

**Minutes for the Conference Call in Follow-up to “Focusing on Beginning Farmers”
Fish Bowl Focus Group, Westminster, VT location.**

Focus Group Date: April 2, 2009

Conference Call Date: April 15, 2009

Conference Call Participants: Beth Holtzman, UVM WagN (facilitator), Mike Ghia, UVM Farm Viability Program (notetaker); Bob Bernstein, Land for Good, NH; Julie Jacque, USDA-FSA, Brattleboro; George Button, USDA-FSA, White River, Jct; Amanda Costello, Cheshire County, NH Conservation District; Jennifer Risley, Hannah Grimes Center, NH; Jassy Bratko, NOFA-MA; Sylvia Harris, Windham County, VT Conservation District; Joan Weir, VT Land Trust; Jenn Colby, UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture

What are the 2-3 most important things that you heard and why?

Jassy: Access to land was a big concern. Business planning is important and business-planning assistance has been useful; Mentoring was also very useful.

Bob: Bob agreed with Jassy’s assessment, and also noted that most of the farmers were not familiar with alternative land tenure models-there is an information gap there.

Jennifer R.: When the farmers defined “success”, they did so largely with “values-based” terms, instead of purely financial criteria.

Jessica: The importance of learning from farmer peers stuck out.

Joan: There seemed to be an information gap on ways to access land for long-term tenure and also affordable housing. There was also a significant amount of emphasis from the farmers on the need for “affordable” farmland, though the discussion was a bit ambiguous what that means?

There seemed to be more of a need for more information on what is required for the farmers to be capable/ready to own land. Business planning support stuck out as a need.

Sylvia: The importance of service providers seeking out and reaching out to the beginner farmers to offer services rather than waiting for the farmers to come to them was an important concept mentioned.

Jen C: The farmers were more seeking “technical assistance” rather than “stuff” (materials, equipment, etc)

Amanda: The farmers lack a voice to policy makers.

Julie: Agreed with the assessment on “measures of success”, but also was interested in the variability in the definitions of success.

George: Agreed with Joan’s assessment, especially about the need for education for farmers on business readiness.

Mike: Concurred on most all of the comments, particularly the need for more education on accessing land, farm affordability, and business readiness.

Are there things unique to this region, which you might expect would be different than other parts of VT?

Sylvia: The orientation of many services in VT are oriented to the northern part of the State making them harder to access in Southeast VT. Also, there is an orientation to big dairy, when that doesn't make up the composition of most of the beginner farmers here.

Beth: The information gaps seemed somewhat larger in this group of farmers than the farmers in the other two focus groups.

Joan: The importance of CSA's and farmers markets is very significant to the economics of agriculture in this region. She wondered if it plays such a large role in other regions? Beth said that she thought it might be similar with most of the state?

Mike, Amanda, Jennifer R, and Jassy: Agriculture in the CT Valley tends to be more regional and less defined by State lines. Farmers participate in markets and access infrastructure and sometimes land across state lines. Sometimes services are accessed across state lines as well. Better coordination between service providers in VT, NH, and MA would better serve the farming population.

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

Sylvia: She felt that the Conservation Districts could be much more involved in organizing and carrying out beginner farmer programs, including helping for better coordination across state lines.

Amanda: Concurred with Sylvia.

Jessica: Sees opportunities for a greater variety in the types of workshops that are offered. She also felt that it was important to get more farmer feedback on the value and effectiveness of the workshops.

Jennifer R.: Feels that Hannah Grimes Center could adapt its current programming to better serve the needs of beginner farmers, especially in the area of business planning and farm labor issues.

Jassy: Would like to develop a beginner farmer education track for NOFA-MA. Also, would like to collaborate with other service providers in this effort. She would also like to learn more about mentoring and how to facilitate increased mentoring?

Joan: Would like to explore more the idea of finding land for an incubator farm in the region. Besides the Intervale, the project in Rutland County could also serve as a model.

Jessica: Also thought looking into the concept of an incubator was also an interesting idea.

What questions did the focus group raise for you? What do want to learn more about?

Jessica: What is unique about beginner farmers relative to the rest of the farming population? Their needs overlap with the needs of the general farming population, so knowing what is unique to beginner farmers in this respect could be helpful? What more can be done to help beginner farmers access land?

Sylvia: How the conservation districts might be able to help beginner farmers address farm-related environmental issues?

Bob: Would like to know more about the continuum of beginner farmer interests/needs and how that changes over time? More in depth information on beginner farmers' familiarity with different options for acquiring land, and also on what types of tenure situation are they willing to consider? How can we better network service providers to address these needs?

Jassy: Successful farm mentoring initiatives?

Mike: How do we get better feedback on a continuous basis from beginner farmers on their needs and how useful the services are to their needs? There is no tracking of beginner farmers specifically. So, we don't know what helps them succeed? And, when they disappear off the radar, we often don't know what happened to them? There is no tracking? Did they go out-of-business? Did they move somewhere else, including out of state? If so, why? Could something have been done to keep them in business or to keep them from moving out of the area or out of the state?

What Questions do you have for each other as service providers?

George: Is there a clearing-house for different service providers?

Beth: The VT New Farmer Network developed a "Resource Guide for Vermont's New and Aspiring Farmers", but it is quickly becoming dated, and there is no current funding for updates and reprinting. The Resource Guide is also in web form housed at the VT Agency of Agriculture website, but has not been updated there recently either.

Mike: Has found that the Resource Guide has been very appreciated by the farmers who have received them. The first part of the Guide has articles on accessing tech assistance, land, capital, and markets. The remainder is a directory of service providers. It's been nice to put something directly into the farmer's hand, though it might be better to be able to give them a flyer with information on the Guide directing them to the website which could be enhanced and kept better up-to-date than a printed Guide?

Beth: There is also the "Northeast Growing New Farmers Project" website.

Mike: In VT, the VT New Farmers Network is a group of service providers working together getting beginner farmer input into its programming and approaches. In NH, there is a farmer group called "Beginner Farmers of NH" which attempts to address beginner farmer needs, particularly educational programming. Is one approach more effective than another in meeting beginner farmer needs, particularly getting farmer input and feedback? Is segregating beginner farmers into their own group as done in NH wise and does it ensure that their needs met and their voices heard, or is it better to have beginner farmer issues addressed through existing, general agriculture organizations?

Jessica: Don't segregate the beginner farmers out. Include the beginner farmers in meetings and the general organizations. (General murmurs of agreement heard amongst the participants).

Sylvia: On-line resources should be used more to get beginner farmer input and feedback and to make information available to them.

Reflections on the Focus Group—What did you think of the “fishbowl” process?

Jenn C: Liked the process despite not being able to talk. Found herself wanting to jump out of her seat to respond to some of the comments, but appreciated that the format helped her to listen.

Sylvia: Concurred with Jenn (others murmured in agreement).

Joan: Often found it difficult to hear the way the room was set-up, especially with many of the farmers having their backs to the service providers.

Jassy: Agreed that it was often difficult to hear. Also, missed being able to see facial expressions as people spoke or reacted to what they were hearing.

Beth: The idea with the fishbowl is that we wanted the farmers to lose track of the audience and to forget that the service providers were there.

Mike: The acoustics of the room made things more difficult. But, the set-up was also different than what was done at the pilot fish bowl up in Jericho, VT the previous winter. In Westminster, the farmers sat in a circle and then the service providers were in rows outside the circle, sometimes being several rows back from the circle. But, in Jericho, the farmers sat more in a horseshoe, and the service providers sat in a horseshoe immediately behind the farmers. So, all the service providers were immediately behind the farmers and could often look across the circle to see farmers’ faces across from them. It still accomplished the purpose of the fishbowl without creating the distance. The room’s acoustics were also better.

Bob: Bob had been surprised that one of the farmers who is normally extremely vocal was very quiet at this meeting. He was wondering why? Bob also noted that when the dialog started, the meeting started to dissipate and he would have liked more dialog between the farmers and service providers.

Mike: Another difference with Jericho is that the meeting was held in February on a very cold day vs. the hot, spring day at Westminster. All of the farmers were very itchy to get the meeting done so that they could get back to work at Westminster. The dialog was much more relaxed at Jericho since no one was feeling the need to rush off. Things might have been different in the Westminster discussion if it had been held in the winter?

Follow-up:

Beth: Beth explained that a packet would go out to all the service providers with minutes from the focus group and the conference call, as well as more detailed information on the mini-grants available through this SARE grant. Collaboration amongst participating service providers will be encouraged. Contact information for all the participants will also be included.

Information derived from these focus groups will also be used to inform a grant proposal from the VT New Farmer Network to the new USDA Beginner Farmer and Rancher Development Program competitive grants program.