



GROWING NEW FARMERS

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DISCUSSION
SERIES #101

What does the term "new farmer" mean?

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As we work together as members of the Growing New Farmers (GNF) Consortium to strengthen and improve programs, resources and services for new farmers, it is important that we begin to use a shared vocabulary and framework to describe our constituency. This common use of terms will help us look at the diverse educational, resource and training needs of all those in this sector according to what kind of "new farmer" they are.

The following discussion is based on *Listening to New Farmers: Findings from New Farmer Focus Groups*. (The full text can be found on the GNF publications page at www.northeastnewfarmer.org.)

I. DEFINITIONS:

There are a number of terms and definitions that apply to this sector: *new farmer*, *beginning farmer*, *young farmer* and *next-generation farmer* are often used interchangeably. However, there may be slightly different meanings to these terms as used by a particular organization.

For example, according to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), a *beginning farmer* is one who has operated a farm for ten years or less. This definition is used to qualify for USDA beginning farmer loan programs. These loan programs also require that a beginning farmer have at least three years' experience as a farm manager.

According to Farm Bureau, a *young farmer* is a farmer under the age of 35. The Future Farmers of America and 4-H programs work with young people of high school age. A young farmer may also be someone working with the older generation on the family farm.

The term *next-generation farmer* is often used to describe a young person who will be among the next generation of farmers. Sometimes the term specifically suggests the next generation of the family to take over an existing farm. Farmers who are the next generation on the family farm are likely to be moving through various stages of decision-making and control during the process of the farm transfer.

Other organizations propose a broad definition of a *new farmer*. This definition includes both people who have started farming *and* those who have not yet begun to farm. In this definition, a new farmer includes all of the above, plus people who are considering or planning a farming career.

II. NEW FARMER TYPOLOGY

Under the Northeast New Farmer Network Project (NENFN), the predecessor to GNF from 1998 - 2001, a series of focus group discussions was held with new farmers throughout the Northeast. A way of classifying -- a typology -- emerged that more particularly describes new farmers. As we strive to improve how we meet the various needs of the region's new farmer clientele, it is important to understand that they fall into different categories depending on factors such as their level of farming awareness, decision making, commitment and risk.

In this typology, there are two broad categories: *prospective farmers* and *beginning farmers*. Within these, there are six commitment or decision-making stages depending on various factors such as their level of farming awareness, experience and commitment. These stages are: recruits; explorers; planners; start-up; re-strategizers; and establishers. For service providers and educators, it is important to recognize that new farmers have diverse educational, resource and training needs in each of these various stages.

New Farmer Descriptions:

Prospective farmers: Prospective farmers fall into three stages. In the first two stages prospectives have not yet begun to farm. In the third stage they may work or apprentice on a farm, but are not decision-makers in their own farming activities and do not have a high level of commitment or risk associated with active farming. In these first three stages, they may be taking part in educational or introductory farming experiences such as apprenticeships.

1. **Recruits:** might consider a career in production agriculture if provided with information and connections to agriculture. This includes farm family members and those not from a farm. They could be high school students, or people who want to change careers.

2. **Explorers:** are investigating a farming future. They are gathering information and may be participating in introductory educational programs and/or farming related experiences. This includes next generation farm family members as well as those not from a farm.

3. **Planners:** have made a choice to pursue some sort of commercial production agriculture. They may not actually be farming yet, but are actively planning their farm entry. Farm employees, apprentices and farm family members who do not

have control of farm assets and limited decision making responsibility also fall into this stage.

Beginning farmers: Beginning farmers are those who are farming, but have been farming for ten years or less. They also fall into three stages.

1. **Start-ups:** are in their first three years of farming. They can be an employee, manager, or operator on rented or owned land. They have decision-making responsibility and an increasing commitment to farming either in time, equity and/or resources, either on their own farm, a rented farm or on a family farm.

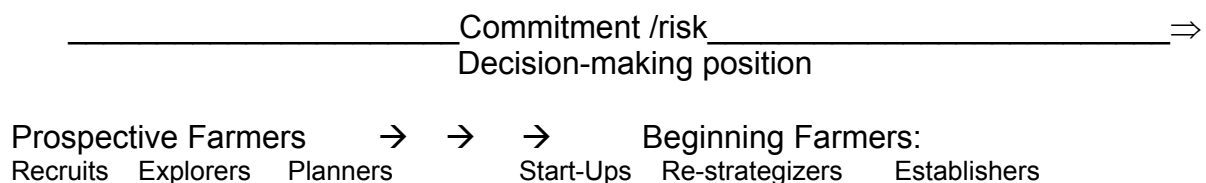
2. **Re-strategizers:** are farmers who are making adjustments in their fourth to seventh years. They have increased decision-making responsibility and commitment to farming as a farm renter, manager or owner. Typically, re-strategizers go through a critical phase of modifying or restructuring their operations.

3. **Establishers:** are farmers who are stabilizing in years eight to ten of the beginning farmer phase. They are on their way to becoming established farmers, and who continue to make changes and improvements to their farm operation.

Since this typology was developed we have recognized a seventh, intermediate stage or subset of new farmers. Although in the typology above they may be classified as either planners, start-ups or re-strategizers, we have started to distinguish family farm members who have decision “influencing” roles on the farm without having farm operator status. They are being nurtured and may be highly experienced farmers, actively influencing farm decisions, but because of the nature of farm transfer within families they are not easily classified as planners or start-ups. Because of their unique circumstances and programming needs this group may qualify as a seventh stage or as a subset of new farmers as they shadow the central stages of the typology.

III. The New Farmer Progression:

New farmers typically pass through several stages during their farming careers. These stages are associated with increasing degrees of commitment, decision-making responsibility and risk.



A steady progression of farmers moving through each of these stages is necessary to sustain the agricultural production sector in the Northeast.

Each stage has definitive (not necessarily exclusive) service and program needs and requirements -- in terms of *what* is offered and *how* it is offered. Our service provider network can best respond by reviewing the typology categories and determining which groups of prospective and beginning farmers each organization or program is best equipped to serve. Grouping all new farmers together for educational purposes is less likely to meet their needs and less likely to be successful. The most

effective programming will deliberately target programs to meet the needs of new farmers in each category.

The next GNF article will focus on the needs of new farmers in each of the six stages.

Each month over the next year, the GNF Professional Development component will highlight a program that targets one or more of the new farmer clientele in the six stages noted above. If you have a program example that you would like to have highlighted, email crm3@cornell.edu.

Source: Johnson, Sue Ellen, Marion Bowlan, Kathy Ruhf, and Cathleen Sheils, *Listening to New Farmers: Findings from New Farmer Focus Groups*, June 2001. Funded by the Mid-Atlantic Consortium and the NE SARE Program. © New England Small Farm Institute

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May 2002