



Guide for Northeast SARE Farmer Grant Technical Advisors

The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program offers Farmer Grants to eligible commercial farmers to explore new sustainable production practices, marketing strategies and other techniques. These projects help farmers address issues that affect farming and the farm community with long-term sustainability in mind.

Securing a technical advisor is a requirement of all Northeast SARE Farmer Grants. Therefore, this tip sheet provides information to clarify the roles and responsibilities of technical advisors on Farmer Grant projects.

Why have a technical advisor?

All projects must enlist a technical advisor who provides a signed letter of commitment to the Farmer Grant applicant explaining their expertise and role(s) in assisting with the project. While Northeast SARE recognizes the broad expertise that farmers possess, the support that Farmer Grant applicants receive from technical advisors can strengthen the proposal, enrich the integrity of the project's research methods, and extend the reach of project results. In addition, lasting relationships made among farmers and technical advisors often lead to additional research and other collaborations, helping to strengthen our region's agricultural community.

Who can be a technical advisor?

Technical advisors possess a wide range of experience and expertise, depending upon the specific needs of the farmer applicant and their project. A technical advisor may be an Extension educator, researcher, NRCS or other government employee, nonprofit staff, private consultant, veterinarian, other agricultural service provider or even another experienced farmer. The key is that the technical advisor provides a needed expertise to the proposed project.

Technical advisors do not have to live in the Northeast region, but they should not be close friends or family members. Northeast SARE staff, state coordinators and Administrative Council members are not permitted to serve as technical advisors because of conflict of interest policies; however, these professionals may assist in identifying suitable technical advisor candidates to fit the needs of the farmer applicant and their project.

What technical advisors DO

Learn about SARE. Technical advisors should become familiar with Northeast SARE and its grant programs, see: www.northeastsare.org. It is helpful to learn the types and scope of projects funded in the past; SARE's national database includes information on all projects funded since the program's start in 1988: www.sare.org/Project-Reports/.

Technical advisors should be sure to read through the current Farmer Grant Application Instructions posted at: www.northeastsare.org/FarmerGrant to understand what is involved in applying for the grant program.

Watch our "Farmers and their Technical Advisors" videos at: www.northeastsare.org/TAvideos to see some examples of farmer and technical advisor collaborations.

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Talk the project through. Before writing the proposal, farmer applicants are advised to talk through their proposal ideas with their technical advisor to discuss its feasibility and fit within the constraints and goals of the grant program.

Contribute background literature. Help farmers provide evidence of past work or research that demonstrate that the proposed project will provide new information and be of help to other farmers. Applicants are asked to provide citations in their proposal including and beyond past SARE projects; some applicants may appreciate assistance with a search of relevant literature and other background information they can use.

Review the proposal. For many farmers, the Northeast SARE Farmer Grant is their first grant-writing experience. Conversely, many technical advisors have some level of familiarity with writing grants, implementing grant-funded projects and filing reports. While the farmer is expected to write their own Farmer Grant, the technical advisor should review the farmer's grant application and the budget spreadsheet. An extra set of eyes from someone familiar with the farm and the project can improve the proposal by identifying sections that may be unclear, correcting errors, and providing feedback to strengthen areas that may need help.

Provide needed expertise. Farmer applicants come to the program with a wide range of background and expertise. The job of the technical advisor is to assist the farmer applicant with the specific expertise they need to develop and conduct a robust project. The following are common areas of expertise technical advisors provide.

- **Research methodology and analysis.** The technical advisor may be called upon for help with the experimental design of the study, data collection methods, and data analysis strategies. In some cases, technical advisors perform statistical analyses for the project.
- **Troubleshooting.** Some projects don't go as planned—this is the price of innovation. Technical advisors may help troubleshoot any problems that arise during the project and make suggestions for moving forward. Note that changes in the project plan or budget must be approved in advance by Northeast SARE. SARE accepts that new ideas are risky and not all new ideas work out. But keep in mind that discoveries some view as failures are valuable lessons; SARE asks that problems and unexpected results be reported so that others can learn from them. Please note that technical advisors are not responsible for farmers who fail to follow through on their projects—managing the grant is the farmer's responsibility.
- **Outreach and promotion of project results.** Help with the outreach component of a Farmer Grant can be a tremendous help to the project. The farmer needs share project results with other farmers and agricultural service providers over as wide a geographic area as possible. Examples of outreach assistance include: helping the farmer develop a powerpoint presentation for use at workshops or conferences; assisting with promotion and implementation of demonstration days and field walks; reviewing and editing fact sheets, guides, and newsletter articles; and assisting farmers with media coverage of the project.

What technical advisors do NOT do

Although technical advisors play a major role in the Farmer Grant, there are certain activities that technical advisors should not do, as follows.

Write the grant. Farmers need develop their own ideas and write the grant application; the technical advisor reviews the proposal but ultimately it is the farmer's responsibility to write and submit the application.

Conduct the project. It is the farmer's responsibility to conduct the project and the advisor should not actively run the project. If the advisor wants to take the primary role in managing things, then they should apply for a Northeast SARE Partnership Grant, specifically designed for agricultural service providers who work with farmers. For more information about Partnership Grants, see: www.northeastsare.org/PartnershipGrant.

How does the Farmer Grant program benefit technical advisors?

If needed, grant funds may be used to pay technical advisors for their time spent on the project. Since SARE's emphasis is on profitability, good stewardship and strengthening the wider farm community, technical advisors share in supporting these goals. The grants also put new ideas into circulation, potentially enhancing the sustainability of all the farms the advisor serves. Helping farmers get these grants is also a good way to achieve educational programming goals, and they can be an effective multiplier as farmer-to-farmer exchanges of information is an effective educational strategy.

What kind of time commitment is involved?

The farmer applicant will consult with the technical advisor in developing the grant application, and so the advisor should allow time to read it carefully, comment on it, and write a letter of commitment to be submitted with the final proposal. Discussions about the roles the technical advisor will play in the project should include consideration of time commitments. If the project is approved, the farmer should substantially run the project.

What technical advisor information is needed for the proposal?

The following technical advisor information is needed to complete the Farmer Grant application:

- Technical advisor name and contact information; this information is included on the application cover page.
- A summary of the expertise the technical advisor will bring the project and role(s) they will perform; this information is included in the section, "What experience, skills and capacity do you and your technical advisor bring to the project?"
- A signed letter of commitment outlining the technical advisor's role, their agricultural or pertinent experience/expertise, and their comments on the need, potential for success and impact of the project. The letter is uploaded to the online application (applications with missing technical advisor letters will be disqualified).

For more information

Questions about the technical advisor roles and responsibilities should be directed to grant program coordinator Candice Huber at Candice.Huber@uvm.edu.

Checklist for Technical Advisors

If you are asked by a farmer to be a technical advisor on a Northeast SARE Farmer Grant, use this checklist to cover your bases. Each step in the process is important and will make your farmer's proposal much more competitive.

- Read the application instructions.
- Talk the project over with the applicant farmer. Do you and the farmer have a clear understanding of the project objectives? Does the project meet SARE criteria? Has the farmer looked at what others have done to address the problem? Is the project innovative and potentially useful to other farmers?
- Talk over your advisory role and make sure you both understand what it will be. Will you be helping with experimental design? Will you be running statistical analyses? Will you be helping with outreach? Does another expert need to be involved?
- Read the proposal, taking care to look for technical issues, errors, or problems with feasibility. If you do not know how to determine if there are technical or feasibility issues, talk with someone who does.
- Go over the budget, making sure it is consistent with SARE guidelines and the costs seem reasonable and current.
- Ask for a second draft of the proposal, especially if there are technical problems to be addressed or there are weak sections that need to be strengthened.
- Make a copy of the proposal for your records and for reference if the project is funded.
- Submit a signed letter of commitment that outlines your role on the project, the agricultural or pertinent experience/expertise you will bring to the project, and your comments on the need, potential for success and impact of the project.