

Peer Networks Frequently Asked Questions



Research shows that farmers learn best from other farmers. That's why AFT is using peer networks to promote climate smart conservation practice adoption among farmers. A farmer peer network is a group of farmers and other agricultural stakeholders that come together to share their farming experiences and lessons learned with the common objective of supporting each other.

Below are answers to some common questions regarding peer networks within this AFT project.

What qualifies as a peer network within this AFT project?

For the purposes of this project, a peer network consists of one soil health advisor (facilitator, you) and at least one farmer (participant). Other agricultural stakeholders can also be included in the network or can be invited to participate in specific meetings. Within each network, the soil health advisor (SHA) can provide support to each farmer individually, as well as bring all the farmers together for group meetings.

How many farmer participants should be part of a peer network?

There is no minimum number of farmer participants that should be part of your network. However, it is recommended to have more than two to facilitate peer learning and support. On the other hand, it is recommended to keep the number of farmer participants at 12 or fewer. It becomes increasingly challenging to manage a group of over 12 people and make sure that all can share their farming experiences.

What geographical area should a peer network cover?

Ideally, all members of the network should be located within a reasonable driving distance so that the soil health advisor can visit their farms. If a group meeting is planned, a central location should be selected so that all can arrive there within a reasonable driving time. This provides the opportunity for all network participants to meet face to face.

Who can facilitate a peer network?

Any farmer or agricultural stakeholder who has successfully taken the Advanced Soil Health Training (and additional onboarding webinar training) can act as a soil health advisor. You will have to sign a Memorandum of Agreement with AFT to officially serve as a soil health advisor within this project and be eligible for payments.

Can I organize group meetings among the farmers in the network?

Group meetings are highly recommended but not required. Group meetings can be very productive because each farmer gets to learn not just from you, but from other farmers in the network. These group meetings can take the shape of a farm tour, equipment demonstration, indoor discussion, etc.

Are these networks open to any farmer?

Yes, all farmers are welcome to join your network, regardless of farm size, crops grown and Historically Underserved Producer (HUP) status. Other agricultural stakeholders can also be part of the network, but most network participants should be farmers. It is important to emphasize that only HUP farmers who grow corn, soybeans, wheat or cotton will be eligible for Financial Assistance payments to implement a climate smart practice, but all farmers are welcome to be part of your network.

The definition of HUPs includes limited resource, beginning, socially disadvantaged, veteran, and women farmers. Any farmer who grows corn, soybeans, wheat, or cotton is eligible to receive Technical Assistance stipends for participating in your network. Again, farmers who grow other crops are welcome to be part of your network, however they will not be eligible to receive any funding.

What type of communication means can I use to reach out to participants?

AFT encourages you to maintain frequent communication with the farmers in your network. It is up to you and your participants to decide what is the best means of communication. Text messaging, phone calls, email or social media groups are examples of possible communication mechanisms.

How do I document my work with the farmers in my network?

The Soil Health Impact Plan (SHIP) you have developed will also serve as a space to document all the actions (phone calls, meetings, farm visits, group meetings, etc.) you take to engage the farmers in your network. Our evaluation team will work with you to seek some engagement via surveys and possible interviews with your network participants to ensure we can speak to the broader impacts associated with our climate smart work funded by the USDA.

Are there any compensation for network participants?

Yes, regardless of HUP status, farmers who grow any of the eligible crops are eligible to receive a \$300 participation stipend per year, as long as they are engaged in your network. In this case, engagement means that they have interacted with you multiple times during the year (phone conversations, active in the network chat, attends individual or group meetings) and are providing you information for reporting on your SHIP.

Is there any compensation for the Soil Health Advisor?

Yes, as long as you have signed up to serve as a Soil Health Advisor and document meaningful farmer engagement in your SHIP— such as frequent communication, farm visits, or group meetings—you are eligible to receive a yearly stipend of \$2,000.

What's a typical group meeting agenda?

Depending on the time available, some core activities within network meetings include:

- Introduction to the network and explaining the reason for meeting.
- Introductions: Every farmer introduces themselves and provides some farm updates.
- Discussion: Focus on a specific soil health practice adoption or soil health problem. Every farmer provides their experience on the topic. The focus is on solutions and resource sharing. The possible outcomes from this discussion can include inviting an agricultural researcher to speak at an upcoming meeting, conducting a farm tour, visiting each other's farms, sharing contact information of each other and other agricultural stakeholders (other farmers, extension officers, researchers, etc.) with knowledge and experience on the topics.
- Planning: The network decides or brainstorms what to focus on next time.
- Sharing food: Typically, network meetings are great opportunities for farmers to further connect by sharing a meal or snacks, which strengthens the relationships among farmers.

Where can I find more information about how to run group meetings for my network?

- AFT Factsheet on peer networks: <https://farmlandinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/06/ag-producers-peer-networks-fact-sheet-clm26.pdf>
- AFT 2-part webinar on leading peer networks
 - Launching Peer Networks Part 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=O387KWUQ3NE>
 - Launching Peer Networks Part 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsRnc1G-jGk>

For additional information, please reach out to your AFT regional staff or email Jose Perez at jperez@farmland.org