Lead Organization Name: Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship

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Duration of Project: Three years

Project Title:
Transferring Innovative Managed Grazing Skills to Historically Underserved Beginning Dairy Producers in the Great Lakes Region through Formal Apprenticeship

Project in a Sentence:
This project uses formal Apprenticeship to transfer innovative environmental enhancement and protection approaches to historically underserved beginning dairy producers, including veterans, women, and farm workers in the Great Lakes region, where family scale dairy farms have been an important part of rural economies.

Project Elevator Pitch:
Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship (DGA) links established and aspiring farmers and provides a guided pathway for transferring managed-grazing skills and knowledge to the next generation, bringing more acreage under managed grazing, and providing public demonstrations of managed grazing systems through pasture walks throughout the region. Managed grazing, which has been identified by NRCS as a best practice for land management, is an innovative and low-cost means of natural resource stewardship for dairy farms.

In managed grazing systems, the majority of farm acres are planted to perennial forages and livestock are rotated through paddocks of high quality grasses and legumes, which are then allowed to rest and regrow. The method mimics the nutrient cycles found in natural systems, restores soil and water resources, protects wildlife and pollinator habitat, improves animal health, and produces high quality milk and dairy products for consumers.

The first federally registered Apprenticeship for farming in the nation, Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship is a two year program in managed grazing dairy production. It combines 3,712 hours of on-farm employment and mentorship under an experienced Master Dairy Grazier with 288 hours of related instruction. It includes financial advising, peer-to-peer discussion groups with local agricultural professionals, and case studies that illustrate models of equity building, milk-share partnerships, investment, and farm transfer. Entrants become Apprentices, then Journey Dairy Graziers, and finally Master Dairy Graziers themselves on a career path that prepares beginning farmers for...
independent farm ownership.

For this project, Cornell University and SCNY Regional Extension and the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) will administer DGA in New York and Pennsylvania, conducting outreach to underserved populations and providing program services, including educational support, professional development, and financial advising. DGA will provide oversight and support for partners, administer the Apprenticeship in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and begin expansion into Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana where a growing number of farmers have expressed interest. Partners in each state will demonstrate managed grazing systems through pasture walks on Master dairy farms that are open to the public. DGA will also partner with Farm Veterans Coalition to conduct outreach among veterans and provide additional support for veterans in the Apprenticeship.

**Deliverables:**

1. Approve at least 25 new Master Dairy Graziers across the Great Lakes States.

2. Enroll 15-20 underserved beginning dairy farmers in the Apprenticeship program in target states (Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) and provide them with comprehensive work-based training in managed-grazing dairy production.

3. Collaborate with Farmer Veterans Coalition to expand farmer training opportunities for veterans through DGA.

4. Demonstrate managed grazing as a conservation and production model that provides a path toward a more sustainable agricultural economy for the Great Lakes Region through annual pasture walks on eight approved DGA Master Farm locations. These walks will be open to program participants, other EQIP eligible producers, and the general public.

5. Develop teaching modules on conservation practices such as nutrient management planning and grazing planning to be utilized as part of the on-farm training curriculum.

6. Provide financial planning services to at least 20 Master and 15 Journey Dairy Graziers, resulting in improved financial decision-making on existing and new start-up farms.

7. Develop two new case studies on use of low-cost innovative managed-grazing systems for improving success of start-up farms for underserved beginning dairy farmers. Case studies will be available to public on the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship website (dga-national.org) and can be used nationally by NRCS with its clientele.

**How We Are Innovating in Natural Resource Conservation:**

Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship is the first federally recognized Apprenticeship for farming in the nation. No other sector of agriculture has a comparable career-path to farm ownership. Now as a National Apprenticeship, DGA not only provides greater access for historically underserved aspiring dairy farmers and moves the industry toward greater diversification and sustainability, but can also serve as a model for other sectors of agriculture.

Importantly, DGA was created by farmers as a solution to farm loss and as an alternative to the environmental risks posed by dairy concentration. This innovative program is gaining national attention for a few reasons: a) DGA offers
training and support that is more comprehensive than any other educational program; b) DGA trains beginning farmers in a conservation-based system that will have a farming lifetime of environmental benefits; and c) DGA is a National Apprenticeships under the U.S. Department of Labor that can be implemented in any state in the United States.

More successful dairy farms that utilize managed-grazing systems will foster new support industries—in portable fencing, cattle genetics, pasture seed mixes, and more—as well as new and expanded markets for value added grass-based and organic dairy products. More market opportunities will draw more farmers to grazing. Thus, this strong economic model and rural economic impact ensures its enormous restorative impact on the natural resource base. Yet it all begins with skilled people who see a career opportunity that is also environmentally and financially sustainable.