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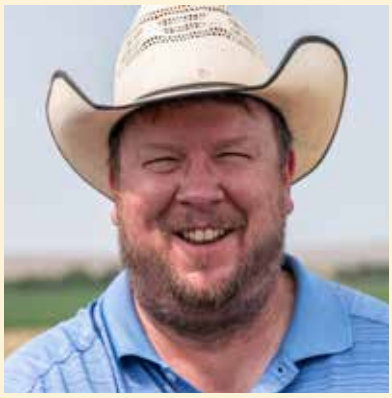
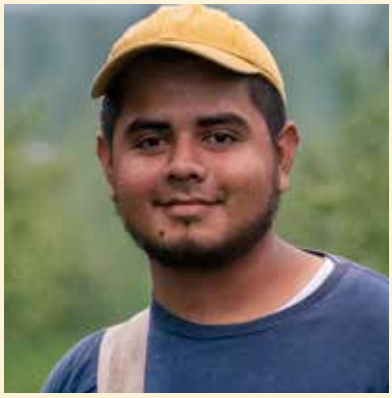
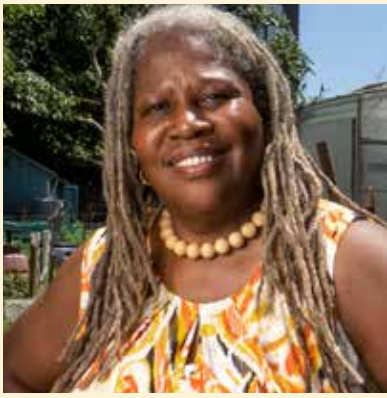
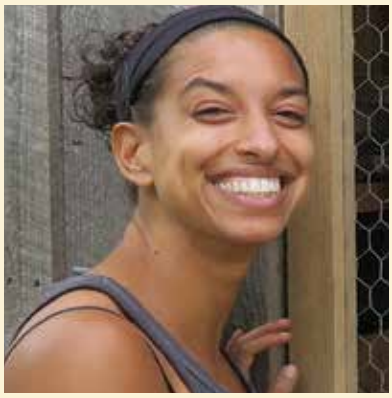
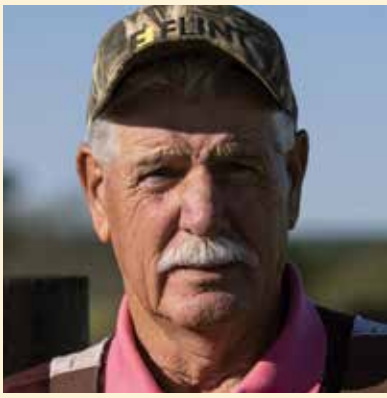
Resilient Farmers, Ranchers and Communities: Social Sustainability in Agriculture



Photos by (clockwise from top left): Lance Cheung, USDA; Lance Cheung; Preston Keres, USDA; Carol Delaney, Northeast SARE; Preston Keres; and Lance Cheung

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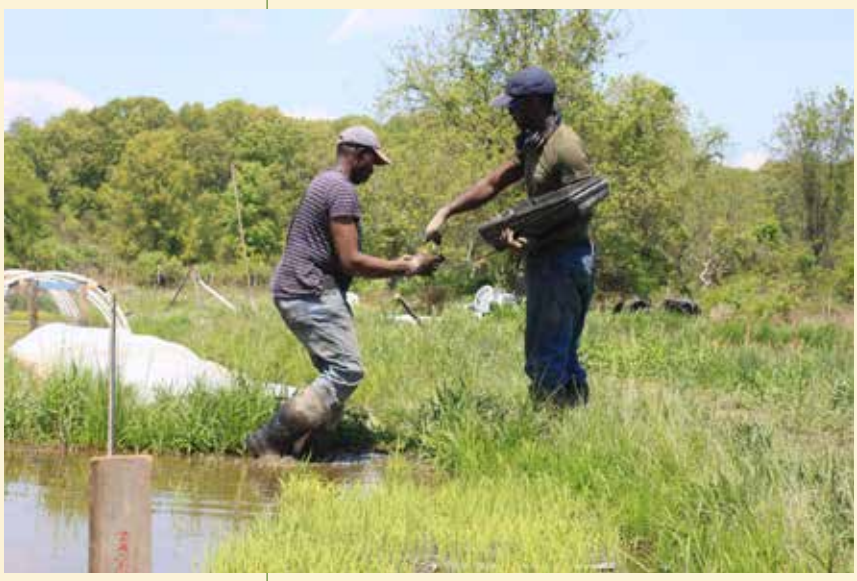
SARE
Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education

WHEN NFAMARA BADJIE, DAWN HOYTE AND OTHER family members started Ever-Growing Family Farm in Upstate New York in 2014, they had an improbable vision: that they could grow rice well enough to allow at least one of them to eventually leave their off-farm job and work full time on the farm. Rice is a nearly unheard-of crop for the state, but it's one Badjie had grown as a subsistence farmer in his native Gambia. It was important to them to preserve Badjie's cultural heritage and values, and to bring close family members into the operation. After seven years of experimenting with different rice varieties and growing practices, they're still on their journey but have made great strides.

In recent years, Badjie successfully adapted rice growing techniques used by the Jola people of west Africa, the ethnic group to which he belongs, to the New York climate. At the same time, Badjie and Hoyte have drawn on support from the local community. For example, using a SARE Farmer grant (FNE19-933), they collaborated with Erika Styger, a Cornell University tropical agronomist, to conduct field research that showed the Jola planting system could produce consistent crops in New York's short growing season more cheaply and effectively than other systems used in the region. Guided by another experienced rice grower, they've added ducks to their paddies for weed control, which they manage organically. They've also developed a customer base from a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program they used to run before turning their full attention to growing rice, and they used a GoFundMe



Nfamara Badjie (left) and his family strive to incorporate personal and cultural values into their farm. Here he and his cousin Moustapha Diedhiou (right) transplant rice seedlings into paddies using the technique they learned in their native Gambia. *Photo courtesy Ever-Growing Family Farm*

campaign—an online platform for crowdsourced fundraising—to buy much-needed processing equipment.

Badjie and Hoyte's story illustrates a truly sustainable approach to operating a farm because it equally emphasizes environmental, economic and quality of life goals. Personal values and social networks have been just as integral to their early success as the financial or production decisions they've made.

The purpose of this bulletin is to draw special attention to social sustainability in agriculture. It describes how we can think of social sustainability, outlines some of the most pressing personal and social challenges facing all of us who are engaged in agriculture, and offers some suggestions for how we, like Badjie and Hoyte, can begin to make ourselves, our employees, our families and our communities more prosperous, resilient and sustainable.

Over the years, most sustainable agriculture research has focused primarily on environmental stewardship and profitability. As a result, farmers and ranchers now have many well-established practices such as grazing, cover crops, crop rotation and conservation tillage to address environmental concerns such as soil erosion, water quality and pesticide use: the very problems that gave rise to the sustainable agriculture movement. Similarly, 30 years of SARE-funded and other research have addressed economic challenges facing farmers, leading to the development of numerous alternative strategies such as direct marketing, value-added processing and CSAs.

During this time, however, quality of life and social sustainability issues have received considerably less attention, in part because it's long been assumed that quality of life is implicitly tied to stewardship and profitability. That is, it was assumed that if farmers and ranchers meet environmental and economic goals, a high quality of life for themselves and their communities would naturally follow. At the same time, many people simply don't want to talk about the personal, household and family issues that affect quality of life.

Yet, trends in agriculture reveal that quality of life issues require special attention. Farms and ranches that we may consider economically and environmentally sustainable can be threatened by challenges such as aging farmer populations, capital-intensive production, consolidation of farms, shrinking rural communities, personal isolation, long-standing inequities for farmers of color and those with limited access to resources, and major disruptions brought on by such events as extreme weather related to climate change, pandemics and market fluctuations. At the same time, as more diverse populations enter agriculture and as stronger ties form between urban/suburban communities and their farmers, quality of life issues will create new challenges and opportunities.

While Badjie and Hoyte prioritize environmental stewardship and financial success, the example of Ever-Growing Family Farm shows that quality of life goals and social strategies can in fact be the critical drivers of success.

What is Social Sustainability?

The three broad, overlapping pillars of sustainable agriculture are economic, environmental and social. We can think of social sustainability as the "people side" of agriculture. Farmers and ranchers are experts at addressing crop and livestock needs and at providing an abundant food supply, and they can do so in a way that sustains natural resources and farm finances. Still, there are many ways to improve the quality of life for all the individuals who contribute to food production—farm owners, managers, agricultural workers and many others—and to maintain vibrant and resilient agricultural operations, communities and food systems.

For example, your farm may have healthy soil and a solid bank account, but if you don't have a plan for farm succession, what will happen to your farm? How will you pass on the farm? If you're not physically healthy, how will you be able to maintain your operation? If you don't have access to the skills and resources you need to innovate and develop resilience to a multitude of risks—from pest outbreaks or climate change to market fluctuations

or disagreements with your family—how will your operation survive these challenges?

Here are some specific ways that rice farmers Badjie and Hoyte prioritize quality of life and social sustainability in both their business and their personal lives:

- They base all their farm decisions on a vision that's informed by strong personal and cultural values.
- They seek out opportunities by engaging with their community, including with local consumers, technical experts and their farmer peers.
- They are entrepreneurial in that they identified a niche product that has a strong market and is adaptable to climate change, and they used careful research to determine how best to grow it.
- They look after their own health by making smart investments in time-saving machinery.
- They get great personal satisfaction by sharing their cultural heritage with customers and by preserving it for future generations.

For this bulletin, social sustainability, as it relates to sustainable agriculture, is explored around five interrelated themes. Giving equal attention to these social and quality of life issues significantly increases the chances that you'll want to continue farming, thereby helping to sustain agriculture across generations and throughout communities. They are:

Social justice, equity and inclusion. While a precise definition of social justice can be difficult to arrive at, it generally represents a communal effort to move society away from the inequities that underserved groups experience and toward a more equitable society. Equity means providing everyone with access to the benefits of society based on their needs, such as land, capital and knowledge. Inclusion means inviting everyone to the table to identify and solve problems and to share in opportunities in a manner that values all voices and contributions.

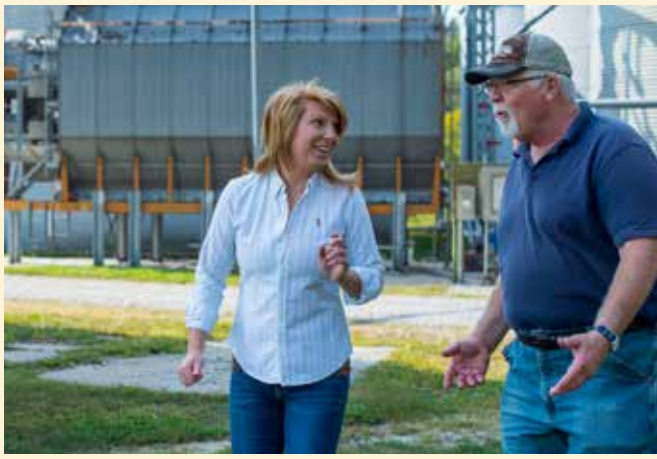
Pathways for the next generation. Preparing farm families, households and the land for the next generation of farmers and ranchers is key to maintaining healthy farms and healthy rural communities. Addressing the challenges involved in farm succession, such as business continuity, retirement, estate planning, land transfer and interpersonal dynamics, helps ensure that farmland and ranches will successfully pass on to the next generation. At the same time, beginning farmers need considerable support—access to resources, mentors and affordable land—in order to overcome the many difficulties they'll face in the early years.

Health and wellbeing. Farmers and ranchers face many physical and mental health risks, from the physical dangers of their daily tasks to the long work hours and the pressure to continue working even when tired, in pain or under stress. Farmers also have specific needs that affect their quality of life, including work/family balance, strong social support, good health and wellbeing, and active social and professional relationships. Identifying and addressing ways to minimize health risks and to support access to good health help optimize overall wellbeing in farm families and communities.

Volunteers work with local organizations and USDA NRCS staff to build a high tunnel at a church in Waterloo, Iowa. The church is in a neighborhood considered to be a food desert. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*

Community connections. Community connections are critical for farmers and are an extended aspect of health and wellbeing. Are you connected to other farmers? To the community at large? How do you use these relationships to better your farming operation and provide yourself with feelings of connection, satisfaction and belonging? Are you able to "give back" to your community on a regular basis or in times of need?

Entrepreneurship as an engine for innovation and adaptation. Entrepreneurship is more than just economics and business. Entrepreneurship encompasses a wide range of traits, including vision, innovation, leadership and the capacity to adapt, particularly during periods of change and stress. Put simply, farmers are entrepreneurs and need to be supported as such for long-term sustainability of farms and ranches.



Along with growing corn and soybeans in Aledo, Ill., with her father John Longley (right), Kate Danner (left) serves as an Illinois Soybean Soy Ambassador to improve her leadership skills. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*

Audience and Limitations

The "social" in social sustainability refers to relationships, both the face-to-face ties between people and the more distant connections forged in the food system. When we think about social sustainability in agriculture, there are different levels of relationships to consider, such as:

- **Personal and household.** Farmer/rancher self-regard and relationships within the household
- **Farm or ranch level.** Relationships among farmers/ranchers, employees, interns and service providers
- **Local community.** Ties between farmers/ranchers and the communities to which they belong (includes both non-farm communities and shared cultural identities)
- **Agrifood network.** Ties between farmers/ranchers, their peers, their customers and their suppliers, lenders and service providers
- **Society at large.** How farmers/ranchers influence public policy and society's views of agriculture, food and sustainability

This means that the factors influencing social sustainability are vast, and some may seem beyond our ability as individuals to influence because doing so would require an investment from many people who are engaged throughout our social, political and economic institutions. But this isn't necessarily the case. The focus of this publication is on sharing some of the common ways that we, both **farmers** and **agricultural service providers**, can work at the individual, farm and community levels to make positive changes to our food systems and society.

Part One: Starting With People

TRUE SUSTAINABILITY IN OUR FOOD SYSTEM ultimately involves, and benefits, everybody who participates in it. When we take steps to understand the challenges that different members of our community face, and when we support improvements in the social conditions of all farmers and farmworkers, we're creating a community that is like the farm we wish to have for ourselves: It's more diverse, has more assets and is more resilient. Also, while equity and inclusion are critical to farm and ranch sustainability on their own merits, the topic of social justice threads its way through all the other aspects of social sustainability that are described in this publication.

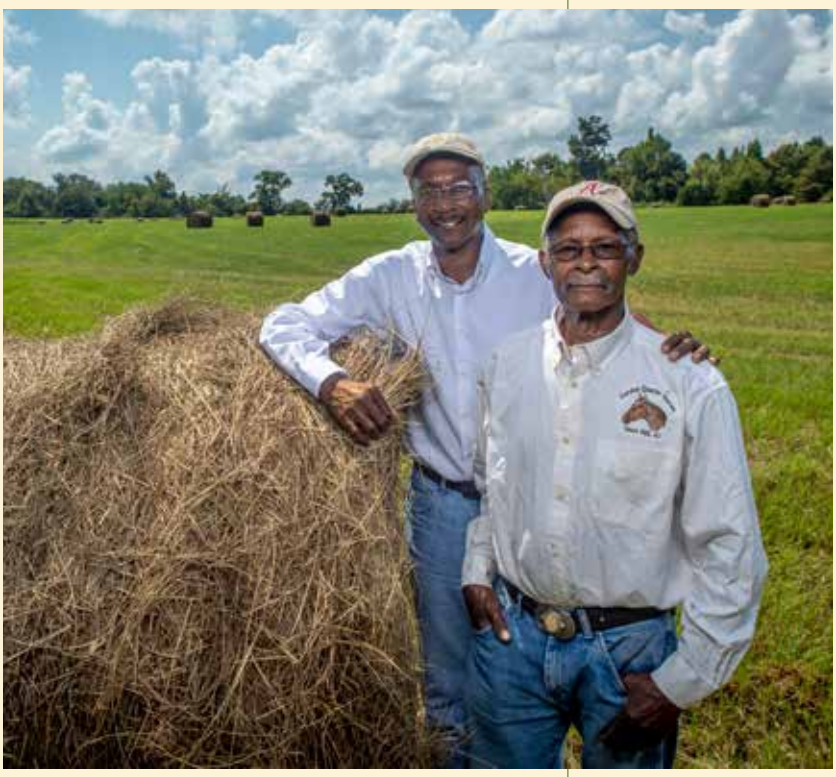
According to the John Lewis Institute for Social Justice, the concept of social justice includes "... a communal effort dedicated to creating and sustaining a fair and equal society in which each person and all groups are valued and affirmed. It encompasses efforts to end systemic violence and racism and all systems that devalue the dignity and

humanity of any person. It recognizes that the legacy of past injustices remains all around us, so therefore promotes efforts to empower individual and communal action in support of restorative justice and the full implementation of human and civil rights … .”

There are many forms of adversity and discrimination that farmers, farmworkers and others in the food system must face simply because they are people of color, women, LGBTQ, immigrants or of a low economic class, etc. However, the majority—farmers who are white, heterosexual and male—are very often in positions of power as employers, primary farm operators, holders of assets and influencers of political and social institutions. As a result these farmers have many opportunities to support positive change throughout our communities and the food system.

The social sustainability and quality of life issues discussed throughout this publication are important for all farmers in one way or another, but how you experience them can be quite different if you’re part of a marginalized group or if you’re seeking to collaborate with people from one of those groups. Because equity is a key goal of social justice, we include an Eye on Equity section in each part of this publication to identify some of the issues that uniquely affect farmer groups that have been traditionally discriminated against, and how we can work together to improve equity and inclusion in those areas.

Berta Mendoza participated in a beginning farmer training program offered by the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA), located in the Salinas Valley of California. ALBA’s training programs reach many Latino farmers, including former field workers, seeking to start a farm business. *Photo by Nathan Harkleroad, ALBA*



Nivory Gordon, Jr. (left) works with his father Nivory Gordon, Sr. (right) at the family’s livestock and horse farm in Snow Hill, Ala., and serves as a USDA rural development area director in northern Alabama. He takes pride in his efforts to improve the sustainability of the farm and to make a difference in local communities. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*

What is Equity?

A concept at the core of social justice is undoing the effects of discrimination by empowering populations that have been consistently disempowered through history. We can do this by recognizing discrimination and making our farms, communities and institutions more equitable and inclusive at all levels. It’s important to keep in mind that seeking **equity** in our communities and social institutions is different from **equality**. Consider the well-known proverb, “If you give a person a fish, you feed them for a day. If you teach a person to fish, you feed them for a lifetime.” In the context of solving social problems that are rooted in discrimination, this proverb reflects an equity-based solution. An *equality-based* solution would be to make sure that every person has the same number of fish, regardless of their circumstances or needs. But equity is when you take a person’s circumstances into account and make sure they have what they need to do their own fishing: the knowledge, time, gear, access to a well-stocked pond and so on.

Thus, equity is not about giving or redistributing wealth, it’s about creating pathways for success through fair access to the sources of wealth. In the case of agriculture this can mean access to learning opportunities, farmland, capital, technical support and government programs.

TABLE 1. Income Received Through Government Payment Programs by Race of Principal Operator[1]

Race [2]	Percent of farmers who received income from government programs	Average amount received per farm	Average amount received as a percent of what white farmers receive
American Indian or Alaska Native	13%	$1,641	37%
Asian	10%	$1,400	31%
Black or African American	24%	$1,596	36%
Hispanic or Latino	11%	$1,667	37%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	12%	$1,524	34%
White	32%	$4,494	100%

[1] Government payment programs include payments from Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Farmable Wetlands Program (FWP) and Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP); loan deficiency payments; disaster payments; other conservation programs; and all other federal farm programs under which payments were made directly to farm producers, including those specified in the 2014 Agricultural Act (Farm Bill), including Agriculture Risk Coverage (ARC) and Price Loss Coverage (PLC). Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) proceeds, amount from state and local government agricultural program payments, and federal crop insurance payments are not included. Source: 2017 Census of Agriculture, tables 59 and 62

[2] Data reflect producers who identify as this race alone or in combination with other races.

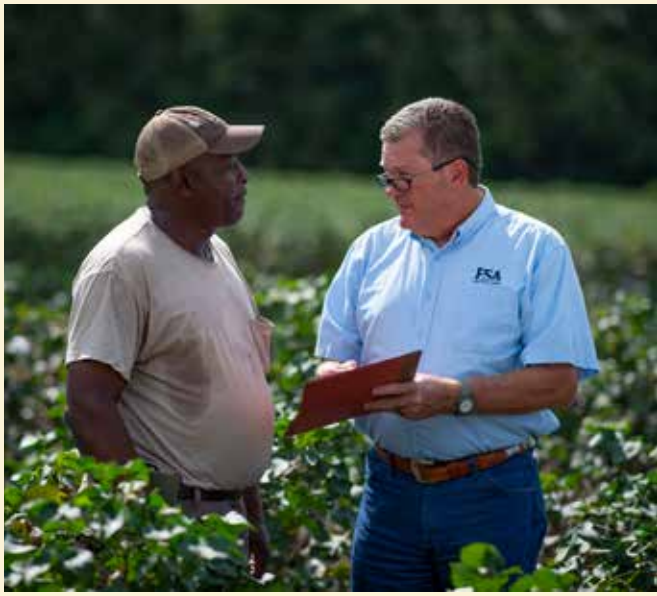
Ensuring equity and inclusion means creating solutions that work for everyone.

For example, McIntosh SEED is a development nonprofit that works to improve conditions for low-income, largely Black communities in the rural South, many of which are either unaware of or have been unable to access USDA's conservation and financial programs such as NRCS-EQIP and the FSA. This is part of a widespread pattern: According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, the amount of support farmers of color receive from government payment programs is roughly one third of what white farmers receive (Table 1).

To help address this inequity, McIntosh SEED Executive Director John Littles, Sr. used a SARE grant (LS18-293) to conduct outreach and build networks between farmers and service providers, eventually reaching 225 farmers in three states. Along with helping some farmers apply for and receive financial and technical support, the project had a lasting impact by providing communities with important social resources, according to Littles.

"The project has incorporated opportunities for trust and relationship building," Littles says. "The farmers and landowners are interacting with their peers and are forming cluster groups and networks for implementing conservation practices. The project intentionally engages and empowers farmers and landowners to assist with recruitment and outreach to other farmers and landowners."

When we talk about equitable access to the sources of wealth, we're talking about more than just financial capital. (Different kinds of capital are described in "Community Connections.") As a result, we need equity in our political institutions and social networks, in our access to clean, abundant natural resources, and more. Ensuring equity and inclusion also means creating solutions that work for everyone, including those with the least access.



Rick Davis (left) talks with a USDA Farm Service Agency loan officer at his farm in Quitman, Ga. Davis has received financial support from government programs that many farmers of color struggle to access, including FSA loans, conservation programs and crop insurance. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*

Equity in Agriculture

Today, the consequences of discrimination and inequities permeate our society and food system in many ways, whether it's policies that over time have dispossessed Black and Native American farmers of their land, extremely poor working conditions for migrant farmworkers, or low-income communities (both urban and rural) that struggle disproportionately for access to affordable, healthy food, good schools, quality health care and a clean environment. Agricultural policies and conditions that continue to promote industrialization and economic concentration have often worsened the effects of discrimination, because the benefits associated with these trends usually go to people who are already relatively well off and less likely to experience similar challenges.

Social equity captures the idea of fairness in all relationships on the farm, in our communities and more broadly in society, including those with service providers, businesses, public institutions and consumers. Whether you're a farmer, educator or service provider, there are many steps you can take to advance the cause of equity. A few common examples:

- Fair and just compensation and treatment of farmers and farmworkers, including safe working and living conditions
- Promoting access to farmland and capital for beginning farmers and farmers of color
- Providing support for women farmers
- Knowing and respecting the fact that different cultures, values, languages and communication styles may affect farmer groups in your area
- Advocating for changes that directly address problems faced by others in your community (e.g., a lack of broadband, environmental degradation, food deserts, poor access to health care, education or social services)
- Hosting or participating in peer networks and community events that encourage the involvement of diverse heritages and cultures

The Resources section at the end of this publication includes a few examples of agricultural organizations that engage in education, service and advocacy in different areas of social justice and sustainability. Supporting or working with existing organizations that align with your values are relatively simple ways to begin contributing toward positive change.

Working for equity means identifying and letting go of some assumptions that have taken hold in the current food system, assumptions about what counts as a farm or as a farmer, or about which ideas are automatically seen as more viable or "correct." To be truly inclusive, all stakeholders in the food system need the opportunity to shape support programs and to have fair access to resources.

Part Two: Pathways for the Next Generation

DEVELOPING WAYS TO SMOOTHLY TRANSITION both farming assets and knowledge to new owners, and to prepare beginning farmers for the challenges they'll face, is essential to reversing trends that threaten the role agriculture plays in maintaining vibrant communities. These trends include the low rate of young farmers entering the profession compared to those retiring, the shift toward farm consolidation, high costs of farmland and the loss of farmland to development.

The challenges of passing on the farm are often compounded when the transition is between unrelated parties. As fewer farm "children" choose to stay on the farm, young farmers without a farm to inherit can be desirable and successful transferees.

Nate and Liz Brownlee are founding members of the Hoosier Young Farmers Coalition, a state chapter of the National Young Farmers Coalition. The group supports the development of young and beginning farmers. *Photo by Beth McRoberts*

At the same time, because the majority of new farmers didn't grow up on a farm, they need access to a wide range of resources and professionals, including mentors and agricultural service providers, to help them manage their operation.

Farm Succession

Farm succession is a complex process involving the transfer of assets, income and management, and it typically includes retirement and estate planning. **Farm succession** is often considered synonymous with farm **transfer** and farm **transition**. In this bulletin, farm succession includes these other widely used terms.

Farm succession includes not only the transfer of assets but also the transfer of knowledge, skills, responsibilities and cultural values from one operator to the next. It's a multi-faceted process that takes time because it encompasses all aspects of transitioning the business to new ownership while providing for a secure exit from farming for the current operator. For a succession to run smoothly and successfully, a retiring farmer needs knowledge, skills and counsel in a wide variety of important areas, including legal matters, business planning, taxes, communication and interpersonal dynamics. Fortunately, there are many resources available to help, from guides and workshops to transition specialists.

While Hansel and Sue Kern haven't retired yet, in recent years they've gradually involved their children, Aaron and Rebecca, in their farming operations with an eye toward eventually completing the transition to retirement. Kern Family Farm, which the elder generation started in 1999 on land they bought from Hansel's parents, is located in the Sierra foothills of California and includes 80 acres of terraced fields, orchards, hoop houses, pastures and woodlands.

After high school, Aaron and Rebecca joined the farm full time, and in 2010 the family began a gradual transition of roles that lasted four years. Aaron has taken over crew and production management from his father; Rebecca manages the on-farm store, marketing, finances and recordkeeping; Hansel remains as the maintenance manager and "the face" of the farm; and Sue holds an off-farm job as an attorney, helps at the store and is engaged in the local farming community.

In 2015 the family formed a limited liability corporation (LLC), a legal business structure that gives joint owners flexibility in gradually transferring farm assets from a senior generation to a junior generation. Forming the LLC allowed the Kerns to formalize the transition. Learn more at www.sare.org/business-structures.

The multi-generational Kern Family Farm includes Sue and Hansel Kern (fifth and fourth from the right, respectively) and their children Aaron (kneeling, left) and Becky (sixth from the right), along with Aaron's partner, Becca (kneeling, right) and their son, Ezra (second from left), pictured here with extended family. *Photo courtesy Kern Family Farm*

Interpersonal Dynamics

Farm succession can be particularly challenging because farmers tend to focus more on the legal and financial side of succession and ignore the often more difficult and stressful interpersonal issues that may be involved, either among members of their family or with business partners or an unrelated successor. Even when a farmer is transitioning the business to an unrelated party, members of their family are typically involved in the critical decisions. Interpersonal skills, such as good communication, listening and conflict resolution, are needed in all succession planning. For more, see "The Importance of Interpersonal Skills" in the Health and Wellbeing section.

For example, if parents are trying to pass the farm to one or more children, they may not fully account for the different lifestyle goals, farming values or sibling dynamics of the heirs. Or, families sometimes mistakenly assume that any differences among heirs will get resolved after the legal matters are arranged. Often, families avoid planning because they don't want to deal with the conflicts that arise because of differences regarding goals, values and perceptions of fairness and equal treatment.

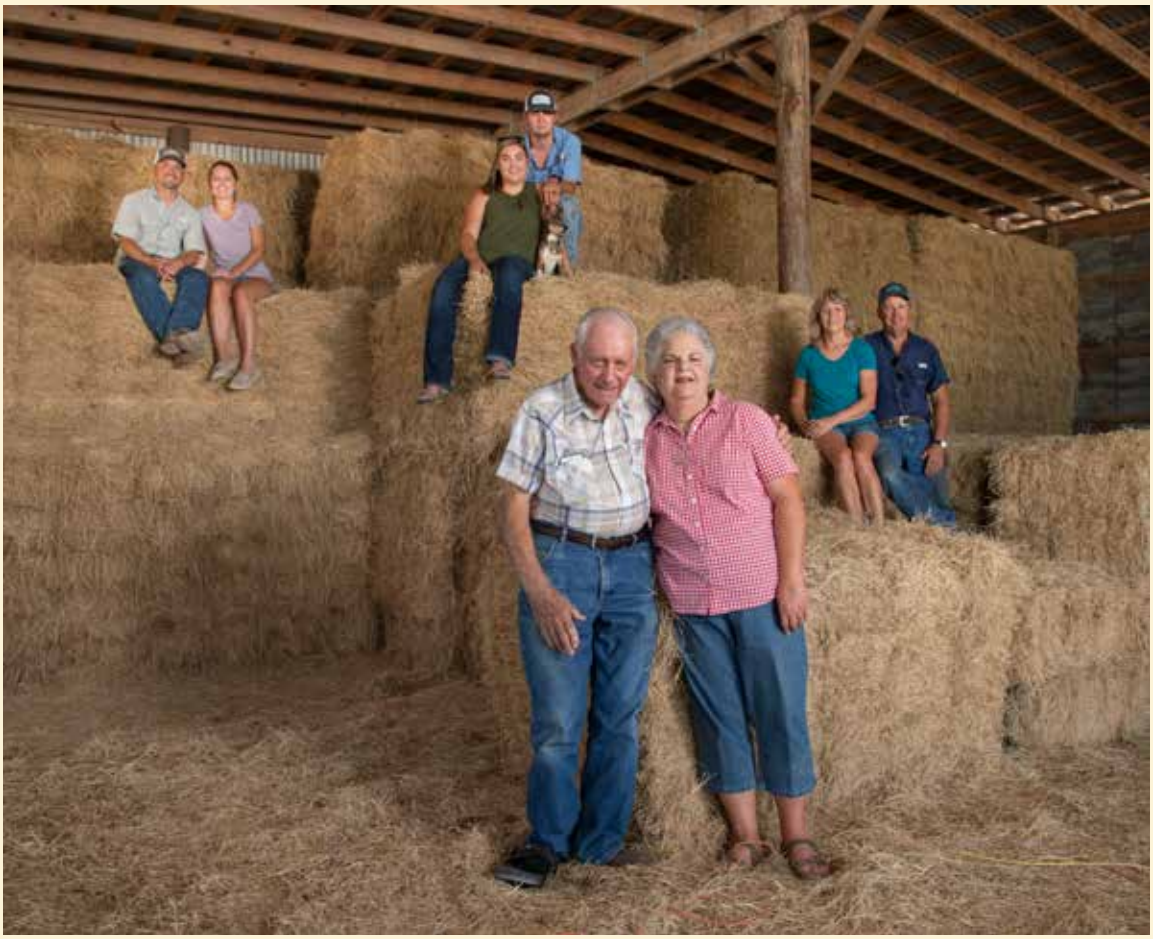
However, harmony and effective communication among involved family members and business partners are critical to successful farm succession. Strained relationships and passive communication (the "wait and see" approach) hinder effective succession. Resolving interpersonal issues as part of the succession process can help avoid serious problems for both generations. Consider seeking out professional counseling for assistance with communication-related challenges.

The Kern family's transition of roles involved constant communication, according to Aaron Kern. "It never was an overnight transition," he says. "Every day we'd check in with each other—do you still want to do this, I can do this, and so on."

Consider the following strategies to help you and your family avoid similar pitfalls:

- **Have frequent farm and/or family meetings.** Meetings can allow all involved family members and partners to express their goals and expectations for the farm. Consider developing a meeting agenda to get started. If the task seems overwhelming, use an objective, third-party facilitator to help the meetings run smoothly. A third-party facilitator could be a consultant, Extension agent or even a trusted neighbor, clergy member or civic leader. Be sure that all participants have a chance to freely express their concerns and interests.
- **Break things down step by step.** Try approaching farm succession gradually, in concrete steps that will help break down the process into "digestible" chunks. Although there is no single way to enter into or exit from farming, a typical progression is to transfer farm labor responsibilities first and transfer management decision-making responsibilities second (e.g., first production decisions, followed by marketing decisions and then financial decisions). Knowing the business model and mapping it out with the next generation is an important part of transferring management. Transferring physical assets tends to come next: Begin with moveable assets such as equipment, machinery, livestock, etc., and finish with farm buildings and land. Finally, be sure to keep track of your steps or actions, no matter how small, to help you feel a sense of progress toward your succession goals.
- **Focus on timely planning.** Often, the business founder is unwilling to give up control of the operation in a timely manner. This "founder control issue" is common among family businesses of all types and sizes, not just farms, and it can function as a barrier to effective succession planning.
- **Recognize different roles within the farm business and family.** Participants involved in farm succession may have different priorities and goals that are influenced by their gender, age and roles within the family and the business. For example, researchers found differences in priorities based on gender: Men tended to view profit as a high priority, while women identified good family relations as a high priority. Different priorities may also exist between the senior and junior generations, and between farming and non-farming family members. Recognize and acknowledge these differences when they exist.
- **Stay positive.** Studies have shown that the junior generation of farm families is particularly vulnerable to stress, which may influence their decision to not become farmers and may contribute to their premature exit from farming. Members of this population who are interested in continuing to farm should also focus on personal resilience strategies to manage stress as they plan their career and

Resolving interpersonal issues as part of the succession process can help avoid serious problems for both generations.



Three generations of the Schirmer family grow cotton, hay and other crops around Batesville, Texas. *Photo by Lance Cheung, USDA*

take appropriate steps that can help reduce stress (see the Health and Wellbeing section).

Focus on Readiness

One of the most important things both generations can do is focus on readiness. Even if older farmers want to see their farm pass successfully to a new owner, they are notorious for thinking they will never retire. This mindset can both delay and complicate the retirement and estate planning process, which are key to a smooth succession. Plus, farmers and ranchers think of retirement in different ways. Retirement doesn't have to mean leaving the farm or stopping all farm work.

For the senior generation, as you begin planning, you must consider:

- What will you do in retirement?
- What will your expenses and source of income be?
- What kind of health coverage will you need and have?

Rarely is it too early to bring in professional help, such as lawyers, accountants, financial planners or others. Identify people who can help you evaluate your plan and then provide the necessary documents early so you have time to prepare and make informed decisions.

Also, recognize that letting go of control and farming identity is hard for most older farmers. Pay attention to differences in values and priorities among generations, and be willing to negotiate them. While senior generation farmers can pass on valuable wealth in knowledge, land and capital, they shouldn't let tradition limit the next generation's ability to innovate.

Beginning Farmer Development

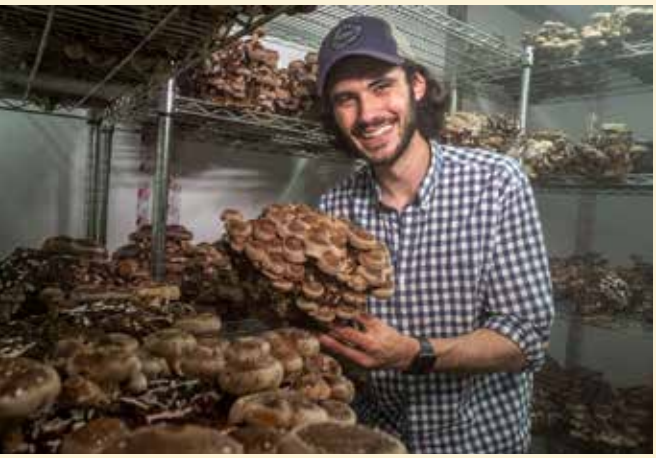
Beginning farmers face multiple and specific challenges. For one, a survey by the National Young Farmers Coalition revealed that young farmers who grew up on a farm find that their cultural and family knowledge is the most helpful "program" for getting established. Yet 75% of young farmers are new to agriculture and don't have past experience or family

members as a resource available to them. They must learn not only how to raise crops and livestock but also all the aspects of how to run a business. This includes whole-farm-planning, market research, business planning, evaluating farm enterprises, land acquisition, financial recordkeeping and identifying key service providers who can offer support. In fact, lack of knowledge in one or more of these areas is often what leads to the financial failure of beginning farms.

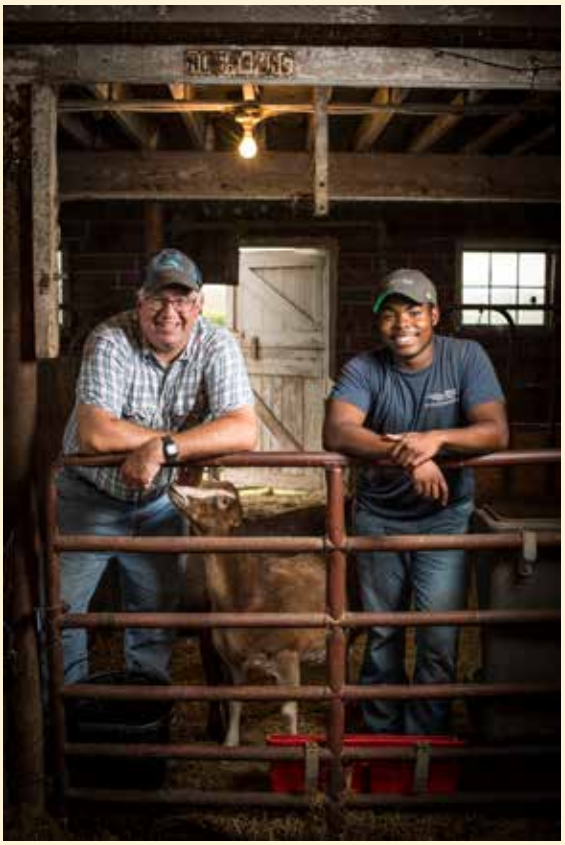
A SARE-funded project in Maine (ENE17-147) set out to address challenges that beginning farmers face by providing a series of workshops in which 64 potential or beginning farmers learned about and developed business plans, enterprise budgets, farm mission statements, soils maps, regulations and permitting research, financial recordkeeping systems and customer surveys.

Follow-up with farmers who participated in these consultations showed that up to 30% of participants used the workshops to conduct more research about their ideas before jumping in, develop more robust business management tools, complete their first enterprise budgets, develop business plans, conduct market research and make marketing plans.

Apprenticeship and mentoring programs can also help. The Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship, a nonprofit that includes a network of mentor graziers in 15 states, provides one such example. Some organizations, such as the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association and Kansas Rural Center, hold in-person "land and labor" mixers to connect landowners and land seekers within a specific geographic area. The National Young Farmers Coalition maintains a list of many programs at www.youngfarmers.org/serviceproviderdirectory.



William Gregg established his gourmet and medicinal mushroom company, Mother Fungi, in Missoula, Mont., in 2017 and expanded with a location in Chicago in 2022. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*



D'Quinton Robertson (right) gains valuable farming experience by working on Aaron Lehman's (left) farm in Polk City, Iowa, while attending college to study agricultural business. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*

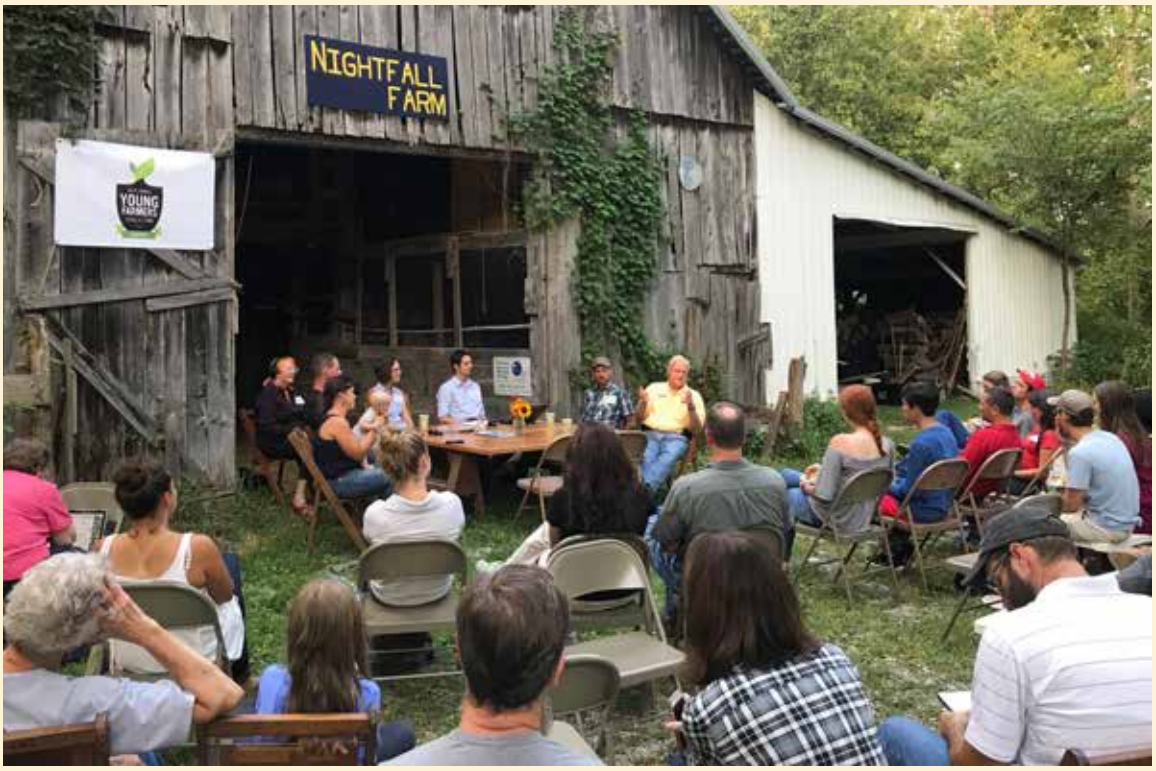
Local youth programs and agricultural educators may know of opportunities as well.

Reducing Isolation Through Peer Socializing

For many beginning farmers, life on the farm can be isolating. Beginning farmers may be working in a new area where they don't know many people, or their neighbors might be spread far apart or may not understand their way of farming.

Finding ways to socialize or network, either in person or online, is important for overcoming isolation. Attending workshops or joining local agricultural organizations are some ways beginning farmers can meet other farmers and have opportunities to learn. Networking in farming communities can also provide financial benefits, where equipment sharing and cooperative marketing arrangements, etc. might arise.

Overcoming isolation was important to first generation farmers Genesis McKiernan-Allen and Eli Robb of Full Hand Farm in central Indiana. While Extension services existed in their state, they felt there was nothing geared specifically toward beginning farmers, and by their seventh year of farming, the couple felt isolated.



Indiana farmers, many of them young or beginning, gather for a workshop and mixer organized by the Hoosier Young Farmers Coalition. *Photo by Genesis McKiernan-Allen*

Suspecting that other beginning and young farmers might feel the same, McKiernan-Allen, who has a five-acre vegetable farm, used a SARE grant (FNC17-1089) to build community and comradery by creating a variety of different online and in-person spaces. These spaces allowed young and beginning farmers to engage with various communities that helped them find company and get answers to questions. She worked with like-minded farmers in her area to establish a local chapter of the Hoosier Young Farmers Coalition (HYFC) to provide a permanent structure for networking for new and young farmers.

McKiernan-Allen and Robb's suspicions that other new farmers were looking for connections proved to be correct, as attendance exceeded their expectations. In the first year, they organized almost 25 events and engaged with more than 800 Hoosier farmers. Over the course of two years, they hosted events, sponsored tables at area farm and food conferences, advocated for their needs during farm bill hearings, and created a website and social media accounts for HYFC. They also hosted five young farmer mixers, sent seven young farmers to meet with staffers at their U.S. senator's office regarding the 2018 Farm Bill, distributed four e-newsletters, hosted tables at six farm/food conferences and added an Instagram account to their social media efforts.

Land Ownership and Tenure Options

Many incoming farmers and ranchers don't get land directly from their own families. They have to rent or buy land in other ways. Many private, state and federal programs exist that can link new, landless farmers to retiring farmers and to non-farmers with available farmland. However, according to an Indiana University survey funded through a SARE grant (LNC16-377), these programs are limited partly because of an imbalance: For every farmer seeking a new owner, there are nearly 10 beginning farmers seeking land. Another discrepancy identified was the difference in what farm seekers want and what is offered.

Identify your short- and longer-term objectives when looking into how to access land and establish tenure on it (i.e., your means of holding onto the land). According to *Farm Access Methods: A Decision Guide*, published by Land For Good, the main categories of land tenure are ownership now, ownership in the future, no ownership (tenancy) and some combination of these. Important things to consider when making this decision include security (Under what conditions might I lose the land?), opportunities to build equity, and affordability. The guide outlines three broad strategies for how an individual farmer can make land acquisition more affordable:

THE NEXT GENERATION OF RANCH MANAGERS AND LAND STEWARDS

More than one-third of the non-urban land in the United States, including both publicly and privately owned, is used for ranching. Although grazing has historically contributed significantly to vegetation change, soil erosion, exotic plant invasions and other negative ecological impacts, there is growing awareness of both the importance of grazing for rangelands and the need to adopt conservation management. At the same time, more of the ranchland going up for sale in the West is getting bought by non-ranching investors or landowners as opposed to by the next generation of ranchers. These new owners might want to maintain a ranching operation but lack the expertise to run a profitable operation that uses good stewardship practices. This points to a need for Western land-grant universities to focus on educating professional land managers who are well-trained in both natural resource management and the business of ranching, in order to help carry on ranching traditions while promoting land conservation.

- Decrease the cost of land (e.g., remove the development or other rights through an easement; choose a location with lower land values or that needs improvements; buy less land; or buy land with others)
- Increase your ability to bear the cost (e.g., increase farm profitability; increase off-farm income; or postpone the decision to buy)
- Lease (rent) land instead of buying it (among all manner of leasing models, the lease-to-own option may be available to achieve eventual ownership)

Depending on your resources and goals, a land transaction can vary in terms of the parties involved (e.g., a seller, a landlord, other farmers, investors, lenders, etc.), the legal arrangement made and the rights apportioned. See the Eye on Equity section for a discussion of alternative tenure models, some of which leverage the greater community's values and engagement in financing efforts.

Eye on Equity

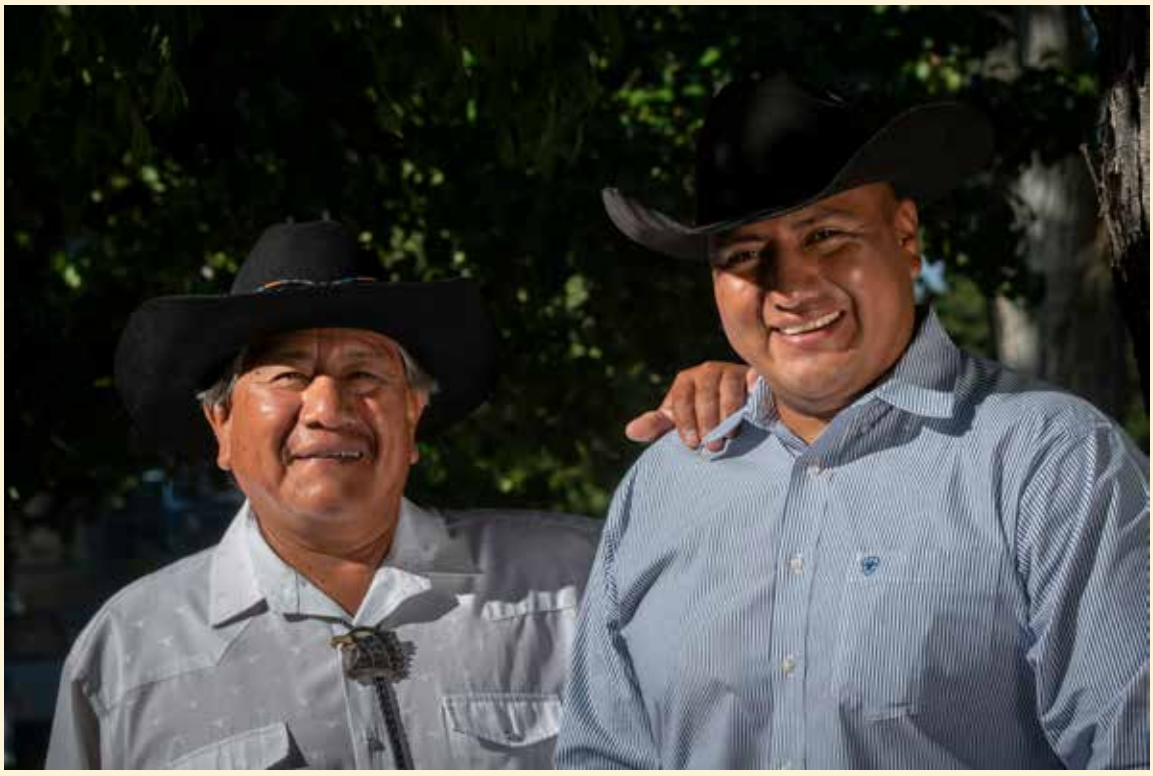
Land is many things to a farmer: the foundation of a livelihood, a source of wealth (if they own it), a source of identity and a connection to the earth. The dispossession of Native Americans and Black and Hispanic farmers of land is one of the sharpest edges of discrimination in the food system and a major contributor to today's wealth gap. The shifting demographics of farmers, rising land costs and, especially in the South and on tribal lands, historic challenges faced by Black, Native American and Hispanic landowners, all have an influence on how land is accessed and preserved for agricultural uses. We can begin to improve equity in land access and succession by understanding the challenges and meeting the needs of beginning farmers and multigenerational farmers of color, and by recognizing the land-based values of our diverse farming cultures.

Diverse Priorities Around Land Tenure and Use

Farms are highly diverse. Along with the wide variety in terms of size and type of operation, farmers themselves are very diverse as people in age, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual and gender identity, and family makeup. With this variety comes a range of personal and cultural priorities that can influence a farmer's approach to farm structure and succession. First-generation farmers, immigrant and refugee farmers, and women operators and landowners are examples of populations whose values and goals may lead them to manage their business differently from the mainstream.

Some may seek out alternative arrangements to access and own land that align more closely with their personal values, such as community land trusts or shared ownership arrangements. (To explore shared ownership, see Land for Good's guide *Accessing Farmland Together: A Decision Tool for Farmers*.) The percentage of farmers who are women is steadily growing, and surveys show they tend to emphasize sustainable principles and practices more so than their male peers. Sometimes female farmers are also linked more strongly to small-scale operations, direct marketing and value-added enterprises. Because of women's increasing importance as operators and landowners, and because of their interest in sustainability, some organizations, such as American Farmland Trust and the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN), are making concerted efforts to reach them with information about conservation practices while encouraging their approaches towards sustainable agriculture.

"Farmland owners who rent out their land have tremendous sway in making agriculture more sustainable, but their power is going largely unused.



Gilbert Louis III (right) and his father Gilbert Louis II (left) are members of the Acoma Pueblo tribe in New Mexico. Louis III participated in a beginning farmer training program for Native Americans through New Mexico State University, and he now carries on the agricultural traditions of his father and tribe. *Photo by Lance Cheung, USDA*

One reason for this is that many of these non-operator landowners are women, who often feel at a disadvantage to their tenants or to their families," says WFAN Interim Executive Director Ahna Kruzic, who used a 2019 SARE grant (ONC19-059) to train women landowners to be sustainability ambassadors to their peers. "We want to change the narrative of women landowners being invisible to being active change agents who understand the sustainable agricultural practices needed on their land, and we want this new narrative to be led by women."

"We want to change the narrative of women landowners being invisible to being active change agents."

—Ahna Kruzic, WFAN

Heirs' Property and Fractionation

Heirs' property and fractionation are two terms that capture a shared experience among Black land owners (heirs' property) and Native Americans (fractionation). The term **heirs' property** refers to land that has been passed down informally from generation to generation, usually because the owner has died without leaving behind a legally binding agreement that identifies specific heirs or an exact planning strategy for the land. When a piece of land becomes heirs' property, it gets divided equally among all living descendants of that family, some of whom may live far away and have no knowledge of or interest in the property. One heir might choose to stay on the land to carry on a farming business, but no one on the agreement actually has a clear title to the property to reflect their ownership. Additionally, although all of the heirs have a shared right to the property, they may have different interests or priorities for its use. When these types of disagreements happen, it can quickly feel impossible for the family members who are farming to access capital from a lender, use government programs or make other important land use decisions. Given its lack of clear ownership rights and high potential for family disagreements, heirs' property is more vulnerable to ownership loss and subsequent development.

Historically, this heirs' property designation has fallen largely on Black-owned land, and it has been identified as one of the primary reasons that Black-owned land has decreased by 80–85% in the last century. It is estimated that today, one third of all Black-owned land in the South falls into this category of heirs' property.

Similarly, **fractionation** began soon after the General Allotment Act of 1887, which attempted to impose white concepts of individual land ownership and management on Native American tribes by dividing up reservation lands and allotting them as parcels to individual tribal members. When the owner died, their parcel was left intact but ownership interests were divided equally among their heirs. Many generations later, a single parcel of land can have hundreds or thousands of owners,

which, among other problems, complicates the ability of tribes to economically develop their lands or improve infrastructure. Cobell v. Salazar, one of the largest class action settlements in U.S. history that addressed federal mismanagement of land stemming from the General Allotment Act, included a $2 billion program in which the federal government would buy back fractionated land and return it to reservations. Fractionation still affects approximately 30% of tribal lands in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains regions.

Many of the solutions to these problems need to occur at the level of state and federal law; for example, in 2021 the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) dropped its long-standing requirement that disaster aid applicants provide documentation of land ownership because it was preventing many Black families from accessing aid. At the individual level, this challenge reinforces the utmost importance of having a legally binding will in place that allows one generation to formally pass land onto the next, or a formal plan to gift land back to a tribe. In the South, many legal organizations provide mediation and legal services to property owners who are facing challenges related to heirs' property, such as the members of the Heirs' Property Retention Coalition (http://hprc.southerncoalition.org/). The USDA offers assistance with heirs' property issues at www.farmers.gov/working-with-us/heirs-property-eligibility.

Alternative Tenure Models

For all the challenges that beginning farmers face, the number one barrier to success is access to affordable land, according to a 2017 survey by the National Young Farmers Coalition. A related constraint identified by the Indiana University survey was a shortfall of on-farm housing. Approximately 75% of farmers and ranchers live on their land, so housing is a critical part of the land-access equation and often the most expensive piece.

There are many approaches that can be viewed as realistic alternatives if acquiring land via a conventional short-term lease or private financing will not work for you. Many of these approaches leverage partnerships with values-based investors, organizations, other farmers, private individuals and local/state/federal entities that are willing to financially support conservation agriculture in their communities. Land access options will vary depending on the level of ownership you seek and the partners or parties you work with. These can include:

Alternative financing. The USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) has ownership, operating and microloan options that are targeted to beginning farmers, women and farmers of color. Community development financial institutions (CDFIs) are private financial institutions that are mission driven and provide lending to less advantaged individuals and communities. Some, like California Farm Link, provide agricultural loans. In addition, there's an emerging trend in crowdsourced funding. In one case, this means using an online platform (some of which specialize in farmland) that pools investment capital for real estate mortgages. In another, it can mean donation-based crowdfunding (not tax deductible), such as asking CSA members for contributions to purchase land or equipment.

Shared ownership. On the surface, forming a limited liability company (LLC) or a corporation might not sound like the solution for you, but these are legal ways to structure your farm operation and pull in multiple investors who share ownership of the assets, including the land. These investors can be other farmers, family members or passive investment partners. Hannah Breckbill and Emily Fagan used this approach to buy eight acres of land in Decorah, Iowa, for their farm, Humble Hands Harvest, which they had previously operated on rented land. Out of environmental concerns, a group of Decorah residents formed an LLC in 2014 to buy a local piece of land in order to prevent it from being sold at auction and turned into a large hog operation. Breckbill, an early investor in the LLC, eventually

Emily Fagan (left) and Hannah Breckbill (right) acquired land for their farm in Decorah, Iowa, by working through a group of local residents interested in land preservation. *Photo courtesy of Practical Farmers of Iowa*

FARMING AND RANCHING ON PUBLIC LAND

Public properties held by local, state and federal entities are another way new farmers and ranchers can access affordable farmland and build community connections. Municipalities, states and federal agencies are often willing to make certain land available for agriculture because they recognize the economic, environmental and community benefits that arise when land is farmed or grazed sustainably.

There's no single approach or model for how to go about accessing public land, and it comes with its own set of challenges. The leasing or permitting process is different than with private land (it may involve a formal bidding process), and it usually takes more time and interpersonal skills to navigate the many agencies within a municipal or state government that will be involved in renting out and overseeing the land.

bought a portion of the land at a discount and moved her farm there, which was an attractive option to the other investors because she and Fagan apply regenerative farming practices to their land.

Cooperatives can also be used to acquire land and make it available to its members. In each of these cases, much planning and work needs to go into both establishing rules for how the legal entity will function and in maintaining its legal status. They also have different considerations as far as taxation, liability and asset sharing. Learn more at www.sare.org/resources/farmers-guide-to-business-structures.

Partial ownership. There are a few different arrangements possible that share a common principle: The farmer holds some rights and interests in a piece of land, and another party holds other rights. Easements are a common example, where a government institution or land conservancy pays a landowner in exchange for certain rights on how the land can be used. Farmland with an agricultural conservation easement on it will be more affordable to a new farmer because it no longer has development value. Or, a beginning farmer might negotiate with a conservation land trust to acquire an unprotected property, where the trust first buys the property, then places an easement on it and finally sells it to the farmer at its lower value. Another emerging concept is a ground lease, where one entity that owns the land (usually a conservation land trust or other similar entity) provides a long-term lease to a farmer tenant. The farmer has the option to buy existing structures or to build new ones, which they would then own and which would provide a source of equity.

Tenancy. As more agricultural land changes hands, and as communities and institutions place increasing value on preserving rural places, the variety of potential landlords is likewise increasing. These can include non-farming spouses or children of a deceased farmer, distant city dwellers who own investment properties, land trusts and conservation organizations, municipalities that hold conservation lands, churches or religious orders, intentional communities, conservation-based nonprofits, CSA members who own land, and schools and universities. Oftentimes, landlords such as these will be guided by a conservation ethic and might therefore be willing to negotiate more favorable terms out of a desire to support local food systems and to see their land farmed sustainably.

For more information, consult Land for Good's guide *Farm Access Methods: A Decision Guide*.

Part Three:
Health and Wellbeing

THE AGRICULTURAL PROFESSION IS UNIQUE IN THE many ways it can influence health and wellbeing. For example, farming and ranching is oftentimes physically demanding and dangerous, and it can also be isolating and stressful. Success is often influenced by many things beyond a farmer's control, from weather to markets to pest or disease outbreak, as well as relationships with family and business partners. Also, on family farms there is often little, if any, boundary between work and home, which presents additional risks to health and wellbeing.

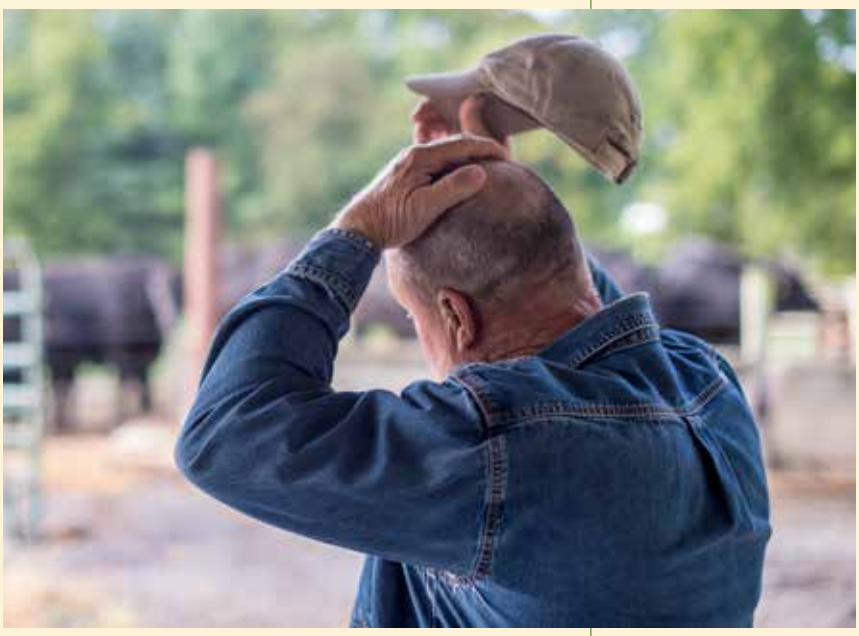
At the same time, many rural communities have less health care available than communities in metropolitan areas. For example, the majority of U.S. communities that are dealing with a shortage of primary care physicians and mental health

professionals are in rural locations. This shortage, along with social stigmas around personal health problems, a lack of privacy in small, tight-knit communities and high health care costs, can all contribute to farmers neglecting their health and wellbeing.

Although all health risks are connected, farmer health and wellbeing issues generally fall into categories:

- Access to health care
- Physical health and safety
- Mental health and stress management
- Personal satisfaction and happiness

You are the most important piece of equipment on your farm. If you don't get regular maintenance and repair when your body breaks down, you can't make decisions or do the work that needs to be done.



The long hours, demanding work and many risk factors associated with agriculture can easily take their toll on physical and mental health if not carefully managed. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*

Access to Health Insurance and Health Care

Health care costs and access to good insurance and coverage are nationwide problems, and farmers are no exception. Often, one partner works off the farm just to obtain affordable health insurance, which decreases the time they have available to farm.

In fact, according to a 2017 study, "lack of access to affordable health insurance is one of the most significant concerns facing American farmers, an overlooked risk factor that affects their ability to run a successful enterprise." According to Shoshanah Inwood, a rural sociologist at Ohio State University, who co-authored this study, "The rising cost of health care and the availability of affordable health insurance have joined more traditional risk factors like access to capital, credit and land as major sources of worry for farmers."

A hospital in Gonzales, Texas, that serves a rural population. *Photo by Lance Cheung, USDA*

Because the insurance marketplace is highly complex and health-related costs can pose a serious risk to personal and business finances, farmers need to be educated consumers. The universities of Maryland and Delaware Extension partnered to offer a Health Insurance Literacy Initiative that includes many online resources useful for educators, consumers and farmers as they navigate their options.

Physical Health and Safety

Farming is, by its nature, a physically dangerous profession. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the fatality rate for agricultural workers is seven times higher than that of all other workers in private industry. Transportation-related incidents (including tractor overturns) are the leading cause of death for farmers and farmworkers on crop and livestock operations.

Farmers also experience pain and disability at a higher rate than other professions. Due to the demanding workload and short labor supply, many farmers feel pressured to continue working when experiencing pain or fatigue, putting them at even higher risk of serious injury. Exposure to harmful chemicals, airborne particulates, ultraviolet light and extreme weather also pose both short- and long-term risks to farmers and farmworkers.

Staying Safe on the Farm

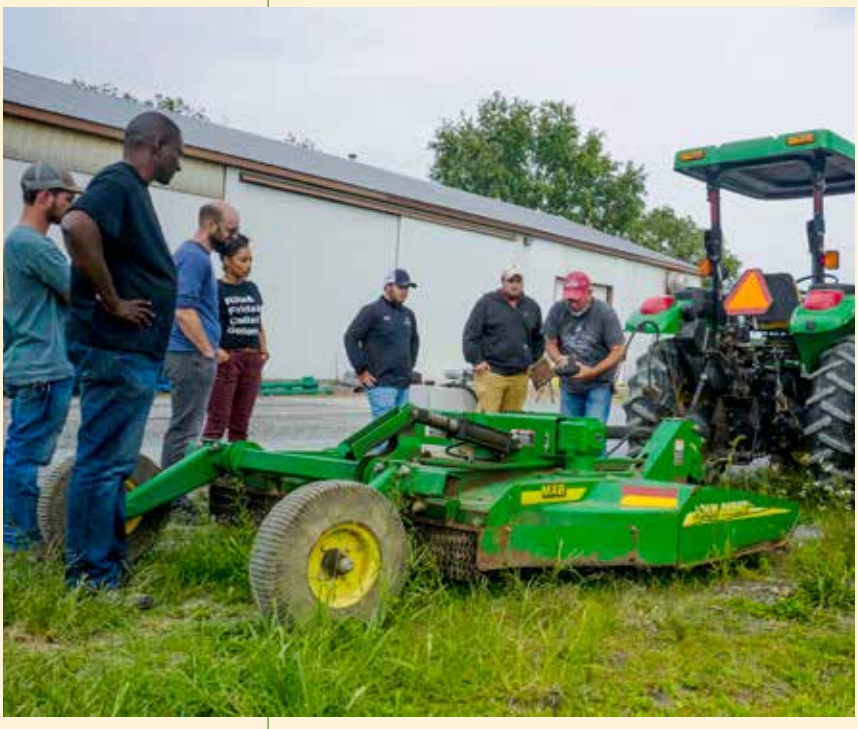
New Mexico State University Cooperative Extension recommends completing a full farm safety audit to identify and rank risk areas before they lead to accidents. They provide a checklist that includes areas of building safety, fire prevention, electrical systems, workshops, fields and lanes, tractor safety and pesticide storage. The audit allows you to check "yes" or "no" to each question and then list whether the hazard is major (life threatening), serious (injury possible) or minor (not likely to cause significant injury or property loss).

Another good resource for farm safety comes from the University of Wisconsin, Madison's "Top 10 Farm Safety Tips," which covers such areas as proper training, equipment maintenance and safe use, and precautions in dangerous situations.

There are many safety-related resources available to agricultural employers and agricultural service providers to help improve conditions on the farm. Some examples:

- The Centers for Agricultural Safety and Health
- The National Center for Farmworker Health
- The National Education Center for Agricultural Safety
- The National Tractor Safety Coalition

University of Maryland students learn about tractor safety during a class at the Central Maryland Research and Education Center in Ellicott City, Md. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*



PESTICIDE SAFETY

Following safety protocols for storing, handling and applying pesticides can greatly reduce the health risks they pose to you, your workers and others. For example, keep a dedicated storage room exclusively for pesticides and control access to it; wear the appropriate protective gear when handling chemicals; mix them in well-ventilated areas; and always read and follow label instructions.

You can find reliable information from Extension programs like The Ohio State University's Agricultural Safety and Health Program (https://agsafety.osu.edu/). (See the related box "Safety Training on the Farm.")

Also, you may be able to reduce pesticide use and cost by adopting ecological pest management practices. Check out the SARE bulletin *A Whole-Farm Approach to Managing Pests* (www.sare.org/whole-farm-approach-to-managing-pests) to learn more.

Maintaining Physical Health

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that farmers are at high risk for work-related lung diseases (due to allergenic pollen and molds, and particulates), noise-induced hearing loss, skin diseases and cancers (due to sun exposure), tick-borne diseases and heat stress. Recent projections from state departments of health also suggest that these risks will increase due to climate change. Therefore, be sure to always wear protective equipment, like hearing protectors and respirators, and to apply sunscreen and insect repellant. Visit your primary care doctor regularly and discuss any areas of concern regarding exposure risks.

Physical injury can also come from not paying attention to your own physical condition or the connection between your physical state and mental health. For example, being tired and stressed can lead to increased physical injuries and also to burn out. To avoid physical injury, listen to your body. Too often, farmers push themselves to exhaustion rather than pay attention to simply being tired. Pain is an important signal that something's not right. If you find yourself in pain or feel tired, take frequent breaks and rest.

If you find it difficult to break a habit of over working, begin by scheduling short breaks during the day. When you take a break, try to switch off completely. Find fun activities that let you switch off and that make you feel energized or refreshed, and give yourself time for them. Regular physical activity—30 minutes a day

where you raise your heartbeat lightly and break a sweat—can reduce stiffness, the risk of diabetes and weight gain, as well as improve mental health.

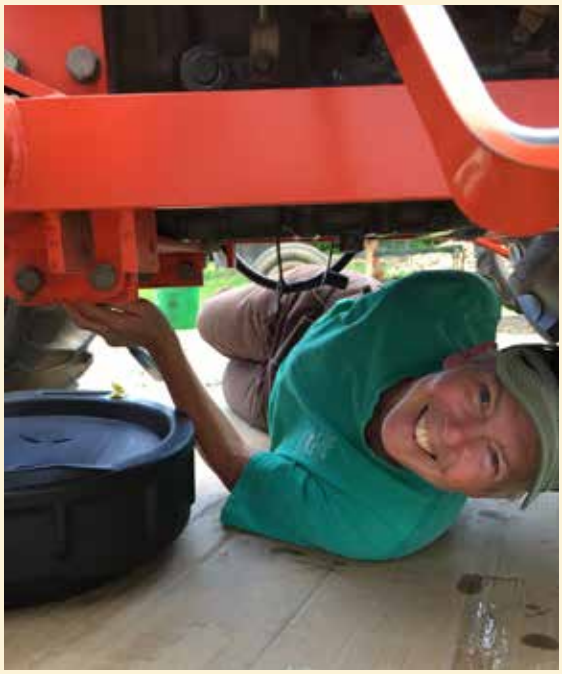
Health Concerns for Women

Women tend to be smaller than men, to have different body proportions and to have different health concerns. For example, tools and equipment are typically designed for men, making them too big, too heavy or unsafe for women to use and increasing risk for physical injury. The Ag Safety and Health Community of Practice (https://ag-safety.extension.org/women-in-agriculture), a collaborative network of agricultural service providers, maintains a collection of resources that addresses the specific health and safety issues many women face on the farm.

University of Vermont Extension educator Beth Holtzman organizes tractor safety resources for beginning farmers, including workshops especially for women farmers. The woman-centered approach helps participants feel more comfortable with a subject that can be intimidating, and it allows them to learn more effectively. "I think the fact that it was all women participating in the course was empowering and a connecting experience," says one participant who attended one of Holtzman's workshops that was funded by a 2013 SARE grant (ENE13-127). "It was less stressful and frustrating, and I enjoyed it that much more." The project website (https://blog.uvm.edu/groundwk/) includes guides, recorded webinars, slide presentations and other resources that could be of use to both farmers and service providers outside Vermont.

People of child-bearing age are at even higher risk of exposure to chemicals, diseases and hormones because they can affect fertility. Even if you are not pregnant, certain kinds of exposure can carry over for months or years. Exposure may come from your own direct contact with a harmful substance or it can be indirect, like washing clothes that have pesticides on them.

For those who are pregnant, other risks increase substantially. Contact with tissues or blood of animals with diseases such as brucellosis, or accidental needle sticks, can cause miscarriages. Swine barns can have dangerously high carbon monoxide levels, which can lead to fetal brain damage or death. Other zoonotic infections such as brucellosis, Q fever and listeria, and exposure to salmonella, toxoplasmosis and insect-borne diseases can also be dangerous for you and your fetus. Talk to your doctor about the kind of risks to be aware of on your own farm.



Vermont farmer Terry Marron participates in a tractor safety course designed for women, offered by University of Vermont Extension educators. *Photo by Susan Hodgson, University of Vermont Extension*

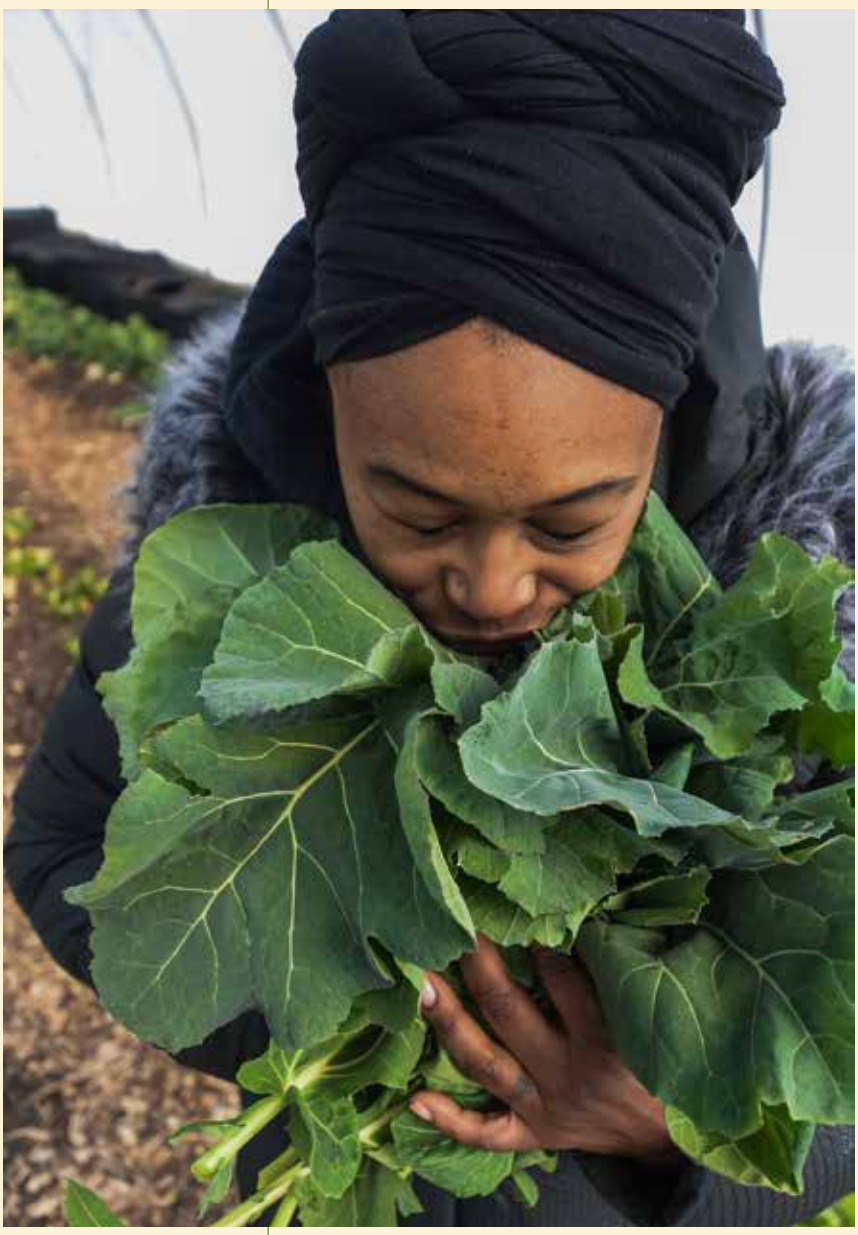
Mental Health and Stress Management

Mental health, which includes emotional, psychological and social wellbeing, affects how we think, feel and act. It also plays an important role in how we manage stress, how we feel about ourselves, how we relate to others and how we make healthy choices.

Farmers and ranchers have one of the most stressful and emotionally demanding jobs in the world due to how much is beyond their control. Farmers have to deal with risk associated with extreme weather, market fluctuations, diseases and pests, and changes in interest rates, regulations and policy. Compounding these stress factors is the fact that many farmers often work in social and geographic isolation, and have heavy workloads that leave them with little personal time. Men in particular may have a mentality to diminish the importance of their own health, often preferring to "tough it out" when experiencing problems.

As a result, farmers are at very high risk for anxiety, depression and suicide. Suicide rates in agriculture are among the highest by occupation in the country, and farmers carry their work stress into their personal and/or family time. The National Farmers Union maintains a Farm Crisis Center that compiles resources on suicide prevention, mediation, disaster relief and pandemic support at https://farmcrisis.nfu.org.

When the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) held workshops in 2018 to teach agricultural advisors how to recognize and respond to farmers in



Sharrona Moore is the founder of Lawrence Community Gardens, a nonprofit farm on 7.6 acres in Lawrence, Ind., that involves local youth in its operations and provides food-insecure communities access to fresh produce. *Photo by Brandon O'Connor, Indiana NRCS*

distress, the feedback was so strong that Senior Advisor Meg Moynihan then used a SARE grant (ENC18-170) to expand her department's mental-health-related offerings. Partnering with the state's health department, Extension service, FSA office, farm and commodity groups, and others, Moynihan organized training workshops on suicide prevention and bereavement, how to support young people's mental health, skills for navigating conflict and stressful situations, and other topics. The group's audience included federal agency staff, state government staff, Extension and other agricultural educators, lenders, clergy, veterinarians and other agricultural advisors.

They had hoped to reach 400 service providers over two years, but instead 1,500 people attended their events, underscoring how desperate many agricultural communities are for stress-related information and resources. "Although a lot of the information is 'common sense' in retrospect, it's a topic we don't break down and think about," reported one program participant.

The three-hour workshop, called "Down on the Farm," is available to educators as a kit that can be offered online or in person at www.mda.state.mn.us/down-farm-training-kit.

Reducing Stress and Managing Depression

Whether you are a farmer, a family member, an educator or a friend, you don't need to be a mental health expert to recognize and support a person in your life who might be struggling with depression or stress. (See the box "Recognize the Warning Signs of Depression.") Steps you can take include learning some of the common signs of mental health challenges, normalizing mental health by talking openly about the subject and knowing how to help someone find professional help when it might be needed. More and more, state departments of agriculture and health are responding to the problems of depression, substance abuse and suicide among rural populations. The National Farm Bureau runs a mental health program that includes information on training, warning signs, resources and ways to get help (www.fb.org/land/fsom).

If you or someone you care about is experiencing any signs of depression, you should talk openly with someone you trust. Also, seek help from a professional. It's important, however, to seek help from professionals who work specifically with farmers and who understand the specific needs and limitations of farmers and rural communities, if such specialists are available in your area. These might include physicians, clergy, personal coaches, mental health counselors, guidance counselors, therapists and psychologists, and clinical social workers.

Doug Kramer, a retired farmer in northwestern Minnesota, decided to see a therapist during the 1980s farm crisis, despite being hesitant at first. "The first few times I went, I felt like I didn't want anyone to know or to see me," he says "But after a couple visits, I guess I didn't care if anyone saw me because I knew I needed help." Listen to his entire story in Red River Farm Network's TransFARMation podcast episode from June 3, 2019, *It's OK to Not Be OK*.

RECOGNIZE THE WARNING SIGNS OF DEPRESSION

Common warning signs of stress, depression and suicidal thoughts:

- Change in routines or social behavior
- Decline in the care of domestic animals
- Increase in illness or other chronic conditions
- Increase in farm accidents
- Decline in appearance of the farmstead
- Decreased interest in activities or events
- Struggling in school (for children)
- Excessive sadness or moodiness
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions, or memory problems
- Changes in appetite and sleep
- Irritability, restlessness or acting agitated
- Expressing feelings of hopelessness and/or suicide ideation

Focusing on your physical, mental and emotional health can manage stress before it becomes a serious problem. For example, try to:

» **Get moving.** Exercise gives you energy and is a known stress reliever. Stress produces chemicals in the body that become harmful when they remain at a high level over time. Exercise provides an outlet for these chemicals.

» **Get enough sleep and eat right.** Rest replenishes your body and mind; a well-balanced diet is essential to your overall wellbeing. Drink more water and fewer caffeinated drinks because caffeine can add to feelings of stress and contributes to dehydration. If you have trouble sleeping, talk with your doctor about it sooner rather than later.

» **Manage your time.** Keeping organized can help you feel in control of your busy schedule and prevent the feeling of being overwhelmed. For example, you could maintain a calendar of important dates and a prioritized list of daily and long-term tasks. Checking items off gives many people a sense of accomplishment.

» **Make time for yourself.** Carve out some time to do the things you enjoy and find relaxing, even if you can only start with a few minutes here and there.

» **Recognize substance abuse.** The risk of abusing alcohol, tobacco or drugs increases with high levels of stress. Don't be afraid to speak up if you or someone you care about is experiencing a substance abuse problem.

» **Assert yourself.** Don't try to please everybody. Practice saying "no."

» **Express yourself.** It may be difficult to talk about your thoughts and feelings, but open communication with people you trust is constructive and healthy.

» **Think positively.** Be aware of negative thoughts and try to focus on the positive. Accept that there are some things you cannot control, and focus your time and energy on the things you can control. Sometimes, focusing on positive thoughts can result in more positive feelings and actions.

» **Maintain a sense of humor.** Laughter truly is the best medicine, and it is a proven stress reducer because it increases hormones that make us feel good.

Agricultural service providers can help farmers cope with stress too, even without having a background in mental health. Some relatively simple examples include encouraging local networking and socializing opportunities or providing practical resources that help farmers maintain control over their life and business, like financial and business planning tools, or training on interpersonal skills (how to communicate openly and effectively) and time management.

The Importance of Interpersonal Skills

Good interpersonal skills, or the ability to communicate and interact effectively with others, are a critical and often overlooked aspect of running a farm business. Honing your interpersonal skills contributes to mental health because the ability to communicate well with family members, employees, partners and others involved in your business can ease many sources of stress. While disagreements over important topics are a part of life, they can create tension and stress when people feel they aren't being heard or when a misunderstanding arises. Examples of good interpersonal skills include being able to:

» Listen actively, with respect and patience

» Mediate conflicts or differences of opinion

» Recognize and accept when others' ideas are better than your own

Focusing on your physical, mental and emotional health can manage stress before it becomes a serious problem.

Good interpersonal skills include the ability to negotiate conflict and work with others toward shared goals. They are an essential part of farm management.
Photo by Preston Keres, USDA

- Identify when personality differences (including your own) are becoming a barrier to collaboration, and figure out how to overcome them
- Work effectively as a team toward a common goal
- Present yourself as an agreeable and reliable person to work with
- Speak up about topics that are important to you
- Give everyone a chance to voice their opinions
- Seek to understand a different opinion or perspective
- Resist the temptation to be critical or judgmental

Oftentimes it's helpful to hold regular meetings with business partners and family members where each person feels comfortable discussing difficult topics in a respectful environment.

Happiness and Personal Satisfaction

Although seeking happiness and personal satisfaction is a fairly universal goal, people follow different paths to achieve it. On the farm, where your personal life and your work are inextricably linked, achieving happiness and personal satisfaction takes on a special set of considerations. Being able to make a living and maintain a good quality of life in a challenging profession are at the top of most farmers' lists. Many are also guided by core values tied to sustainability, healthy food, community engagement and wanting to be good stewards of the earth. Multi-generational farmers frequently have the additional goal of keeping the farm viable across generations.

Happiness and personal satisfaction are highly individual goals that are specific to each farmer or farm family. What are your core values about your life on the farm? What do you enjoy the most, and where can you make improvements? These are not just questions to bear in mind; you can also use the answers as guiding principles in business planning.

Consider the various ways that you might define your own happiness and personal satisfaction, and think about which ones are the most important to you and which ones are less important. Some common ones you might reflect on include:

- Stable personal relationships
- Meaningful social and professional relationships
- A sense of identity and self-determination
- Empowerment, or feeling like you have a voice
- A strong sense of community and social support
- Work and family balance
- Your farm-related values (e.g., environmental sustainability)

Work and Family Balance

As mentioned in the physical and mental health sections, prioritizing your tasks and how you spend your time can make a great difference to your individual wellbeing. It also affects the stability of your family. But when you work where you live and long hours are required on the job, it can be difficult to distinguish between work and family. Can you distinguish between work that is urgent and work that is important?

To ward off overwork before it happens and to create more time for both family and yourself, consider using the "three P strategy": prioritize, plan and pace. To prioritize, for example, separate out daily jobs (e.g., milking and feeding) from seasonal projects (e.g., cultivating or spraying) and additional projects that can be done anytime (e.g., maintenance). First, focus on daily activities that need to be done, and spread out your tasks to leave more time for rest. Once you prioritize essential tasks, you can plan out the day or week and figure out how to pace yourself so that you can create free time for yourself or your family.

If tension arises because of a conflict between work and personal schedules, focus on communication. If everyone knows the "set-in-stone" deadlines versus the flexible ones, it can help the family understand where you can budge and where you can't. This can be particularly important during hectic times on the farm, such as planting and harvesting. Most importantly, effective communication like this builds solidarity in the family and helps everyone feel that they are on the same team. It also helps ensure that key things get attended to.

Eye on Equity

We've already seen that rural communities lack adequate access to health care because of limited insurance options, high costs and rural hospital closures. For many rural and farming populations, health care access is further complicated by many layers of inequity, including:

- Rural minority populations experience more health issues, higher poverty and poorer access to quality health care than white rural populations.
- Good insurance options for the self employed are harder to come by.
- Access to health care options varies based on citizenship.
- Some traditional cultural norms discourage recognizing and meeting one's own needs.

Educators can learn about the needs of specific communities in their area and about the resources that are available to them. Look for ways to incorporate health and wellbeing information into your outreach, such as folding it into farm business management programming.

Farmers should be sensitive to the health and wellbeing of their employees. If you have full-time employees, try to offer them the best health insurance you can afford, and encourage them to take time off and vacations during slower periods on the farm. Inadequate health benefits put your workers at an

If tension arises because of a conflict between work and personal schedules, focus on communication.

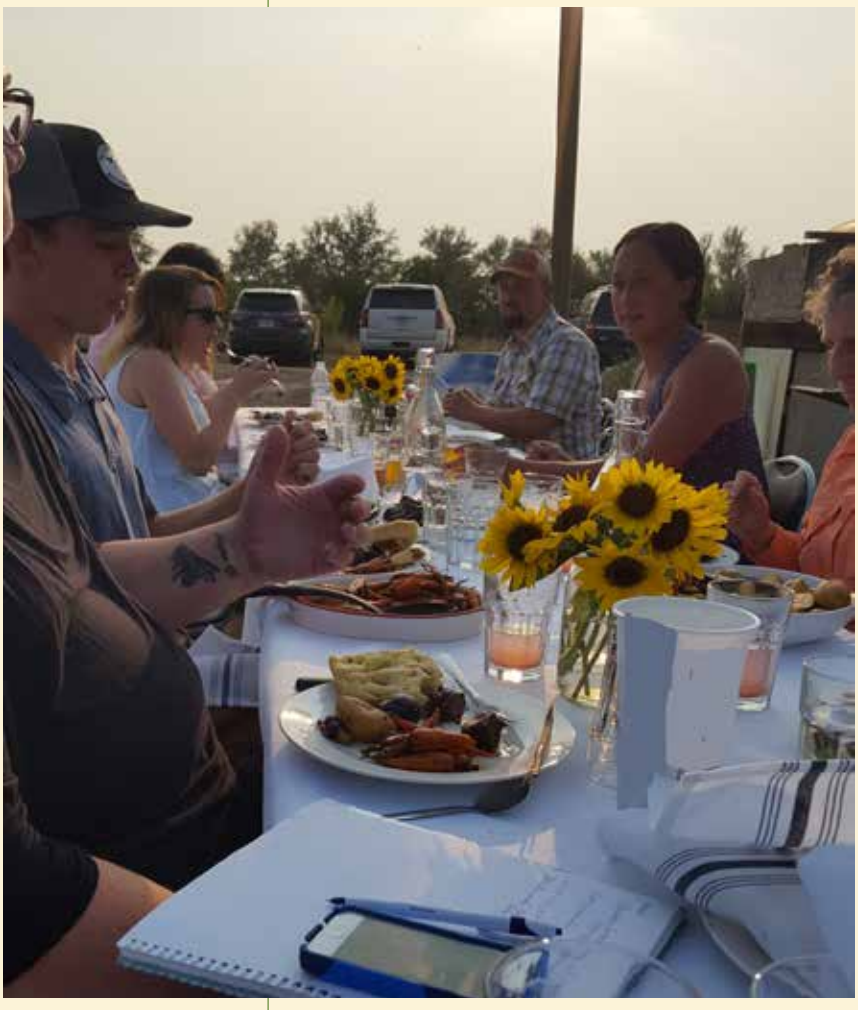
Tracy Potter-Fins (left) and Bethany Stanbery (right) with their daughter at their farm in Huson, Mont. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*

economic and quality of life disadvantage, whereas good benefits are a valuable form of compensation that will help you attract and retain talented, motivated employees.

Health Care for Farmworkers

Migrant and seasonal farmworkers, who are among the most economically and socially disadvantaged populations in the country, face multiple barriers to accessing health care. These can include frequent mobility, language and cultural barriers, lack of health insurance, lack of transportation and the cost of medical services. At the same time, 75% of farmworkers are either U.S. citizens or are authorized to work in the United States.

Both educators and farm operators who employ seasonal workers should be aware of the federally funded system of health centers established to provide primary and behavioral health care services to uninsured populations and people with Medicaid and Medicare. Within this system are migrant health centers that are equipped with additional resources to effectively serve farmworkers, such as mobile units, outreach workers and interpretation staff. These centers provide health services to an estimated 20% of the country's farmworker population. A searchable map of health centers is at https://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov and a map of migrant health centers is at www.ncfh.org/migrant-health-centers.html. The National Center for Farmworker Health also hosts a national referral hotline (1-800-377-9968) for farmworkers seeking assistance in locating health care services. The Migrant Clinicians Network offers case management services for farmworkers and can help with the transfer of medical records.



A farm-to-table dinner held in Malta, Mont., hosted by the Alternative Energy Resources Organization (AERO) as part of an initiative to grow the local food economy. The event was attended by AERO staff, farmers and local food industry representatives. *Photo courtesy AERO*

Part Four:
Community Connections

FARMERS AND RANCHERS ARE WELL KNOWN FOR having a strong sense of community. We usually think of community in terms of our neighbors. However, the value of community in our lives as both farmers and business owners goes beyond the people who live in the same place as us. "Community" can mean our neighbors, but it can also include people who live far away and those who share the same background, interests, or experiences.

In agriculture as in life, community can exist at various economic, geographic, political, cultural and social levels. Perhaps there are other farmers in your area who might be interested in marketing cooperatively to improve sales. What about other farmers you might chat with or follow on social media and who share your philosophy about farming practices and are a source of advice? Who else in your town might get equally riled up as you do about changes to zoning laws? How can you engage with your non-farming neighbors in a positive way that earns their respect and support for the contributions you make to the community? These are all examples of ways to think about community and how community can improve both the sustainability of your operation and the health of the community where you live.

Farmers in Montana are taking a grassroots, values-based approach to strengthening regional food economies through a project called the Montana Food Economy Initiative. Organized by the nonprofit Alternative Energy Resources Organization (AERO) and funded by two SARE grants (OW17-026 and RGR20-009), the project has brought together stakeholders to create strategic plans for growing the local food economy in four regions of the state. By their estimates, replacing 15% of out-of-state agricultural products with in-state products could generate $134 million of new income for Montana's farmers. In such an ambitious project, AERO has discovered that relationships are vital to success, and that cultivating them takes time.

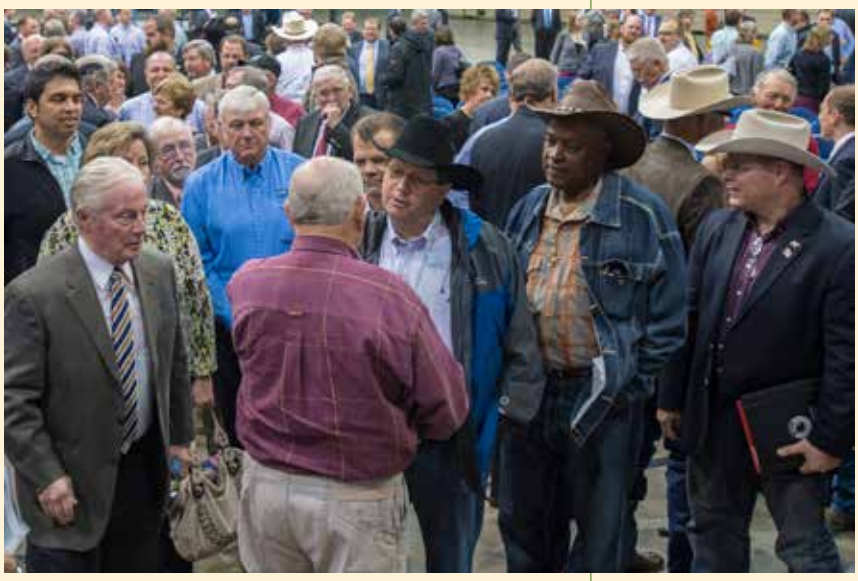
"It helps to have—and commit to—real relationships in a community to facilitate this type of work," says AERO Co-Executive Director Lindsay Ganong. "An authentic interest and willingness to learn new things about a community and the people there, as well as openness to adjust how you do things, is vital."

The Value of Community Capital

In economics, the term capital generally refers to financial assets that businesses can draw on to support their operations and produce something to sell. Social scientists, however, use the term capital much more broadly, referring to what are known as community capitals to help build community. Community capitals are like financial capital in that they represent assets that can help you and your business thrive. These forms of capital are available to all farmers to varying degrees, and they are particularly useful in communities with a deficit of financial and built (infrastructure) capital; such areas are likely to exhibit greater levels of poverty and inequality, and may need to rely more on social and human forms of capital.

Different types of community capital include:

» **Human.** The wide collection of skills and information embodied in a community that can be applied to community needs. One way you can invest in human capital is by hiring local teenagers for certain jobs and providing them with opportunities to build up their farming skills. Not only can you cultivate talented labor, you help ensure the next generation will want to remain within farming communities.



Farmers talk with former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue after a town hall meeting in Kansas City, Mo. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*

» **Social.** The social relationships shaped by bonds between individuals and among groups that can be drawn on for information and assistance. Trusting relationships developed over time enable community members to cooperate more effectively to set and pursue shared goals or respond to problems.

» **Natural.** Natural resources found in a community, such as land, water and soil. Healthy ecosystems benefit the whole community by being more resilient, more attractive and better for health.

» **Built.** The infrastructure and facilities available to a community, such as transportation, telecommunications or industry. Equitable access to a wide array of well-maintained infrastructure is essential to the economic health of a community.

» **Cultural.** The worldview and traditions that shape how a community interacts and the perceptions, goals and motivations of its members. Shared values of sustainability, fairness and service can lead to many positive changes in a community.

» **Political.** Access to policy decision making with people in positions of power and authority. Policymakers make better decisions when more people can communicate their diverse, on-the-ground perspectives and priorities.

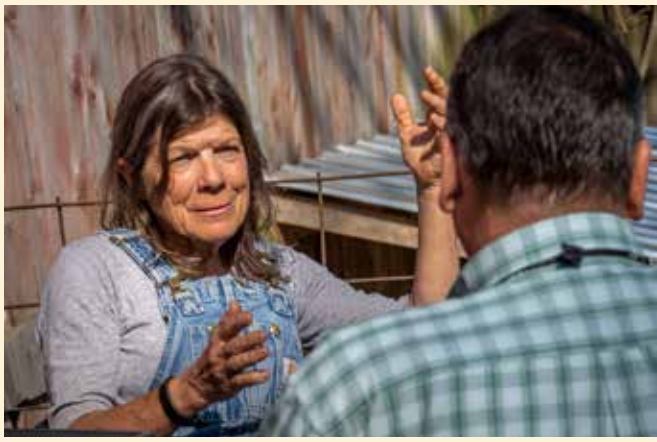
Key to community connections is the process of building and maintaining relationships, shared values and institutions.

Connections on the Farm and Ranch

Key to community connections is the process of building and maintaining the relationships, shared values and institutions that help create and maintain community.

In agriculture, community connections focus on the quality of relationships among farmers and between farmers and the non-farming communities in which they live (people for whom agricultural interests and values might be important but are not of the highest importance in their daily lives). These relationships occur at many levels. For example:

- **A sense of place.** Do you feel that you belong in your community? Do you have a positive attachment to your community, socially and culturally? Do you have mostly positive interactions with others in your community? For example, learning about the natural and human history of your area might motivate you to engage with others to enact positive change, such as efforts to preserve your local environment, history and culture, and this can contribute to a sense of personal fulfillment.
- **Civic engagement.** Are you able to contribute to local organizations and/or services? Can you participate in local activities and community life? Can you influence how agriculture is incorporated into your town's master plan? Is there active participation via social interactions and social networks in your community? Participating in local advisory boards, agricultural associations or public meetings can empower you, which makes you feel like you have a voice on issues that affect you but might otherwise feel like they're beyond your control.
- **Regional presence of agriculture.** How much other agriculture is there in your region? Is all of the food produced being exported or can you obtain much of your food locally or regionally? Can it be promoted? For example, in western North Carolina, the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project has engaged in long-term efforts to promote local foods as a way of creating new opportunities for area farmers who struggle with commodity markets.
- **Community pride.** Do you have pride in your community? Does your community band together to support each other when some or all are faced with hard times? For example, in response to the economic and supply chain turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a group of Midwestern commodity farmers began devoting some of their acreage to "chaos gardens." With minimal effort, they planted vegetables as cover crops that local food banks and members of the community were invited to harvest.
- **Community stability and safety.** Do you feel free and safe to interact with and participate in the community? Is your community mostly free of crime and disorder, or are agricultural crimes common, such as property damage or theft of valuable livestock, machinery, supplies or crops?
- **Shared understanding.** Is there a shared understanding between farmers and the community about what happens on farms? Are neighbor relations positive? Does your community see farming as part of the local culture? Engaging with the community at large, be it through local marketing or through participation in local government and public events, is an effective way of sharing with others both your personal values and your value to the community.
- **Equity.** Does your community have local access to information, inputs and expertise? Do all citizens/farmers have equal access to financial and social resources? For example, is there broadband access planning in your community, and does it provide opportunities for farmers and agriculture? Or, are there farmers in your community whose first language isn't English, and are there resources available to help them access information that is available to native speakers?



Dominique Herman, a farmer in Warwick, N.Y., hosts a local county official to talk about operations on her farm. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*

Social Relationships and Shared Values

Strong social networks between peers, fellow community members and those who work with farmers help support farm businesses and the families that rely on them.

Beyond having a positive impact on health and wellbeing, research also suggests that strong community connections lead to enhanced economic development and improved democracy. Recognizing the role that strong relationships play in advancing their cause, the AERO project in Montana includes an intensive training program for producers and agriculture professionals to develop their coalition-building skills and improve their ability to lead local food initiatives.

Social networks can take many forms, and while social media is one of them, we are talking about much more than that. The form they take and the value they provide can vary depending on whom you are trying to connect with, where they are located and why you're connecting. If you're an educator, understanding the needs and strengths of these networks can help you provide better support to your farmer clients.

Farmer-to-Farmer Social Networks

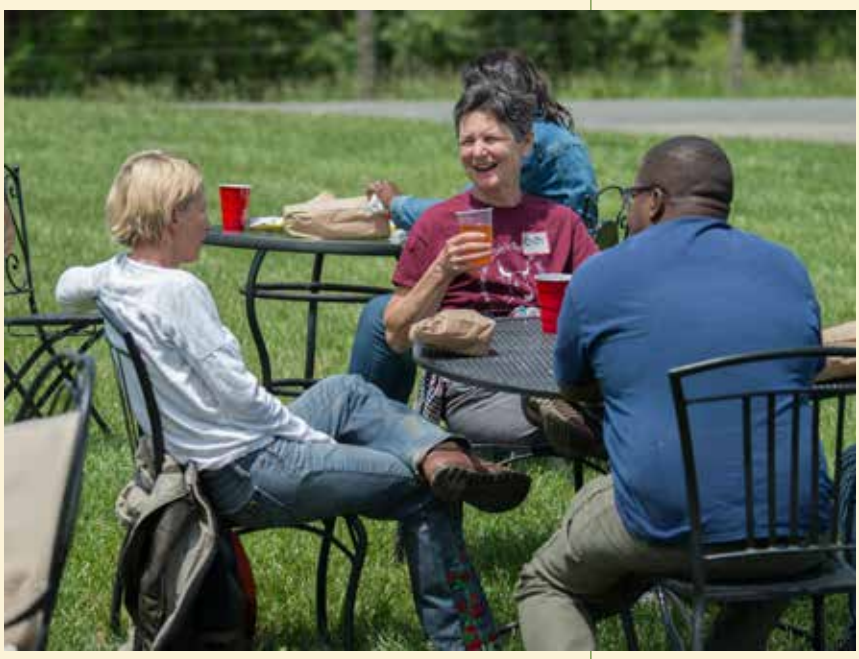
Connecting with other farmers is a powerful way to improve your own farming practices, gain new business opportunities, create a more favorable public environment for farming, respond to unexpected challenges and increase your sense of fulfillment. Consider the many ways you can create or join both formal and informal farmer-to-farmer networks.

Peer networks. Peer networks might include learning circles or farmer meetings, and they can be used to share information and socialize. Basically, they are any loosely structured educational event, often focused on a specific topic, that allows farmers to learn from each other. They are especially helpful in a local setting and for beginning or young farmers. Existing networks should include a formal or informal mechanism to find and welcome in new farmers. Just as increasing biodiversity is a time-tested way to make a farm more resilient, striving for a diverse network of people will bring you more experiences, perspectives and ideas that help you when solving problems or pursuing new opportunities.

In Minnesota, the Hmong American Partnership and University of Minnesota (UMN) Extension partnered with an advisory board of Hmong farmers to organize farmer-to-farmer outreach on the topic of on-farm food safety Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs), in a project funded by a SARE grant (ONC16-016). The group learned that the key to a successful peer-to-peer project was to focus first on those farmers who are most motivated to engage, and then let them become mentors to others over time. In this case, it was a handful of farmers who wanted to scale up to wholesale markets, where GAP documentation is usually required.

"Many who sell at farmers markets care about food safety in general but not enough to develop a food safety plan or even attend a workshop," says UMN Food Safety Educator Annalisa Hultberg, a project leader. "The peer mentors are now able to offer this information to their peer farmers, encouraging them to attend a food safety workshop or field day led by the mentors."

Conferences and meetings. In-person events are not only a great place to learn about new techniques and equipment, they're also valuable for networking, socializing and expanding your horizons. These events are typically organized around a shared value or identity of some kind that can cross political and other divides, such as organic production, women farmers or a particular commodity. This gives them the potential to build dialog around other issues that attendees might view differently.



Farmers chat during a break at a workshop held on the Lakota Ranch in Remington, Va. *Photo by Lance Cheung, USDA*

Farmer-to-Community Social Networks

Today, many farmers and their non-farming neighbors lack a shared sense of identity, especially in rural areas that are seeing population growth driven by the arrival of exurban, non-farming residents. This can lead to misunderstandings and less community solidarity, but the trend can also be reversed when people in the community see the positive role farming can play in their own quality of life.

Fostering a positive relationship with the community commonly involves activities like agritourism or public events, direct marketing or social media efforts. First, you should have a sound marketing plan in place to ensure any investment you make in this area is likely to provide a good financial return. Part of a good plan is having appropriate marketing materials that share your personal and farming values with the public to help them understand and appreciate your work, and even see themselves in it.

Not only can you create new income streams from activities like U-pick, farmers markets, farm dinners or harvest festivals, you're also educating the public on "where their food comes from" and providing them an opportunity to participate in it. Raising awareness of farming activities may help solidify positive community attitudes toward agriculture within your region, and it can turn the general public into advocates for issues that are important to you.

For Shakera and Juan Raygoza of Terra Preta Farm in Edinburg, Texas, community support was vital to allowing them to put high tunnels on their land. They've gained a presence in the community through their CSA and farmers market customers, by hosting field trips and allowing families to visit the farm on weekends, and by working with the local university on beginning farmer training programs. At first, local zoning laws prohibited the Raygozas from building high tunnels within the city limits, but through extensive petitioning from their supporters and with some favorable media coverage, they were able to convince local officials to grant them an exemption. "We support our community, and they showed up for us," Shakera Raygoza says. "And now they're reaping the benefits of all the produce we're growing [in our high tunnels]."

Hear their story in their own words at www.sare.org/terra-preta-community.

You can take positive community relations a step further by partnering with local educators, nonprofits and other farmers in local or regional initiatives that address environmental stewardship or public health. Look out for local watershed conservancies, youth education programs or groups that support food-insecure families, to name a few. One example is the New-Mexico-based Quivira Coalition, a coalition of farmers, ranchers, conservationists, land managers and others that promotes agricultural practices that are both profitable and ecologically sound.

Kate Edwards (left), of Wild Woods Farm in Johnson County, Iowa, chats with a member of her CSA at a pickup location. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*

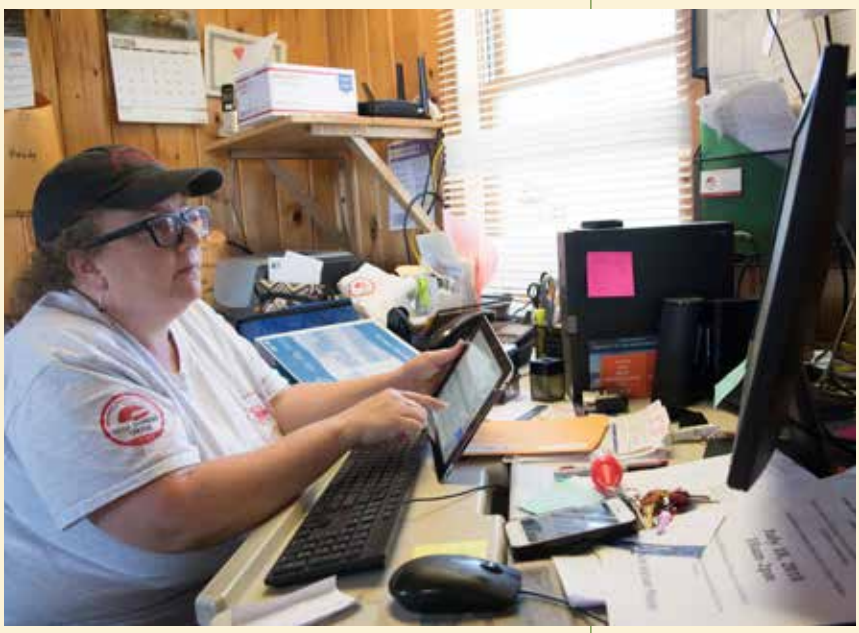
Cooperative Development

The cooperative (or co-op) is a unique business model in which the farmers who use its services are its collective owners and decision makers, meaning individual members share in its financial value and have a voice in its management. Like its name suggests, a co-op offers the benefits of cooperation among farmers as opposed to the drawbacks of competition. Cooperatives have been around for more than 200 years, and they remain an effective tool for farmers to assert themselves in the food supply chain by working together.

When you join a cooperative or form one with a group of other farmers, you can begin buying supplies or services and selling products at a higher volume, which gives the cooperative more leverage to negotiate better prices and terms from large corporate suppliers, distributors and retailers. In many cases, a cooperative will create its own capacity to fulfill certain production, processing, distribution or marketing needs instead of paying another company to do so (for example, by investing in shared farm equipment and hiring staff to use it or by building facilities for processing and packing). By scaling up and expanding its activities through more of the supply chain, a cooperative allows its members to more efficiently capture the economic value of the food they're producing.

This can have a spillover benefit to the entire community. Not only can individual farmers keep and invest more food production dollars in their own community, the cooperative itself pays local taxes and oftentimes creates jobs. Because small cooperatives are locally owned and collectively managed, the jobs and tax revenue they provide are more durable than other kinds of businesses. Whereas a corporate business can easily leave town because of a decision by a single person or a small leadership team, a cooperative is owned by all of its members and is thus rooted in its community.

Cooperatives also provide farmers the opportunity to amplify their voices. Many cooperatives engage in political advocacy on issues that affect its members, and, for the same reason it has more clout in the marketplace because of its scale, it can be more effective at influencing policy because it represents many voters. In fact, cooperatives sometimes collaborate with other cooperatives or with trade organizations for greater impact.



Cranberry Isles Fishermen's Co-Op bookkeeper Amy Palmer processes payments to co-op members for their hauls. The Maine co-op involves 80 people, including ship captains, crew members and co-op staff. *Photo by Lance Cheung, USDA*

Eye on Equity

Implicit in the idea of community is that everyone belongs and has something to offer. This means casting a specific eye toward inclusion and equity at every level of community. How are marginalized farmworkers and community members treated? Does the community make an effort to include them in the local culture, or are they relegated to the outskirts? Are farmworkers treated fairly with livable wages and adequate housing? As farmers grow increasingly diverse in terms of age, background, gender, sexual identity and race, are all farmers made to feel welcome and provided with adaptable accommodations in agricultural networks, tours, workshops, meetings and other communal spaces? A community cannot be truly sustainable if some of its members lack equal access to adequate housing, food, education and support services.

Diversity is a critical theme throughout all of sustainable agriculture, whether it is ecological diversity across the farm landscape, biodiversity in the soil or human diversity in our communities. Just as we understand and appreciate the importance of maintaining soil that is teeming with many kinds of life, all healthy and working to help you grow a good crop, in our communities we all benefit from different ideas, voices and practices leading to innovation and the overall strength of the community.

Effective Outreach to Targeted Groups

For agricultural educators, there are certain principles of adult learning to bear in mind when delivering effective programming for farmer constituents, according to the guide *Sustainable Agriculture Through Sustainable Learning: An Educator's Guide to Best Practices for Adult Learning*. These principles are rooted in cognitive science, and they have particular importance when engaging with producer groups who identify as women, are immigrants, speak limited English, or are people of color. They include:

- Create a safe, nonjudgmental space for learning. This concept is based on science that suggests the brain is more receptive when a person is experiencing positive emotions such as joy or surprise, and it is unreceptive when negative emotions are felt, such as anger or fear.
- Understand your audience well enough to make content relatable to them. The brain processes new information more effectively when it has prior knowledge or experience it can relate this information to.
- Identify any existing knowledge and implicit biases your audience (or you) might have toward the topic. Implicit bias happens when the brain processes new information by relating it to similar existing knowledge. While this is an efficient way to create memories and knowledge, it also causes the brain to make assumptions about a new situation without fully taking into account all of its unique characteristics. This happens to all of us in one way or another, and biases can be an impediment to learning if they are not identified and addressed in some way.

Learn more from *Sustainable Agriculture Through Sustainable Learning: An Educator's Guide to Best Practices for Adult Learning* at www.sare.org/adult-education.

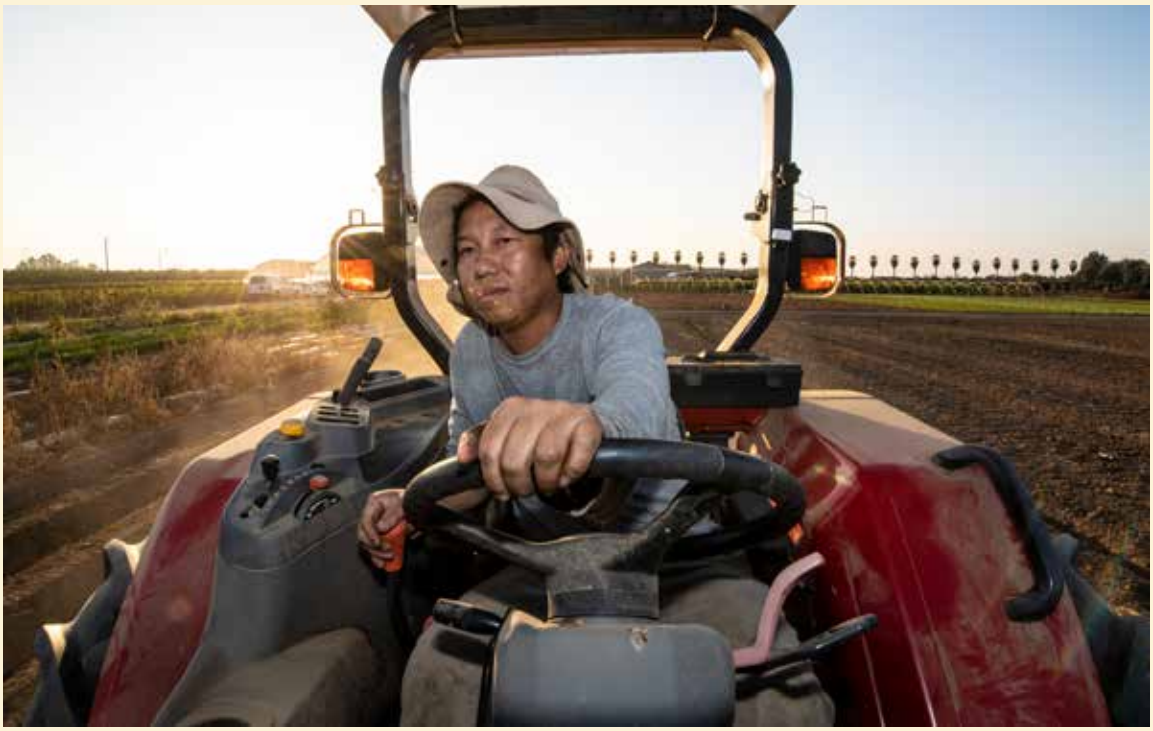
Women farmers. U.S. agriculture has traditionally been a male-dominated profession, but as women gain more prominence as farmers, ranchers and agricultural landowners, targeted outreach to them is increasingly important. Many women producers report that they value women-only learning events and networking opportunities. The intention is not to exclude men from important conversations. Rather, it's to take advantage of the principle that adults learn and engage better in comfortable spaces, and women who participate in women-only events regularly report they feel more willing and able to engage with the subject matter and to share their experiences with other participants.

There are many examples of this approach being used successfully. Annie's Project (www.anniesproject.org/) is a risk-management curriculum for women in agriculture that has been offered in 33 states. The Women Food & Ag Network and American Farmland Trust (AFT) collaborate to offer "learning circles" designed to help woman-identifying landowners and producers improve their conservation practices through information sharing and networking (https://wfan.org/women-caring-for-the-land). AFT reports that more than 70% of women who participate go on to take action toward improved conservation on their land.

Peggy Fredericks (left), a livestock producer and facilitator with the People's Partner for Community Development, a nonprofit serving the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation in Montana, meets with USDA State Plant Health Director Gary Adams (right) to discuss a major pest problem on reservation rangeland. *Photo by Lance Cheung, USDA*

Working Across Diverse Cultures

To help diverse cultural groups thrive in agriculture, service providers oftentimes need to develop skills, perspectives and partnerships that go beyond what they use in their typical outreach. According to the Journal of Extension article, *Facing Issues of Diversity: Rebirthing the Extension Service* (Schauber and Castania), the personal skills needed to navigate and communicate across cultural differences include:



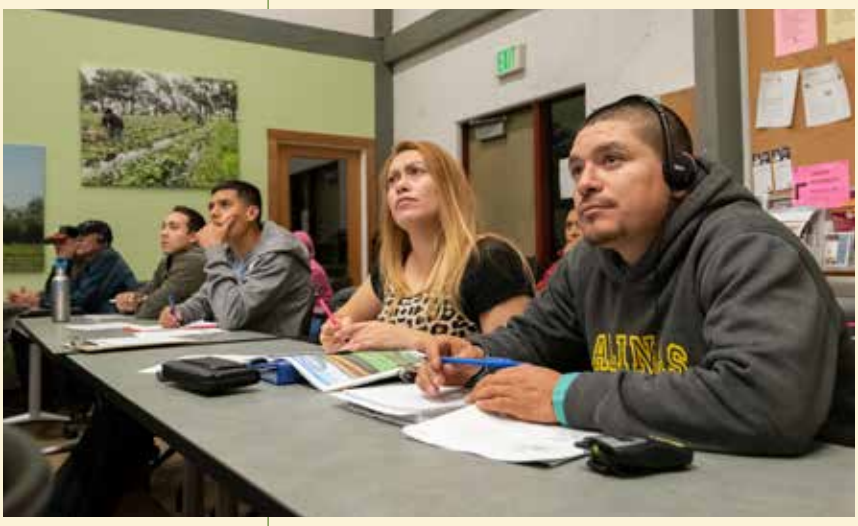
Vue Her, a Hmong farmer in Singer, Calif., first learned about the NRCS and its funding opportunities through an NRCS radio program hosted in the Hmong language. *Photo by Lance Cheung, USDA*

- An awareness of one's own cultural communication style, which reflects one's perceptions, assumptions, norms, beliefs and values
- An awareness of other valid cultural communication styles, which reflect different perceptions, assumptions, norms, beliefs and values
- An understanding of historical power differences and the present-day behaviors that result from the history of a group's survival
- The ability to empathize cross-culturally, to take multiple perspectives, to observe mindfully while reserving judgments and to adapt one's communication style to others.

Some steps that educators can take to improve their service to culturally diverse groups include providing diversity skills training for staff, hiring professionals who have these skills and/or represent different cultures, and encouraging partnerships with organizations that have established relationships with and understanding of the communities they are trying to reach.

Hispanic and Latino farmers. The number of farms with a principal operator who identifies as Hispanic or Latino increased 53% from 2002 to 2017, according to the U.S. Census of Agriculture. The members of this broad farming community are quite diverse; it can include immigrants, multigenerational Americans, professionals who recently became farmers, farmers with extensive agricultural experience, and farmers with varying proficiency in English and Spanish. Many of these farmers face myriad barriers to accessing information and services provided by educators. These barriers may include language or immigration status, but beyond that, even U.S.-born Hispanic and Latino farmers can be challenging to reach due to a suspicion of government or because service providers lack a connection to their cultural values or communities. The inconvenience of attending outreach events and multiple demands on time can be other difficulties.

In Pennsylvania, horticulture professor Elsa Sanchez organized a series of workshops to help her Extension colleagues improve their ability to work with Hispanic farmers, one of the fastest growing and often underserved farmer demographics in their state. The workshops, funded through a 2015 SARE grant (ENE15-139), included an expert on the science of inclusion, a Latino community studies specialist and representatives from organizations with a long history of serving Hispanic farmers. Some of the programming ideas that came out of the series included:



Headsets providing Spanish language interpretation are available at a workshop held by the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA), an organization that provides beginning farmer training to farmworkers and others in the Salinas Valley of California. *Photo by Lance Cheung, USDA*

- Build trust and personal relationships to improve the comfort level of Hispanic and Latino farmers/farmworkers.
- Provide transportation and involve families.
- Contact community groups to help identify and work with farmers/farmworkers.
- Contact employers of farmworkers and communicate to them the value of educational programs for farmworkers.
- Use interpreters and translators.
- Provide childcare or an activity for kids who are attending events with caregivers.
- Learn Spanish, even if it's broken Spanish.
- Hire a staff person who is dedicated to outreach to Hispanic and Latino communities.

The University of Vermont Extension's *Farming Across Cultures* (www.uvm.edu/extension/agriculture/faccp) includes information and resources to help farmers improve cultural awareness and communication when working with Latino employees.

Native American communities. Native American and Native Alaskan tribes are recognized by the United States as sovereign nations with their own systems of self governance. (Notably, though, Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders do not have federal recognition.) Today, there are many examples of Native American communities working in culturally relevant ways to improve natural resource stewardship, economic conditions and quality of life for their members. In many cases, these efforts are in collaboration with technical specialists at universities and with local, state and federal agencies. A few include:

- The Native American Rangeland Partnership is a collaboration between Western tribes, the NRCS, the U.S. Forest Service and others; its goal is to provide high quality, culturally relevant training to tribal rangeland managers.
- The Blackfeet Indian Reservation used a SARE grant (EW18-027) to improve the internal capacity of its employees who manage the reservation's agricultural resource management plan, a blueprint for using, protecting, conserving and restoring the tribe's agricultural lands.
- Many of Alaska's federally recognized tribes and its 12 regional Alaska Native corporations—which together are the state's largest private landowners—have partnered with the NRCS to establish tribal conservation districts. These districts are able to combine local and traditional knowledge with technical resources to actively manage natural resources in a way that achieves goals in subsistence, economic opportunity, resource development and cultural preservation.
- In 2018, Michigan educators formed the Michigan Inter-Tribal Land-Grant Extension System (MILES) to help Extension make inroads with local tribes. The team consists of Extension staff from its 1862 land-grant university and its three 1994 colleges, and they collaborate with tribal leaders and each other to provide culturally appropriate support for the 12 sovereign tribal nations located in Michigan.

At the same time, there are very few Extension agents serving Native American tribes through the Federally-Recognized Tribes Extension Program (FRTEP). A 2016 review of FRTEP resources estimated that while there is an average of three agents per county across the United States, there is an average of 0.1 agents per reservation. Similarly, the system of tribal colleges and universities (1994 land-grant institutions) provides research, education and Extension programming to tribal communities, but with very limited resources.

Agricultural professionals seeking to work with tribal communities in their area should be aware there are significant differences compared to working with their usual clientele. Extra effort needs to be made to overcome distrust by learning the cultural values of a tribe and taking steps to build relationships. You also need to have a solid grasp of how land tenure issues, tribal governance, traditional knowledge and cultural values influence the management of land and risk in

order to provide effective support in the areas of research and education. According to the Western Extension Risk Management Education Center, "Long-held and long-practiced tribal cultural beliefs may be intricately intertwined with on-the-ground ranching and farming practices. Tribal members often identify cultural aspects of their life as much more important than their financial or economic health."

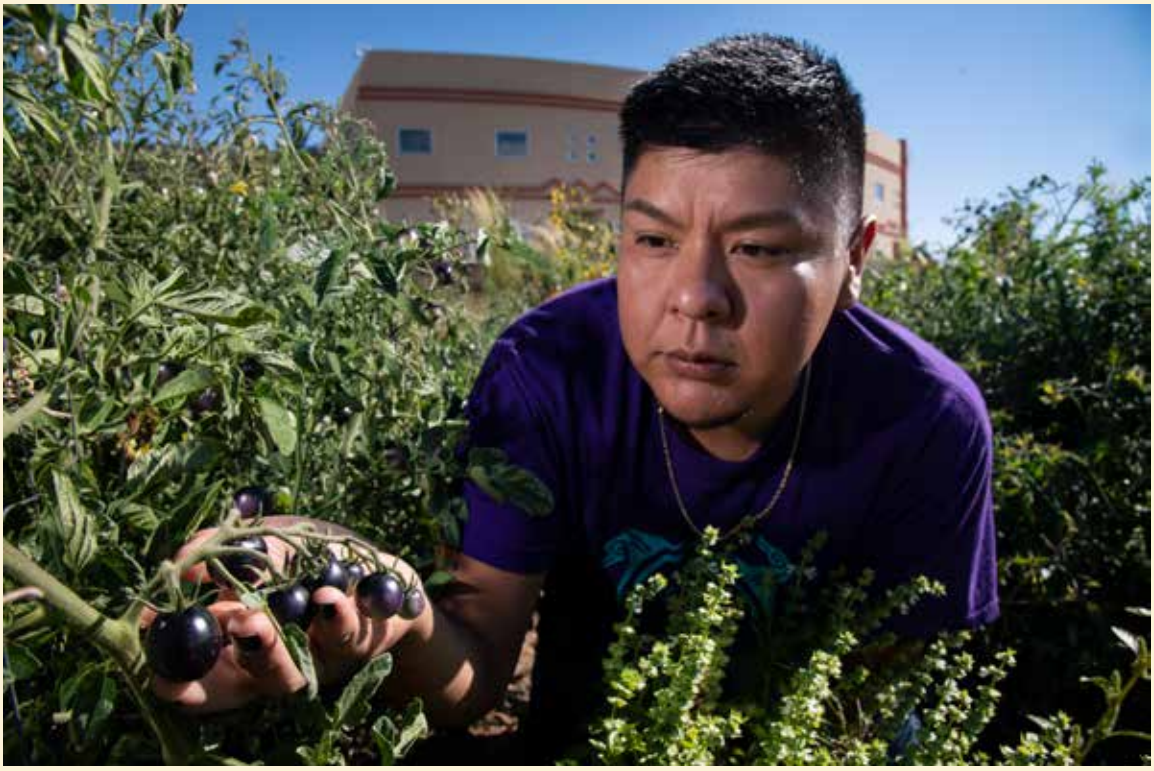
Low Income Communities and Local Foods

Local food systems contribute to the two-way street of farmers supporting the community and vice versa, but often many members of the community may not have access to local food because of a reduced income or because they live in neighborhoods that aren't served by farmers markets. At the same time, many farmers who sell locally already have a low profit margin and can't afford to lower their prices to a point that low-income families can afford.

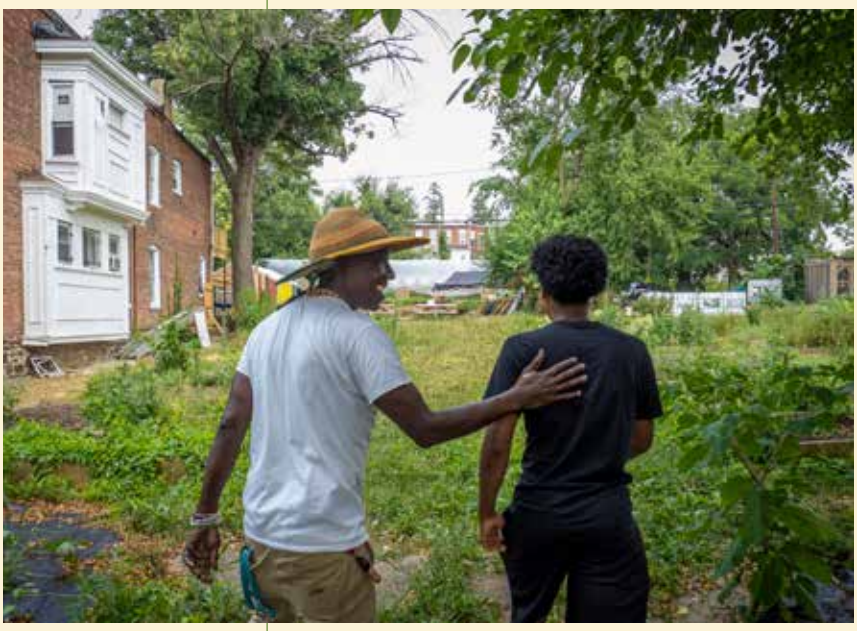
Leah Penniman and the team at Soul Fire Farm in Grafton, N.Y., who are recognized nationally as leaders in food justice for getting fresh food and farming opportunities to those who are usually left out, decided to tackle this problem with a SARE grant (FNE17-879). Seeking to reach low-income consumers and communities while maintaining a financially viable farm business, Penniman and her team worked to identify and promote best practices for farmers hoping to reach low-income communities.

Penniman and her farm team conducted multiple customer surveys and listening sessions in several Albany, N.Y., neighborhoods and also interviewed fellow farmers who were already serving low-income communities. They found that the largest barriers to food access for low-income consumers included cost, lack of transportation and lack of accessible markets selling local, fresh, nutritious food. They also learned that farmers can overcome these barriers using a variety of strategies including community outreach and relationship building, community and nonprofit partnerships, government programs and accessible distribution approaches. For more information about lessons learned, see the project's guide, *Sowing the Seeds of Justice Food Manual*.

As with farmers markets, many producers find it difficult to lower the cost of their CSA shares enough to serve low-income families without suffering a loss. One possible solution is to invite existing CSA members to pay "supporting shares," in which the member pays for their share as well as for the cost of donating a share to a low-income family. Partnerships between local nonprofits and area farmers offer another possibility, similar to how a food hub works to collaborate and improve food distribution. While a



Research Assistant Kyle Kootswaytewa inspects black cherry tomatoes at the demonstration garden of the Institute of American Indian Arts, a 1994 tribal land-grant institution. *Photo by Lance Cheung, USDA*



Richard Francis (left), who goes by the name Farmer Chippy, is the executive director of the Plantation Park Heights Urban Farm in Baltimore, Md., where he and his team combine urban food production with mentorship for young adults. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*

network of farmers focuses on production, a nonprofit aggregates produce and provides the capacity to manage the CSA's marketing and distribution logistics at a lower cost because it can leverage support from grants, donors and volunteers.

VINES (Volunteers Improving Neighborhood Environments), a nonprofit in Binghamton, N.Y., offers a subsidized CSA for low-income families using this approach; along with offering different CSA share cost levels based on income, the program accepts Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. VINES provides two-way education as well. Staff share recipe suggestions and tips on how to store and cook produce with members, and the nonprofit received a SARE grant in 2015 (ONE15-241) to provide technical training for its farmer collaborators. The training sought to improve the overall efficiency and profitability of their shared model.

Part Five:
Entrepreneurship as an Engine for Innovation and Adaptation

WHEN WE HEAR THE WORD ENTREPRENEURSHIP, we usually think of the profitability leg of the sustainable agriculture three-legged stool: the willingness to take risks and try something new in order to make a profit.

However, like entrepreneurs in other fields, farmers and ranchers are often motivated by more than just monetary goals. Vision, leadership, innovation, independence and the ability to adapt, especially during periods of change or stress, are all traits of entrepreneurs. As an entrepreneur, you'll always be using a variety of means to sustain your business, and flexibility is critical to your success. Even if you don't consider yourself to be a risk taker or a true "entrepreneur," taking steps to improve your business skills and to cultivate a talented, motivated workforce will make your operation more resilient and forward looking.

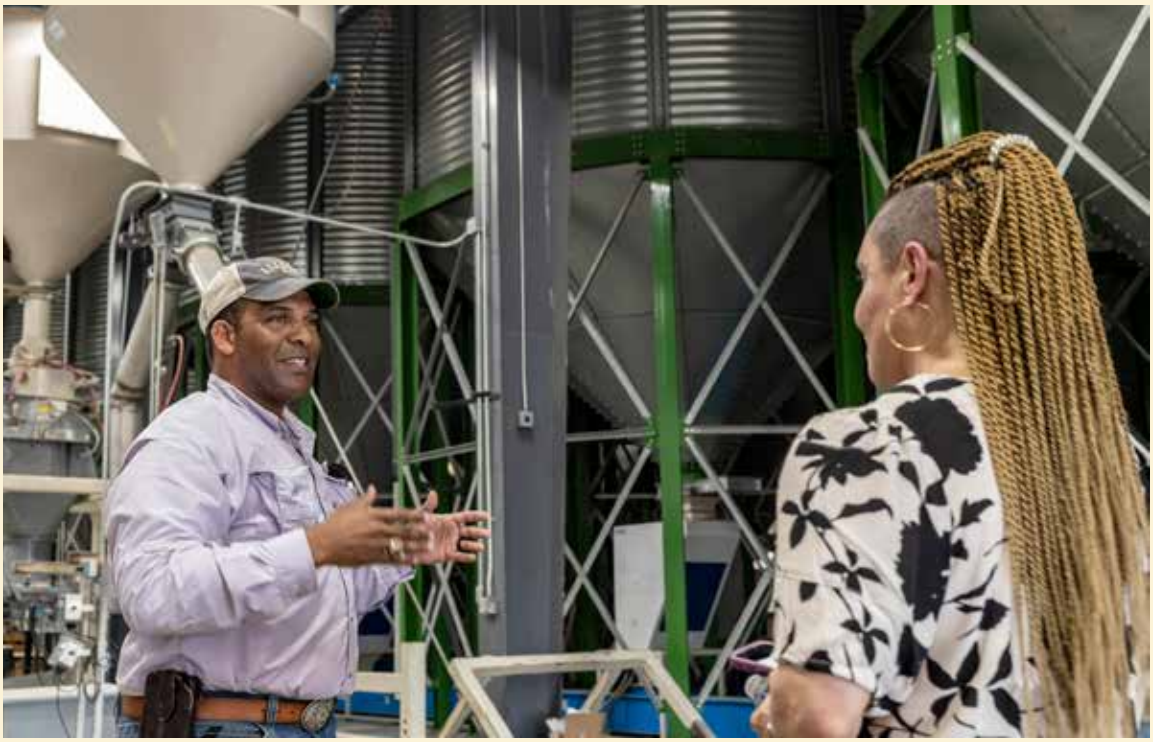
Some characteristics of successful farm businesses:

- **Vision, innovation and adaptability**, which are particularly useful in periods of change and/or stress (in a word, resilience)
- **Good human resources management**, including positive labor relations, good working conditions and leadership development
- **Strong networks** with technical service providers (to obtain needed information in a timely manner), peers (to exchange ideas) and customers (to build reputation and markets)

Vision, Innovation and Adaptability

With slim profit margins, environmental challenges and constant change in the areas of technology, consumer preferences, markets and regulations, all farmers have to be ready to adapt. But having vision, skills and a plan to assess emerging opportunities—and to recognize what isn't working well—is the difference between keeping you out in front of difficult times versus always reacting to them.

Your vision for your business and your life is the big picture of what you want to do and where you want to be in the future. For it to be a sustainable vision, it should go hand in hand with cultivating an ecologically based, resilient and diversified farming system. Grass-fed beef, niche crops for ethnic markets, value-added products or emerging commodities, such as hemp or lentils and peas (for health-food markets), are examples of products that can add new income streams to your business, for yourself and potentially for another generation. At the same time, they present



P.J. Haynie (left) gives a tour of his rice mill to USDA Deputy Secretary Jewel Bronaugh (right). Arkansas River Rice, located in Pine Bluff, Ark., is the only Black-owned rice mill in the country. *Photo by Christopher Willis, USDA*

opportunities to add new crop rotations and cover crops to your operation, which can help you overcome ongoing production challenges such as extreme weather conditions, herbicide-resistant weeds, and issues around water quality and scarcity. Your vision for yourself, your business and your land should all complement each other.

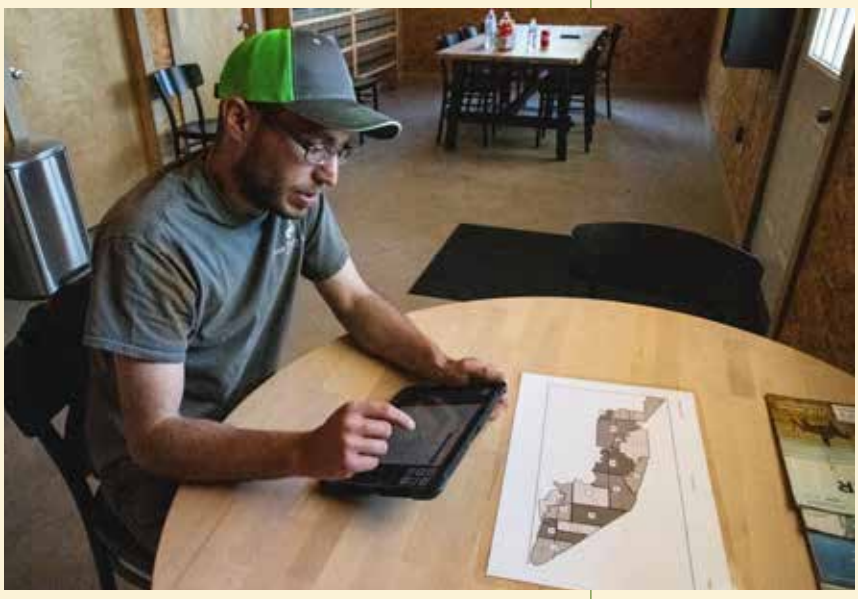
A vision for your life and your farm might start at a personal level, but it's best to refine it through formal business planning processes that involve relevant family members, partners and employees. Business planning is important not just for beginning farmers but also whenever you're considering a major change. It's probably not a bad idea to review your plan every few years and make necessary updates. The planning process helps you:

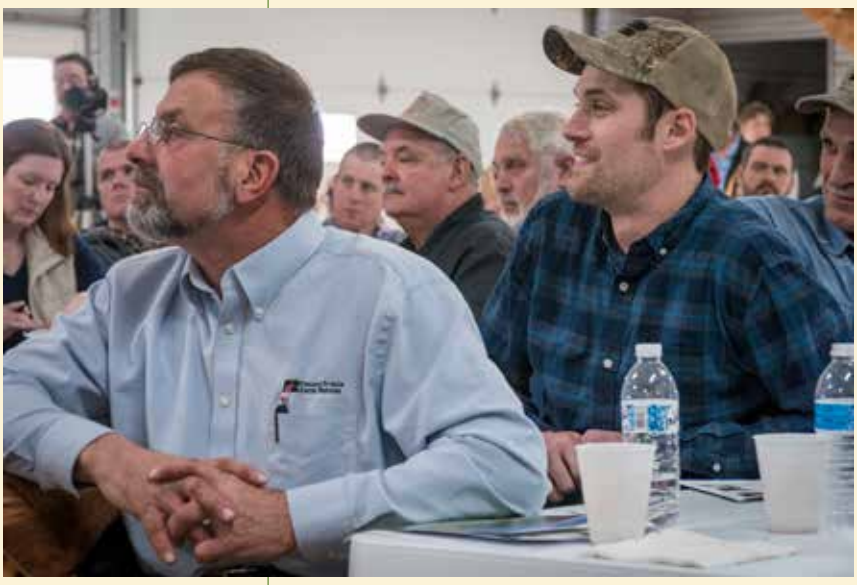
- Evaluate production alternatives
- Identify new market opportunities
- Determine how you'll produce and sell something new
- Manage the financial risk of a new venture
- Communicate your ideas to lenders, business partners and family
- Keep track of your progress and adjust course as needed

The SARE book *Building a Sustainable Business* (www.sare.org/business) can walk you through the details of developing a business plan.

Members of the Kansas City Food Hub, a farmer-owned cooperative, have latched onto a business idea they expect will be good for their members and for the greater community. To meet the needs of children with food allergies they are marketing packaged, allergen-free foods to local school districts.

Alexander Frick Jr. reviews field data as he plans for the day's operations. He and his father Alexander Frick Sr. began adopting precision agriculture technology in 2017 to improve management on their 3,000-acre grain farm in northeast Texas. *Photo by Lance Cheung, USDA*





Attending workshops and other events provides important opportunities to learn, share ideas and network with other farmers. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*

"Because we were small farmers, we knew we would struggle providing menu items for an entire school population, so the idea of solving a major problem for a small percentage of the population was born," says farmer James Leek, who is helping organize this project for the co-op, which is supported by two SARE grants (FNC20-1232 and FNC19-1175). "It has been easy to talk with the schools, as they are eager to solve this problem."

The co-op has created, tested and advertised a range of popular menu items, such as gluten-free pasta dishes, and they continue to refine their business model so that it's cost effective at the scale their customers need. When schools' food purchasing was disrupted by COVID-19, the co-op broadened their strategy by marketing their allergy-free products to small grocery stores, cafes and directly to consumers.

Many resources are available to help if finance, business management or marketing aren't your favorite topics. Maybe a trusted family member or employee would like to take on responsibility in these areas. You can also gain support through peer networks or pick up some of these skills at conferences. Most state Extension offices have resources and business specialists available to provide in-depth help.

Social Networks and Use of Advisory Services

Many farmers and ranchers might have an independent streak, but high-performing businesses don't go at it alone. They have strong networks with technical service providers (to obtain needed information in a timely manner), peers (to exchange ideas), and customers (to build reputation and markets). These relationships were discussed in the previous section, Community Connections.

Networking with other local farmers and technical service providers is a very effective way of solving problems, responding to adversity and identifying opportunity. When presented with a challenge or an opportunity, ask yourself: Are you an expert in this? Is this confusing? Are you unsure what to do? Who are you bouncing ideas off of to evaluate and test your ideas? Do you know where to look for information? To grow and sustain your business, seek out those communities or individuals that can support you in finding your answers.

Professional Development

Participating in social networks with peers and advisors isn't something you would do only when you're planning a big change or are faced with a sudden challenge. You should think about networking as an ongoing form of professional development. As with any profession, agriculture is evolving, and it's important to maintain both your knowledge and your skills, and to stay up to date with current market trends, production strategies and relevant regulations. Regularly attending conferences or workshops and networking with peers are great

INNOVATION BEGINS ON THE FARM: CONDUCTING ON-FARM RESEARCH

The most innovative farmers are willing to conduct their own research through on-farm trials and market studies, and by collaborating with researchers on larger projects. Not only do these farmers gain insights for themselves, but by leading the way and sharing their experiences with peers, they also provide an invaluable service to their communities. Learn more about the availability of SARE grants to support farmers and Extension specialists seeking to conduct on-farm research by visiting www.sare.org/grants. The SARE bulletin *How to Conduct Research on Your Farm or Ranch* (www.sare.org/research) includes practical guidance on how to run replicated research trials as well as market studies and demonstration trials.

ways to both hone your skills and stay connected to new information and opportunities.

Developing a relationship with local educators and organizations that engage in sustainable agriculture research is a great way to get new ideas and put them into action on your farm. (See the box "Innovation Begins on the Farm: Conducting On-Farm Research.")

Human Resources Management

If you're the owner and/or operations manager of a farm, you're also likely both a leader and a boss. Your employees are your human capital: They are an asset, and the more you invest in them, the more they can contribute to the growth and resilience of your business. Successful entrepreneurs need to be equipped with a range of skills to hire, retain, cultivate and motivate a team of high-quality employees.

Good employees increase farm profitability not only by helping you innovate, solve problems and operate efficiently, but it's also cheaper to find and retain good people than it is to replace mediocre ones every few years. When you think of your team as people with families in your community, then it's especially important to reflect on the kinds of jobs you're offering and to make sure they're good ones.

The Farm Labor Dashboard, hosted by the University of Vermont in collaboration with six state Extension programs, includes a range of resources to help you recruit, hire, train and retain non-family employees. It's available at www.uvm.edu/aglabor/dashboard.

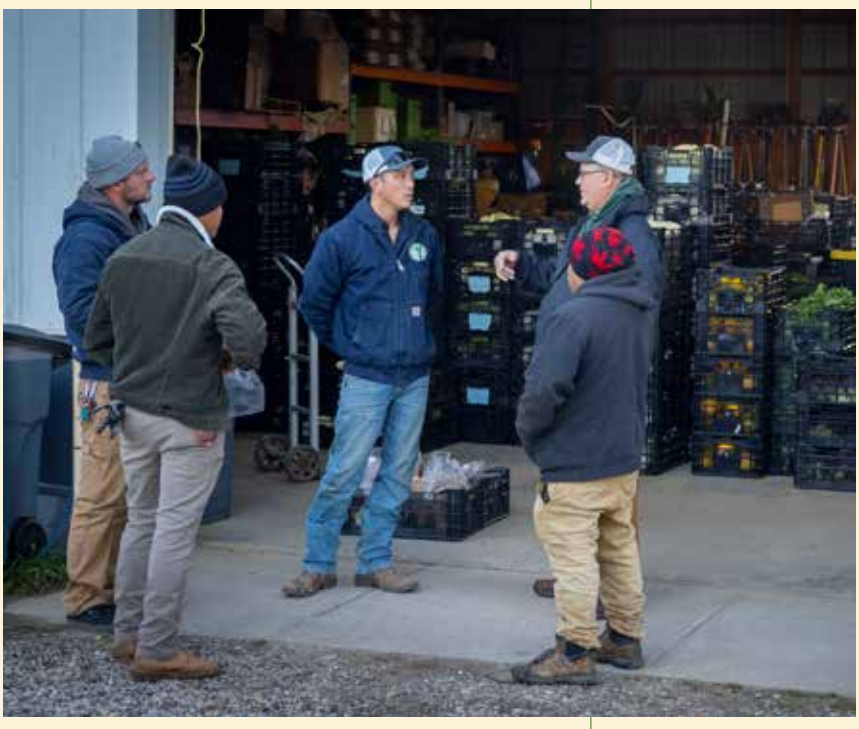
Vital Communities, a community development nonprofit in New Hampshire, used focus groups and surveys during a 2016 SARE-funded project (ONE16-275) to learn how farmers can improve their retention and recruitment practices. While it may come as no surprise, farm employees reported that good benefits, growth opportunities and clearly stated expectations—through a job description, training protocols and regular communication—were among the most valued aspects of a good workplace.

As population dynamics between rural and urban areas continue to shift, with many farm-raised kids moving out and urban dwellers moving in, farmers oftentimes report that qualified workers with agricultural skillsets are becoming harder to find. This challenge makes it especially important to consider the ways you can make your farm a desirable place to work.

Leadership and People Skills

Your first thought might be that as a boss or manager your job is to make sure the day-to-day work is done right. This may be true, but you also need to think about your leadership qualities. As discussed earlier, it's important to have a vision for the farm and everybody involved with it, and leadership is about enacting that vision. This means making important decisions and seeing that the work is done with your big-picture goals in mind, including the role of your employees in sustaining that vision. Leadership is also about creating a culture where employees feel motivated and engaged as opposed to disinterested or unhappy.

Effective leadership requires an awareness of your management style. An overbearing "do what I say" approach is generally considered less effective than a more participatory, performance-based approach. Two-way communication should be encouraged: You share written goals, strategies, and financial and production performance data as they relate to key decisions and expectations, and you listen when employees share their concerns, aspirations and ideas about what's working and what should be done differently. For more about being a good communicator, see "The Importance of Interpersonal Skills" in the Health and Wellbeing section.



William Lee (center), co-owner of Sang Lee Farms in Peconic, N.Y., speaks with members of his crew. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*

THE SEEDS OF A GOOD TEAM: THE HIRING PROCESS

Building and retaining a high-quality team of employees begins with an intentional hiring process. Texas A&M AgriLife Extension's *Human Resource Management: Employee Attraction and Selection Guide* recommends following these steps:

1. **Consider the needs of the operation and how they can be made into a position *someone will want to do*** (e.g., write a detailed job description that captures required duties, skills and certifications).
2. **Build an applicant pool** (e.g., use targeted advertising and word of mouth to attract quality applicants).
3. **Evaluate the applicants** (e.g., use one or more of the following steps: a written application, written tests, oral tests, interviews, practical tests and references; a series of steps is helpful when hiring for more specialized jobs).
4. **Make a selection** (and don't hesitate to re-open the search if you haven't found the right person).
5. **Hire and train** (e.g., consider pairing the new person with a mentor as part of training, and make periodic evaluation a regular routine that starts early).

The University of Vermont's Farm Labor Dashboard includes many resources to help with the recruitment and hiring process: www.uvm.edu/aglabor/dashboard.

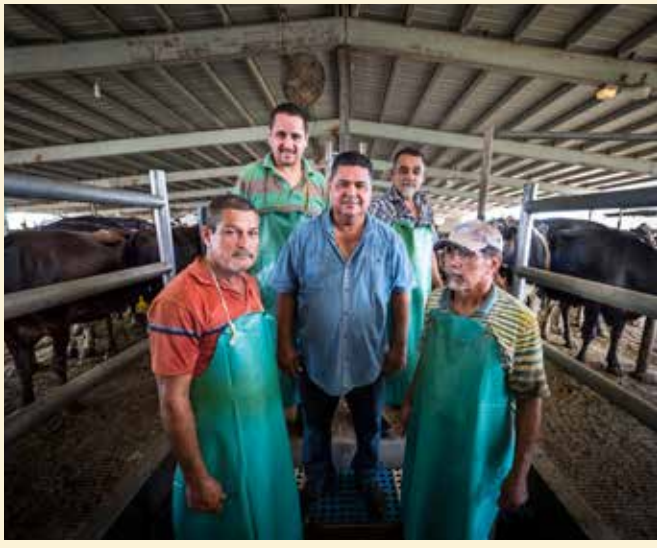
Good On-Farm Relations

To attract and retain good employees, create a good position, set clear expectations, offer fair compensation and maintain a positive working environment that demonstrates their value. Consider strategies that let your employees know they're accountable for their work and that you respect their contributions, such as:

- Craft an employee's job description so that it clearly describes the duties and performance standards expected for the position.
- Keep updated documents like procedures manuals, employee handbooks and activity logs, which help ensure work is done correctly.
- Conduct regular staff meetings and performance evaluations, and use these sessions as an opportunity for employees to share concerns, ideas and other feedback. (For farmers lacking human resources skills, crafting a good evaluation plan can be a challenge. They should be periodic enough that workers have time to meet expectations, should include actionable information and should have a clear path to improvement.)
- Develop performance standards for each position and back them up with incentive payments or bonuses when targets are met. Making it a point to tell your employees that you value their strengths and accomplishments can also be a rewarding form of "payment."

Also, it's important to offer a realistic living wage for your area. While the best approach to employee compensation is tying payment to performance, this can be a difficult system to establish on a farm, since much of the farm's overall performance is beyond the control of individual employees. You may need to think creatively about how to do this, for example by offering tenure bonuses for long-time employees, incentive payments for doing general maintenance tasks or following safety protocols, or bonuses for arriving to work on time consistently. Other ways to motivate employees include creating a system of pay grades associated with increased levels of responsibility that improve the farm, and encouraging employees to seek out training and certifications that help them move up.

There are other kinds of compensation you can offer to workers that might be as attractive to them as the level of their wage. These can include (in an approximate order of low- to high-cost ideas):



Gustavo Toledo (center) with members of his crew at Vaqueria Ceiba del Mar in Arecibo, Puerto Rico, one of the largest dairy producers on the island.
Photo by Preston Keres, USDA

- A set and consistent work schedule that includes clear expectations and strategies for taking vacation and holiday time
- Free farm produce or meals
- Gear such as work clothing or boots
- Moving expenses
- Child or elder care
- Subsidized housing or utilities
- Paid leave
- Retirement programs
- Health and dental insurance

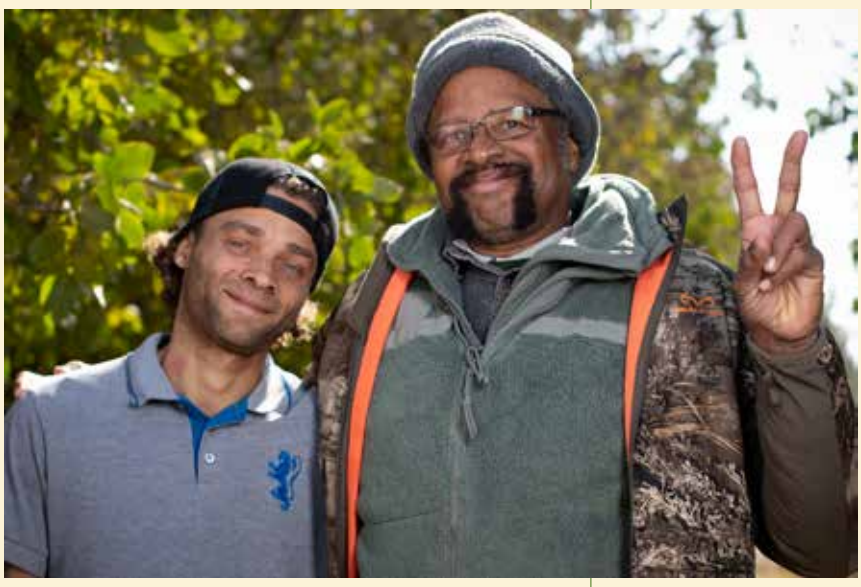
Beyond compensation, think about what makes your farm a unique and attractive place to work. For example, do you have family friendly policies, a set schedule, opportunities for career advancement, a positive and respectful work environment, or a social justice mission? Having shared values and understanding of the farm's place in the community will help you attract and retain quality employees who are eager to contribute to the sustainability of your farm enterprise.

Accommodations

There are many accommodations you can offer employees to show that you value them and to make them more comfortable and invested in their work. Family benefits are especially important, such as parental leave and child care. Also, a pregnant woman shouldn't be asked to do tasks that are too physically demanding, dangerous or that risk exposure to harmful chemicals. When a mother is nursing, offer regular breaks for nursing and provide access to a dedicated, private nursing facility.

Also, look for ways to improve conditions around physical labor. We all know farm work is difficult, with repetitive tasks often performed in hot or wet conditions, but does the job have to be that way 100% of the time? This is something to think about when creating a new position.

When difficult labor is unavoidable, add diversity of tasks to people's daily schedules to limit the amount of time they spend on repetitive and demanding work, such as stooping in rows or carrying heavy boxes. Also, make sure they have the appropriate gear, food, water and break time when doing difficult work. As much as you can, match people to tasks based on their physical ability. Learn how you can implement small changes that improve ergonomics and reduce the likelihood of sudden or chronic injuries in the guide *Simple Solutions: Ergonomics for Farm Workers*, published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2001-111/default.html).



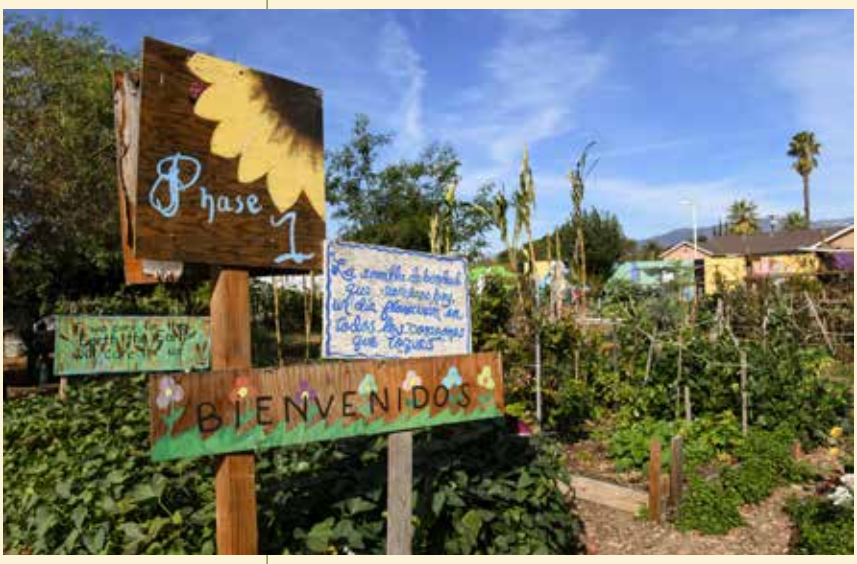
Jim Chew (right) and his son Sonny (left) are part of a family-run pistachio farm in Chowchilla, Calif. Chew, who has a prosthetic leg, receives support from the National AgrAbility Project, which provides resources for farmers and agricultural workers with disabilities. *Photo by Lance Cheung, USDA*

Some farmers or their employees may experience a disabling condition in their lives, either as a result of their work or otherwise (e.g., arthritis, amputation, respiratory impairment, or vision or hearing loss). The National AgrAbility Project (www.agrability.org) provides training, resources and direct consultation for farm managers as well as for employees so that people with disabilities can maintain gainful employment in agriculture and contribute meaningfully to a farming operation.

Contact the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division (www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/agriculture) for regulatory information on agricultural employment, including laws around wages, overtime, recordkeeping, child labor, housing, transportation and field amenities, for employees as well as migrant and seasonal workers.

Risk Management

Risk management is also a huge part of entrepreneurship. As a business owner, you must be able to adapt to current needs in your communities, shifting markets and changes in the climate. The Extension Risk Management Education program (http://extension-rme.org) identifies five broad categories of risk that can affect agricultural businesses:



A welcome sign at Huerta del Valle, a nonprofit farm seeking to improve food access and education in the Inland Empire, a vast urban area to the east of Los Angeles. *Photo by Lance Cheung, USDA*

- **Production risk**, such as the effect of weather, pests, diseases and other factors on farm production
- **Price or market risk**, such as the prices received for farm products, cost and availability of inputs, and access to markets
- **Financial risk**, such as the influence of volatility in prices, yields and income on liquidity and the ability to repay debt; changing interest rates, credit rules and credit availability
- **Legal/institutional risk**, such as government policies and regulations related to food production and marketing, environmental issues, commodity and income support programs, etc.; legal liabilities that farms and ranches can face
- **Human risk**, such as labor issues, succession and asset transfer, estate planning, health and personal issues such as divorce

There are many ways to manage these forms of risk, such as buying crop insurance, entering into production or marketing contracts, or diversifying enterprises and marketing channels. In addition, proactive steps geared toward creating a well-organized operation that employs sustainable production practices can mitigate many anticipated and unanticipated risks. For example, implementing a business plan, following good employee management practices, using good recordkeeping practices, building assets and pursuing value-added markets all help. Emphasizing soil health, resource conservation and biodiversity are also critically important, especially to mitigate production risks associated with climate change.

Eye on Equity

Along with its environmental consequences, the consolidation of power in today's food system among large agribusiness corporations results in less autonomy and reduced profit margins for small- and medium-scale farmers. According to the National Farmers Union, farmers receive only $0.14 of every dollar that consumers spend on food. (Learn more at The Farmer's Share, online at https://nfu.org/farmers-share.) In 2020, farmers whose primary occupation was farming and who had farm sales of less than $350,000 generated a mean income of $6,085, whereas the mean income for farmers with sales of more than $350,000 was $271,466, according to the USDA Economic Research Service. Furthermore, 53% of the farmers in the former group had negative income in 2020, compared to only 13% in the latter group.

A lack of equity in our food system and in the institutions that support farmers makes it more difficult for all small- and medium-scale farms to succeed, but there's a disproportionate effect on those farmers and communities who are marginalized. Likewise, farmworkers must be treated with fairness and dignity in order for our agricultural communities to truly thrive. They are easily exploited in the current food system, and their health is particularly at risk due to its intensive, concentrated nature, for example through exposure to harmful pesticides or deadly pathogens, exemplified in an extreme way by major COVID outbreaks in crowded meatpacking plants and housing facilities in 2020.

Democratizing the Food System

The concentration of wealth, ownership and power among a small number of large corporations in our food system limits both the influence of consumers and farmers, and the economic opportunities for farmers. Increasing democracy in the food system, among other things, means encouraging production and marketing models that give consumers the ability to make food buying decisions based on their values, while at the same time providing fair compensation to farmers who respond to those values.

Direct marketing and local food systems offer many examples of how more democratic models can mutually benefit consumers, communities and producers because these models are effective at connecting farmers and consumers who have shared sustainability values. For example, CSAs allow consumers to share financial risk with farmers, and they're willing to do so because they "know where

their food is coming from." Cooperatives empower farmers by giving them a stronger position to assert their interests when dealing with agribusiness suppliers and buyers (see the section Community Connections). Similarly, food hubs and values-based supply chains help small-scale farmers reach like-minded consumers at larger scales than they can through direct marketing. Urban farms and garden-based education programs can help improve health and wellbeing in marginalized communities that are poorly served by the larger food system.

Located in the Atlanta metropolitan area, the nonprofit HABESHA, Inc. (Helping Africa By Establishing Schools Home and Abroad) provides one example of how farmers and communities can work together to democratize the food system. HABESHA runs several training and education programs to help turn children, teenagers and young adults into urban food growers, with an emphasis on the culture and history of the Pan-African identity, leadership development and sustainable living. Executive Director Cashawn Myers has used two SARE grants (LS18-296 and LS20-322) to develop the HABESHA Works and HABESHA Agriculture Leadership Opportunity programs, which together provide both incubator-based farm training and advanced skills in leadership, social/emotional intelligence and business development to new and established urban farmers.

A trainee in the HABESHA Works program makes "weed tea" to be used as a natural pest repellent. *Photo courtesy of HABESHA, Inc.*

"By affecting these areas of the farming business, the community receives the benefit of having a growing and sustainable local economy," Myers says. "Over time, the growth and sustainability of these businesses may potentially lead to the increase of employment opportunities for the Black Belt population."

Farmers, consumers and community groups have tools at their disposal to have a voice in enacting positive change in local food systems. Food policy councils are one example. Originally formed mostly as municipal entities decades ago with the rise of sustainable agriculture, today's councils have evolved and are more typically organized by local nonprofits to serve as broad-based coalitions that advocate for community friendly policies and programs related to food and agriculture. Providing a venue for both knowledge sharing among diverse collaborators and for advocacy, councils can influence local policy in the areas of access to healthy foods, land use planning, economic development, regulations regarding urban farming or community gardening, and much more.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers, discussed in the section Fair Treatment of Farmworkers, provides another example of how farmworkers can leverage the power of consumers to enact change in the food system.

Structural Racism's Effect on Agriculture

Historical patterns of racism in society, institutions and public policy have had the lasting effect of stripping wealth away from farmers of color through land loss and a lack of access to capital and technical support. Throughout American history, at the same time that farmers of color were being kept away from sources of wealth, white farmers were enjoying easy access. Among the many consequences of this injustice today is that many farmers, especially Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans, continue to be at a disadvantage when trying to draw on resources to grow their businesses. At the national level, these issues are being acknowledged and addressed to an extent, for example through large class action settlements such as Pigford (Black farmers) and Cobell (Native American landowners), and through USDA programs geared toward meeting the needs of limited-resource and socially disadvantaged producers.

"By affecting these areas of the farming business, the community receives the benefit of having a growing and sustainable local economy."

—Cashawn Myers, HABESHA, Inc.

For agricultural professionals, tailoring your educational activities to better respond to the production, marketing and business management needs of farmers of color can begin with educating yourself and colleagues about issues of systemic racial inequity in agriculture. Two places to turn include the Racial Equity in the Food System workgroup (www.canr.msu.edu/racial-equity-workgroup), a national network of Cooperative Extension professionals and community stakeholders, and the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion resource offered through eXtension.org (https://dei.extension.org/).

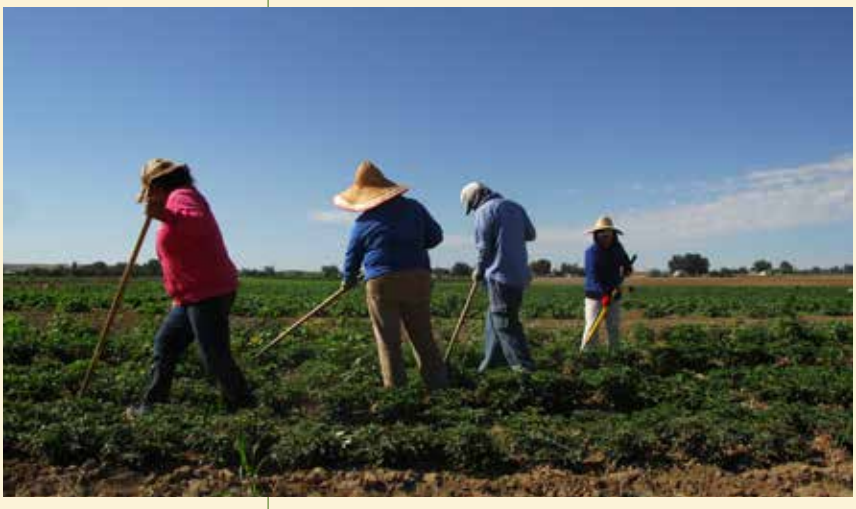
The Center for Environmental Farming Systems, a partnership between North Carolina's land-grant universities and its state department of agriculture, maintains a committee on racial equity in the food system that works with community groups to address issues of structural racism at the level of state institutions. Their goals are to:

- Understand their role in the historical construction of the racial hierarchy (through higher education, agricultural and food systems work)
- Acknowledge their role as gatekeeper and as an ally to communities most impacted by food systems disparity
- Examine their policies, practices and procedures, and work to make those more equitable

Fair Treatment of Farmworkers

Farmworkers are among the lowest paid workers in the country, and they work in some of the most hazardous conditions while their access to health care is very limited. (For more on equity in farmworker health, see the Eye on Equity section in "Health and Wellbeing.") In addition, their protection under employment and labor laws is inconsistent from state to state and is typically less than the protection enjoyed by all other employment sectors. Sexual harassment, forced labor and poor living conditions are also a reality for many farmworkers.

Farmworkers are among the lowest paid workers in the country, but there are many ways to compensate and retain good employees. *Photo by Kirsten Strough*



Hazardous working conditions need not be the status quo. Agricultural systems are human systems that we create, and so we have the ability to create working conditions where workers are safe, respected and fairly compensated.

In 2006, the California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS) conducted a study of 12 medium- and large-sized farms in California that use progressive labor practices to identify what farm employees valued most in a workplace and what growers saw as the benefit of good labor management practices to their business. Through interviews with farm employees, CIRS identified these top five priorities in a workplace environment, in order of importance:

- Respectful treatment
- Fair compensation
- Year-round employment
- Traditional benefits
- Non-traditional benefits

The 12 growers reported that, along with feeling compelled by a personal sense of obligation, the benefits they saw to maintaining a motivated, talented workforce included (in no particular order):

- Increased retention and reduced training costs
- Reduced management costs for supervision and oversight
- Improved product quality and better prices
- Reduced accidents and lower workers' compensation rates

CIRS suggests implementing the following labor management practices where feasible:

Low-cost strategies: respectful treatment; regular acknowledgement and appreciation; free food from the farm; personal loans; policies and mechanisms for communication and information sharing; clear grievance procedures; flexible work schedules; a safe and healthy work environment; diversity of tasks; allow social services to conduct on-farm outreach; celebrations, team-building and appreciation parties

Medium-cost strategies: bonuses and profit-sharing; year-round employment; paid time off; retirement plans; educational assistance; opportunities for training, skill acquisition and professional advancement

High-cost strategies: higher wages; health insurance; housing

In Florida, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' Fair Food Program (www.fairfoodprogram.org) provides an internationally recognized model for how farmers, farmworkers and retailers can partner to ensure humane working conditions and wages on farms. Some of the largest food retailers in the country, such as Walmart, McDonald's and Whole Foods, began participating in the program after receiving pressure from a public awareness campaign about inhumane conditions on Florida's tomato farms, including slavery practices and sexual assault. These retailers now agree to pay a $0.01 per pound premium on tomatoes that goes directly to worker wages, and they agree to buy tomatoes from farms that participate in the Fair Food Program. For a farm to qualify, it must follow the humane practices outlined and monitored by the coalition. These include regular worker-to-worker education about their rights and responsibilities, a grievance reporting system and conflict resolution process, and other best practices that further improve working conditions and wages.

Where Do We Go From Here?

A THEME THROUGHOUT THIS PUBLICATION IS THAT social sustainability—the human side of agriculture—extends beyond the quality of life of individual farmers and their families. While it's of course critical to find ways we can improve our own quality of life, it's equally important to take a broader view by recognizing the challenges faced by other people who are part of our food system. When we look for ways we can support and value each other, we help create healthier, more resilient agricultural communities that benefit everybody.

In many ways, the personal and social issues outlined here are within our control as individuals, for both farmers and agricultural educators. This is particularly true when we work with our peers, employees and community members to solve problems and create opportunities together. A few steps toward taking action include:

» **Personal reflection.** Just as you might test your soils, monitor your fields for signs of pests or review your finances on a regular basis, it's important that you take the time to reflect on how issues of personal and social sustainability relate to your own life and farm operation. Along with considering your own situation, reflect on your employees and your position in your community—in what ways can you meaningfully support others and receive the support you need?

» **Engagement with resources and people.** Also like other aspects of farming, you'll likely find there are existing resources on the topics most relevant to you, as well as local farmers and agricultural service providers with helpful expertise. At the same time, there are probably other farmers in your area who are facing some of the same challenges as you and are equally interested in solutions. Take the time to identify and engage with the people and resources that can be of help to you. Some organizations and resources are listed at the end of this publication.

» **An equity and inclusion mindset.** There's something in it for all of us when we include the voices and value the contributions of everybody engaged in the food system, starting with those in our local community. Embracing differences and working more closely with unlikely partners can lead to new ideas and meaningful collaborations. Rather than looking at other farmers as competitors or thinking their situation isn't our business, we should view equity and cooperation as an opportunity to improve the health and resilience of entire communities.

Jason Grimm (right) talks with his grandfather Norman Grimm (left). The younger Grimm started his own enterprise, Grimm Family Farm, in 2011 and continues to farm alongside his family in eastern Iowa. *Photo by Preston Keres, USDA*

Resources

We present only a few examples of the many organizations that provide valuable resources and support on the topics presented in this publication. Most of the ones listed here work at a regional or national level. Consult with other farmers and educators to identify useful resources at the local and state level.

Starting With People

Farmworker Justice
www.farmworkerjustice.org

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives
www.federation.coop

Intertribal Agriculture Council
www.indianag.org

Women Food & Ag Network
https://wfan.org/

Pathways for the Next Generation

American Farmland Trust
www.farmland.org

Farm Commons
www.farmcommons.org

Land for Good
www.landforgood.org

National Young Farmers Coalition
www.nyfc.org

USDA's Beginning Farmers and Ranchers portal
www.farmers.gov/your-business/beginning-farmers

Health and Wellbeing

Agricultural Safety and Health eXtension community of practice
https://ag-safety.extension.org

AgriSafe
www.agrisafe.org

CDC Regional Centers for Agricultural Health and Safety
www.cdc.gov/niosh/oep/agctrhom.html

Farm Aid's Farmer Resource Network
https://farmerresourcenetwork.force.com/FRN/s/

Farm Bureau's Farm State of Mind program
www.fb.org/land/fsom

National AgrAbility Project
www.agrability.org

Community

Talk with other farmers and educators–both in person and on social media–about local community-building opportunities and groups. Also review the list of more than 100 grassroots organizations that comprise the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition: https://sustainableagriculture.net/about-us/members.

Entrepreneurship

Regional Extension Risk Management Centers
http://extensionrme.org

Regional Rural Development Centers
https://www.usu.edu/rrdc

Many state Extension programs have resources and specialists that can help with various aspects of business management. A few examples include:

Iowa State University Ag Decision Maker
www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/homepage.html

University of Vermont Farm Labor Dashboard
www.uvm.edu/aglabor/dashboard

University of Wisconsin Farm Management Program
https://farms.extension.wisc.edu

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USDA United States Department of Agriculture

National Institute of Food and Agriculture

SARE Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education