

Lasting Impacts of a 2012 SARE Beginning Farmer Professional Development Project



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ABSTRACT

In 2012, a SARE state professional development program, designed to increase the ability of individual agricultural service providers (ASPs) to meet the needs of new and beginning farmers, sparked the formation of the Beginning Farmer Resource Network of Maine (BFRN).

BFRN's continuing high level of activity is a testament to the sustainability of the network structure and the value BFRN offers to participating organizations, agencies, and institutions.

BFRN has become a model for maximizing resources and improving farmer services by increasing statewide communication, coordination and collaboration among ASPs.

BEGINNING FARMER RESOURCE NETWORK OF MAINE



Mission Statement: BFRN is a coalition of Maine agriculture agencies & organizations working together to connect aspiring and beginning farmers to resources for farm business success.

25 current members representing Extension, state and federal agencies, and non-profit organizations.

Activities:

- Bi-monthly meetings with member updates, coordination of activities, and professional development trainings.
- Online beginning farmer resources directory website (22,865 unique page views in 2017).
- 3 days of hands-on, in-depth workshops at the annual Maine Agricultural Trades Show.

Guiding principles: The network continues only as long as it has value to its members. It has no overhead to support and relies on members for shared leadership.

SARE state program support has included:

- 2014 strategic planning retreat – new leadership and committee structure developed and implemented.
- **2018 impact survey** – 24 BFRN members responded. Results are reported here.

MORE EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT AG SERVICE PROVIDERS (ASPs)

92% of BFRN members said participating in BFRN has made them more effective in their work as ASPs by:

- Making new connections with other ASPs,
- Knowing personally who to refer clients to,
- Keeping up to date with programs and resources, and
- Having an online clearinghouse of available resources.

BFRN members reported saving on average 6 hours per month as a result of BFRN

“The relationship and trust that has formed between BFRN members is really what makes the referral process tick ... It's also inspiring to be part of a team that's pulling for beginning farmers. It helps you get up and do the work every day, even though it's quite difficult.”



Photo by Edwin Remsburg

SARE PDP PROGRAM “READING THE FARM” (RTF)

From 2008 to 2014, Maine conducted annual RTF trainings:

- 2-day retreats for ag service providers from across Maine
- Trainees conducted in-depth studies of two farms to explore whole-farm interactions and sustainability
- Trainees learned from each other and the farm families, and used a team approach to develop recommendations

In 2012, the RTF training focused on the unique challenges, opportunities, and resources for **Beginning Farmers**



Photo by Ellen Mallory

Trainees identified the need to:

- Network and coordinate activities among the diverse agencies, non-profits, and for-profits working with Maine's beginning farmers, and
- Better connect these farmers to existing resources

Six months later, the RTF trainees and others initiated the **Beginning Farmer Resource Network of Maine**



MORE SUCCESSFUL BEGINNING FARMERS

Members reported, as a result of BFRN:

- Over 800 farmers have made changes (e.g. business planning and accessing technical assistance),
- Affecting about 40,750 acres and 47,265 animals, and
- Resulting in a total value over 5 years of \$8,178,000.



Photo by Edwin Remsburg

EXPANDED PROGRAMMING FOR BEGINNING FARMERS

Since 2012, BFRN members have developed:

- 11 new programs
- 8 grants, including **2 new SARE projects**:
 - Focusing on Interpersonal Relationships for Greater Farm Viability - ENE16-142, \$61,002.
 - Training the Trainers: Enhancing Extension Resources for Beginning Farmers - ENE17-147, \$47,107.



Photo by Tori Jackson