1 | Peer Networks Support Agricultural Producers to Foster more Resilient Operations

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Formally organized farmer networks are emerging as a unique entity that blends the benefits of decentralized exchange of farmer knowledge within the structure of an organization providing a variety of sources of information and forms of engagement. We define formal farmer networks as farmer networks with a distinct membership and organizational structure, leadership that includes farmers, and an emphasis on peer-to-peer learning.

— ASPROOTH ET AL. 2023

Peer networks have the power to influence change and lead to tangible impacts for agricultural producers, their communities, and the land they steward.[13]

Peer networks strongly impact the adoption of new practices because they can:

- Connect agricultural producers with new resources and new, more connected communities,[8,1,19,9,12,15,11]

- Support producers in responding to emerging needs in creative ways that build off network knowledge,[19]

- Allow for intentional spaces for collaborative learning and problem-solving,[17,11,14] and

- Build a foundation of mutual aid networks that can foster resilience and solutions to local challenges related to weather, soil, production systems, markets, and more.[5]

Adoption of new practices can result in social, economic, and environmental benefits for agricultural producers. Networks help to increase knowledge about conservation practices and result in relationships that are needed to support farmers in navigating transition challenges and, ultimately, in the successful implementation of these practices.[7] Research shows that farmers and ranchers who are better connected to others adopting practices and grassroots organizations promoting adoption are more likely to adopt new practices.[16,4,6] This work supports the idea that it is not enough to "broadcast knowledge," but social learning can be facilitated in a way that allows farmers and ranchers to learn from one another and resource providers to help "assemble or weave networks."[13] These networks can then help spread awareness about programs and persuade others to engage.[13]

Networks can be powerful for fostering a collaborative learning environment and spaces to build trust-based relationships with others with shared lived experiences.[2] This can be especially appealing for historically underserved producers who have experienced discrimination based on their lived experience, farmers of color, beginning and limited resource farmers, veterans, and women.[18] At American Farmland Trust, our peer-to-peer learning circles and the larger farmer and agricultural resource provider networks we foster, result in increased knowledge, confidence, and connectivity in participants.

Considerations for Designing Effective Peer Networks

"Farmers learn directly from other farmers in multiple ways: through conversations, and also through visual observation of farming practices…. The particular strength of demonstration activity is that it enables experiential learning and direct communication between peers."

— SUTHERLAND & MARCHAND, 2021

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL PEER NETWORKS:

- Producers are the primary information source

- Producers have face-to-face and in-person interactions[1,10,3,8]

- Agricultural service providers and agricultural producers form collaborative relationships built on mutual trust

- Producers engage in collaborative problem solving
- Producers gain practical tools around new skills or problem solving.[19]

GETTING STARTED: (adapted from Women for the Land Learning Circles[7] curriculum development with input from the Environmental Defense Fund's Farmer Network Design Manual[20])

1) **Start with relationships.** Foster collaborative relationships to ensure shared vision and partnership with farmers who will or already make up your network.

2) **Build a budget and program management approach.** Develop a sufficient set of resources that will truly enable the work, including a plan for how to get the work done organizationally and distribute activities beyond one entity.

3) **Identify roles and responsibilities.** Set ground rules for how you want the network to function.

4) **Set the agenda.** Build opportunities for in-person, experiential learning that fosters learning from peers in the network who are experienced and knowledgeable across topics rather than from subject-matter officials.

5) **Conduct outreach and promotion.** Get creative to build buy-in and look for ways to foster mechanisms for staying in touch.

6) **Build in points of reflection.** Plan for an evaluation strategy so you can iteratively improve the function of the network.

7) **Create a resource-sharing strategy.** Ensure participants are receiving and able to share resources, support, and tools within the network.

8) **Build a succession plan.** Think through how your network will function when certain people leave, move on, retire, etc.

9) **Share your lessons learned.** Explore ways to share what you learned in your network with a broader audience.

10) **Provide a summative evaluation.** Take time to consider the learning once the network has been disbanded or perhaps once formal management of it is complete.

RESOURCES TO SUPPORT YOUR WORK:
- Practical Farmers of Iowa
- American Farmland Trust's Women for the Land Program- see SARE handout
- Women Food & Ag Network's Women Caring for the Land
- North Central Region Water Network
- Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Learning Fellowship
- Environmental Defense Fund Farmer Network Design Manual
- Soil Health Institute's Soil Health Farmer Networks
- Climate Land Leaders

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