NRCS 2017 Conservation Innovation Grants
Project Fact Sheet

Lead Organization Name: Third Sector New England - New Entry Sustainable Farming Project

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Duration of Project: Three years

Project Title:
Conservation Technology Outreach to Historically Underserved and Beginning Producers in Massachusetts through an Incubator Farm Training and Demonstration Model

Project in a Sentence:
This project is designed to empower historically underserved beginning farmers to thrive through new educational programs and individual technical assistance supporting adoption of farm conservation planning; demonstrate innovative conservation technology approaches to protect soil, water quality, and improve farm production outcomes; increase participation in federal conservation programs; and promote integration of conservation principles with farm profitability goals.

Project Elevator Pitch:
This CIG outreach and training project aims to provide a career path for beginning farmers, including dozens of historically underserved producers, by offering access to NRCS conservation programs and comprehensive training in conservation-minded farming addressing business planning, production, marketing, food safety, regulatory compliance, and risk management. Through comprehensive curriculum development, targeted outreach, and technical training programming, the project will build the conservation-oriented business, production, and land management expertise of 400+ historically underserved farmers over the course of three years. More than 75 producers will be educated in classroom-based settings, hands-on field settings, on-farm demonstrations, and through the development of an extensive and innovative one-on-one case management program. This program will provide individual technical assistance, follow up, and tracking to help each individual producer define and achieve their farm conservation goals. Moreover, the project will see significant multiplier effects extending throughout the Northeast region beyond the 75+ individual farmers trained directly. While the project is designed to target efforts (greater than 10 hours of technical assistance per producer) on a core of 25-30 producers each year, additional producers will benefit from attendance at one-off workshops hosted throughout the program and an enhanced network of peer-to-peer learning.
Deliverables:

1. New training curriculum developed for nine revised Farm Business Planning Course workshops, nine Specialty Crop Production Course workshops, and eight field based trainings with demos of conservation practices.
2. Delivery of six Farm Business Planning Courses (9-week; 3-hour/week classes; 2 courses/year).
3. Delivery of three Specialty Crop Production and Conservation training courses (9-week; 3-hour/week classes; 1 course/year).
4. Delivery of 27 field-based workshops (nine, 2-hour workshops/year involving NRCS staff).
5. Demonstration of conservation practices educating more than 150 producers.
7. Fact Sheet on Massachusetts Nutrient Management Regulations disseminated.
8. Case management reports of farmer progress (25 per year over three years; 75 total); providing over 1,000 hours of individual technical assistance to farmers each year during the project.
9. Detailed case studies and success stories of up to three farmers per year over three years.
10. 75 new farm business plans and 75 new farms in production with conservation plans.
11. 120 nutrient management and water quality (food safety) plans created by new farmers.
12. Six, 5-minute conservation demonstration and training videos created and posted online.
13. Record keeping templates created, posted, and archived for farmers on incubator farms.
14. Enrollment of 45 eligible farmers in NRCS conservation cost-share programs.

How We Are Innovating in Natural Resource Conservation:

One of the many innovative aspects of this incubator farm model is the community-based learning environment that is facilitated among farmer participants. The incubator farm model fosters farmers’ commitment to sharing conservation knowledge and best practices with others throughout the region, particularly as they “graduate” from the incubator training program and launch their own farm operations, hosting future apprentices and laborers who may go on to start their own farms in the region. Producers learn best from other producers and more readily adopt proven conservation practices that improve production outcomes and their bottom line. This peer-to-peer learning often happens during the “gather information” stage as a farmer seeks evidence to support their decisions. The comprehensive education component of this project is crucial during this early stage when producers are learning new information and developing processes for decision making (evaluating whether the costs and savings of a decision are sound, discovering any pitfalls of the decision, and then applying it to their situation). Producers also benefit from participating in sequential learning experiences and exposure to a variety of teaching methods or venues with a strong focus on hands-on learning. This project will guide producers in adopting new conservation technologies to save time and/or money, incorporating cutting edge research, achieving production goals, and simply enjoying connecting with and learning from other producers.