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THEME OVERVIEW: INNOVATIONS TO SUPPORT BEGINNING FARMERS AND RANCHERS

Dawn Thilmany McFadden and Suresh Sureshwaran

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Across the United States, agricultural producers are responding to increased interest in the “Know your Farmer, Know your Food” concept promoted by the USDA, as well as growing market demand for local foods. At the same time, USDA and industry leadership have a growing concern about the aging farmer and rancher population, and wonder who will be the future food producers in this country. Subsequently, an unprecedented transition in farm enterprises and land use is occurring as the U.S. farm population continues to age, and in some regions, there is evidence of a “shift” from the conventional system of passing down operations within the same family or to farms with similar production plans with an emerging generation of beginning farmers who are at least two generations from an agricultural family background.

All these trends led to a small proliferation in programs targeted at beginning farmers and ranchers, a fact that gave rise to this theme set of articles that shares some of the trends, programs and projects that demonstrate how the government, academic and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) communities are responding to this population. In her article, Ahearn delves deeper into how beginning farmers vary from the broader population, in terms of demographics, financial resources and performance. Some of the differences seem to deviate from conventional wisdom.

More customer-focused marketing channels often require a modified approach to production planning and implementation that begins with changing the farm business structure and modes of production to meet food demand according to the marketing outlets used to reach consumers. While some producers are transitioning to new production and marketing practices, other producers are entering agriculture only to find that there are few technical assistance offerings or, for that matter, limited or non-existent management and decision tools oriented toward production and marketing planning for smaller-scale, diversified operations. In their article, Sureshwaran and Ritchie highlight some of the new resources and programs available to bridge some of the gap between needs and resources for beginning farmers. This overview also helps to frame the commonality between the final two articles, new USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) grants that are funding outreach and technical assistance programs.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2009, BFRDP funded 29 projects to train, educate, and provide outreach and technical assistance to beginning farmers. Twenty-five of these projects are standard projects that address the needs of beginning farmers and ranchers through new and established local and regional training, education, outreach, and technical assistance initiatives that enhance self-employment in farming, ranching, and forestry opportunities. At the request of stakeholders, these projects are very outcomes oriented and there is already evidence that the initial set of 2009 grantees are increasing the knowledge base of beginning farmers while strengthening networks and communities to improve peer support.

It is also important to note that the outcomes are commonly saving new farmers from negative outcomes, with a notable share of participants reporting that what they learned led them to exit from farming and thereby helping them to avoid investment losses in time and capital. Finally, these programs are helping Extension and community professionals to reach a fairly diverse set of project participants.

The changing attitudes toward food and farming has seemingly affected the types of strategies that beginning farmers are using to gain momentum. The articles by Zimmer and Wilcox, and Meyer and his co-authors, describe three such projects from Missouri, Kentucky and Colorado. These articles focus on the types of tools, educational models and content needed in new Extension programs targeted at bridging the experience gap for agricultural producers who are new to the agricultural sector.

For More Information

Start2Farm.gov. (2011). Available at: <http://Start2Farm.gov>.

USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. (2011). Available at: <http://www.nifa.usda.gov/funding/bfrdp/bfrdp.html>

Dawn Thilmany (dawn.thilmany@colostate.edu) is Professor, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado. Suresh Sureshwaran (ssureshwaran@nifa.usda.gov) is a National Program Leader for the Small Business Innovation Research Grants program and is responsible for the following topic areas: Markets and Trade, Rural Development, and Food and Nutrition.

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