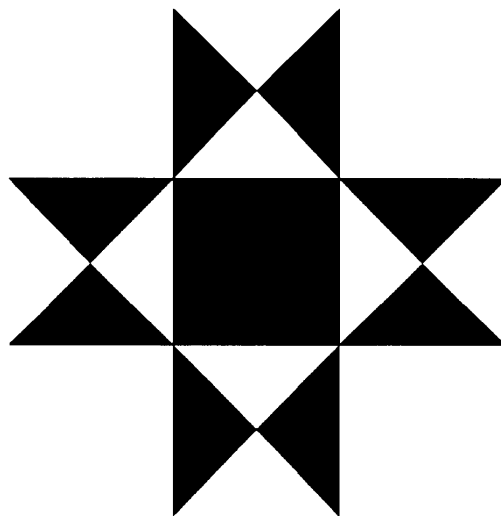




How To Write a Sustainable Community Grant



Northeast SARE
University of Vermont
655 Spear Street
Burlington VT 05405
www.nesare.org

Agriculture in the Northeast will be diversified and profitable, providing healthful products to its customers. It will be conducted by farmers who manage resources wisely, who are satisfied with their lifestyles, and have a positive influence on their communities and the environment.

—Northeast SARE outcome statement

Funding for this grant program is contingent on continued federal appropriation
for the USDA/NIFA SARE program

© 2011 Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education.
This material may be copied freely for instructional purposes.

Contents

[The basics](#)

[Why this booklet?](#)

[Who can apply](#)

[Types of projects funded](#)

[Examples of past projects](#)

[Types of projects not funded](#)

[Budget overview](#)

[Step by step: Writing the application](#)

[Question 1: What is the problem and why is it important?](#)

[Question 2: How will your project address the issue?](#)

[Question 3: What will your methods be?](#)

[Question 4: How will you measure your results?](#)

[Question 5: How will the results make your community more sustainable?](#)

[Question 6: How will you package and disseminate your results?](#)

[Question 7: Who is the project leader? Who are the collaborators?](#)

[Required attachments](#)

[Other attachments](#)

[The budget](#)

[Submitting your proposal](#)

[Proposal time line](#)

[How funds are paid](#)

[A note on reporting](#)

[Questions, problems, and staying connected](#)

The basics

The Northeast SARE program is about farmers: Grants are awarded based on how convincingly a proposal makes the case that it will help farms and the surrounding community become more sustainable. The goal is to address the specific pressures and constraints in the community that limit or prevent farms from becoming more profitable, better stewards of natural resources and the environment, and having a positive impact on the community.

Key topics for this grant program are finance, marketing, land use, water use, enterprise development, value-added activities, and farm labor, but projects outside these topic areas may be funded if there are measurable farm and community impacts, the content is innovative, and farmer participation and potential benefit is compelling.

All successful projects must have a strong connection to commercial agriculture and support improved stewardship, appropriate growth, improved farm profits, a better quality of life, networking and cooperation, or a cleaner environment.

Why this booklet?

Sadly, about a third of the Sustainable Community proposals we see don't have a compelling relationship to SARE priorities or to commercial farming, so we have put together this booklet to help you understand the various elements that reviewers look for. We will also cover other common trouble spots like budgeting, outreach, and basic concepts about project design.

Wherever possible, we have created examples to illustrate each point, drawing on past proposals in a composite, nonspecific way. Our goal is to help you write a competitive, interesting, and thoughtful proposal. We hope that what you learn here will improve your chances of getting a grant, although there are never any guarantees.

The Sustainable Community Grant application consists of seven narrative questions, a budget, and relevant attachments. After covering a few general points about eligibility, content, and common errors, we will walk through the seven narrative sections, offer examples of good and less good responses to them, and look at a sample budget. We recommend that you read through the entire booklet at least once before writing anything at all, then keep it handy if you decide to apply.

Who can apply

Sustainable Community Grants are for agricultural agencies and nonprofits such as Cooperative Extension, conservation districts, state departments of agriculture, and the non-governmental organizations that serve the farm community. A farming cooperative or a town planning board may also apply, and all applicants must show in their proposal that they have active support from commercial farmers. Applications should come from institutions or entities that serve a definable town, township, watershed, county, or other geographic area, and we will want proof, in the form of letters of commitment, that farmers are actively involved in planning and implementing the project. There is a limit of one Sustainable Community proposal per year.

Next, the application itself must come from one individual within the organization—often a staff person, board member, or other constituent, depending on the situation. The point here is that unaffiliated individuals are excluded—there must be some sort of institutional structure standing behind the proposal that gives the project coherency and continuity. We also require that the appropriate administrative person within the organization—an executive, a chairman, or other official—read, approve, and sign off on the proposal.

And, finally, the project must take place inside the region as defined by Northeast SARE and by our partner in this grant, the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development. This region is made up of Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C.

Types of projects funded

The purpose of this grant is to enhance social and community impacts within the context of agricultural change, and focus areas include finance, marketing, land use, water use, enterprise development, value-added activities, and farm labor.

An example of **finance** would be a project that addresses access to capital and credit, new ways of leveraging farm equity, innovative investment or partnering arrangements, and new cooperative models for managing debt or developing new enterprises. This can include micro-enterprises, acquisition and tenure, creative leasing, and other ways to address barriers to farm investment.

Marketing projects can encompass a range of efforts to enhance access and improved sales through better health and safety standards, consumer-farmer relationships, adding value to farm products, entry into niche markets, labeling, and new marketing partnerships. And while enhancements to

existing farmers' markets aren't excluded, reviewers prefer genuinely new ideas on how to address the marketing needs of commercial farmers.

Examples of **land use** topics have historically included things like current-use regulations, zoning, the role of towns and land trusts as managers of agricultural land, the preservation of agricultural soils, and the status of agriculture in the land-use decision making process. Examples of issues in **water use** include access, water quantity, quality, and rights to use. There are other potential issues specific to the preservation of agricultural resources that could encompass both these topic areas, such as watershed management, hazard prevention and abatement, and inventory or planning projects that look for sustainable solutions to issues in environmental quality.

Enterprise development might include business planning, training (including train-the-trainer and entrepreneurship training), network development, applied research, and new business incubation. And this topic can sometimes merge with **value-added product development** and address issues of market access, technical services, zoning, licensing, food safety, insurance, entry costs, adaptive reuse, and creating the conditions that allow businesses to cooperate so they can achieve economies of scale.

Examples of issues in **labor** include availability, timing, quality, training, regulations, transportation, benefits, planning or facilitating time off, efficiency, distribution, the social impacts of technology, and other labor issues that affect workers and farm families. Labor issues can be complex, and reviewers are looking for proposals that give farmers, as employers, the tools they need to hire and retain workers critical to farm operations. Reviewers will also consider proposals that address labor issues within a farm family, including farm safety, quality of life, and efficiency.

Topics outside these stated priorities may be funded, but only if the applicant can make a strong case for its relevance and its potential to strengthen the position of agriculture within the community.

Examples of past projects

There are [brief summaries of past projects](#) on the Northeast SARE website that will give you a general idea of the topics and initiatives reviewers have selected in the past and the content, depth of inquiry, and proposed results reviewers look for.

To read annual and final reports from Sustainable Community Grant projects, [search the reports database](#), where you can use keywords to find projects in your interest area or set your search for projects in your state or region.

To see reports for some exemplary projects, set your search for the project numbers in bold below.

CNE08-053, Incubation, expansion, and learning: The Microloan Fund for New England Farmers

CNE08-039, Martha's Vineyard poultry program

CNE08-040, Strengthening community through enhancing the economic viability of dairy farming: An innovative regional branding initiative

CNE07-032, Adding value to the sustainable farm

Types of projects not funded

Reviewers do not fund projects where the benefit to commercial farmers is unclear. This exclusion encompasses things like food donation programs, public awareness campaigns about nutrition or agriculture, educational programs for non-farmers, and community or school gardening projects. SARE recognizes that efforts like these can benefit non-farmers and the general public, but SARE funds are specifically directed toward the needs of commercial farmers.

Reviewers also do not approve startup or simple ongoing support for an established enterprise like a CSA or a farmers' market. Again, there is clearly value in this kind of support, but SARE has already invested many dollars toward developing and refining these models, back when they were new concepts, and the result has been widespread and expanding adoption. SARE's role has always been to seek out and support innovation, and SARE reviewers are only interested in new ideas and new models.

That said, reviewers may consider interesting initiatives that actively enhance or streamline an existing model in a compelling way. For example, a project proposing alternative payment models, new techniques for food safety, or innovative ideas about distribution or membership for a farmers' market or a CSA would be considered, provided the idea breaks new ground and can be replicated by others. This is distinct from using SARE funds to expand an existing market or fill a hole in a CSA budget.

Budget overview

Awards are capped at \$15,000, and funds can be used to pay personnel costs, mileage, for materials and supplies specific to the project, consultant costs, and project-specific long-distance, fax, and conference calls, although note that phone charges must be over land lines; cell phone charges are excluded. Grant funds can also be used to cover meeting expenses and printing, postage, or outreach costs associated with hosting an educational event or field day.

Equipment costs, if they appear in the budget at all, must be modest and project-specific. Computers, digital cameras, video equipment, copiers, and other items that have a prolonged usefulness beyond the boundaries of the project are considered general-use equipment—these items are

not normally funded, so if you request funds for general-use equipment, make sure the need is clearly justified. If some costly piece of equipment is central to the project and you don't already own it, you can include the cost of a rental in the budget.

Indirect costs such as heat, rent, maintenance, electricity, internet access, telephone (except as noted above) or any other expenses that would be there in the absence of the project should not be part of the proposal budget, unless your organization has a federally negotiated indirect cost rate. If this is the case, you may include an indirect cost of up to 10 percent.

Also excluded are capital costs such as the purchase of land or the construction of buildings, barns, greenhouses, or other major fixtures. In the same vein, the grant cannot be used to start or expand a farm or fund the physical resources for the startup of a new organization. We also will not allow costs associated with group meals unless clearly justified as light refreshments or working lunches necessary for the continuity of a training or meeting. Northeast SARE cannot fund items of apparel, awards, gift certificates, or promotional items.

Step by step: Writing the application

This section looks at the seven narrative questions in the proposal and gives sample responses, followed by a brief discussion of strengths and weaknesses. The idea is to show how some applicants lapse into common errors and others offer a specific and convincing fit with this grant program's priorities.

The examples that follow are merged from many different proposals, and have been rewritten to illustrate general points. None of the examples are from an actual proposal, but were instead developed to clarify a specific point. They are here to be learned from and not copied; please resist any temptation you may feel to borrow. Strong, fundable ideas tend to be singular, backed up with data, and developed in response to verifiable needs and conditions. If you find you have to borrow someone else's content, reviewers will probably not score your proposal highly—derived applications tend to be incoherent, unconvincing, and poorly documented, lacking the specificity, support, and participation we need to see.

Question 1. What is the problem and why is it important?

Here's a sample response to this question:

The erosion of local and regional foodsheds, combined with evolving climate issues specific to water, temperature, and energy use, has created an opening for change in the crops we grow. In our state, more than 85 percent of the food is imported from elsewhere (F.B. Mason, UMass Viability white paper 38, 2008)—this despite a relative abundance of good, if expensive, agricultural land.

A 2009 survey of Thunder Valley farmers, along with a series of winter meetings, indicates a growing interest in new crops (Wilson, "Hearts and Hands" survey, executive summary, 2010). One result of that interest has been a working group of farmers and farm advisors who have identified the reintroduction of staple grains (wheat, oats, barley, rye, spelt, and certain kinds of rice) as a promising avenue for diversification and response to new growing conditions. These farmers specifically seek nimble, environmentally sound, and viable alternatives to traditional products like tomatoes, potatoes, and tobacco (see attachment B).

This proposal is off to a good start—the basic requirement that proposals be driven by the needs of commercial farmers is met, and the applicant has done the research and organizing that any good project is built on. Note that documents supporting core assumptions are referenced and a key planning document is attached—the applicant has looked beyond personal experience to confirm that the project addresses a wider, real-world problem. The applicant has also demonstrated a grasp of how issues in sustainable agriculture are often interconnected—that climate disturbances, while challenging, also offer opportunities, and that new farm products can support diversification and the ability of commercial growers to try out new ideas.

Here's an excerpt that is less promising:

The CSA model helps consumers access fresh and nutritious local food, but most CSA members are from the middle and upper economic classes; food programs for low-income families in our state tend to be underfunded and managed from a distance. At the same time, obesity and health issues are escalating, especially among children, who often do not understand where food comes from or how it is prepared. Local CSA farmers, partnering with our agency, are in a unique position to help address key issues in our society through improved access and innovative, sustainable approaches to new models of distribution.

Northeast SARE acknowledges that the issues described in this proposal are very real, but the SARE program benefits farmers. It's perhaps true, as the applicant says, that farmers are uniquely positioned to help *address* childhood obesity and economic access to fresh food, but, in general, these are not problems that farmers *face*. Also notice that references to past work that supports key assertions are absent. In this sample, the applicant has failed to grasp SARE funding priorities. Consider this alternative presentation of the same problem:

The CSA model helps consumers access fresh and nutritious local food, but most CSA members are from the middle and upper economic classes; food programs for low-income families in our state tend to be underfunded and managed from a distance (Heaton, “Feeding Whole Communities,” Ag Connections, May 2008) . At the same time, obesity and health issues are escalating, especially among children, who often do not understand where food comes from or how it is prepared (Acton, “Overweight and Starving,” Ag Connections, December 2009).

Three local CSA farmers in our community are having a hard time recruiting community members in sufficient numbers to make their operations viable. We want to boost the membership of these CSAs by linking low-income families to the CSA, subsidizing initial membership costs, and facilitating the use of benefits payments for CSA membership fees.

These farmers, partnering with our agency, are in a position to help address key issues in our society through improved access and innovative, sustainable approaches to new models of distribution. And our agency is in a unique position to bring membership to these farms by reaching out to our clients.

In this improved sample, reviewers can assess whether the farmer and the community will benefit from the project, background material has been incorporated to support key claims, and it is clear that this may be an interesting solution to both the farm and the social problem.

And, finally, here is a response to this question that addresses labor equity and farm and farm worker quality of life:

Consumers have shown a willingness to pay a premium for products that benefit low-income workers in developing countries, yet remain largely unaware of the economic struggle of farmers close to home (Smart and Wissen, “Domestic Fair Trade and the Local Food Movement,” Farm-to-Table conference proceedings, Orono, 2009). The goal of this project is to test the development of a local fair-trade label to see if consumers will support farmers who pledge to pay a living wage to their workers and adhere to established standards developed in the course of a previous SARE grant (CNE06-011).

In this response, the applicant offers to adapt an established concept—fair trade—in an unconventional way, and in a context that supports improved labor relations and the potential for improved profits and quality of life. The project also draws on the results of a previous SARE grant, and this adds value to a previous SARE investment. Make sure you search through past SARE project reports (go to www.sare.org and select “project reports”) in your topic area to see what has already been funded. Note that, unlike the other sample citations in this section, this one is authentic. Other useful agencies for background information and research might include Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (www.attra.org), the Organic Farmers Research Foundation (www.ofrf.org), and the National Agriculture Library (www.nal.usda.gov).

Question 2: How will your project address the issue?

This response continues from the less promising sample answer to question 1 that you read earlier:

To fill this nutritional gap, several area CSAs give surplus seasonal products to soup kitchens, church groups, and summer youth programs, only to have this food go unused because of the labor and expertise involved in preparing and cooking them. There is a need for improved training in using and managing fresh crops so they are nutritious and appealing, and there is also a surplus work force—youth aged 12 to 18—who have declared a willingness to harvest and learn to prepare these products, which will reduce health risks through exercise at the farm and better eating habits.

Again—while food donation and nutrition programs clearly have honest value, this proposal is focused on building a conduit for donating overflow products that can't or won't be sold. There is also a follow-on error in proposing to use youth labor to move surplus crops from the field and into that donation program. This effort may look superficially useful to the farmer, but an unskilled youth labor force requires supervision, acceptance of risk, exposure to possible labor-law infractions, and issues of inherent instability. Projects like this may have value in other dimensions, but the commercial farmer is not in line to benefit. If the problem were addressed differently, it would probably have a better chance during review. Consider:

To fill this gap, our agency will recruit 50 low-income families as members for each of the three CSAs. In return, the CSAs will offer a 10 percent discount to these families for a three-year introductory period, and our agency will secure other funding to subsidize another 40 percent of the membership cost. The families will pay the remaining 50 percent of the fee, but we will work with our federal food stamp program officials to process food stamps as membership payments. The monthly food stamp payments will reimburse a fund set up by our agency so that the membership fees can be made in advance to the farmers.

Also, these CSAs would like to give surplus seasonal products to soup kitchens, church groups, and summer youth programs, but cannot justify the added harvest and preparation labor expense. There is a need for improved training in using and managing fresh crops so they are nutritious and appealing, and there is also a surplus work force in the community—youth aged 12 to 18—who have declared a willingness to harvest and learn to prepare these products, which will reduce health risks through exercise at the farm and better eating habits. Our outreach specialist will work with the farmers to coordinate and supervise these workers, and the farmer will receive compensation for time spent directing these activities.

Here is another response to this question from a different project. Here, the applicant is looking for new ways of structuring agricultural lease agreements in an area where land values are very high.

With farmland now selling for more than \$12,000 an acre (see attachment C), there is growing interest in new tenancy models that can make towns more supportive of local agriculture (see SARE project CNE06-008). As our panel of expert farmers has collected and reviewed tenancy agreements, they have also been invited to act as advisors on tenant contracts between a local land trust and farmers who need added

cropland. Capturing this body of experience so others can access will support wider adoption of tested policies and tenancy models. A guide, tentatively titled “Land Lines,” will do this, and will describe legal and planning models for putting fallow acreage back in production.

In this sample there is clear potential for farmer benefit, and there is also appeal for reviewers in that the approach speaks to the institutional change needed to keep agriculture on the public agenda. It’s also clear that the farmer involvement meets SARE baseline criteria and the proposal builds on, and does not replicate, previous work. The weakness is that the proposal is a bit static—the applicant is proposing an exchange of grant dollars for a certain publication. Further reading confirms that the project activities are focused on writing, editing, and producing the guide, not on deploying it. This project would only be a good candidate for funding if there were also a robust outreach plan.

Question 3. What will your methods be?

This question is often a make-or-break proposal element, since applicants sometimes offer plans of work that are mainly echoes of question 2, “How will your project address the issue?” But the *how* of a project and the more nitty-gritty description of *what you plan to do* are different—use this section to describe clearly what sorts of steps, events, and benchmarks you plan to deploy, and put them in a clear, logical order. Here is an example of a response that signals to reviewers that more concrete planning is needed:

Together, Greenkeeper Kitchen and Riverbend Market will create a powerful farm-to-market opportunity for local growers who seek new customers and revenue streams. These efforts will incubate a new generation of entrepreneurs—young people and students who are already proving their ability to turn farm produce into profits. In this way, Greenkeeper Kitchen and Riverbend Market represent a short- and long-term investment in both community economic sustainability and agricultural viability.

This is rhetoric, not a plan of work. Compare it with these methods, from a proposal that also seeks to support entrepreneurial farmers:

July: Ten entrepreneurial coaches trained, to include the project leader, a Cooperative Extension agent, a support agency representative, two farmers, two farm finance advisors, and three consultants active in the agricultural community.

October: Three open “Agricultural Entrepreneur” workshops in the north, central, and southern parts of the state. Sign-ups with interested workshop participants.

November: Distribution of the workbook and resource guide to signed-up farmers. The continuing participants talk on the phone at least once with a coach who has experience in their proposed business area.

December and January: Three closed workshops with continuing farmer participants. These will emphasize broad principles of enterprise planning, new product launch, marketing, and using sustainable principles that support long-term success.

January and February: Coaches meet individually with farmers to develop business plans and identify financing. Each coach will take on no more than four aspiring farmers and meet no fewer than three times.

March: Coaches and farmers meet for a final workshop to report to each other on the status of their plans, any early implementation, and to discuss preparations for the months ahead; coaches to follow up by phone in April and May.

A plan like this gives reviewers confidence that the project has structure, logic, and builds on what went before. Take the extra time to confer with your farmers and other project participants to develop a time line that is clear and in sync with what you hope to accomplish.

Here's another sample response to this question where the proposal seeks to enhance access to fresh local food, especially among low-income residents:

Early summer: Advertisements and cooking demonstrations make low-income consumers aware of the benefits of local food.

Midsummer: First Farmer Round Table to discuss the marketing questions and seek new outlets for fresh local food.

Midsummer: Restaurant buyers meet with project leaders to learn more about the growing demand for local food and the potential economic impact of local sourcing.

Midsummer: Advertisements and cooking demonstrations continue.

Late summer: Second Farmer Round Table to assess change and exchange information.

Fall: Harvest Festival to bring together residents, farmers, restaurateurs, and others to celebrate and solidify the community's commitment to support for local farmers.

This looks at first glance like a viable plan of work, but the reviewer comments on this proposal point up clearly what the problems are: "This project has many activities, but most aren't directed toward the problem. Is there evidence that the ads and demonstrations will engage or even reach a low-income population?" And: "At the round tables, are farmers are talking to each other, to consumers, or to restaurant buyers? And what real role do restaurant buyers and restaurant managers have in the delivery of fresh food to the target population?"

So while this sample does have a plan of work, that work doesn't have a compelling relationship with the priorities stated elsewhere in the proposal. Make sure that the linkage between project goals and project activities is logical and articulated.

Question 4: How will you measure your results?

Capturing relevant data is a key component to any project, and it's important to design your project so that it yields useful, trustworthy results—this is why we require that you write and upload a draft evaluation tool with your completed proposal. This draft tool does not need to be elaborate, but it should show reviewers that you understand how to measure results in a specific, useful way.

Some applicants get into trouble with this narrative section by assuming that simple counting can lead to a result. Consider:

We will track increases in our mailing list as a key indicator of how eco-labeling affects sales.

This assumes that an increase in the size of a mailing list says something about sales, but, as one reviewer commented, “If you want to see if eco-labeling increased sales, then track sales. Tracking the mailing list makes no sense to me.” Another reviewer pointed out that even if the bigger mailing list is a defensible result, it's not a very compelling one: “It only benefits the author of this proposal.”

Here's a pretty good response to this question:

We will do a telephone survey to measure how many farms need new acreage, how much, the specific soil types required, and what crops or livestock will likely be included in an expansion, and then use this information to connect farmers with municipal and land-trust lease opportunities. We will then monitor the types of contracts used as the project progresses and work with both farmers and lessees to identify any problems. As the project comes to an end, we will do a follow-up survey (see sample attached) to confirm that both farmers and land administrators understood the lease options and to also collect the initial data needed to develop at least three in-depth case studies. These studies will consider the economic and production impact of the project and reported satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the effort. The overall goal is to broker and support six new lease agreements affecting 300 acres.

Here, there is real coherency between what is being measured and counted and the overall project goals; the data will be used to bring landowners and land seekers together in a way that could benefit both, and then the data will also be used in the case studies that are a component of project outreach.

Compare this to:

We will distribute at least 2000 fact sheets about CSA management and track hits on our website to gauge interest in the topic and the level of response. A sign-in sheet will capture the attendance at the workshops, and we will measure our results by asking attendees whether their awareness of the sustainable impact of CSA has improved.

This second response is problematic because measuring “awareness” is almost always a soft indicator of real change. It doesn't help that this measurement has a lot in common with the mailing list growth mentioned above, in that this is not information anyone else can really use. When writing this section, make sure you are thinking less about your organization's internal function or advancement

and more about the kinds of measurable, firm results that will guide understanding and future replication.

Question 5: How will the results make your community more sustainable?

The focus of this grant is on projects that improve the sustainability of the farm community through appropriate growth, improved farm profits, a better quality of life, a cleaner environment, or improved farm stewardship. That's a lot of outcome areas, and we don't expect that every project will address all of them. We do expect that projects will address at least one and perhaps as many as three.

That said, it's a good idea to focus your response to this carefully, and avoid generalized and extravagant claims that will undermine your credibility. For example:

Eco-labeling has a profound impact not just on how farmers produce healthy food, but has the potential to revitalize rural economies dramatically through job growth, a healthier environment, and the wider adoption of sustainable and organic farming methods. Income from premium eco-labeled products will also improve the quality of life for farm families, encourage more interest in farming as a profession, and teach children to make healthy consumer choices that will guide them later on in life.

This sort of inflationary argument has very little traction with reviewers, who are farmers, farm agency staff, and other professionals working in sustainable agriculture. They understand there are barriers to sustainability and most have real-world, hands-on experience in addressing them, and they want to see a real-world, hands-on response.

Compare the last sample to this one to support adding value to raw farm products, and see if you understand how it's far more clearheaded and realistic:

Adding value only works when new farm income balances favorably against the added labor; when farmers have the tools and training to decide whether to proceed with a new enterprise, they will tend to use time and money wisely and often develop stronger farm management skills. Those farmers who do proceed with a new product will also reduce the percentage of crop spoilage by processing products with imperfections that could not otherwise go to market, thus increasing profits and the supply of locally-produced food that consumers actively prefer.

Another common error reviewers report is that applicants assume that, if they can get grant money to expand or merely continue their operations, the community will automatically become more sustainable. Reviewers need proof that this assumption is actually true. Here are some sample comments from reviewers when they spot this kind of error:

“The proposal is basically to do what they're already doing—continued marketing, promotion, and coordination—and any plan for external outreach is largely absent.”

“While they've clearly done some research internally to develop next steps with their markets, they've largely ignored other models. The expansion plan seems to be operating in a vacuum.”

“This proposal is supposedly all about farmland preservation, but the actual request is to repair the roof of a manure pit. Applicants should read the proposal instructions.”

Question 6: How will you package and disseminate your results?

Applicants sometimes lower their chance for funding because, despite its simplicity, they don't seem to understand this question. See if you can spot the flaw in this response:

The Green Willow Market Initiative will culminate in a community-wide meeting where the market enhancements and the online interface will be unveiled. We will educate consumers on how the online ordering process works and also integrate this information into our community buying guide. The local press will be encouraged to attend this event.

You perhaps saw right away that this describes how the applicant will attract attention to the work of their own organization; it does not describe how the project results will be made useful to others who may want to replicate. It's a surprisingly common error. Here is a better response that gives reviewers the information they need:

Alternative equity and financing models often require new appraisal mechanisms, intake procedures, and lending guidelines, and we will develop an explanatory handbook and web document that will include sample forms, budgets, and loan documents. These materials will be distributed freely across the agricultural lending community and will also be presented in a workshop at a rural development conference in early February. We will also use direct mail to make sure that Cooperative Extension leaders in the mid-Atlantic are aware of how alternative credit structures can serve the farm community.

When writing this section, think beyond the immediate spreading of news about your organization and think instead about how others can learn from what you've done and what they will need for replication. This often means looking outside your normal constituent circle and working outside an established comfort zone. Here's another acceptable response to this question:

We will compile the results of the labor study on the four farms into a 24-page booklet covering key topics in worker safety, training, language and communication, housing, and documentation, which will then be distributed to extension offices across the state. We will also host a series of five winter workshops on farm labor issues at grower meetings in coordination with extension staff. The workshop content will include a presentation by the project leader and the cooperating farmers. We plan to reach at least 115 farm advisors and distribute the materials they will need to advise client farmers who need seasonal help.

Question 7: Who is the project leader? Who are the collaborators?

In general, people get this question exactly right, although we sometimes see responses that deliberately avoid the question. For example:

The project leader is Food for Thought, which has a six-year track record in environmental learning and leadership... .

Note that the project leader must be an individual—normally the applicant—and not an organization or an entity. When writing this section, clearly identify the project staff, collaborators, their roles, and their various qualifications. Here’s what an acceptable entry might look like:

William Cowherd has been the special projects manager at Food for Thought since 2002, and he brings to the position a B.S. degree in animal science and four years of experience as a grazing consultant with NRCS. He organizes our annual grazing conference and has wide contacts in the dairy community. He has managed prior awards from the Kellogg Foundation and, in a previous position, a grant from SARE’s southern region. He will be the primary project manager and contact person.

Katherine Bellwether will collaborate on the project and handle farmer recruitment, survey delivery, and follow-up. Katherine is a farmer who has been active in project planning.

Bob Wire is a Moses County extension agent. He will work with the project manager on survey analysis, logistics, outreach, and curriculum development, and will disseminate project results through the Cooperative Extension community.

Required attachments

All **collaborators, including farmers, must submit a letter** outlining their project duties and confirming their willingness to participate. Avoid using interchangeable form letters with a perfunctory signature; instead, ask each collaborator to write a real-world description of what they understand as their contribution or role. Letters of support should reflect the content of the proposal itself, and there should be a close fit between the roles described in the proposal and these commitment letters.

Each proposal must also include as an attachment **a verification instrument or plan**. This can be a draft end-of-project survey that measures project results, or, if a paper or online survey isn’t an ideal fit for your project, then a plan for interviewing farmers or other key participants to verify the project’s impact. Verification doesn’t need to be elaborate, but it must probing, specific, and on point. There are some very useful tip sheets on developing evaluation and verification tools on the web at <http://extension.psu.edu/evaluation/titles.html>.

Below are some sample survey questions from a project addressing labor issues on vegetable farms:

1. How many seasonal laborers did you employ between April and November of the past year?

2. Did your use of seasonal labor increase or decrease compared to prior years? If there was a change, indicate the difference.

3. How many seasonal laborers were housed on the farm? (If none, enter zero.) If the family members of laborers were also housed on the farm, include them below:

Number of laborers housed

Family members housed

4. As a result of the workshops, did you provide seasonal laborers improved access to transportation or the ability to get to banks, post offices, stores, and other amenities?

Yes

No

5. As a result of the workshops, did you offer laborers training in safety, farm management, or regulatory issues? If yes, describe where indicated.

No, no training provided

Yes. _____

6. Did you display the bilingual posters we provided?

Yes

No

7. Describe below any results, either positive or negative, arising from the workshops, the training booklet, or the poster that changed how you managed your laborers or your farm. Be as specific as possible.

Other attachments

Optional attachments can include project-specific materials such as **maps, budget spreadsheets, plot plans, data or documents that support the core assertions of need, or photos of project elements that might be otherwise difficult to explain.** Use good judgment with optional attachments—do not send along things like press clippings, brochures, newsletters, or general letters of support from people who are not collaborators. All optional attachments should link directly to the proposal itself and present data or other core information such as the results of related work done by others, documented entry costs, or land values.

The budget

The cap on this grant is \$15,000, and funds can be used for personnel, materials and supplies, travel, printing and publications, and other direct costs—this last category includes things like consulting, subcontracts, photocopying, and other expenses that would not be there in the absence of the project. This is an important concept: SARE funds are not meant to supplement a general operating budget. Instead, they must be used to implement a specific project and seek specific results. As with the narrative part of the proposal, there are certain common errors in budgets that reviewers watch for. They are:

Personnel expenses are not linked to individuals or project tasks. There should always be a close and unambiguous fit between the narrative and the budget. Make sure you specify in the narrative part of the proposal who will do what and the effort involved. Once you have set these key parameters, build your personnel budget accordingly.

Expenses appear in the budget that fall outside the project’s plan of work. We often see proposals that contain budget items unrelated to actual project costs—if you are proposing to improve access to affordable leased land, for example, do not include the cost of maintaining a general website.

The budget is poorly justified. Reviewers want to see budget items calculated in a transparent way, so that a travel cost, for example, is described by purpose, distance, rate, and a named destination that’s consistent with the plan of work—“Four round trips to Windy Knoll Farm to deliver workshop materials, 17 miles each trip at .55 a mile, \$37.40” For materials and supplies, we expect to see some cost multiplied by some quantity—for example, “print 300 post cards at .36 each, \$108.” The justification should match the budget, line for line, showing how the budget lines were arrived at, and the justification total should match the overall budget total.

The budget has errors in arithmetic. It's important to check your budget carefully for errors and it's a good idea to use spreadsheet software to minimize or eliminate them. You are actively encouraged to develop and attach your budget as an Excel spreadsheet as a supplement to the budget you submit in the online template. Using spreadsheet software both reduces error and also makes for easier budget revisions later on if your project is funded. Submitting an Excel spreadsheet is by no means required, but if you have one, please submit it as a convenience.

Sample budget

Personnel

Mary Greene, project leader	\$ 1100
Jack Smith, community organizer	600
Anna Banks, volunteer coordinator	300
Fringe on above	700

Materials and supplies

Signage for FarmFest	480
Banner	550
Pencils, clipboards	35
Training materials	1200

Travel

To cooperating farm	48
To festival site	32

Printing & Publications

Flyers	250
Post cards	90

Other direct costs

Jerry Gray	800
Postage	267
Land-line long distance and conference calls	95
TOTAL (rounded to nearest dollar)	\$6547*

*Note: If this organization were eligible for indirect cost recovery, then an indirect charge of \$655 could be added for a budget total of \$7202.

Sample budget justification

For each line item in the budget, we will need to see a justification. A justification is a brief, clear indication of how you arrived at each line-item request, and each one should follow a predictable format. For example, the justification for the budget on the previous page might look like this:

Personnel

Mary Greene, project leader: \$20/hr. for 55 hrs.; Jack Smith, community organizer: \$15/hr. for 40 hrs.; Anna Banks, volunteer coordinator, \$15/hr. for 20 hrs.; Fringe at 35%

Materials and supplies

Signage for FarmFest, 8 at \$60 each; base banner, \$350, lettering \$200 ; pencils, clipboards for volunteers, \$35.00; training materials, 120 spiral bound workbooks @ \$10 each, \$1200.00

Travel

Five round trips to cooperating farm: total 96 miles at 55 cents/mile, \$52.80; seven round trips to festival site: total 63 miles at 55 cents/mile \$34.65

Printing and publications

1000 flyers at .25 each \$250.00; 1000 post cards at .09 each, \$90.00

Other direct costs

Jerry Gray, farmer, \$200 per diem, 4 days \$800.00; postage, 100 mailings @ \$0.37, 1000 postcards @ \$0.23, \$267.00; land-line long distance calls to collaborators, 2 conference calls, \$95.00

About indirect costs

Some institutions and agencies have a negotiated federal rate for indirect costs. If your organization is one of these institutions or agencies, then you can capture 10 percent of direct costs as an indirect cost.

Submitting your proposal

Proposals are submitted on line, and we strongly recommend that you prepare all your narrative responses using a word-processing program first. There are strict word limits for each narrative section, and thoughtful and even strenuous editing will be needed to comply with them. If you simply go to the

online submission template, register as a user, and begin typing, it's very likely you will run into difficulties.

Before submitting, you will need to convert all your attachments to an electronic format, either by scanning original documents or acquiring them electronically to begin with. The formats accepted by the online submission template include .pdf, .doc, .docx, and .xls.

The link to the online submission interface is in the application instructions on the [Northeast SARE website](#), and these instructions are normally revised and posted in late summer. Feel free to register and visit this interface, once it is open for use, just to look around and see how it works, but do not enter text and hit the “submit” button until you are very confident that your proposal is complete.

Once the proposal has been submitted, you will need to print it out as a .pdf document—this option is only available once the “submit” button has been deployed. Once printed, have the president of the governing board of your organization or comparable agency officer read and sign off on the proposal where indicated. The names of your collaborators should also be listed on this page, including cooperating farmers. You will also need to read and then sign your own name under “assurance.” Then, within two weeks after the submission deadline, mail the full signed proposal, excluding attachments, to **Northeast SARE, University of Vermont , 655 Spear Street, Burlington, Vermont 05405-0107.**

Proposal time line

In general, application materials are released in late summer of each calendar year with submissions due in October. This give applicants the time they need to plan, develop proposal components, consult with others as needed, and collect supporting data.

Reviewers begin reading, scoring, and commenting on proposals in November; this process continues into January.

In early February, reviewers finalize their recommendations for funding, which are then presented to the Northeast SARE Administrative Council at their winter meeting. Final award decisions are announced in March.

How funds are paid

Northeast SARE pays out grant funds as reimbursements—project managers should plan to send invoices regularly, often monthly or perhaps quarterly. An invoice template can be downloaded from the Northeast SARE website under “manage your grant,” where you will also find information about reporting and general project management.

If your project is funded, you should develop a straightforward, workable system for tracking costs and for saving receipts and other documentation of how funds are being spent. As a practical matter, you should request reimbursements as you go, so that you are balancing your costs against your award in a way that works for your organization's budget. Be aware that we will always hold back the last 10 percent of the award until we have an acceptable final report.

A note on reporting

Reports are submitted on line, and if your proposal is successful we will send you what you need to access the online reporting interface. Annual reports are due December 31 of each year the project is funded and a final report is due within 60 days of the contracted end date.

If you get behind in reporting, or if your reports are incomplete, we may place a hold on your funds until reports are satisfactory and up to date.

Questions, problems, and staying connected

SARE staff are always ready to answer any questions and can often be very helpful if you run into an unexpected issue—you can assume that almost any problem you encounter has probably come up before with some other project.

Northeast SARE staff also understand that innovative, interesting ideas are inherently risky, and what you may see as failure may look like useful information to us—it's just as important to understand what doesn't work as to understand what does. The point here is that it's never a good idea to suffer in silence or to hide an unexpected problem; staff has broad experience with the many kinds of speed bumps a project can run into, and will work with you in a positive, uncritical way to figure out what to do if one crosses your path.

Never hesitate to call or e-mail us if you have a question or need support.