



# Guide to Outcome Funding for Research and Education and Professional Development Grants

## Outcome Funding Basics

Outcome Funding is a public sector framework that Northeast SARE began using in 2000 with the intention to help applicants, reviewers and grantees focus on the end goals of the project—*project outcomes*—and view all project activities through the lens of how they will contribute to those end goals.

Northeast SARE currently uses outcome funding for its [Research and Education](#) and [Professional Development](#) Grant Programs.

The word “*outcomes*”, as used by Northeast SARE, means specific actions taken by project participants and measurable benefits resulting from those actions.

## Projects as Investments

With outcome funding, proposals are viewed as potential investments and the anticipated outcomes as the return on investment.

Reviewers may assess proposals in the mindset of investors with these questions in mind:

- What is SARE buying with the public’s funds?
- What are the chances the project will deliver this?
- Is this the best use of the limited SARE funding?

Project outcomes are investments toward the overall goals of Northeast SARE, which are described in the program’s outcome statement:

*Agriculture in the Northeast will be diversified and profitable, providing healthful products to customers. Farmers and the people they work with will steward resources to ensure sustainability and resilience, and foster conditions where farmers have high quality of life and communities can thrive.*

Successful proposals clearly contribute to this outcome statement and, by their design, aim to obtain measurable results.

Northeast SARE further models the investment approach by engaging in more frequent and in-depth exchanges with applicants and grantees than many USDA grant programs. The purpose of this ongoing engagement is to find and fund the best possible projects, provide constructive critiques to applicants who are not funded, and help ensure that grantees have the support they need to be successful.

## **Achieving project outcomes benefits the grantor, the grantee and project participants!**

When a project achieves the outcomes intended, that is a great return on investment for SARE. But it also means success for the project leader, and most importantly, positive meaningful change for real people who participated and benefited from the project.

## Positive Change through Education

Underpinning the work of SARE are theories that research and education can lead people—in our case, farmers and service providers—to positive new actions or changes in behavior. Changes sought by SARE are ones that can improve conditions for farmers and farm communities in ways that contribute to greater sustainability.

Education plays a central role in outcome-funded projects. Through education, project participants gain knowledge, awareness, skills and/or attitudes that lead them to implement new practices or change behavior.

Research and Education Grant projects work directly with farmers to help them learn and then make beneficial changes. In Professional Development Grant projects, the focus is on service providers who learn so they can then teach and help farmers to make beneficial changes.

The diagram below depicts the pathway by which Northeast SARE envisions that educational experiences will lead to learning outcomes, which will promote new practices or changes in behavior that result in social, economic and environmental benefits for farmers, communities and society.



## Outcome Funding Terminology

Outcome funding uses the following terminology for key components of proposals and projects. Each term, as used by Northeast SARE, is explained below.

- [Participants](#)
- [Key Individuals](#)
- [Performance Target](#)
- [Milestones](#)
- [Verification](#)

### Participants

These are the individuals who participate in the project and make specific, measurable changes in behavior as a result of learning through the project. They are people who have a demonstrated, strong need and interest to solve the problem or seize the opportunity the project addresses, and thus achieve a benefit.

For Research and Education Grant projects, the participants are farmers.

For Professional Development Grant projects, the participants are service providers who work directly with farmers.

### Key Individuals

Key Individuals are the project leaders and team members who conduct or contribute significantly to the project and have primary responsibility for the project's success. They have relevant experience and skills, time and commitment to complete the project.

### Performance Target

The performance target is a statement that sets forth the outcome goals for the project, i.e., the specific practice or behavior a number of participants will implement, and, for Research and Education Grant Program projects, the benefits expected to result from the actions. The performance target represents the project leader's best, informed estimate of what will *happen if all goes according to plan*.

Performance targets are written in proposals in a prescribed format with specific components.

#### **A Research and Education Grant project performance target defines 4 components:**

1. The number and type of farmers who will adopt the practice or change in behavior.
2. A specific, verifiable practice or behavior farmers will adopt by the end of the project as a result of their participation.
3. The extent of farmer adoption, expressed in measurable units such as acres, animals, markets, etc.
4. The measurable social, economic and/or environmental benefit(s) expected to result from the farmers' adoption of the new practice or strategy.

## Examples

The following are performance targets examples for Research and Education Grant projects:

- 15 vegetable farmers adopt new insect bio-controls on 200 acres of cucurbits, resulting in 2 fewer pesticide applications per season for a total reduction of 30,000 lbs. of pesticide used.
- 30 beef producers transition to an intensive grazing system to feed 900 animals, reducing purchased feed costs by an average of \$6,000 per farm per year.
- 5 dairy farm families complete farm succession plans, resulting in agreements for the terms of transfer for a total of 1,250 acres of farmland to new owners.

### **A Professional Development Program Grant performance target defines these 3 components:**

1. The number of service providers who will take action to teach, advise and/or assist farmers about sustainable practices or strategies after learning through the project.
2. The specific, verifiable actions they will take as a result of the project to use their new knowledge, awareness, skills and/or attitudes for teaching, advising and/or assisting farmers.
3. The total number and type of farmers the service providers will teach, advise and/or assist.

Some professional development targets may include a fourth, optional goal for farmer adoption stated as:

4. (Optional) The number of farmers who adopt a specific practice or change in behavior as a result of learning from the service providers, and the extent of farmer adoption.

## Examples

The following are performance targets examples for Professional Development Grant projects:

- 15 agricultural service providers conduct education programs that teach 300 direct market farmers about strategies for expanding into intermediary markets such as foodhubs, grocery stores, restaurants and cooperatives.
- 8 livestock professionals teach the FAMACHA system of Barber's pole worm (*Haemonchus contortus*) parasite management to 320 sheep farmers who raise 6,000 sheep.
- 24 Extension educators and crop consultants teach greenhouse and high tunnel bio-control methods to 200 growers. *Optional*: 50 of the growers they work with each adopt one or more new bio-control practices.

## Considerations for Writing and Reviewing Performance Targets

A performance target is just that—a target. It is not a guarantee but rather a reasonable, well-informed estimate of what should happen *if the project goes according to plan*.

Writing a performance target may be challenging for applicants. It is important to know that Northeast SARE has no 'right size' or expected thresholds for performance targets.

Northeast SARE asks project leaders to be realistically ambitious about what their project can accomplish. And, we ask reviewers to be realistically critical in their review of performance targets.

Questions to consider when making decisions for an ambitious and realistic performance target include:

- How great is the farmer need and interest in the problem or opportunity that the project will address?
- For a Professional Development project – how great is the interest and motivation of service providers to learn and assist farmers?
- How complex is the problem or opportunity addressed in the project?
- How complex or time-consuming will the education be?
- How large, diverse and geographically dispersed is the participant audience?
- What time commitment are participants able to dedicate to the project?

You, as an applicant, may have strong background and expertise in the project area that provides critical information needed to establish a performance target. However, to fully answer the questions needed to propose a realistic performance target, it is also necessary to talk to participants about their needs, motivations, and capabilities.

## Performance Targets and Funding Levels

Each project and its spending needs are unique, but in general:

- Projects with greater intensity of interaction, greater amount and complexity of change sought, greater number of participants and longer duration tend to have higher funding needs.
- Projects with lesser intensity of interaction, lesser amount and complexity of change sought, fewer participants and shorter duration tend to have lower funding needs.

Reviewers assess each project and funding request on its own merits as an investment for Northeast SARE and avoid comparisons between projects.

## Milestones

Milestones are sequential steps for learning and interim actions that participants must accomplish in preparation to achieve the performance target. The progression of milestones should lead logically to the performance target. Participants accomplish milestones as they participate in project activities.

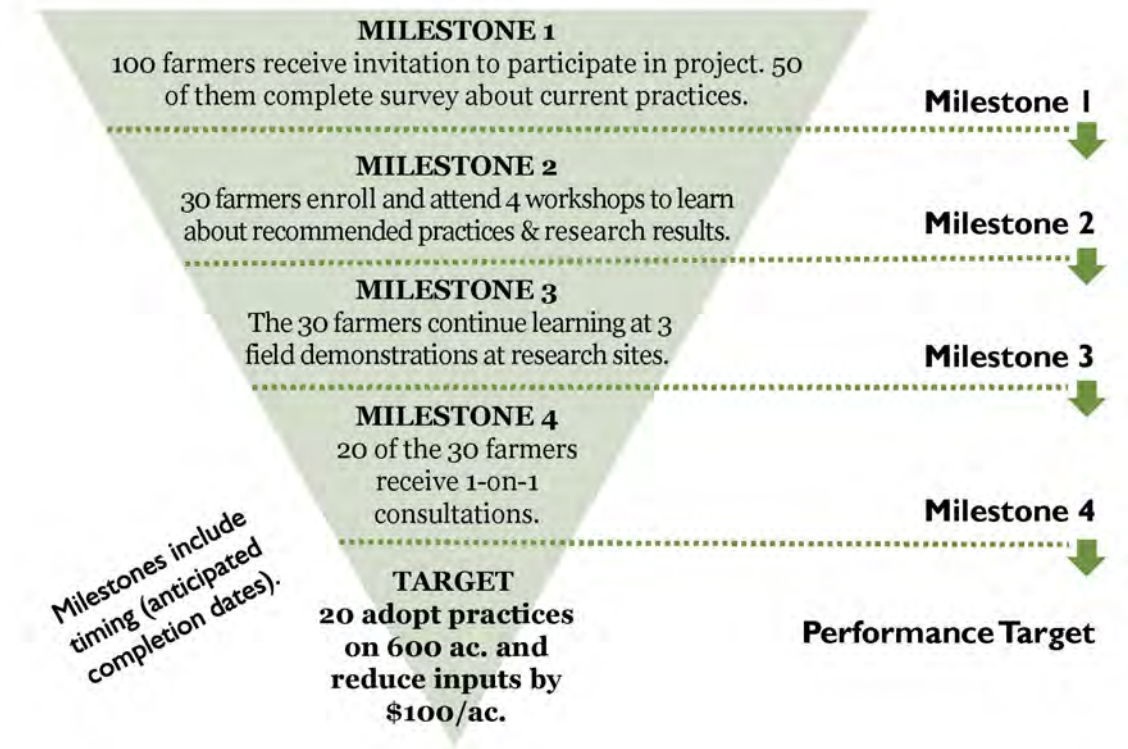
Milestones are written in a format that describes what a specified number of participants do and learn as a result of participating in project activities over time. Note: Milestones are **not** written as the project team's plan of work. While they do reflect the team's activities, they are intended to describe participants' experiences as they interact with the project team so that the project team can remain focused on the outcomes for participants.

Milestones outline essential participant experiences as they interact with the project team including a timeline for:

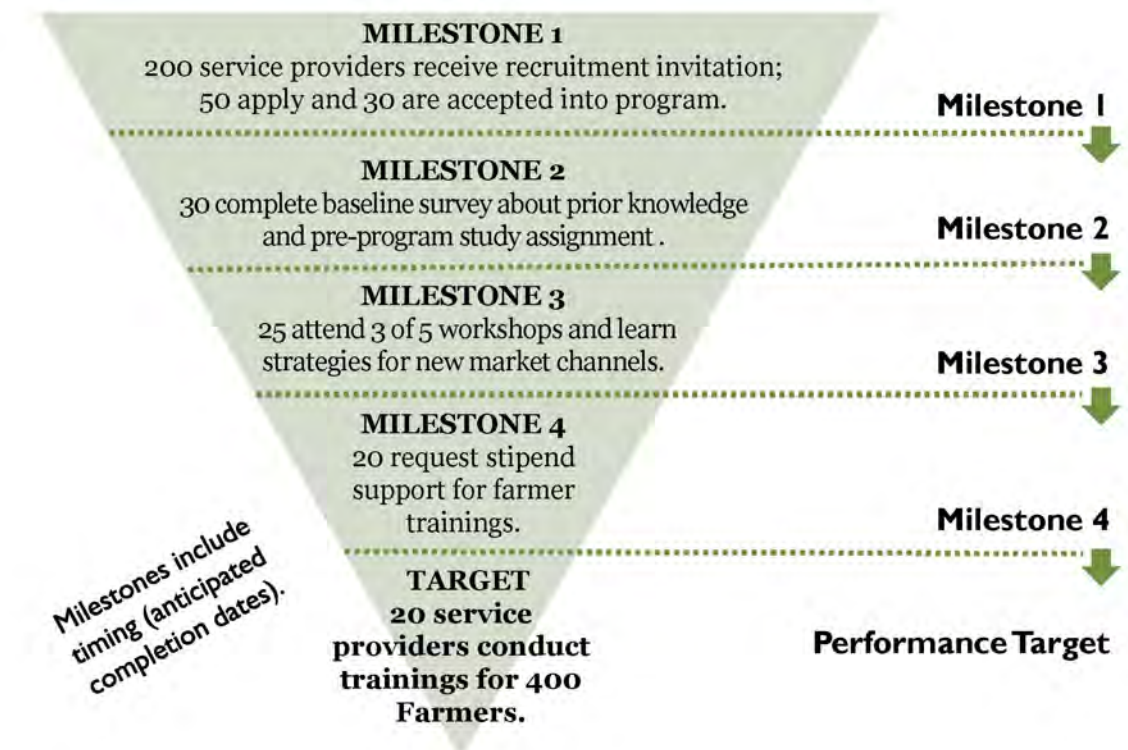
- Recruitment
- Engagement for learning
- Learning through educational activities
- Evaluation of learning
- Support for implementing new practices or behaviors
- Verification of new practices or behaviors and resulting benefits

It may be helpful to conceptualize milestones as outlining a year (or more) in the life of participants as they interact with the experiences listed above.

**Following is a simplified example of Research and Education milestones leading to a performance target.**



**Following is a simplified example of Professional Development milestones leading to a performance target.**



## Valuable Roles of Milestones

Milestones have several important roles in outcome-funded projects.

Because they outline essential participant-project team interactions for learning and interim action, they show participants that the project team has a clear plan for them.

They also provide a timeline and monitoring tool for the project team to assess progress throughout the project – and make adjustments if needed.

For grantees, milestones also become the framework for reporting annual progress in their education program. (Research activities and results are reported separately.)

## Verification

Verification is the term used in outcome funding for the activities the project team conducts to find out—or verify—the extent of action and benefits that resulted from their project. The project team asks questions and collects data to quantify the extent to which participants:

- Achieved milestones (this is done throughout the project).
- Performed the actions and achieved the benefits described in the performance target (this is done after the time needed to implement a new practice or behavior change).

## Verification Plan

Each project includes a verification plan that describes:

What information (data) the project team will measure or collect. Data needed to verify the performance target includes: number and type of participants (farmers and service providers), the specific practice or behavior change they implemented and to what extent, and, for Research and Education projects, the benefits that resulted.

The timing and methods used to measure/collect data should be included in the verification plan.

## Verification Tips

Below are tips Northeast SARE grantees have learned that contribute to successful verification.

- Plan verification at the beginning, when the proposal is written including draft tools that will provide the data needed to verify the performance target.
- Select indicators that are directly related to the Performance Target, and are measurable, and realistic.
- Collect baseline data about participants' current practices, knowledge, skills and attitudes and other items relevant to the project – this provides a starting point to compare results to. Note potential obstacles to change.
- Collect demographic data (e.g., farm type, size, acres in specific crops, herd size, gross sales, number of markets, customers, employees, etc.) to better characterize the farms in the performance target.
- Inform participating farmers or service providers at the beginning about the project outcome



goals and expected benefits, the planned milestones and learning experiences, and the plan to verify outcomes. This provides a clear picture of where the project intends to take them including how they will be supported.

- Solicit buy-in of the outcome goals, learning objectives and expectations from participants. Include buy-in for the verification plan with participants; respond to their feedback and negotiate alternative measures, methods and timing, if needed.
- Keep good records of participants' contact information and how they prefer to be contacted. Projects can be stymied if the team has not maintained good connections with participants.

## Putting the Pieces Together

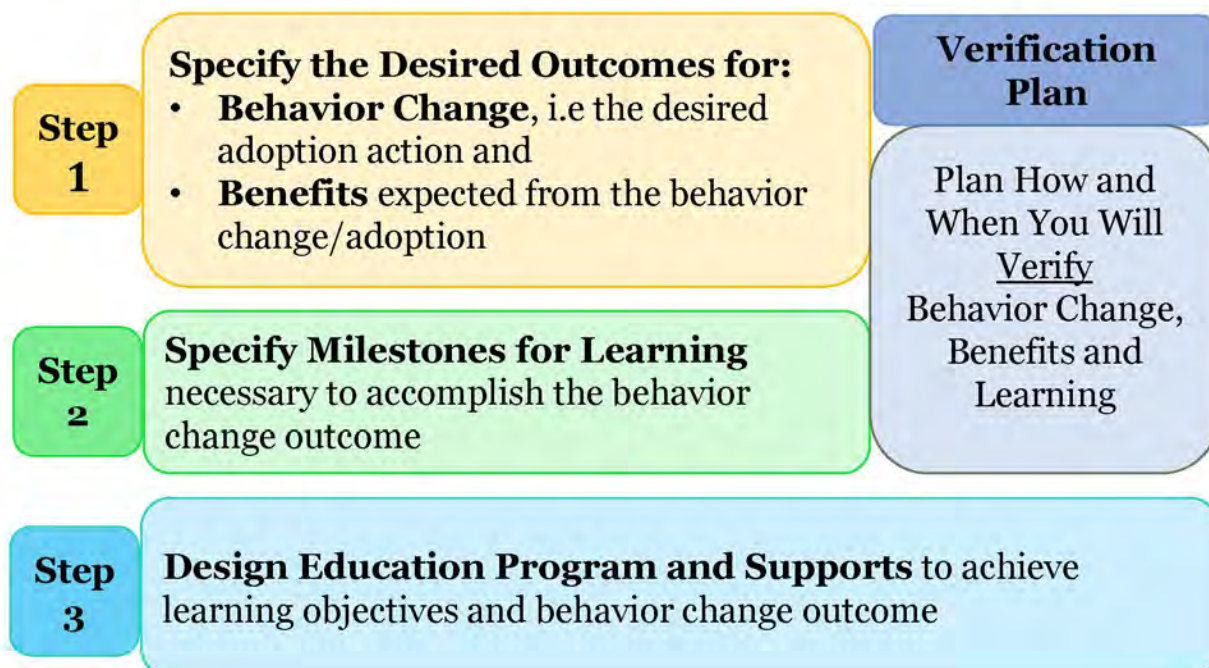
[Participants](#) accomplish specific, essential [Milestones](#) in learning and skill development as they participate in project activities and interact with [Key Individuals](#) to become prepared and motivated to take the specific actions described in the [Performance Target](#).

[Key Individuals](#) communicate with participants to [Verify](#) their progress in accomplishing [Milestones](#), and their follow-through actions or behavior change and resulting benefits, as described in the [Performance Target](#).

## Planning Outcome-Funded Projects: Start with the End in Mind

Planning for outcome-funded projects begins at the end – with a clear articulation of the desired new practices or changes in behavior and benefits expected to occur by the end of the project. Lining up speakers, making content presentations, designing activities, etc. does **not** come first. Working backward from the end goals, outline the learning and timing necessary to reach the goals.

Develop the plan to verify participation, learning and behavior change as these goals (Performance Targets) are established to help ensure that the established goals can realistically be measured.





Designing backwards with the end goals in mind, and vetting ideas for the project plan with an advisory team and potential participants during planning, will help keep the project plan focused on the steps participants need to take, and the resources and support they may need to implement the new practice or support in their behavior change.

## **Engagement: An Essential Ingredient for Success**

Meaningful and consistent engagement is a key ingredient for success in outcome-funded projects. Leading participants to make changes takes time and on ongoing engagement – for listening, learning and building relationships.

The project team can increase their level of engagement with participants by:

- Involving them in project planning.
- Informing them early about project goals and soliciting their endorsement of the goals.
- Providing meaningful, relevant learning experiences designed with their needs in mind.
- Collecting and responding to feedback about their learning and confidence to take action.
- Providing support—not just information—to help them follow-through on new action. Consulting, mentoring, providing assistance with their planning, and monitoring progress may all be needed to help participants follow-through on new actions.

## **Outcome Funding and Research**

### **A Note for Research and Education Grant Program Projects**

In outcome funding, the research component of Research and Education Grant projects is important for generating new knowledge about practices that advance sustainable agriculture, and how to apply them. It is recognized, however, that new research data alone will not lead to the outcomes of new actions by farmers.

Results of a project’s applied research—research that is relevant to the new actions targeted by the project and that may provide data to refine or improve targeted practices—contribute cutting-edge content for the education program. In some projects, farmers participate directly in research activities and this may be an integral component of their learning experience.

Northeast SARE encourages applied researchers to consider how the outcome funding approach can help them not only conduct research, but also promote adoption of successful research-based recommendations.

An outcome-funded Research and Education Grant project funds applied research and supports the following:

- Shepherds the adoption of research recommendations.
- Provides education about a topic of great interest to the researcher, or the researcher can fund service providers to help conduct the education program.
- Publishes results and creates guides, bulletins or other information products that can reach a wide audience for the researcher and SARE.

This synergy can make conducting an outcome funded Research and Education Grant project a win-win for applied researchers.

## Additional Resources

If you are interested in learning more about outcome funding, a good reference is *Outcome Funding: A New Approach to Targeted Grantmaking* by Harold Williams, Arthur Webb, and William Phillips. It is available through the [Rensselaerville Institute](#).

## For More Information

For more information about outcome funding and Northeast SARE, please [visit our website](#) or contact us.

- Research and Education Grant Program: Heather Omand at: [heather.omand@uvm.edu](mailto:heather.omand@uvm.edu) or 802-651-8335 x 551.
- Professional Development Grant Program: Katie Campbell-Nelson at: [kc2233@cornell.edu](mailto:kc2233@cornell.edu) or 413-834-1090.

Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SARE)  
University of Vermont | 140 Kennedy Drive, Suite 202 | South Burlington, VT 05403  
[www.northeastsare.org](http://www.northeastsare.org) | 802.651.8335



National Institute of Food and Agriculture  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program offers competitive grants to farmers, educators, service providers, researchers, nonprofit staff and others to address key issues affecting the sustainability of agriculture throughout our region. The Northeast region includes Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C.

Northeast SARE, one of four regional SARE programs, is hosted by the University of Vermont and is funded by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture. USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer. We offer our programs and employment to everyone without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or familial status. Any reference to commercial products, trade names, or brand names is for information only, and no endorsement or approval is intended.

Updated August 2021