

2014-2017 Northeast SARE State Program Project Plan for: University of Vermont

Project Title: Social Sustainability on the Farm

PROJECT TOPIC AND JUSTIFICATION OF TRAINING NEED

“Social sustainability” is generally defined as “the ability of a social system (in this case, a farm) to function at a defined level of social well-being indefinitely.” Farms face a myriad of social sustainability issues both internally (including health and wellbeing, human resource management, etc.) and externally (interaction with the community). How farm families identify, plan, and manage social sustainability on their farms has significant impacts on the viability of not only their own farming operations but of their communities as well. While every farm faces social issues at different phases of a) their business development and b) family life cycles, there are varying degrees of preparedness and/or “wellness” (including ability to cope and adapt) among farm families.

Helping farmers identify critical points in business development and family life cycles where particular social issues may likely arise is a first step in effective work in this area. Social issues in these 5 thematic areas will be considered in relation to farm business and family life cycles: farm succession, community connections, health and wellbeing, equity and entrepreneurship. Outfitting farm families with tools and support resources may help them recognize and plan for impacts on social sustainability when making business and/or production decisions. Further, steps to incorporate social sustainability indicators into Extension program evaluations may serve to elevate the importance of including social sustainability in sustainable agriculture research and education to achieve holistic programming.

Therefore, this project will build on initial efforts of our state programming (in current 2011-2014 project) by focusing on social sustainability issues that affect farm families. Based on state program evaluations, UVM Extension educators have increased their general knowledge about social sustainability and have started to make steps to integrate what they learned into their programming. Through personal interviews and a “dots survey” conducted in spring 2014, UVM Extension educators are especially interested in 1) gaining a better understanding of the roles that social sustainability plays in farm business and production planning, 2) helping farmers understand and cope with changes on their farms and in their families, and 3) measuring Extension programming impacts on farm social sustainability.

In January 2014, the Vermont Farm Viability Enhancement program conducted a survey of their farm business planners (additional target beneficiaries for this project) and found that their 19 respondents expressed interest in professional development training on quality of life factors (41%); human resources (39%), and farm succession (37%). These results indicate an interest in social sustainability beyond Extension.

5. BENEFICIARY AUDIENCE DESCRIPTION and RECRUITMENT EFFORTS

Beneficiaries

12 Extension ag educators and other service providers (i.e., farm business planners, and staff from non-profits and farmer organizations like NOFA-VT) will be recruited to participate in this project. They will be selected from a pool of the estimated 90 providers who work in Vermont with farmers.

Recruitment Efforts

- Notices about the project will be emailed directly to Extension educators and agricultural service providers.
- Individuals will commit to the project through an online form—the form will describe the project (including the performance target), learning objectives, and participant expectations.
- In year 2, implementation funds will be distributed to the 12 participants on an “as needed basis.” Here, participants will apply for funds for educational program expenses that advance the project’s learning outcomes and/or helping achieve the performance target. Commitment to the project goals and performance target, and agreement to complete a project evaluation and share their learning with other professionals will be further requirements of fund approval.

3. LEARNING OUTCOMES/CURRICULUM

Participants will increase their knowledge of and ability to address social sustainability in their sustainable agriculture research and education through:

- A farm diagnostic tool using the family development cycle and touchpoints of the 5 social sustainability themes.
- A farm diagnostic tool using the business cycle and touchpoints of the 5 social sustainability themes.
- 5 info sheets that provide descriptions and indicators of each of the social sustainability themes (farm succession, community connections, health & wellbeing, equity, and entrepreneurship).

Participants test diagnostic tools and info sheets in farmer programming (educational events, one-on-one consultations, etc.) by choosing at least one tool developed and apply it in ongoing or new programming. Participants evaluate use of the tools as well as develop indicators that can be used to measure education effects on farm family social sustainability.

Based on participant use and feedback, the tools are refined and published for wider use among other educators. In addition, a compiled set of social sustainability indicators Extension educators can use in their work.

4. EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES PLANNED

The following educational activities are planned:

- Ten webinar trainings over the course of the project (4 trainings in year 1, 2 in year 2, and 4 in year 3). Year 1 & 2 trainings will be conducted by “outside experts.” Year 3 trainings will be conducted by project participant teams who have utilized the implementation funds.
- Two in-person trainings per year (1 on farm, 1 round-robin “classroom” style). During the on-farm training, the host farmer will provide primary instruction in year 1; in years 2 and 3, farm hosts will be paired and co-present with project participants. The round-robin training will be a stand-alone workshop or added to existing trainings to meet participant time management goals.
- Twelve quarterly check-ins among participants throughout the course of the project (web conferences).

Effective adult learning techniques will be implemented; for example program materials will be developed and distributed in advance, and webinar trainings will include time for discussion. This is particularly important given the Jan 2014 service provider survey where 85% of respondents preferred group discussion and 75% requested presentations from outside consultants.

SEE ATTACHED MILESTONES FOR YEARS 1, 2 AND 3

VERIFICATION OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

Online end of training surveys will be administered to all participants to measure knowledge gain, change in skills and behavior, specifically their intent to change the way they work with farmers. Data will provide summative program assessment.

Quarterly conference calls with participants will allow for monitoring of participant progress / provide formative program assessment, provide on-going participant support, and help verify performance targets.

2a. AG SERVICE PROVIDER ACTIONS PROJECT PERFORMANCE TARGET

12 Extension educators and other Vermont ag service providers use social sustainability “diagnostic” tools and info sheets in their programming to assess and address key social issues farm families face.

2b. INDICATORS OF AG SERVICE PROVIDER ACTIONS

- Number of farmer education programs and research projects that have been adapted and/or created to include social sustainability concepts.
- Number of farmers reached by these efforts.
- Data retrieved from participant program evaluations that document social sustainability (using project’s social sustainability indicators).

VERIFICATION OF PERFORMANCE TARGET

Participants will respond to an end-of-training surveys as well as annual follow-up surveys to verify changes in behavior relevant to the performance target.

Survey instruments used by beneficiaries where social sustainability topics were integrated will be collected and shared.

1a. FARMER ACTIONS DESIRED

Since social sustainability issues are unique across each individual farm and farm family, desired actions are variable. However, the following farmer actions are desired:

- Consideration and/or incorporation of social aspects into business and/ production decisions.
- Effective stress management that may arise as result of changes on the farm and/or family, e.g., farm diversification (entrepreneurship), farm succession, and climate change mitigation.
- Effective communication of quality of life goals with family members and service providers.
- Awareness of what to do and who to contact if they need help with social sustainability issues.
- Have an articulated plan on how to involve the community in and on the farm.
- A farm succession plan (including business transfer and estate plan) and/or exit strategy (for early life cycle businesses) written into farm business plans.
- Efforts made to balance work and family.
- Effective human resource plans and policies.

1b. INDICATORS OF FARMER ACTIONS

- Number of farms with farm succession plans.
- Number of farms with business plans that include an exit strategy.
- Number of farmers who express satisfaction with their family-work balance.
- Number of farms that increase participation in community activities and/or involve community on the farm.
- Number of farmers who indicated satisfaction with peer-and/or resource networks.
- Number of farmers who report an increase in use of personal stress management techniques.
- Number of “junior generation” farmers who express interest in the farm over the long-term.
- Number of farmers who participate in wellness and/or farm safety programs.
- Number of farm employees who feel well supported by their employers.

VERIFICATION OF FARMER ACTIONS (optional)

The project will not be reaching farmers directly. Participants will be asked to track farmer contacts and behavior change as a result of programs delivered. Survey questions using social sustainability indicators will be distributed; that data collected and compiled.