

2014 Final Report for Vermont State SARE Program

Project Title: Social Sustainability on the Farm Field-based Trainings

1. Report Summary

Improving quality of life is a central component of the missions of both Northeast SARE and the University of Vermont Extension. But what does “quality of life” mean, particularly to Vermont’s farm families? To explore this and other social sustainability issues, the Vermont state SARE program offered a three-year project for Extension educators.

Although it is generally agreed upon that social sustainability issues are important to address, they are often overlooked in educational programs. Therefore, the project helped Extension agriculture personnel to better understand the “third dimension” or social sustainability issues individual farm families face, and integrate these issues into their work with farmers. Social sustainability topics the project addressed included:

- Entrepreneurship (including business formation, use of advisory services, vision, human resources management),
- Farm succession (business continuity, retirement and estate planning, land transfers),
- Quality of life (work and family balance, satisfaction, social support, health and stress, social and professional relationships),
- Social integration (contribution in local services, quality of non-agricultural relationships, social contribution, and regional presence of agriculture),
- Equity issues (including access to information and resources).

The trainings were structured as traditional professional development farm tours but with a twist – they focused on farmers as the training instructors. The host farm families were selected based on a) their sustainable farming practices, b) a diversity of enterprises and farm operators (representative of Vermont’s agriculture), and, mostly importantly, c) their ability to articulate one or more aspects of social issues (internal to the family and externally with the community at large) important to them. Some of the farm hosts were the same farms Extension educators visited in the early 1990’s as part of some initial sustainable agriculture professional development trainings-- trainees were able to see how these farms have changed over time and what issues these farm families faced to maintain their sustainable farm businesses. Four of these types of trainings were offered over the course of the project. The project also included informal discussion sessions following the farm visits, and three presentations/workshops at service provider conferences.

Seventeen University of Vermont Extension educators formed the core group of participants; however a total of 101 service providers and farmers participated in the project trainings. In a follow-up survey of the core Extension educators, all but one said they gained new knowledge regarding social issues that farm families face (n=14). Of these respondents, 71% said they implemented changes in their work with farmers to include social sustainability topics as a result of what they learned. As a result, these efforts reached no fewer than 47 farmers; 27 farmers reported a better understanding of social issues and/or reported improvements of social issues on their farms, including increased communication with family members on management decisions; the inclusion of happiness and personal satisfaction as part of farm viability discussions; and the use of professional mediation for farm transitions.

2. Performance Target(s)

Of the 20 agricultural service providers who participate in this training, 18 will increase their knowledge of social sustainability issues that farm families are facing, and 10 will implement a change in their current work to include social sustainability topics (i.e., entrepreneurship, farm succession, quality of life, and/or social integration). As a result, 50 farmers will report a better understanding of these issues, and 20 will report an improvement in at least one aspect of social sustainability on their farms as a result of educational efforts conducted by trainees.

3. Report on 2013-2014 Milestone Accomplishments

Five educators integrate social sustainability topics and/or guest speakers into their educational programs for farmers. 25 farmers report an increased understanding of social sustainability issues. January-March 2014.

- Five educators integrated social sustainability topics into their work with farmers, including:
 - 2 educators who pursued the development of social sustainability indicators and accompanying verification tools to use in Extension-wide programming; one changed her farmer surveys to help better measure farm-level social sustainability;
 - 2 educators increased the focus on social sustainability in a business planning course for farmers offered in Fall 2013--the course was attended by 20 farmers; and
 - 1 educator used social sustainability (eg., potential social return on investment) to help frame new Extension partnerships with farmer hosts in a youth agriculture program.

Follow-up survey of farmers reveal that 20 report an improvement in at least one aspect of social sustainability as a result of educational efforts conducted by trainees. April 2014.

- Educators reported a total of 27 farmers who said they gained a better understanding of social issues and/or reported improvements on of social issues they faced as a result of Extension educational efforts. These behavior changes included:
 - Increased consulting with family members on management decisions;
 - Expanded the discussion of farm viability to include happiness and personal satisfaction; and
 - Use of professional mediation for farm transitions.

A team of trainees collaborate to coordinate the year 3 field-based training where they recruit 5 farm families and work with them to lead the training. June 2014.

- A team of three trainees collaborated to offer a joint VT SARE / VAAA (Vermont chapter of the NACAA) field-based training in the Finger Lakes region of New York, October 2014. Five educators visited 5 family farm businesses.

Final project survey conducted and report submitted to the NE-SARE office. August 2014.

- The final project survey was conducted and report submitted to the NE-SARE office in December 2014.

3-Year Summary of Activities, Participants, Learning Outcomes and Products

Table 1 –Activities.

Type of Educational Activity Conducted by Project	Number of Each Activity Conducted
Workshop/Field Day	1
On-farm Demonstration	
Tour	4 field-based trainings
Webinar/Talk/Presentation	3
Other on-line training	
Individual Consultations (an estimate is acceptable)	
Other (specify)	

Table 2 – Participants.

Type of Agricultural Service Provider	Number Who Participated
Extension	38
NRCS	3
Other Federal/State Agency	3
Other (specify)	55 Non-profit staff, consultants, & university faculty (non-Ext)
Total Number of Agricultural Service Providers*	96
Farmers	5

Table 3 - Learning Outcomes.

	Total Number of Agricultural Service Providers	Total Number of Farmers	Total number of acres or animals the farmers manage, if known
Verified an increase in knowledge about social issues affecting farm families	22	0	--
Verified an increase in confidence in identifying social issues of importance to farmers	28	0	--
Verified intention to integrate social issues into work with farmers	21	0	--
<p>Please note: Core educators identified the following as learning outcomes; survey results indicated an increase in knowledge gain of all topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better understand social sustainability concepts. • Better understand the complexities of facilitating change in these types of social behaviors (vs. technical or production-related behaviors). • Better understand farmer perspectives on how farm labor and/or marketing decisions relate to quality of life. • Learn the extent to which farms are able to diversify their activities, expand produce, and/or extend the season to make their farm businesses more resilient. • Better understand the ways farmers are making decisions about business development in relation to the quality of life they desire. • Learn how farmers are balancing support for their communities with their roles as business owners. • Generate new research ideas and/or partnerships. • Improve understanding of metrics to measure performance and success (that might be used in an outcome-focused project). 			

Table 4 – Products.

Type of Information Product Produced	Number of Each Type Produced
Fact sheet/Guidance document	1
Decision tool	
Website/web content	1
Article (newsletter, press)	
Curricula	
Video	
Other (specify)	3 blog posts

4. Performance Target Outcomes and Additional, Unanticipated Outcomes

a. Summarized Outcome Data

Table 5 – Numbers of agricultural service providers taking action

The total number of agricultural service providers who incorporated information and/or used skills learned through the state program training activities in their educational activities, services and/or information products for farmers.	10
The total number of farmers these agricultural service providers reached through their efforts.	47

Table 6 – Actions taken by the agricultural service providers

Place an X next to all that apply	Types of Educational Activities Ag Service Providers incorporated information they learned into	Number of Each Activity Type, if known
X	Workshop/Field Day	1
	On-farm Demonstration	
	Webinar/Talk/Presentation	
	Other on-line training	
X	Individual Consultation (an estimate is acceptable)	15 (est)
	Fact sheet/Guidance document	
	Article (newsletter, press)	
	Web content	
X	Other (specify)	Development of new program on labor management

Table 7 – Actions taken by farmers

The number of farmers who made a management change as a result of learning from the project activities and/or the trained agricultural service providers?	27
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider considerations in expanding farm and more consulting with family members. • Remote monitoring of quality indicators to allow more flexible use of time and location; able to balance work/life better; expanding the discussion of farm viability to include happiness. 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turned to professional mediation to get a good start on transition. • Increased knowledge of diversified farm operations and direct marketing 	
Number of acres, animals, or other appropriate production units that were affected by these changes. <i>(please enter your best estimate; you may leave this blank if you have no idea)</i>	

Table 8 – Additional outcomes as a result of the project

Type of Outcomes Achieved	Number of Each Outcome
New working collaboration	1
Grants applied for	1
Grants or other funds received	
Other (describe)	2 poster presentations at national professional conference

b. Outcome Narrative

Performance Target Outcomes

Seventeen (17) University of Vermont Extension educators formed the core group of participants for this project. These educators participated in at least one of the field-based trainings (farm tours) as well as a workshop and/or follow-up discussion session offered. A final project survey revealed that all but one respondent (93%) said they gained new knowledge regarding social issues that farm families face as a result of their participation in the project (n=14). Of these educators, 10 (71%) said they implemented changes in their work with farmers to include social sustainability topics as a result of what they learned. These changes included:

- looking more broadly at issues of social sustainability;
- being more thoughtful of farmer-to-community connections in water quality programming;
- incorporating farm succession and community connections discussions in working with farms on entrepreneurship;
- including social sustainability questions in follow-up evaluations;
- integrating quality of life and profitability goals in labor management programming;
- incorporating farmworker health topics into public health classes; and
- reframing “viability: to include social sustainability.

Several educators said the project has helped them become more aware and mindful of social sustainability as they plan and implement Extension programs. For example, one educator said, “I have begun thinking more intentionally about how to incorporate equity issues into my work. I felt

like we have been trying to do that inherently, because we work with a lot of women farmers, but it's reinforced my attitude about making sure it's front and center. Equity issues raised in this group were expanded upon...and it has helped me use new techniques to further encourage educational programs meeting women's needs." Another said the project has brought, "'ease of use' to the forefront of my program design and outreach." And another educator said, "I've tried to keep social sustainability issues out front in my program development and be more mindful of the need to be explicit in approaching the topic with farmers."

As a result, educators reached no fewer than 47 farmers; 27 farmers reported a better understanding of social issues and/or reported improvements of social issues on their farms, including increased communication with family members on management decisions; the inclusion of happiness and personal satisfaction as part of farm viability discussions; and the use of professional mediation for farm transitions.

Social sustainability is not easily measured but one educator reported on its importance to farm families. He said, "This project has helped me weave compassion, sensitivity and more broad assessment metrics into the nuts and bolts of day to day problem solving and education...As a result of this project I have landed on that measure being a "pain-happiness" scale, i.e. what is causing you pain and/or preventing you happiness as it relates to your farm/business and personal satisfaction?...[As a result of sharing this with a farmer group], the veteran, larger dairy operator in the group with us spoke frankly, 'All those financial reports are fine. But if I looked at those in the first few years of starting my farm and went by the benchmarks I would never be here 30 years later. I probably made less than minimum wage for the first 15 years, but my family was provided for, my cows were healthy, and I was happy. That was my report. Those were my goals.'"

Other Results, Unanticipated Outcomes and Interesting Finding

One participant said the training stimulated an idea to conduct survey work with livestock farmers to further assess social sustainability topics; they applied for funding to pursue this project. Another said, "This project helped to influence the development of an integrated research and extension project looking at labor management decisions on small and medium sized farms. The project will be developing tools and resources to help farmers make labor management choices that fit with their quality of life and profitability goals."

Examples of unanticipated outcomes were poster presentations given at the national Rural Sociological Society Annual Meeting in 2013 and Ag & Human Values Conference in 2014.

5. 2013-2014 SARE Outreach Activities

Our SARE outreach work conducted through presentations, exhibits, and social media continued to help Vermonters (especially farmers and agricultural service providers) better understand SARE, its grants programs, and project results.

Event/Activity	Number of Contacts <i>(please enter your best estimate)</i>	
	Farmers	Ag. Professionals
National SARE Outreach Steering Committee Meeting (10.1.13)	4	11
Health Insurance Requirements for Farmer Employers Webinar (1.8.14)	1	17
Farm Transfer Planning Meeting (1.14.14)	2	7
PAHCC Ag Advisory Meeting (1.22.14)	2	6
Vermont Farm Show (1.28-30.14)	53	38
Greenworks Conference (2.13.14)	16	2
NOFA Winter Conference (2.15-16.14)	45	23
No-Till and Cover Crop Conference (2.19-20.14)	50	12
Vermont Hops Conference (2.27.14)	12	8
Vermont Oilseed Producers Conference (3.3.14)	8	5
Vermont Organic Dairy Conference (3.5.14)	20	7
Vermont Grain Conference (3.13.14)	15	9
NOFA-Vermont Board Meeting (4.8.14)	8	12
Vermont Extension Professional Improvement Conference (5.13-14.14)	0	22
NE-SARE Farmer Grant recipient visits (5.29.14)	5	1
PAHCC Ag Advisory Meeting (6.11.14)	3	5
Poster presentation at national Ag and Human Values Conference (6.20.14)	0	7
Social sustainability presentation at national Ag and Human Values Conference (6.21.14)	3	18
Organic Dairy Field Day (6.18.14)	12	8
NWCS Annual Field Day (6.24.14)	22	30
Twilight Meeting at The Farm Between (7.29.14)	4	8
NE-SARE R&E Grant Writers Webinar (7.30.14)	0	18
NE-SARE PDP Grant Writers Webinar (8.8.14)	0	13

CVCSP Conservation Field Day (8.29.14)	8	6
NE-SARE State Coordinator Mini-Grants Review Session Webinar (9.5.14)	0	11
Reading the Farm Training, NH (9.24.14)	5	15
National SARE Outreach Steering Committee Meeting (10.8-10.14)	4	11
Vermont Crop Storage Webinar (10.15.14)	15	3
Joint VT SARE / VASS Social Sustainability Tour (10.20-22.14)	0	5
Farm to Plate Summit (10.23-24.14)	7	23

- Vermont SARE twitter feed. 81 tweets to 618 followers (an increase of 22% followers from last year).
- Development of VT SARE state program website: www.uvm.edu/vtsare.
- 4 NE-SARE-related blog posts for Women’s Agricultural Network blog:
 - Digging into a Summer of Soil Health (7.2.14): blog.uvm.edu/wagn/2014/07/02/digging-into-a-summer-of-soil-health/
 - Personal Resiliency: The Antidote to Stress (2.14.14): blog.uvm.edu/wagn/2014/02/14/personal-resiliency-the-antidote-to-stress/
 - Making Social Media Work in Sustainable Agriculture: 7 Lessons Learned (12.11.13)
 - blog.uvm.edu/wagn/2013/12/11/making-social-media-work-in-sustainable-agriculture-7-lessons-learned/
 - SARE Meets Social Sustainability on the Farm (10.10.13): blog.uvm.edu/wagn/2013/10/10/sare-meets-social-sustainability-on-the-farm/

6. Assessment of Project Approach /Lessons Learned/Future Recommendations

The choice of topic for this three-year project was both challenging and rewarding. Social sustainability is a “fuzzy” topic and one that does not easily translate to NE-SARE’s traditional model of program delivery and verification. However, it is a critical topic; if our farms are not socially sustainable, they are simply not sustainable in a holistic view. As one participant said, “I think this work is on the edge of something bigger and has a lot of promise.” Therefore, I look forward to continuing this work over the next three years.