



Cultivating the Next Generation

An Evaluation of the
Beginning Farmer
& Rancher
Development
Program (2009 to 2015)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



I. Executive Summary

“It is impossible to overstate how helpful the BFRDP grant was to our organization. The grant helped us provide hundreds of beginning farmers with knowledge, skills, and support services they need to launch or strengthen their farm businesses.”

—Beginning Farmer and Rancher Education Organization Project Leader

THE NEED FOR A NEW GENERATION

Our nation’s farmers and ranchers are aging. At the same time, aspiring and beginning farmers nationwide continue to face significant barriers to farming. To ensure the continued success of agriculture in the U.S., it is vital that we facilitate the transfer of skills, knowledge, and land between current and future generations. But new farmers entering agriculture today have different needs and face new challenges compared with those farmers who came before them and are now facing retirement.

As a result, interest in new farmer training has grown and hundreds of projects have emerged over the past decade with the goal of arming the next generation of farmers with the skills they need to succeed in agriculture. Many of these projects have received federal support through the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP). To date, BFRDP is the only federal program seeking to explicitly

train the next generation of farmers. Since the program was created in 2008, nearly \$150 million has been invested in new farmer training projects across the country.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Nearly a decade after the establishment of BFRDP, and with the 2018 Farm Bill on the horizon, it is timely and necessary that we better understand how to design more effective and successful new farmer training programs, as well as evaluate the return on federal investments in growing the next generation of farmers.

The purpose of this analysis was to conduct the first-ever comprehensive evaluation of the program to better understand the outcomes and impacts BFRDP has had on training the next generation, the factors that lead to more successful new farmer training projects, and ways to improve evaluation. Our evaluation included a review of all project reports for completed standard

Over 90% of projects included farm business management training and more than a third of projects helped new farmers access land and capital — two absolute necessities for anyone looking to farm.

BFRDP grants from 2009 to 2015, a survey of all corresponding project leaders, and in-depth interviews with successful grantees to better understand the keys to their success.

It is our hope that the findings from this evaluation will allow practitioners, policymakers, federal agencies, and the general public to better understand both the value and impact of BFRDP as a whole and the projects it has supported. Our findings also point to ways that the program, and new farmer training projects writ large, can be further strengthened to better support the next generation of farmers, and to ensure the program's continued success.

KEY CONCLUSIONS

1. BFRDP has been successful in meeting its legislative mandate (see Table 1 on page 4)

Congress created BFRDP in 2002 with the recognition that more needed to be done to ensure the stability and success of the next generation of farmers. Our findings show that BFRDP has fulfilled this broader purpose and is meeting the statutory priorities outlined by Congress.

Farmer Driven. The degree of farmer involvement in the project design, implementation, and decision-making of a BFRDP project is a key evaluation criteria established by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in administering BFRDP. Our findings show that farmers are at the core of BFRDP projects, with nearly every project we evaluated including farmers either in project development or implementation.

Broad Training Topics. Congress outlined an extensive list of priority training topics that provide new farmers with the basic production, marketing and business skills, and technical assistance they need to start a successful farm business. Our findings illustrate a

wide variety in educational content and highlight the diversity and complexity of new farms and the farmers themselves.

Partnerships are Key. One element of BFRDP's success is its innovative approach to supporting collaborative projects that involve partnerships with nonprofit and community-based organizations (CBOs), and academic partners. Of the completed projects evaluated, all but one included at least one partner or collaborator, and the majority of project leaders surveyed found that their partners made a significant contribution to the project's success.

Reaching Underserved Farmers. During the grant period evaluated, BFRDP was required by law to ensure that at least a quarter of total available funds supported projects that address the needs of underserved farmers. In total, over half of all projects and 53% of total funding supported projects focusing on socially disadvantagedⁱ beginning farmers and ranchers as a primary audience.

Regional Balance. To ensure BFRDP reaches farmers throughout the nation, BFRDP is required to ensure geographical diversity in awarding funds. Our findings demonstrate that, on the whole, projects appear to be regionally balanced, with some variation from year to year.

Table 1. BFRDP Legislative Requirements and Evaluation Findingsⁱⁱ

	LEGISLATIVE REQUIREMENT	EVALUATION FINDING
Target Audience	<i>Provide training, education, outreach, and technical assistance initiatives for beginning farmers or ranchers</i>	Projects Serving: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Aspiring farmers: 77% › Beginning farmers, <=5yrs: 94% › Beginning farmers, 6-10 yrs: 54%
Program Priorities ⁱⁱⁱ	<i>Livestock, forestry, crop farming, farm transfer, business training, financial and risk management, natural resource management, marketing strategies, curriculum development, mentoring and apprenticeships, resources, land access, other related topics</i>	Projects Providing Programming in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Agricultural production: 89% › Farm business management: 97% › Financial and business planning: 95% › Environmental sustainability: 82% › Marketing: 94% › Land access: 51% › Mentoring: 66% › Apprenticeships: 27%
Partnerships and Collaborations	<i>Priority to partnerships and collaborations led by or including nongovernmental and community-based organizations</i>	Projects Led by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Nonprofit/CBOs: 56% › Land Grant/Extension: 40% › Other University: 4%
Underserved Farmers	<i>25% of funds must serve limited resource or socially disadvantaged farmers, or farmworkers</i>	53% of funds to projects focusing on socially disadvantaged farmers as a primary audience Projects Targeting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Minorities: 51% › Women: 21% › Immigrants, refugees: 27% › Low income/limited income: 48% › Farmworkers: 9%
Regional Balance	<i>In making grants, ensure geographical diversity</i>	Total States Served: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › 45 states and the Virgin Islands Projects by Region: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Northeast: 16% › South: 27% › North Central: 28% › West: 29%
Grant Size	<i>\$750,000 maximum</i>	Average Grant Size: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Land Grant Universities/Extension: \$592,000 › Nonprofit/CBOs: \$507,000 › Other Universities: \$616,000



Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship (DGA), a BFRDP grantee, links current and aspiring dairy farmers and provides a guided pathway for the transfer of knowledge, skills, and farms to the next generation. Photo courtesy of Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship.

2. BFRDP is helping to grow the next generation of farmers

From an organic incubator farm in California to a dairy apprenticeship program in Wisconsin, one thing is clear: BFRDP is making an impact on beginning farmers and ranchers across the U.S. and yielding results in training the next generation of farmers.

While the available data do not paint a complete picture, the information available points in a positive direction, with over 60,000 beginning farmers impacted directly by BFRDP.

Focus on Starting Small. Almost all projects focused on farmers in their first 5 years of farming, with a significant focus on those farmers starting out at a small scale.

Intense Programming. More than two-thirds of projects offered intensive programs, lasting months or even several years, designed to move aspiring farmers quickly into production or at least well on their way.

Increased Success Farming. BFRDP project leaders estimate that on average, over half of BFRDP project participants have started farming, with nearly three-quarters being more prepared to farm and more successful in their farming endeavor.

3. BFRDP is building a national infrastructure, new models, and best practices to train and support new farmers

BFRDP has been a major force in providing essential training services for new and aspiring farmers and spurring the development of local and regional networks to support beginning farmers as they navigate the complexities of starting a career in U.S. agriculture.

Besides directly training the next generation of farmers, BFRDP funding has also helped projects:

Build Capacity. Evidence from project leaders shows that BFRDP grants have helped nonprofit and community-based organizations, along with their academic partners, build their capacity, serve more

farmers, and serve them better. As the leaders state, BFRDP funding is critical for their work.

Fill a Critical Gap. The use of and demand for these services highlight how BFRDP appears to have filled an essential gap in skills development historically occupied by family and community by providing a broad variety of training and support, within and among projects, to meet beginning farmers' developmental, resource, and time needs.

Create an extensive collection of tools and resources now available through an online clearinghouse to all organizations serving beginning farmers and ranchers. Three-quarters of the projects developed curricula for the benefit of beginning farmers and ranchers.

Develop, expand, and replicate successful models for training beginning farmers and ranchers.

BEST PRACTICES—AT A GLANCE

While there are no “one size fits all” programs, both project leaders and our project analysis identified several themes that successful projects shared:

Farmer-to-Farmer Strategies. Mentoring is one of the major farmer-to-farmer strategies successful projects employed. Project leaders also noted the effectiveness of having peers learn from each other in classroom settings and using farmers as teachers in training activities.

One-on-One Services. In addition to mentoring, one-on-one technical assistance services from other experts (e.g., farm finance, vegetable production, livestock management, etc.), are equally important to meet farmers' specific needs, both during the early years and as they gain experience.

Networking. Fostering networks provides a way to build ongoing relationships among farmers and other professionals, creating a support system that continues to serve beginning farmers and ranchers long after training programs end.

General Education Methods and Principles. Using

adult education and general education methods and principles was a recurring theme identified across successful projects and evident in best practices. Successful educational strategies include utilizing farmers' experience and needs when developing programming, encouraging learning from peers, and using available educational theories or models.

Successful Project Vignettes also provide in-depth examples of innovative new farmer programs and their outcomes, and highlight the factors that led to their success (see Successful Project Vignettes in full report for additional details).

EVALUATION PRACTICES—AT A GLANCE

A primary goal of this evaluation is to improve both USDA's process of evaluating funded BFRDP projects and its ability to understand, and communicate to stakeholders and policymakers, project impacts. Issues with evaluation design and reporting identified in project reports^{iv} included: difficulty tracking specific number of farmers served, minimal tracking of medium-term outcomes, outcome measures not well defined, and uneven quality of reporting.

This evaluation also explored project leaders' experience with their own evaluations. Almost all leaders reported that the evaluations they conducted were useful to their organizations and that they continue to conduct evaluations as part of their ongoing education work. Project leaders who consider their evaluation strategies at least somewhat effective offered suggestions for best practices, including having direct connections with farmers to collect data, and maintaining contact with farmers over time.

However, fewer than half consider their evaluation strategies to be effective or extremely effective. Likewise, fewer than half have staff members with evaluation training managing that process. Given these findings, providing more technical assistance and guidance on evaluation could strengthen the program in the future.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS — AT A GLANCE

Table 2. BFRDP Recommendations for Policymakers, Grantees and USDA

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS
1. Continue long-term investments in new farmer training that support new models and build on the national infrastructure already established
2. Continue investments in evaluation to identify long-term impacts
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GRANTEES & PRACTITIONERS
1. Continue to implement a farmer-to-farmer focus in education
2. Deepen farmer engagement in program development
3. Utilize adult education and general education methods and principles
4. Continue to learn about and share best practices for working with different audiences
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USDA
1. Revise grant reporting guidelines and processes to collect more usable data to document project impacts
2. Incentivize collecting follow-up evaluation information
3. Provide more evaluation technical assistance , guidance, and financial resources to grantees
4. Continue to evaluate BFRDP as a whole
5. Provide grantees with more opportunities to learn from each other and share best practices
6. Evaluate regional distribution of grants to ensure strategic investments in meeting regional and commodity-specific beginning farmer challenges

ⁱ “Socially Disadvantaged Farmer” is defined in statute (7 U.S.C. 2003) and includes any farmer from a socially disadvantaged group whose members have been subjected to racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities.

ⁱⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all percentages in Table 1 designate percentage of completed standard grants included in this evaluation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Priorities reflect statutory requirements that were enacted under the 2008 Farm Bill (7 U.S.C. 3319f).

^{iv} Grantee project reports are made publicly available in USDA’s Current Research Information System (CRIS) database.

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To download the full report, visit:
sustainableagriculture.net/publications/bfrdp

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