuals from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds face additional barriers to launching and sustaining successful farm operations, as they often have limited time and financial resources to dedicate to new educational or entrepreneurial enterprises, and must balance ongoing support of their families with the time and money it takes to start a new business. Farming is an exceedingly risky venture, as it not only requires significant investment up front to secure the land, equipment and infrastructure needed to successfully produce a crop; it also exposes the new business owner to uncontrollable risks, such as weather and market vagaries. In order to minimize these risks and make it possible for individuals from diverse backgrounds to explore farming as a career, the Growing Farmers, Growing Food program offers comprehensive training and support; affordable land rental complete with equipment and infrastructure (incubator farm); and guaranteed markets to diverse farmers.

MFA's unique approach uses the rich resources of a 40-acre Certified Organic farm, located within the Twin Cities Metropolitan area, to provide beginning farmers with this land-based incubator opportunity. There are only a handful of such incubator farms in the Midwest and 85 total known sites in the country. Very few of these operations are also Certified Organic. As a result of MFA's leadership in serving SDA farmers,

Goal 1: Provide farm enterprise development training to 10 SDA farms (representing up to 30 farmers) each year.

Activities:

- Provided access to Certified Organic farmland, equipment, supplies and infrastructure to 19 new farm businesses
- Offered 32 classroom training sessions, 38 demonstration-based skill sessions, 9 field trips to other farms, and 3 community workdays to SDA farmers
- Offered 95 individual support sessions to assist farmers with paperwork and in-the-field issues.
- Expanded land-based training program to include 2 new components: Whole Farm Management and Organic Transitions, which were designed to meet emerging farmer needs

Data:

- 19 distinct farm enterprises served over 3 years. All farms completed business plans and basic record-keeping books. All farms were Certified Organic.
- 6 new independent farm businesses were established (defined as operating independent of MFA staff support)
- Average of 11 farms per year participated in the training program (8, 13, 13)

Discussion:

Challenges for farmer participants usually center around the time, transportation and resources required for their farming operation to be successful. New participants can underestimate how frequently they will need to visit their plot to maintain high production standards and the level of commitment that is truly needed for an entrepreneurial venture like farming to be successful. The program staff communicate these requirements to all new applicants and include them in the participant agreements, but there is still some attrition each year as a few of the new participants discover they are not prepared to make the required investment.

Outcomes

- All farmers gained new knowledge in organic farming and farm business management
- All farmers implemented new farming and business practices
- The percent of participants continuing in the training program from the previous year increased steadily over the three years,

from 50% (4/8 total) to 61.5% (8/13 total).

Accomplishments

Each year of the project, farmers took on more active roles in providing input into the training curriculum and program design, offering support to their fellow farmers, and representing their farms at community outreach events. In the third year of the grant we created a new staff role for a farmer mentor which was filled by May Lee, a basic training program graduate who was the first Certified Organic Hmong farmer in Minnesota. In addition to providing on-site technical assistance to other farmers in our program, Ms. Lee also presented at the 2015 MOSES Organic Farming Conference in LaCrosse, Wisconsin as part of their new Hmong language track, and has been asked to return there this year, as well as to be a keynote speaker at the upcoming Immigrant & Minority Farmers Conference in February 2016.

Goal 2: Provide technical assistance to 10 SDA farms each year in developing and establishing direct and wholesale markets.

Activities:

- Operated a CSA program to provide a guaranteed market to all farmers in training
- Identified new and creative market opportunities each year: community events, co-ops, schools, restaurants, nonprofit partners, etc.
- Created an aggregated farmers market stall in 2015 to offer a reliable market and new experience to farmers
- Became a SNAP-authorized retailer for farmers market and delivery route
- Provided 10 CSA shares to SNAP participants with incentives provided through FINI pilot project, in partnership with Urban Oasis

Data:

- Total CSA sales to customers over 3 years: \$295,916. Total CSA members grew from 204 in 2013 to 220 in 2015.
- Total wholesale sales over 3 years: \$57,490
- All farmers had 3 or more regular market channels
- Average gross sales for farmers over the three-year period: \$8,122/acre
- Total farmer sales at farmers market in 2015: \$7,303

Discussion:

All of the farmers participating in the training program had guaranteed markets to sell their produce to as a result of the Big River Farms food hub MFA operates. The food hub buys produce from the farmers-in-training, aggregates it, and sells to CSA members, wholesale and retail accounts. Over the 3-year grant period, Big River Farms had the opportunity to try a number of different types of accounts, including a locally-owned cooperative grocery store; a number of restaurants; the Minneapolis Public School District; large-scale community events, such as a meal which served 2,000 people; culturally-specific stores; a farmers market stand; and Bon Appetit foodservice. While none of these accounts individually grossed large numbers for the farmers, as a component of the training program the diversity ensured farmers were exposed to a variety of types of markets to gain experience with how to plan, harvest, pack, and invoice for these accounts. Staff turnover and difficulty finding a qualified candidate prevented us from filling the Marketing Coordinator position we had originally envisioned, but the goal of having each farm establish 3 different types of markets was still reached in all three years.

Accomplishments:

For MFA graduate Moses Momanyi of Dawn2Dusk Farm, it's all about "the farming lifestyle." After growing up on a farm in rural western Kenya, Moses always wanted to return to farming after relocating to the U.S. Through the support of MFA's Basic Training and Whole Farm Management programs, Moses and his wife Rhona were able to start their own independent farm business, Dawn2Dusk. They now sell their produce and eggs at four farmers' markets, run their own 31-member CSA, and also maintain regular wholesale accounts. In November of 2013, Moses and Rhona were able to purchase their own 20-acre farm, and moved their farm operations there for the 2015 season. "MFA has been very resourceful," Moses shared. "They have helped me to know that I can do this. If I hadn't come to MFA, I couldn't have figured out how to do wholesale, or the CSA, or farmers markets. It would have been very difficult."

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

Our training and technical assistance services are customized to meet the needs of socially-disadvantaged farmers, and delivery methods are designed to remove the barriers these farmers face to achieving sustainability. In all three years of this project, MFA offered our Basic Training Program for SDA farmers, which includes the following annual components:

- Pre-Season: 12 classroom sessions on business planning, plot planning, seed and supply purchases, financial benchmarking, growing for different markets, greenhouse production and transplanting.
- Growing Season: 8 classes on production planning, organic practices, soil health, farm safety (tractor and pesticide use), post-harvest handling, financial benchmarking, business planning and marketing. 4 farm tours on diverse enterprises, with many participating farms run by successful graduates of the program.
- 15 demonstration and skill sessions in the greenhouse or in the fields, many offered by Farmer Mentors who are previous graduates of the program. Topics include seeding diverse crops, transplanting, cultivation, irrigation, preparation of product for different markets, and equipment usage.
- 1:1 technical assistance from staff and farmer mentors throughout the year, with a minimum of 5 individual sessions per farm,

per year.

- Farmers receive plots starting at .25 acres and growing up to 2 acres during their time in the Basic Training program. With land rental comes access to comprehensive infrastructure and equipment, including: greenhouse space, cooler, irrigation, cultivation of plots, and a packshed. All land is Certified Organic. Farmers can also purchase supplies through MFA. Even after 3 years in the Basic Training program, many of our farmers weren't ready to run a viable farm business without continued support. To bridge this gap we created two new program tracks in year 2 of the grant: the Whole Farm Management program and the Organic Transitions program. Whole Farm Management provides 3 acres for graduates to continue building their businesses while using land and infrastructure provided by MFA. These farmers do their own tractor work and maintain their own organic certification. They sell to the Big River Farms food hub but also have their own accounts. These more experienced farmers provide 1:1 support to the new farmers in the Basic Training program. The Organic Transitions program is an offering that responds to the needs of socially-disadvantaged farmers in our community. These farmers are interested in learning organic methods but need support during the transition. They also have access to 3 acres and receive assistance with completing the certification process.

Due to the need for 1:1 assistance, face-to-face training, and hands-on demonstration, the staffing requirements for this program model are high and will likely continue to be so as long as the target population remains the same. Required qualifications for staff are also high, as they must have the technical farming expertise as well as the communication and relationship-building skills needed to establish trust and effectively train a highly diverse population of farmers. It can also be challenging to provide training to such a diverse group of farmers, as all participants have different levels of English language literacy and past farming experience.

For all three years of this grant MFA served as the fiscal agent and co-host for the annual Immigrant & Minority Farmers Conference, which completed its tenth year in February 2015. It is one of the largest gatherings in the country of immigrant farmers, with more than 200 participants in two full days of workshops and events. Partners on this project included the Farmer's Legal Action Group, National Immigrant Farmer Initiative, the University of Minnesota, Minnesota Department of Agriculture, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, and other USDA representatives. The conference is free to farmer participants as a result of support from diverse sponsors, and translation is provided in Karen, Bhutanese, Spanish, Hmong, and other languages as requested.

As a result of MFA's leadership in providing customized, land-based training to SDA farmers, the landscape of opportunities for immigrant and other minority farmers in the Twin Cities area has improved significantly since the start of the grant period. MFA's staff has provided technical assistance and consulting to other programs to help them establish new training offerings, and has also worked to raise awareness of the needs of immigrant farmers by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency, and private agricultural companies such as AgStar. As a result of this work and the high public profile of the annual conference, there are now new programs influenced by MFA's farm incubator model (such as the Hmong American Farmers Association and the Farley Center for Peace, Justice and Sustainability) in the Midwest.

As these and other organizations increased their focus on serving immigrant farmers, we increased our collaborative efforts to coordinate our services with these organizations during the grant period, and found new ways to work together to deliver improved and expanded services to farmers and respond to emerging needs for technical assistance. Key partners for this work included Farmers Legal Action Group (FLAG) in St. Paul; Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) in Spring Valley, Wisconsin; Urban Oasis in St. Paul; Our Community Foods Project in Stillwater; and Hmong American Partnership in St. Paul.

How have the results been disseminated to communities of interest?

Results from this project will be shared with MFA's other grant funders through our year-end report; with partner organizations at community meetings; and with the broader community of CSA members and supporters through MFA's regular communication channels (newsletter, website, etc.). We also share results through our participation in the National Incubator Farm Training Initiative (NIFTI) and with the farmers in the program through annual feedback sessions.

Program staff began formalizing the educational curriculum used in the Big River Farms training program this year, putting all materials in writing, including lesson plans and topics for field sessions. We are also working to ensure all the program policies for land rental, equipment use, and participation in the training program are in writing to ensure consistency and clarity of expectations with all farmers. This process is 80% complete and will be finalized over the winter. Once materials are complete, they will be shared with community partners, NIFA, other funders, and organizations throughout the country that receive technical assistance through NIFTI.

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

{Nothing to report}

Participants

Actual FTE's for this Reporting Period

Role	Non-Students or faculty	Students with Staffing Roles			Computed Total by Role
		Undergraduate	Graduate	Post-Doctorate	
Scientist	0	0	0	0	0
Professional	0	0	0	0	0
Technical	0	0	0	0	0
Administrative	0	0	0	0	0
Other	3.5	0	0	0	3.5
Computed Total	3.5	0	0	0	3.5

Student Count by Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) Code

{NO DATA ENTERED}

Target Audience

The Growing Farmers, Growing Food project served only individuals from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds, but was open to the highly diverse groups which meet this definition, including immigrants and refugees from all over the world, women, limited-resource and African- and Hispanic-American farmers. This open approach is unique in the Midwest, as most of the newer farmer training programs established in recent years serve only one specific ethnic group. Our model offers rich rewards to the farmers and the community, as it creates the opportunity for strong, cooperative relationships to develop amongst diverse groups of people who would otherwise rarely form those bonds. Our farmer participants over the years have expressed their gratitude for the many new ideas they've learned from their peers in the program, who bring knowledge of culturally-specific foods and growing practices to our program.

A total of 19 distinct farms participated in our training program during the grant period, representing 55 individual farmers from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds. All of these were also limited-resource. Ethnicities of the immigrants served in the program were Hmong, Somali, Latino, Oromo, Karen, Liberian, Russian, Guatemalan, Ethiopian, Burmese, Bhutanese and Kenyan.

Products

{Nothing to report}

Other Products

{Nothing to report}

Changes/Problems

{Nothing to report}