
innovati*ns

IN SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

THE NORTHEAST REGION SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE RESEARCH AND EDUCATION PROGRAM



SARE at a Quarter Century

Timeline

Senator Patrick Leahy

Fred Magdoff

Elizabeth Henderson

On the money

Winter 2013-2014

INNOVATIONS

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THE NORTHEAST REGION

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This issue is dedicated to our more than 1600 grantees—thank you.

From the top, clockwise: Bob Muth, New Jersey; Ed Fry, Maryland; Jack Lazor, Sid Bosworth, and Heather Darby, Vermont; Maya Kosok, Maryland; Pam West, West Virginia.



Credits: Jack Rabin; Edwin Remberg, Barb Leidl; Debra Heleba; Candice Huber.

25
years

Lessons learned a look ahead

A generation has passed since Congress funded the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program of USDA. The goal of this program was to promote science and outreach that pursued economic, environmental, and social goals for farming. Since then, the application of sustainable agriculture has evolved, and so has the implementation of SARE's grant programs.

In the beginning, sustainable agriculture was a far-out concept to many. Often equated with soil-huggers and bug-lovers, or at least something out of the mainstream, agricultural sustainability has now become an accepted, even over-used term.

But along the way, the real nature of sustainability began to emerge: it involves a systems approach. It turns out that the triple bottom line of profits, stewardship, and social well-being is embedded in a highly complex web of interactions. Understanding how these pieces fit together and where the relationships can be leveraged is the study of food systems, which to my mind, is sustainable agriculture 2.0.

So while it is still true that sustainable agriculture is predicated on place-based orientation of production systems and has a biological basis for healthy farming practices, it goes way beyond the farm to regional value chains, water-

shed-level phenomena and societal aspirations for healthy people and ecosystems.

The founders designed SARE grant-making with several enduring and compelling attributes. First, the program has decentralized leadership: it is administered at the regional level where unique needs can be identified and acted upon. Second, it institutionalizes stakeholder engagement in that leadership: our Administrative Councils are populated by a pretty wide swath of the agricultural community, and they call the shots within the boundaries of SARE's authorizing legislation. Third, SARE's portfolio is built on innovation, not subject matter. We don't tell applicants what topics they should work on, just that they should contribute to new ideas and practices that enhance food system sustainability. Fourth, SARE has a mandate to create learning communities among agricultural service providers as well as producers. That is, we have a professional development program that pushes the "trainers" to train themselves as well as the folks they are hired to help. It turns out we all benefit from a co-learning approach when it comes to understanding complex systems like farms. Fifth, SARE has a mandate to conduct outreach, and that has moved the results of our grants from reports on the shelf into forms people can

use: books, bulletins, videos and web pages that helped move once-marginal concepts such as cover cropping, direct marketing, intensive pasture management, organic farming and soil health into the mainstream.



So what does the future hold for SARE? I don't know, but I can offer several suggestions for keeping the program healthy and effective.

Leave the door open. New ideas will come through; they will push our envelopes and some will move to widespread adoption over time.

Demand accountability. Requiring applicants to aim for measurable results makes the most of a public investment in our program and leads to findings that are more compelling to those that follow.

Focus on farmers. Although sustainable agriculture and the food system must involve markets, manufacturers, and policy makers, it has been SARE's clarity that farmers are our primary customer, and our unyielding commitment to engaging them in grant reviews, project implementation, and policy development that has kept us grounded in practicality even while innovating.

– Vern Grubinger

Where does an idea begin?

Patrick Madden, the founding national director of the Low-Input Sustainable Agriculture (LISA) program, the predecessor to SARE, points to the beginning of the sustainable agriculture movement as being the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, a bestseller that broke the news to a wide, national audience about the environmental damage wrought by agricultural pesticides. In *Silent Spring*, Carson wrote about organic and biodynamic farming as offering an alternative to chemical loading with products like DDT.

But there is also a deeper history of the conservation movement that includes people like John Muir, founder in 1892 of the Sierra Club, and Teddy Roosevelt, who established the Forest Service and spoke of conservation as "a national duty." And the Dust Bowl in the 1930s raised new and urgent alarms about farming practices that disrupted the soil, causing disastrous dust storms that triggered the establishment of the Soil Conservation Service, now the Natural Resources Conservation Service, or NRCS.

The 1960s brought with them not just tribal celebrations like Woodstock and the summer of love, but also a growing awareness of the intersecting issues of the environment, social justice, and grassroots democracy; with it came a hands-on, experiential, and fresh approach to highly localized food production. Gradually, the many different strands of thought about agriculture were becoming a multicolored braid of emerging science, hands-on experience, changing farm practices, and a commitment to the health of the planet.

So it's a long story, with roots in the national culture, and like most stories there is an equally long counter narrative from people who say that alternative agriculture will never produce enough food or fiber to feed a rapidly growing population—that the sustainable goal is in itself unsustainable. The common (but not universal) yield gaps between low-input and conventional farms are real, but they are also narrowing; through research and education; high-tech is meeting low-impact with an increasingly friendly handshake and farmers benefit from innovations that boost yields through better cycling of nutrients, beneficial insects, soil health, and companion cropping.

This issue of *Innovations* celebrates the first 25 years of SARE program operations by taking a look at where the program began, what drove the early leadership to build the legislation and leverage the funding, and what all this looked like from the ground, where the farmer stands.

... and where does it lead?

Below is a summary of the top ten topics for Research and Education grants as a percentage of all awards, 1988 to 2013:

- Agricultural education 11.1%
- Nutrient management 9.8%
- Organic farming 9.6%
- Marketing 8%
- Pest management 7.6%
- Pasture management 5.6%
- Cover crops 5.3%
- Processing and adding value 4.0%
- Soil stewardship 3.6%
- New crops and enterprises 3.1%



1988: The Northeast awards \$2,555,987 for its first 11 Research and Education awards. Fred Magdoff is named regional coordinator.

1991: The EPA begins contributing \$1 million a year; this collaboration continues until 2001.

1993: First Farmer Grants awarded.

1994: First Professional Development Grants awarded.

1999: Northeast SARE partners with the National Agroforestry Center, a collaboration that will continue through 2004.

2003: First Partnership Grants awarded.

2004: A regional conference, "Setting the Table: Tools and Techniques for a Sustainable Food System," draws more than 600 people from 39 states.

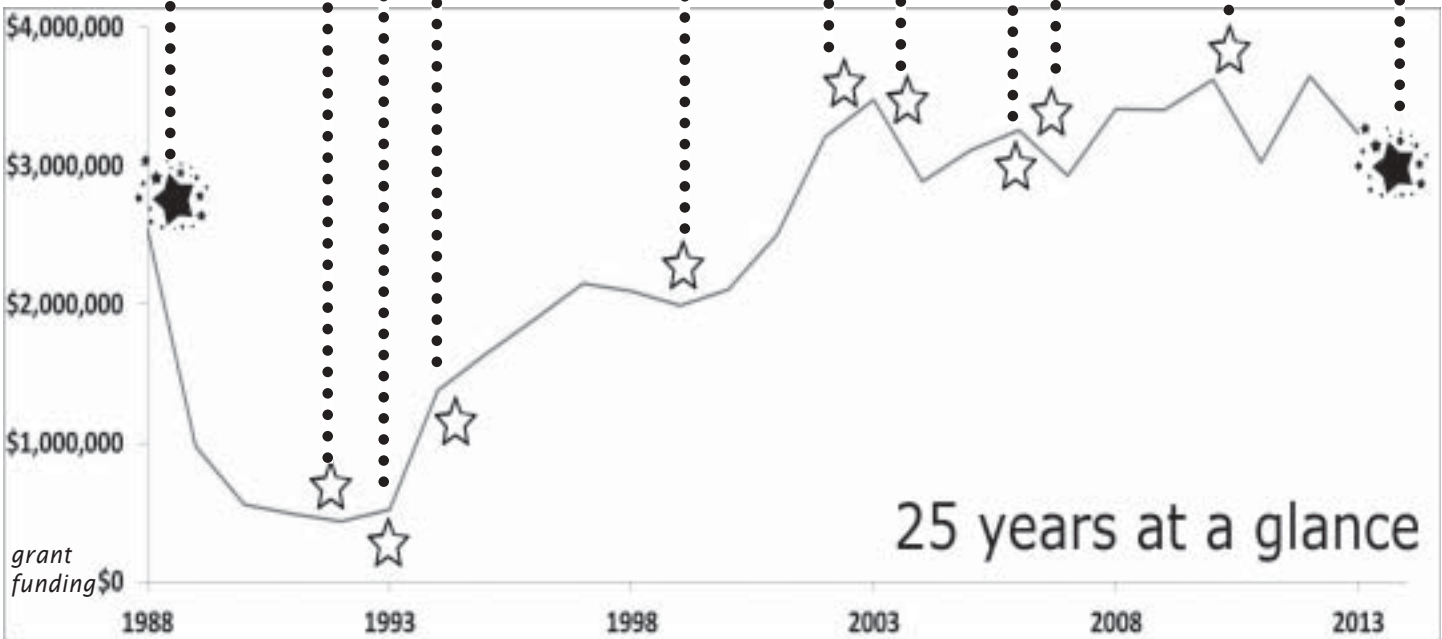
2006: First Sustainable Community Grants awarded in partnership with the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development. This program will merge with the Partnership Grant in 2012.

2007: Vern Grubinger becomes only the second Northeast regional coordinator in nearly 20 years. The program partners with the Appalachian Regional Commission to offer one-time grants for economic development projects in selected mountain counties.

2008: First Agroecosystems awards supporting long-term research.

2013: SARE celebrates its first 25 years.

2010: First Graduate Student Grants awarded.





Building a culture of respect

“The people on the two committees—the Administrative Council and the Technical Committee—absolutely had to believe the process was fair. And we knew that if they didn’t believe it, we would be in big trouble.”



“It has taken a lot of people, and people of good will, to make it happen.”

Fred Magdoff, the founding regional coordinator in the Northeast, reminded us recently about how the grant making process reflects SARE values. “From the beginning,” he says, “a tone was set that the farmers’ views should be treated with extra respect because of their expertise and background.

“We also started, very early on, to pay farmers for their work with SARE—it was a way to show that we considered farmers to be professionals. And it also seemed like the right thing, since all the other folks on the committees were being paid for their SARE work by their different organizations.”

Recruiting the program leadership—technical reviewers and the people who serve on SARE’s decision making body, the Administrative Council—proved to be a critical part of program viability. It’s easy to forget, after two and a half decades of Northeast SARE grants and programming, that there were many early uncertainties and challenges, and managing conflict and competing interests was, as Patrick Madden once said, like a “ballet in a mine field.” Alternative and sustainable concepts were

new, not part of the mainstream, and at times unwelcome. But, as Fred explains, “The best way to resolve the criticism was to bring people in—the more open we were, the more diverse the backgrounds of the people in the organization, the better the decisions.”

A culture of courtesy toward different points of view also meant that people, and especially farmers, got invested in SARE early on: “They understood that they were making real decisions, that something was going to happen differently as a result of the grant making process.” Proposals were selected from what came in the door, but the realization of the program’s mission was driven by “what grabbed people’s attention as having the potential for real change.”

The end result? “Credibility,” says Fred. “The people on the two committees—the Administrative Council and the Technical Committee—absolutely had to believe the process was fair. And we knew that if they didn’t believe it, we would be in big trouble. It has taken a lot of people, and people of good will, to make it happen.

It's been the staff, the grantees, and the people who work on our committees—a lot of people over the years. If you have doubts, then join us, learn, just come on down. Openness is the way we operate.”

The big tent notwithstanding, Fred remembers the early days, a time when there was as uphill struggle to explain how SARE could enhance conventional agriculture.

“There were uncomfortable meetings,” he says, “and meetings where people really didn't understand what we meant by sustainable. They believed that if farming was profitable, it was sustainable.”

Speaking with Cooperative Extension deans and directors about the benefits of a whole-farm approach helped, but changing people's minds took time: “I remember talking in the hallway following a national meeting to someone from the Environmental Protection Agency during this time,

and he was genuinely surprised by the intensity and fervor of the program's sense of mission.”

But since then, many of the ideas supported by SARE grants have moved from the edges of the agricultural community and into the mainstream—ideas like cover crops, conservation tillage, farm diversification, habitat management, season extension, value-added, and

Many of the ideas supported by SARE grants have moved from the edges of the agricultural community and into the mainstream.

alternative marketing models like buy-local campaigns and community supported agriculture.

“Of course,” Fred points out, “that doesn't mean

we've had nothing but successes, because when you're working on new ideas some of them just don't work out. But unexpected results are not failures, either.”

“When I was a graduate student I ran an experiment, and it just didn't work out the way I thought it would. So I went to my advisor, and we went through the details of the experiment together. And then

he said, ‘Look, this surprise is telling you something. That's important information. The experiment didn't fail, it just didn't work out the way you thought it would, which is not the same thing.’

“That stayed with me. It's important to think that way about the grants, too—that what may look like failure is actually a surprise, and surprises teach us things.”

Looking back on twenty-five years of program history, Fred sees a long and productive learning curve. “We have made inroads in the way people think, we've seen changes in farm practices, and it's been a tremendous learning process for everyone. And this learning process was also important to me personally—meeting people, visiting farms, seeing what happened with projects.” New knowledge, new ideas, and new learning communities have all left an indelible mark on the health and vitality of farms and farm communities in the Northeast.

—Helen Husher



Betting the farm: CSA, The Real Dirt, and social justice on the agenda

If we need reminding about how much has changed in how we support research in alternative agriculture, farmer Elizabeth Henderson can refresh our communal memories: “The first time I called Cooperative Extension, back in 1979, for advice on how to grow raspberries organically, the agent laughed at me: ‘That’s not possible,’ she said. I didn’t bother to call back for a long time.”

This was a time when farmers who wanted to walk a different path were essentially marginalized—“excluded,” as Elizabeth puts it, “and treated like we weren’t worth spending time on.” It was beyond frustrating, since the support system that was supposed to help producers was actually elbowing a certain type of producer out of the way. Most academics were invested in their established ways of doing things, and looked on organic agriculture as “a throwback to some prehistoric age.”

Now, there are more than five million acres of farmland certified as organic in the U.S., and sustainable farm practices have become part of our national conversation about how food production

interacts with the environment and helps build healthy communities.

But getting to liftoff was not easy. After an initial period of what Elizabeth calls “non-communication,” the 1985 proposal for LISA, the forerunner of SARE, became “the first time I was aware that there was a serious attempt to get funding for research that would include alternative and organic agriculture. And I knew it would be good to have this kind of research—there was money being invested in organic agriculture in Europe and India, so it didn’t seem totally outside the realm of possibility that the U.S. might be induced to taking organic agriculture seriously.”

She also remembers that her early contact with SARE came via Tony Potenza, who was the first organic farmer appointed to the SARE regional leadership. Potenza encouraged the Northeast Organic Farming Association, or NOFA, to apply to SARE, and the timing of the second grant round opened up an opportunity. “In 1988,” she says, “I was in the process of moving from Massachusetts to New York State—I wasn’t up to my ears in farming, so I

helped coordinate a grant that NOFA wrote. That proposal included offering training sessions for Cooperative Extension and other professionals in organic agriculture.”

The proposal was funded in 1989, and offered training in Massachusetts, New Jersey, Maine, and New York, and one of the key objectives was to establish a network of experienced organic and sustainable farmers in the Northeast who could provide information for researchers, host field days, and develop a manual of current sustainable and organic practices. This last effort resulted in the publication of the first edition of *The Real Dirt: Farmers Tell about Organic and Low-Input Practices in the Northeast*.

“The initial plan,” says Elizabeth, “was that NRAES (the Natural Resource, Agriculture, and Engineering Service), would handle the publishing side of things, but when the chapters were sent out for peer review, the feedback was that the book’s content wasn’t based on research. But of course that was exactly why we did the book—there was no research. Instead, *The Real Dirt* was based on practices”—what some reviewers described dismissively as “indigenous knowledge”

Determined that the book would find its way into print, and running out of the grant funds needed to make this project component work, Elizabeth put in unpaid time finishing up the editing and writing. “We had a crisis,” she says, “and then Rodale stepped in.” Finally published in 1991, *The Real Dirt* was one of the first books in the U.S. that was based on first-hand experience of how to do organic farming.

With grant management experience under her belt, Elizabeth was soon invited to join the Northeast SARE Technical Committee, the group that reviews proposals and makes recommendations on which projects to fund, and then later she was asked to join the Administrative Council, the governing body of Northeast SARE.

“Serving on these committees was an opportunity to get to know people from other parts of the agricultural system. It was a good experience for me because I didn’t learn to farm by going to a university—I learned by doing and reading—and being on these committees meant that I met people I otherwise would not have been exposed to. I learned a lot.”

She particularly remembers meeting Dave Smith, then the director of Cornell’s Small Farm In-

stitute, who told her, “Sustainable agriculture is like a train, roaring into the future, and you are riding in the engine. People like me are running behind as fast as we can, just trying to catch up.”

Paying attention to farmers, and the perception of farmers as leaders and teachers, was an important component of the SARE culture from the start. “I felt we were really listened to, that I was listened to, and that my ideas were seriously considered. Fred’s leadership style made it possible for a diverse group to work together, and for there to be a place in the conversation for people like me.”

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For example, it was Elizabeth who first suggested that the region provide funding for Robyn van En to begin work on *Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen’s Guide to Community Supported Agri-*

culture. Van En died before the manuscript was complete, and Elizabeth again stepped in to finish the writing and editing; after publication, this book was often described as the foundational text on CSA, and is widely understood to be the bible for both farmers and consumers. *Sharing the Harvest* is now out in a second edition, with the possibility of a third edition on the horizon.

She was also interested in the topic of healthy farms: “This was a

hard idea for some people to understand because it wasn’t a narrow research question. But, as a farmer, I knew that I wasn’t really looking for specific solutions to this or that pest problem. Instead, I understood that I was swimming in this sea of interconnections.” Building on this idea, the region adopted a whole-farm approach in its yearly call for proposals, and the concept later flowered into the Agroecosystems research awards now offered by the region.

These days, Elizabeth continues her service to the sustainable agriculture movement through her work on the board of NOFA-NY; she also is the NOFA representative to the Agricultural Justice Project, which focuses on labeling that supports fair labor practices and fair pricing for farmers. She also works with the Domestic Fair Trade Association, which focuses on corporate social responsibility, strong communities, fair treatment of workers, and a sustainable food system. Her Peacework Organic CSA is now also enjoying a twenty-fifth anniversary of its own, and is in Newark, New York, about thirty-five miles east of Rochester.

—Helen Husher



A key SARE champion on Constitution Avenue

A message from Senator Patrick Leahy

I supported the creation of SARE in 1988, and I have worked since then to keep funding for this research grant program strong. SARE was a necessary precursor to the National Organic Standards Act that I authored as part of the 1990 Farm Bill. Before that, there were any number of definitions of organic agriculture and even more theories about what constituted sustainable agricultural practices.

In helping to move organics into the agricultural mainstream, I knew that rigorous science must be part of our approach. Expanding our knowledge was important in starting up the organic standards and labeling system, and over the long term it will be important in better understanding and defining sustainability. Credible research has been important in building

public confidence, developing the new techniques needed to keep up with rapidly growing demand, and informing traditional farmers as well as new producers who are beginning to implement sustainable practices.

While the impact of SARE extends well beyond organic agriculture, one indication of the program's success—and proof that this has been money well spent—is that the organic industry nationally has grown continuously since 1990

with sales reaching \$28 billion today. The acceptance and growth in organic products is due in no small part to research and education made possible through SARE. The benefits go well beyond the financial and include improvements in water quality, wildlife habitat and

other environmental outcomes that help define sustainability.

Vermont partners in particular have made good use of the SARE program, moving our state into the forefront of sustainable agriculture and organic production. The SARE program will only grow in importance with the recent focus on food systems research by a consortium of Vermont educational institutions, through Vermont's embrace of the Working Landscape initiative, and with the heightened urgency of reducing the ecological footprint of farming. This relatively small program continues to make a huge difference in Vermont and for sustainable agriculture nationally.

—Senator Patrick Leahy

"The benefits go well beyond the financial and include improvements in water quality, wildlife habitat, and other environmental outcomes."

Total dollars awarded for each grant program

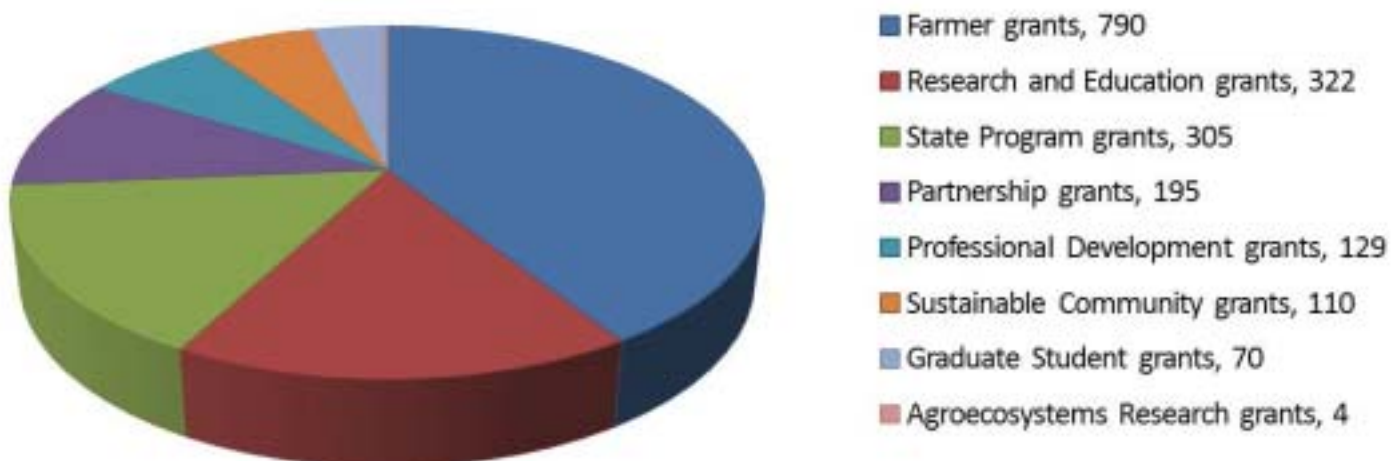


On the money

Since 1998, Northeast SARE has awarded about \$55 million in grants to researchers, educators, and farmers, for state-specific programming, and to the many consultants and nonprofit agencies that serve the agricultural community. This has translated into 1,620 awards to advance sustainable farm practices and vibrant farm communities.

Yet it is the story behind these award numbers that reveals the mission. When asked, 64 percent of farmers involved with SARE programming say they improved sales as a result of SARE investments, and 59 percent say they improved the soil quality on their farms. Seventy-five percent of farm educators say they enriched their programming because of SARE Professional Development efforts, and recent exit surveys indicate a near-100 percent satisfaction among grantees with the program's efficiency and ability to solve problems. Regional staff and leadership truly embrace the honor and responsibility of delivering SARE programming to our constituents.

Number of awards by grant program





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