

NRCS CONSERVATION INNOVATION GRANT
Final Progress Report

Grantee Entity Name: Center for Rural Affairs

Project Title: Teaching Conservation: Learning Circle Outreach and Training for Underserved Farmers and Professionals.

Agreement Number: 69-3A75-17-46

Project Director: Kathie Starkweather

Contact Information: Phone Number: 402-617-7946, email: kathies@cfra.org

Six Month Period Covered by Report: 9-30-16 through 9-29-19

Project End Date: September 29th, 2019

A. Project Status and B. Project Results

The project goals and our progress to accomplishing them:

(1) Teach women, veteran, and beginning farmers about conservation practices informed by soil and climate science and enable them to implement these practices.

In year one we held a series of classes in Ord, NE. We had 13 women register for the classes. 9 of those women were EQIP eligible, and 3 were not. However these three women either worked at NRD or NRCS, or were a student.

We structured our classes and presentations around the “Adaptation Resources for Agriculture, Responding to the Climate Variability and Change in the Midwest and Northeast.” Each participant got a copy of this guide and were walked through the process of creating a conservation plan. We also handed out USDA resources on EQIP, CSP and a climate change report put together by the state climatologist.

We utilized learning circles in this first year. The learning circle format includes expert instruction alongside peer learning, and has proven very effective in conservation training. In some learning circles, local farmers who were in the classes, helped supplement staff as group leaders.

Below are the speakers who participated that first year:

-Tyler Williams, Extension Educator for Lancaster county specializing in Cropping Systems and Climate Resiliency.

-Martha Shulski, Director, Nebraska State Climate Office and Nebraska State Climatologist and Applied Climate Science Mission Area Leader

-Bryce Bauer, District Conservationist Lower Loup NRD

-Mark Sintek, Resource Conservationist, NRCS

Mark Sintek also lead tours of farms that utilized NRCS programs, including EQIP and CSP.

We were able to hear from a farmer about their EQIP experience, see the hoop barn that was purchased through EQIP, and learn about their future plans for working with NRCS.

In addition to those activities we also fielded 18 calls with people interested in enrolling in CSP and EQIP. We also did outreach on CSP sign up periods through our news releases, blog posts and emails.

After the classes we interviewed participants, talked with speakers, and retooled the classes to meet the needs of our participants. The series of classes in year 1 ended with a series of farm tours to see conservation practices in the area being used. We also took participants to a series of sites that had used prescribed burns to reduce the population of red cedars, an invasive tree. We ended the series with a conversation with the Center for Rural Affairs policy team on what the participants needed from state and federal conservation programs. This information was carried to the State Technical Committee and Natural Resource Districts.

In year two we planned to take our 5-week courses to 3 different groups. We targeted women, veterans, and beginners. To prepare, we took the lessons learned, suggestions from participants, and information from NRDs, NRCS and our consultants, and made appropriate adjustments. We added more information on agroforestry, pollinators and native prairie and how to work these ideas into a long term conservation plan. We also met with the Natural Resource Districts in our target areas and took information we gathered from year one and shared it with them. We talked about the needs of non-operator women landowners and how they prefer to receive information. We discussed the courses with the NRD staff and got their feedback about the farmers they currently work with. These conversations guided our decisions to target specific populations in their areas. We consulted with a member of our policy team who was a Veteran as well as our Veteran Consultant as we reached out to that audience.

We had to do some rearranging to miss busy times for these groups based on recommendations from our speakers and NRDs. Following feedback from earlier classes, we also decided to create a lending library with a few key books on climate change and soil health. The State Climatologist as well as a few speakers at the national USDA-SARE conference provided recommendations for resource materials.

In year 3 we presented at a local sustainable farming conference with the state climatologist, our policy team member, and a University of Nebraska- Lincoln professor. It was attended by 30 sustainable farmers, with representatives from beginner, women, and veteran groups. We were able to collect data from this presentation as well as promote the videos that were online. We had follow up learning circles planned for late March, but they had to be pushed back due to widespread flooding in Nebraska.

The learning circles were pushed back to July and August. In July we had 16 farmers attend our learning circles. We had speakers from the local NRD, NRCS as well as a women farmer. Resources were made available as we toured 3 farms that were utilizing different NRCS programs. In August we helped organize 2 learning circles for women and beginning farmers.

40 attended these learning circles where NRCS, climate adaptation and other available resources were discussed. We learned that when we collaborated with other organizations we could combine our resources to get the word out and increase our outreach.

(2) Enable women, veteran, and beginning farmers to effectively use federal and state programs for conservation while developing recommendations to improve these programs.

In the first year federal and state programs were referenced, all of the questions were answered by USDA and state employees, and USDA and state handouts were given to participants. NRCS was heavily involved in our first year classes. Local NRCS staff attended class sessions to explain federal and state programs, show participants examples in the field, and answer individuals' questions. This was highly rated within participants' surveys and comments.

In the second year we met with 3 NRD offices. We invited them to the classes and continued to engage with them through the planning process. We shared information with them on women non operator landowners and they shared the main populations of farmers they work with, and dates that may work. They also let us use space that they had available in their office for classes. Unfortunately, despite our best efforts to take all of these things into consideration, in all three workshop series, our turn out was little to no participants. We then decided to readjust. We had collected contact info from facebook and email from people who were interested but did not attend. There were about 70 participants who indicated they were interested but did not attend. We were able to reach out to a few of them, and read comments on the event, and it seemed like the time commitment was the biggest barrier for participating. They wanted the information but there are too many things in the way of their participating.

We then revamped the series to be an online series. We filmed our speakers, edited the videos and retooling the pre and post tests to collect data. The webpage that housed the information had 135 views and the videos had 108 views. We had 30 farmers reach out to us for more information, and handed out the first publishing of the resources, all 25 of them.

Our policy team published several pieces during the second year of the grant, with and without these funds. They are linked below:

[A farmer's view: A look at the Conservation Stewardship Program](#)

[WNAX: CSP survey indicates farm bill priorities for conference committee](#)

[We surveyed farmers, conservation is important](#)

[More than 800 Midwest farmers surveyed on conservation, results discussed in report](#) - High

Plains Journal

[Conservation Stewardship Program popular with farmers](#) - Wallaces Farmer - July 18, 2018

In year 3 we continued to field technical assistance requests from members of these audiences on state and federal programs for conservation. After the widespread flooding we had a surge in

technical assistance requests to help access programs to help with flood and disaster relief. When appropriate, conservation programs were also recommended for the future prevention of damage.

In year three, the policy team also conducted a series of interviews of several beginning, veteran, and women farmers to learn about their operations, the challenges they face, and their engagement with conservation programs. We then developed fact sheets from each of these interviews to tell these farmers' stories. These case studies are listed below under "publication examples."

(3) Engage NRDs throughout the project to maximize impact and replicability.

We invited NRD employees to attend this first class series and engaged them as speakers. When planning for year two we engaged with NRDs more during the site selection process and as we plan the schedule.

During the second year, 2 of the 3 in person series were scheduled to be held at NRD offices utilizing their space for our educational programming. We maintained a good relationship with the NRDS and engaged them when problem solving when classes should be held and again when turnout was low. They provided insight to events in the area and where we may find folks who would be interested in participating.

Problems or Delays:

Over the course of year 1 we had a few lessons learned. Due to weather we had to reschedule and combine two of our classes. In future series we planned to devote a whole class to going over resources. We would then bring in the speakers to allow for more specific questions and a more informed discussion. We would also like to have some of the speakers come back to answer questions either after the tours or attend the tours with us in years 2 and 3.

In year two we had a few more lessons learned.

- The time commitment for this series seemed to be too much for folks. Many people indicated they were interested in the topics, but were unable to attend. Many indicated that an online option would help them overcome this barrier.
- Through technical assistance we learned the NRCS offices are still understaffed. We have had NRCS employees indicate that they would like to attend our events but that they do not have time to leave the office.

In year three we learned:

Over the course of this reporting period we had a few lessons learned:

- Participants became more engaged with the material presented when we were able to incorporate small group activities in person.

- Online videos are popular and people seem to like the fact they can watch them on their own time. We fielded questions from the videos via email and phone calls.

Media Overview from Project:

Throughout the project we had:

Media Placements - 138

Blogs - 22

Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn) - 138

Newsletter - 2

Enewsletter - 5

Publications - 8 (8 case studies)

Media releases - 16

Weekly columns - 3

Media Examples

- 5/17/18 - [When the dust settles, farmers focus on land stewardship](#), McCook Gazette, McCook, Nebraska
- 6/1/18 - [Your view: Focus on stewardship](#), Norfolk Daily News, Norfolk, Nebraska
- 7/6/18 - [Learning Circles and Farm Succession Workshops Target Women Landowners](#), NET Nebraska

Blog Examples

- 12/5/2018 - [Conservation Innovation Grant Case Studies: Conservation is key for Ruth](#) (also appeared in the March/April 2019 newsletter)
- 1/18/2019 - [Conservation Innovation Grant Case Studies: Ben's past, present, and future exist in family farm](#)
- 1/25/2019 - [Conservation Innovation Grant Case Studies: Agricultural roots bring Eric home to Nebraska](#)

Publication examples

- [Conservation Innovation Grants Women Farmer Case Study: Ruth Chantry](#) (case study) (457 views on webpage)
- [Conservation Innovation Grants Veteran Farmer Case Study: Ben Schole](#) (case study) (395 views on webpage)
- [Conservation Innovation Grants Beginning Farmer Case Study: Eric Thalken](#) (case study) (512 views on webpage)
- [Conservation Innovation Grants Farmer Mentor Case Study: Del Ficke](#) (case study) (93 views on webpage)

- [Conservation Innovation Grants Farmer Case Study: Bob Bernt](#) (case study) (115 views on webpage)
- [Conservation Innovation Grants Beginning Veteran Farmer Case Study: Matt and Emely Hendl](#) (case study) (140 views on webpage)
- [Conservation Innovation Grants Beginning Veteran Farmer Case Study: Mariel and Anthony Barreras](#) (case study) (97 views on webpage)
- [Conservation Innovation Grants Beginning Farmer Case Study: Alex McKiernan and Chloe Diegel](#) (case study) (92 views on webpage)

Website visitors

- Climate adaptation - 135 views (created Feb. 7, 2019)

Next Steps:

We learned that the participants need materials and information that they can access on their own time. We will incorporate this into future grants through more case studies, blogs, and videos. Conservation is a concern among landowners and farmers in Nebraska, especially after the widespread flooding. When we were able to connect the flooding to our changing climate we saw an uptick in interest and attendance in our learning circles. Our next steps are to take this knowledge and apply it to future grants to continue to promote conservation practices to farmers and landowners.