

Equitable Access for Sustained Productivity:

Accelerating implementation of sustainable agriculture and forestry among historically underserved producers and veteran farmers and ranchers through community-based partnerships.

BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

Barriers facing historically underserved producers include lack of access to: capital, agricultural enterprise training, and sustainable agriculture methods. Systemic issues in the agricultural sector, especially those that are racially based, have supported a cycle of disparity that most often begins with a denial of credit. A lack of access to capital, coupled with a lack of access to business training, directly impacts a producer's capacity to engage in conservation activities. The project used enhanced approaches rooted in the "whole business" of family, farming and community to address these major barriers.



PROPOSED INNOVATIONS

Bundled services approach to simultaneously address the multiple barriers faced by historically underserved producers and landowners

Two-generational approach, engaging and supporting two or more generations of producers in outreach, training, and assistance

A cohort of Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) to provide loans to underserved producers for sustainable agriculture and forestry production

The project design is rooted in a "triple bottom line" approach and activities that build a foundation for short- and long-term economic, environmental and social benefits to producers, landowners and communities.

Project Team Partners



Objectives

Develop culturally appropriate, linguistically relevant training materials; and deliver through "hands-on" training sessions and "bundled services," including planning support and access to loans and community grants.

Develop a multi-media platform for technology and traditional knowledge transfer to support a community of practice for underserved producers.

Foster a network of rural-serving CDFI's that assist historically underserved producers to leverage community development financing in support of sustainable agriculture and forestry.

METHODS

Outreach and Training Workshops using culturally- and linguistically-appropriate educational materials, presentations by agricultural, conservation and community economic development professionals and "hands-on" experiential field training sessions.

Conservation Planning Assistance provided by NRCS professionals, with coaching and support from project team members in helping landowners understand and implement application processes and conservation practices.

Ag Enterprise Planning Assistance through coaching, technical assistance and access to user-friendly business planning and financial management tools.

CDFI Community of Practice established, a cohort of existing/emerging CDFIs providing rural and agricultural lending programs and alternative financing.

Lending by CDFIs, with special focus on bridge loans to support low-resource producers and landowners in implementing conservation practices.

Grants to Community Partners, supporting organizational capacity building and implementation of community-led food production, value-added processing and programs that created new markets for producers and landowners.

Underserved and Non-Traditional Audiences Reached

Farmers and Landowners - Existing & Beginning

- African American
- Native American
- Hispanic (including current farmworkers)
- Women
- Military Veterans
- Displaced Coal Miners
- Incarcerated Individuals (about to be released)
- Youth/ Next Generation of Farmers and Landowners
- Elders - Farmers and Landowners
- Heirs Property Owners
- Family-owned LLCs created for heirs property-owning families
- Future Farmers of America
- Producer cooperatives and multi-state producer (nonprofit) collaboratives
- Farmer-to-farmer networks of urban producers
- Community Development Corporations
- Community Development Financial Institutions
- Banks
- Foundations
- Nonprofit organizations
- Faith Groups and Churches
- Food Hub Directors
- Landowning Community-Based Organizations (led by people of color)

BY THE NUMBERS: REAL RESULTS!



Geography

6
States

35
Counties

1
Tribal
reservation/
3 counties



91
Outreach
Meetings

3,129
Participants

Outreach & Education

Bundled Services



101
EQIP
applications
submitted



54
Conservation
Management
Plans
Completed



61
Ag enterprise
plans
completed



325
Youth and
2Gen
landowners
engaged



395
Producers
and
Landowners
Assisted



58
CDFIs
engaged

51
Community
Grants
totaling \$506,240
supporting
community
agriculture and
forestry and
access to new
markets

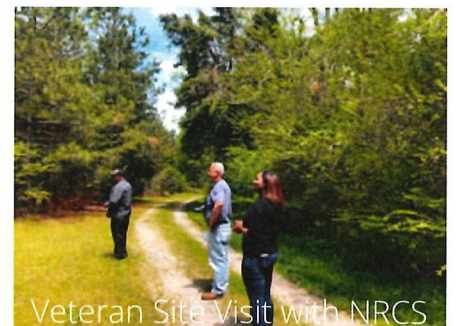
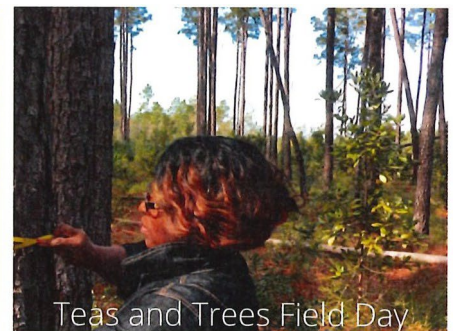


Challenges

- 5 of the 6 states suffered devastating natural disasters (Midwest floods and Hurricanes Florence, Michael and Dorian) during the project period, which severely impacted producers and landowners, and the project team members' ability to deliver services.
- Very few loans were made to producers and landowners, many of whom had been hit by multiple natural disasters and were already maxed out on debt and/or crop and timber stand losses. There is strong interest in bridge loans to cover upfront costs of implementing conservation practices.
- The federal government shutdown of December 2018 prevented substantial work on the project at a pivotal time for Native producers in SD, especially. It impacted the project team's ability to do outreach and training, as Tribal Nations were focused on mitigating the disastrous effects of the shutdown on their furloughed federal tribal citizens, unfunded Tribal healthcare and other programs, and food systems disruptions

Innovations On the Ground

- McIntosh SEED Community Forest, in Georgia, provided a vitally important venue for strengthening landowner skills, knowledge and comfort levels with conservation practices learned in the workshops. Being on land owned and managed by an African American community-based organization resonated significantly with landowners and producers. Example activities included:
 - Teas and Trees workshops hosted for female forestland owners, with agendas that included presentations by female forestry and conservation professionals and field experiences that actively engaged participants in forest management practices at the Community Forest.
 - Youth Field Days hosted at McIntosh SEED Community Forest engaged FFA members, including youth landowners and producers of color, in learning forest stewardship concepts and practices. Agendas included discussions on how youths' families might implement the practices on their holdings.



Other Innovations:

- Cooperative use of greens-chopping machine by multiple producers to create value-added products. Use of the equipment was coupled with facilitated access to new urban markets, resulting in increased revenue to underserved, low-margin producers.
- Ag enterprise development and land leasing workshops for soon-to-be-released incarcerated individuals helped build skills, knowledge and confidence while also providing livelihood options for individuals with barriers to employment.
- Educational materials, workshops and presentations were developed on how to start Rural and Ag Lending programs for CDFIs; how banks and foundations can support rural and ag lending; and how nonprofits can reach underserved producers, businesses and communities about NRCS programs.
- 2Gen conservation toolkits were assembled by youth for Native producers, including grazing sticks and hoops, soil infiltration kits, soils manual, maps, notebooks, etc.
- Project partners used technology (Zoom, Skype, conference calls) to engage dozens of family members in facilitated conversations and decision-making about heirs property and land stewardship/ conservation options. This significantly reduced time frames needed to share information and reach decisions about land.
- Sponsored landowner participation in forest landowner meetings and Indian Nations Conservation Alliance Conference that would otherwise be inaccessible.
- Hosted 1st National Conference for Outreach and Agriculture Development, and presented on community forestry to non-traditional audiences, including the Georgia Grantmakers Alliance.



Addressing Heirs Property

The 2018 Farm Bill provides unprecedented access for producers who own heirs property to qualify for NRCS programs and services. Project team members worked to advance estate planning and increase communication on NRCS programs and service goals.

Project team partners helped landowners address heirs property issues through creation of farm enterprises and expansion of multiple farm businesses that are then able to utilize NRCS programs and services. Specific strategies included: structuring farm LLC operating agreements; deeding lands into family companies or corporations for agricultural use; incorporating an agricultural cooperative; and multi-generational farm succession planning. While we have reported on "single" farm entities supported through this grant, one family included 77 individuals, another included 50 individuals spanning three generations and a third included individuals representing 20+ families.

Lessons Learned

- Relationships of trust are necessary to build. Project team partners had existing relationships with tribes, churches, community groups, etc., which increased access to historically underserved and/ or excluded producers and landowners. This increased the ability to build trust while also increasing access to new and niche markets.
- Many landowners had limited or no access to documents related to their lands and limited familiarity with terminologies, conservation practices and application procedures.
- Engaging producers and landowners in discussions about traditional ecological knowledge and stewardship practices helped bridge the gaps in understanding of technical terms.



Community Garden



Community-owned High Tunnel



Tribal Garden Producing Sorghum



McIntosh SEED Community Forest

Lessons Learned (continued)

- It is vitally important for historically underserved producers and landowners to be able to engage with people to whom they can relate: who look like them, who share similar life experiences, who can support military veterans or formerly incarcerated individuals, and who have patience and knowledge to translate the programs, practices, jargon and science-based approaches to lessons passed down through the generations through families and communities.
- There is great value in having a diverse project team sharing TA recommendations, tools, experiences and resources with each other.
- Historically underserved producers partnering with faith groups and community groups provides opportunities to increase access to resources that include land, funding, markets and more.
- Pairing ag enterprise planning with conservation planning adds significant value to historically underserved producers and landowners, as revenue generation is key to engaging families in sustainable production, management and conservation practices.
- Sustainable agricultural operations for historically underserved producers and landowners are enhanced significantly through provision of coaching, technical assistance, encouragement, support in accessing new markets or connecting to community and faith groups creating new markets. Again, economic viability is key.
- Producers of color, in particular, improved income generation through access to information about higher-value niche crops in demand in urban markets, such as saw palmetto, herbs, spices and value-added products such as chopped and bagged greens.



2Gen Lessons Learned

- Young people from producer- and landowner-families have a great interest in leveraging the family holdings and "doing something with it."
 - Six Youth Summits and Field Days were hosted by project team partners during the project period, attended by 325 youth. Learning sessions covered the broad spectrum, from agricultural planning and production to best practices in forest management, to food and climate justice, and action planning for youths and their peers...
 - Agricultural enterprise development and business planning were of special interest, with youth who were connected with community-, faith- or tribal groups, working collaboratively to create new programs and markets that increase production and income, as well as increasing access to healthy foods for their communities.
 - Gaining attention and "buy-in" of multiple generations is often more easily achieved by working directly with young people first, helping them gain knowledge and skills, and having them take the lead on introducing family members to opportunities in production, marketing and sales, conservation and management best practices.
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Outputs and Outcomes

- 57% of the participants in our How to Lease Farmland workshop, stated they were "Likely" or "Very Likely" to implement the techniques they learned within the next 6 months.
- Before our EQIP training, 71% of participants said they had "Very Little" knowledge (the lowest rating on our scale) of EQIP or conservation plans.
- After our EQIP training, 57% of the participants said their knowledge of EQIP increased "A Great Deal" (the highest rating on our scale) and 71% said their knowledge of conservation plans increased "A Great Deal".

To access educational materials, presentations and videos produced during the Equitable Access for Sustained Productivity project, click on [this link](#)

Potential Next Steps

- Work to secure additional private and public funding to enable ongoing support and coaching to help historically underserved producers and landowners that participate in conservation programs and services, and implement additional conservation practices.
- Create a peer learning and implementation network that connects historically underserved producers and landowners and engages multiple generations in growing the use of conservation tools and practices on family lands.
- Leverage lessons learned to explore opportunities for cooperative implementation of conservation programs and practices to better serve and engage historically underserved producers, landowners and communities.

The project team partners thank the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Conservation Innovation Program for this vitally important -- and impactful -- investment in historically underserved producers, landowners and communities.

This project has truly "helped people help the land" and created a brighter, more prosperous and conservation-oriented future

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