

Growing New Farmers Project: A Final Evaluation Report

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The Growing New Farmers Project was a four-year initiative (2000 – 2004) funded by the USDA. Its purpose was to build a service infrastructure to support new farmers in the twelve Northeast states. The project created the Growing New Farmers Service Provider Consortium and dozens of new resources, programs and projects for new farmers. It raised awareness about new farmers, conducted research and encouraged supportive public policies.

After four years, how have we done? Has the GNF Project made a difference to our service provider network? To new farmers?

INTRODUCTION:

A final survey of GNF Consortium members was conducted in late fall 2004 and early winter 2005. The survey was sent via e-mail to approximately 200 GNF members with e-mail addresses. The survey was attached to the message as a MS-Word file, and was also included in the text of the message. The e-mail began with a short message from the Project Director, and requested that the survey be sent to via e-mail to the Project Evaluator. Directions included how to send it back via text email, as a Word file or via postal mail. Respondents were promised that responses would be kept confidential; only anonymous, aggregated data would be used in reports.

Despite the ease of the survey, and a reminder e-mail, only 40 usable replies were received. These are summarized below, using descriptive statistics. No correlations were made, although the data was scanned for any unusual trends, since number of respondents was low.

Similar, but not exact questions were asked at the end of the March 2004 Conference. A comparison of selected items occurring on both surveys follows this summary of the final survey. It is presented to show that generally responses follow the same pattern on both surveys, increasing the reliability of the questions somewhat.

Given the fact that respondents had to reflect on how they thought or how they perceived specific situations in the past, the following information is presented as evidence of the project's outcomes, not proof.

1. Before the GNF Project, my awareness of issues facing new farmers was: (avg: 3.61)

<i>High</i>		<i>Not on my radar screen</i>		
___ 5(8)	___ 4 (8)	___ 3(11)	___ 2(5)	___ 1 (2)
21.1%	21.1%	28.9%	13.2%	5.2%

63. My awareness *now* of issues facing new farmers is: (avg: 4.42)

<i>High</i>		<i>About the same</i>		
___ 5 (24)	___ 4(10)	___ 3(2)	___ 2 (2)	___ 1(0)

63.2% 26.3% 5.2% 5.2% 0%

Observation on Q1 & Q2: Awareness of issues facing new farmers increased substantially from the level before the GNF Project. It should be noted that a number of respondents who had high awareness prior to the project, also had high awareness at the conclusion. However, a majority of those who had reported an awareness level of 3 or less prior to the project, reported a shift to levels 4 and 5 at the conclusion.

3. Before the GNF Project, my knowledge of effective programming for new farmers was: (avg: 2.87)

<i>Very Knowledgeable</i>				<i>Very Limited</i>	
___ 5 (3)	___ 4(9)	___ 3(11)	___ 2(10)	___ 1 (5)	
7.8%	23.7%	28.9%	26.3%	13.2%	

4. My knowledge **now** about effective programming for new farmers is: (avg: 4.08)

<i>High</i>			<i>About the same</i>	
___ 5(15)	___ 4(15)	___ 3(6)	___ 2 (0)	___ 1 (2)
39.5%	39.5%	15.8%	0%	5.2%

Observations on Q3 & Q4: Responses to this question also show an increase in knowledge about programming for new farmers, with a significant shift to the more knowledgeable end of the scale after the project, versus a middle to low end spread prior to the project.

5. Reflecting back **BEFORE** the GNF Project, I think that **services and resources** for new farmers were: (avg: 2.03)

<i>Very Available</i>		<i>Available</i>		<i>Limited</i>		<i>Don't remember</i>	
___ 5 (0)	___ 4(2)	___ 3(10)	___ 2 (14)	___ 1(11)	___ 0 (1)		
0%	5.2%	26.3%	36.8%	28.9%	2.6%		

6. In my opinion, as a consequence of the GNF Project, the availability of services and resources for new farmers has:

- a. ___ Greatly improved (19) 50.0%
- b. ___ Improved somewhat (15) 39.5%
- c. ___ Improved only a limited amount (4) 10.5%
- d. ___ Not changed (0)

Observations on Q5 & Q6: Prior to the GNF Project, the respondents indicated that the availability of services and resources was generally from available to very limited. As a consequence of the GNF project, the respondents thought that services and resources had improved somewhat to improved greatly. This finding is also supported by responses to what are lasting accomplishments and what is important now. (questions 9 and 14)

7. The most important thing I've learned from GNF about serving new farmers is:

Observation on Q7: What stood out in the responses to this question was the strong acknowledgement of the many differences among new and beginning farmers and that this adds to the challenges of developing programs and directing resources and services to them. Respondents also indicated that networking was very important. The responses are clustered by topic below.

Finding and reaching them is the challenge.

Marketing is the most important thing

"New Farmers" is not a monolithic concept; people come into farming with a wide range of knowledge, experience and financial resources. You can't think of "new farmers" as just one demographic type.

Also the definitions and continuum that you developed through focus groups with new farmers has continued to be extremely helpful - it has provided a useful perspective on the time and phases involved in starting a farm.

Differences in new farmers needs

Different new farmers have different needs. New farmers may not know what they need.

Diversity of requests for info

How deep the need is for practical learning resources for new farmers and how little there has been in terms of resources targeted to them.

How many variations there are of "new farmer" and how to tailor different responses to different needs depending where they fall on the new farmer continuum.

It reinforced the fact that 'one-size' does not fit all with regards to programs, needs

It's surprisingly difficult to introduce new ideas to new farmers.

New farmer audience is complex and most organizations do not have the capacity to target programming to them.

Some of their additional needs

The diversity of beginning farmer needs in the Northeast

The new farmer needs are a little different than established farmers

There are so many types in this category of ag entrepreneur that matching existing program mandates to them is not an easy thing.

Understanding the types of challenges and issues they face because then it becomes easier to speak with, assist, develop ways to help them.

We have a long way to go in the area of assisting new farmers with articulating farm and family goals and improving on farm decision-making.

Engaging them in participatory learning... interactive education that is focused on their needs and questions.

Important to have materials directly targeted at new farmers and appropriate for community/region
The benefits of mentoring; the need for a variety of new product recommendations; the importance of bookkeeping and business analysis in new farm startups. New farmers can lose a lot of money fast if they don't preplan sales and market demand; Dave Smith is worth his weight in gold.

Farmer to farmer connections need to be encouraged even more for new farms.

NFs need both "dirt experience" and business savvy. One requires expensive access to land and the other has usually only been available through life experience. I don't think we have really solved the land issue, but we have identified and helped to spur some services on the business development side that are valuable and should be sustained.

I've found out that there are many, many people and agencies that are aware of the problems facing new farmers and want to help. I have also found out that USDA in general doesn't care.

Learned about other programs through your publications and website.

Networking with other service providers

The availability of ideas open for new farmers. The streams of funding to the streams of issues they face.

Networking is key and efforts to regionalize a market identity can succeed.

The network of service providers in the NE who have developed resources for new farmers]

The vast array of agencies outside my state and prior to Federal level which are willing and able to help.

The vastness of resources available to assist them.

What are the best materials and programs to refer people to .the various programs that are currently available and on-going information about new farmer unique needs.

Raising the awareness of beginning farmer issues are the regional and national level.

Raised awareness;

The definitions and continuum that you developed through focus groups with new farmers has continued to be extremely helpful - it has provided a useful perspective on the time and phases involved in starting a farm.

Getting the importance of Small/new farm problems identified and recognized as special.

Getting trainers talking about this audience and planning classes just for them.

Raising the awareness of challenges facing new farmers

The awareness raising within the organizations attempting to assist/support farmers;

The creation of a regional movement - the consortium- that is committed to focusing on the unique needs of new farmers.

The networking

Development of network

Holding the network together long enough to give it legs

The networks established.

Network and networking tools

Developed new programs, products, tools to directly benefit new farmers.

New farmers

The formal and informal partnerships that were stimulated into existence.

The partnerships and networks are always the most lasting accomplishment of any project as they continue to grow after projects are completed.

GNF has gotten policy makers to put more funds towards the beginning farmer area.

Products and tools that were developed to assist new farmers

Providing one stop shop for new farmers

Literature and references.

Bringing new farmers together and making them feel part of a community from which they can draw support.

Bringing so many people together

Built skills to develop new farmer program

Access

The Directory

I think GNF came along at just the right time in the evolution of programming for new farmers in Vermont. There were those of us out there that had been offering focused services to new farmers but GNF helped build the momentum and excitement about serving new and beginning farmers. Because of GNF, we were able to "package" services with GNF's access points (markets, capital/credit, land, and technical/production info) and build our local and regional networks -- I'm hopeful these networks will be a lasting achievement!

Web site for resources; project profiles on web site

Providing, via the website, the vast array of resources available.

The website info is great, info generated via funded projects is also helpful.

Website;

The website with information to share w/ new/beginning farmers and the overall awareness of the importance of addressing new farmer issues through policy, resources, and programming.

Network website

10. I credit the GNF Project with changes in overall awareness about, and services to new farmers... (avg: 3.05)

Observation on Q9: *Nearly three-quarters of the respondents reported that they credited the GNF Project with significant changes in overall awareness regarding new farmers; further, almost one quarter indicated that change at somewhat.*

___ <i>A lot</i> (11)	___ <i>Quite a bit</i> (17)	___ <i>Somewhat</i> (9)	___ <i>Not at all</i> (0)
28.9%	44.7%	23.7%	0%
___ <i>Don't know</i> (1)			
2.6%			

11. My organization is a GNF Consortium member: 32 Yes 2 No 4 Don't Know

12. I participated in the GNF Consortium in the following ways:

- a. *Professional development activities:*
 - 45% regional retreats
 - 68% read/downloaded one or more **project** profiles
 - 71% read/downloaded one or more **topical** articles
- b. 32% Served on a GNF Advisory or Review Committee
- c. 32% Posted events to the GNF Web calendar
- d. 32% Posted information or events to the GNF list serve
- e. 55% Sought other GNF members for information or advice
- f. 61% Collaborated with another organization(s) on activities or projects that benefit new farmers
- g. 71% Promoted new farmer awareness and/or programming in my organization
- h. 58% Promoted public policies that support new farmers (local, state or federal)
- i. 58% Made more referrals (e.g. referred new farmers to the GNF Website or other new farmer resources)
- j. 84% Used the GNF (www.northeastnewfarmer.org) web site
- k. 63% Used the directory of programs and resources at the GNF web site
- l. 0% Other (Please describe)

13.I attended the 2001 GNF conference in Albany, NY

22 57.9% YES
12 31.5% NO
4 10.5% No Answer

13a. I attended the 2004 GNF conference in Windsor, CT

18 47.4% YES
12 31.5% NO
8 21% No Answer

14. For me/my organization, the GNF Consortium is important 73.6% (28) is not important 5.3% (2) [no response 21% (8)] because...

Observations of Q14: *By far, the respondents indicated that networking, expanded resource availability and potential for referrals were very important outcomes of the Consortium. Other areas of importance were the 'model', and being the 'voice' for new farmers. While only one respondent indicated that their time and funding was limited due to operating from grant to grant, and couldn't actively participate in the Consortium, this is an important response and should be considered in future efforts.*

Loudest voice in the country for new farmers.

Reaches an underserved audience

Focus on new farmers

Hard to answer this one - its not that this consortium is not important, but we operate from grant to grant and work hard to provide help to the farmers and new farmers in our region. Our time and funds are limited and active participation on consortiums, panels, and the like, is difficult.

Offers a very interesting model for supporting new farmers and fostering collaboration and exchange.

Successful program models

We can learn from and collaborate with the new farmer programs of other organizations

It has not really impacted our programming and does not seem to support the need for increased planning/improved decision-making needed by new and existing farmers.

Neither important or unimportant. We reach new farmers but do not have a special program aimed only at small farmers.

Networking

Clearinghouse of resources to refer new farmers to.

It is a place to send potential new farming youth, young new farmers, and the educators who work with potential new farmers for resources and programs.

It is a resource for referrals for our program participants

It provides me as a service provider a wealth of resource tools to better serve my constituents.

It provides so many resources

It's one more way to be in touch with methods and resources specially designed for these new kinds of farmers - a group that's one bright spot in ag demographics.

Share resources

The resources provided to assist in new farmer programs.

It has accomplished what it set out to accomplish and helped them educate many, many people - new farmers, those who support them, those who did not support them. Or understand their special needs and those who were apathetic.

It began a regional exchange that was lacking

It has helped build important networks at home and throughout the region

it is a network of service providers committed to the needs of beginning farmers.

Link to other organizations and services

Value farming

I am no longer a beginning farmer however I can see the value to beginning farmers

15. The most important thing the GNF Consortium should do in the future is:

Observations on Q15: *Keeping the website current and continuing the networking were high on the list of respondents' expectations of the Consortium in the future. Respondents also suggested continued awareness raising, additional funding, and public policy education.*

Keeping the level of awareness in the service provider consciousness

Building awareness and supporting new services

Continue to promote awareness of new farmer issues and develop resources and policies to enable new farmers to begin successful enterprises.

Keep making contacts for beginning farmers who need assistance

Raise its profile with new farmers

One-on-one advisors in the entrepreneurial area.

Support new farmers in developing clear farm and family goals.

Raise more funds for mini-grants - I think that jump started a lot of new farmer work.

Try to maintain the program

Would be great to have funds to implement programming based on findings

Continue partnerships and resource/tool development

Continue to communicate with each other regarding the needs of beginning farmers.

Continue to work together meeting the needs of new farmers.

Find a way to perpetuate itself

Keep the Faith, concentrate on developing an even more effective directory through updating and outreach

Make sure service providers continue to know about each other and the resources they provide.

Seek to continue linking existing services as a collaboration instead of starting new programs.

Send bulleted lists of issues/programs to members

Share information of interest

Stay in touch, keep meeting, keep the information flowing, utilize the resources that came out of this project and keep passing them on to other new farmers and those who want to see them succeed.

Survive and address connections with immigrant farmers/ethnic markets/rural-urban connections.

Maintain a collaborative spirit and continue to work together, and keep monitoring new farmer issue/progress/status to ensure efforts continue to move forward.

Continue to work with CCE and agribusiness to keep the needs of new farmers on the forefront.

More programs for beginning farmers

Promote calendar on website

The listing of regional/statewide classes.

Work on a more robust land-link program.

Provide information to CCE and agribusiness on the needs of new farmers and lobby for resources to help us.

Change public attitudes/policies

Keep sharing info, ideas, resources, keep up the web, list serv

Keep the listserv, calendar of events and other news announcement media going and up to date

Keep the website current.

Maintain an up to date GNF website,

Maintain the website and network for information sharing.

16. In 2005, I think the most pressing need(s) of new farmers is (are):

Observation on Q16: *Financial issues and needs relating land were clearly first on the minds of respondents as the most pressing needs in the region.*

Apprenticeship/mentoring/internship framework or curriculum

Continuing the GNF Consortium

To improve how they make on-farm decisions, which is the single most important factor in operating a successful enterprise

Access to funds

Continuous access to resources.

Determining how to remain viable in an industry that has a very slim profit margin.

Financial analysis.

Financial info that enables them to accurately assess the profitability of their farming dream...many have dreams but the reality of returns is limited.

Protection during the bad weather years

Business planning assistance

Start up dollars

Still access to capital, knowledge and land resources

Intergenerational Farm transfer support (consultant and established worksheets/process)

Access to knowledge from experienced farmers

Basic growing ?

Access to affordable land

Access to land

Access to land and credit; business planning; more support for local agriculture.

Affordable land

Affordable land arrangements and troubleshooting (TA) advice as problems and opportunities arise.

Incubator programs with leased land in areas with good proximity to market.

Land values are too high and prices for products too low, so new farmers have to be very business savvy to stay in farming.

To stay on the land and to succeed financially and environmentally.

Regional distribution systems; marketing knowledge, improved skills in business planning; risk management

Training

Continue to promote new farmer awareness and promoting and adopting public policies that support new farmers.

Accessing and using the USDA system.

I don't think pressing needs necessarily change from year to year so I'd say they would be access to info/resources on how to start and access to credit, markets, land, etc.

Knowing what resources are available

17. The category I represent is:

12 *Cooperative Extension*

2 *Educational institution (non-Extension)*

1 *Federal agency*

4 *State, county or local agency*

4 *Farmer*

14 *Non-governmental organization*

2 *Other* _____

18. Comments I'd like to share about the GNF Consortium and the GNF Project:

It has been an honor!

While the participation of agencies varied, the hard work done by those involved reflected in the great amount of resources now available to new farmers. The organizational aspects were very well thought out and implemented.

This project began something good which is hard to sustain without constantly replenished outside resources (grant money). This is true for so many of the things we see that need doing. Can't keep the people beyond the peak of their learning curve, because they must look elsewhere for support.

Call me a dreamer, but what we really need is a national effort - not just those opportunistically funded by regional grants when available. A lot of the new farmer stuff could perhaps most sustainably be centralized into a national "library" and some "call in" consultants (yes - even literally by phone or email). Sort of like the SARE topic experts who receive stipends for bringing their knowledge to the field. We need to not just plant new farmers - we need to support them with a network as extensive as the one we have had for long time farmers.

I started my current job in 2003 so my involvement with GNF has mostly been the past two years, 2003-2004. I learned a lot and feel I would have learned even more had I been involved since 2001 and before.

Thank you for your efforts; we do appreciate your work.

Excellent workshops in 2001,. 2004

The GNF consortium was very valuable to the audience I work with and hope it will continue in the future in some useful form.

Comparison of selected responses from March 2004 conference evaluation with those of final evaluation.

Observations: Using percentages of those responding to similar (but not exact) questions asked of participants at the March 2004 Conference and those on the final survey confirms a general pattern of responses in both cases. In the areas of awareness, knowledge and services, both groups of respondents indicated a much higher level of after GNF than prior to the start of the project. The fact that the percentages are so close strengthens the reliability of the data. This is important because respondents were asked to reflect on a prior level, as well as their current level. Remembering past status is not always accurate, so that these results should be viewed as very supportive evidence, rather than conclusive proof.

Similar percentages for giving GNF credit for changes, member of the GNF Consortium, and not attending the initial Albany Conference occurred for both groups of respondents.

Differences in percentages of respondents reporting involvement in various project and Consortium activities, between the 2004 Conference and the final survey, may be attributable in part, to the availability of some activities after March 2004. It may also be attributable to a different mix of respondents in the final survey.

Question	2004 Conference		Final Survey	
	Pre GNF	Post GNF	Pre GNF	Post GNF
Awareness	26%	91%	42%	90%
Knowledge	30%	82%	31%	79%
Services	57%	93%	32%	90%
Crediting GNF		74%		72%
Member GNF		72%		84%
Not in Albany		40%		32%
PD- retreats		20%		45%
PD – download files		50%		68%
PD – download topical articles		51%		71%
Served on GNF committee		20%		32%
Posted to web calendar		8%		32%
Posted to listserv		13%		32%
Sought advice from GNF members		48%		55%
Collaborated on projects		42%		61%
Promoted farmer awareness		60%		71%
Promoted public policies		37%		58%
Made more referrals		48%		58%
Used web site		68%		84%
Used directory		53%		63%