

Beginning Farmer focus group conference call  
April 8, 2009

1. What were the 2-3 most important things you heard? (and why)
  - John: Need for information and land availability clearinghouse
  - Travis: Questions around how to influence smart policy changes
  - Violet: There are so many services available. It's hard to know what specifically would be helpful to each specific situation; need for more one-on-one time with farmers (Extension, RCND)
  - Ed: Discussion reflects conversation at VT grass farmers conf; there are implementation projects available, but long-term TA is missing; the question is how do we fund technical assistance providers (business, production, etc.) Example: There may be funding to develop grazing plan, then TA goes to next project and the producer is challenged to implement program
  - Nick: Surprised that marketing seemed to be an issue; he thought VT has a good leg up. Issue is with follow-up and resources – folks depend on the internet for technical information, but need to make sure resources are suited locally and regionally
  - Bill: Wanted to get a sense of physical infrastructure needs from the farmers, especially info about usefulness of community coop model with light storage, cleaning, packaging; three needs that came up were information & data, access to land, and access to money; got sense that there is lots of info and data, but that this info is not necessarily connected to the community; mixed sense of whether land programs are working; there is lip service about available funding for new farmers, but not enough access to it
  - Scott: Barriers to small livestock farming; what can the community provide to increase capacity; concern about food safety regulations
  - Scott: There was a lot of positive feedback about the orgs providing the services, NOFA, Intervale, etc.

What things might service providers (individually or collectively) be able to address?

- John: It's important that we try to come up with a way to meet the needs, esp. related to land availability. Not all farmers who have available land list it with a commercial agent; there should be a statewide agency that is a listing agent (such as the dept. of Ag, UVM ext?)
- Violet: New York has NY Farm Link (based at Cornell – hard to maintain an updated statewide database. Model works better locally, not statewide; maybe model could be improved, but not successful here.
- John: Perhaps work through regional development corps to create a regional land database
- Violet: Another model – town planning board member/ staffer could connect aspiring farmers with properties that may be changing hands.
- Nick: Sometimes inundated with people calling for info about getting in to farming; there is a need to steer people, give them a blueprint to help plan so when they come to looking for financing, land agreements, do homework beforehand.
- John: working through RDCs would be good. Each RDC has a SBDC person that person could make sure people do homework, business planning
- Beth: we see a lot of people looking for basic info
- Mary: Nick: where are you sending them

- Nick: if we have time, we try to work with them, send to Internet, NOFA workshops, do they have technical experiences, understand challenges.
- Bill: Re: woman who is starting farm, ordered all animals, doesn't think there are any resources to help her, wasn't aware of local resources; resources are there, but people who need to know about them, don't; need to connect them; she had tried Agency of Ag and UVM Ext. She is just going ahead and doing it.
- Nick: wary to give out names of successful farmers, sensitive to their time and competitiveness
- Bill: not talking about referred to farmers, talking about resource agencies
- Ed: I don't think that's unusual. People get started before they have done due diligence.
- Mary: 20 years in counseling beginning farmers – agree it's a lack of marketing. Not getting to people when there's a critical need; every case is an individual case, all have unique set of skills and resources. Need to have someone to craft learning plan
- Violet: talking about Ext. we have a small farm agent in every county; certain farmers are always hit up as resources – one farmer gets 12 calls a week, like sharing knowledge, but isn't reimbursed, doing work of an ext. educator - we're looking to use farmers as educators and compensating them
- Bill: concern that farmers would want to protect market area, not want to be paid to consult potential competitors; better on a Score model. Retired farmers, or an agency that is funded to do that – neutral resources
- Mary: regionally it's more of an issue
- Travis: use mentor farms in incubator program at Intervale (primary veggies) farmers are supportive of new farmers; under farm viability work statewide, if there's a production issue, look for farmer outside competition area to help; problem is finding farmers who have time
- Beth: NOFA is starting paid mentoring program for veggie farmers; some experienced farmers are hired by farm viability program.
- Jess: link food hubs with RDCs
- Bill: where are the common places in communities where people look for info; consider joint effort, inexpensive trifold brochure "considering farming?" lists resources, leave in town halls.
- Jamie: local store as community meeting place, info exchange center; potential information hub
- Travis: we get calls from people in Detroit asking questions about farm cons, making cheese, often refer people back to home; people forget to look locally; how to make it so people feel confident with their local resources? Build in resources to address this; once people are IN THE NETWORK, they access resources
- Bill: this is not a huge dilemma, it's a link in the chain that needs to be fixed
- Bill: need to create not just a list of resources of what and who those resources are for; to create confidence, there has to be a default contact.
- Nick: that seems to be what happens, they get a list of info and start making calls; give questions so people could figure out what they need
- Bill: brochure – explain what each org does. You must be able to answer these questions, then they know which org they need to talk to; brochure available in communities and online.

- Travis: Looking at resource guide from vt farmer network (can get from WaGN website) , has organizations, how many people on call know about it?; need questions for folks to create a decision tree so they can navigate resources.
  - Default contact or customized learning plan.
  - Bill: if person can self-define and know who is best resources:
  - Violet: New York beginning farmer website has learning modules (like choose-your-own-adventure) so people can figure out where they are.
  - Mary: it's marketing, but our target audience is ourselves, everyone on this call should know about New Farmer Network Guide and should use it. Should keep eachother in the loop and agree on refrerral network.
2. What Questions did the focus group raise for you?
- Diane: echo comments on concerns and where to go for the information; one-stop sho[pping] would be great, but difficult to do; NFN resource sbook is good, need to get more people there.
  - Jamie: Keep coming back to concept of regional food hubs like Intervale, Foofoorks, Raffle, Hinesburg, is there an opportunity as part of mission to make info available to new and aspiring farmers and link
3. What do you want to learn more about?
- Bill: need for off-farm processing resources; what can communities do to support growers in catchment area?
4. Questions for each other?
5. Reflections on the Focus Group – Process
- Diane: well facilitated, process allowed people to talk and not take over process
  - Violet: good to see similar work, being done different
  - Travis: likes that focus was on farmers, not providers; excited to hear about differences in topics that come up in different groups, revising assumptions as we listen to different farmers.
  - Remember that each group is different, ideas come from small group of farmers and may need to be tested for state or regions
  - Nick: a room full of start-ups may have had different comments; was a good mix, but separate groups for farmers at different levels would have had different
6. Other items/Comments?