



BEGINNING FARMER

ALABAMA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM

BFRD POSTER NARRATIVE 2016 (ST. PAUL, MN)

Progress of the Alabama Beginning Farmer Project

Progress of the Alabama Beginning Farmer Project at Auburn University using a Collective Impact Approach (Grant# 2015-70017-23910)

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ABSTRACT

The Alabama Beginning Farmer (BF) Project is geared toward low-resource farmers and military veterans new to farming. The immediate needs of producers statewide have been documented through stakeholder meeting, event, and newsletter surveys. Technical Assistant Providers (TAPs) assisted 19 farms in the past year and identified business decision-making skills, access to capital, land, markets, and infrastructure to be the most critical needs. The BF Project is poised to expand and be in high demand from producers who provide critical support to the growing local foods industry.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The BF Project was initiated in 2015 as a partnership between two farm service providers (Farmscape Solutions and Crotovina), three producer organizations (Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network, Alabama Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association, and Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group), and the backbone organization (Alabama Extension). A collective impact model (proposed by John Kania and Mark Kreaver in the Stanford Social Innovation Review) utilizes the strengths of each collaborator for a unified theory of behavioral change measured using a consistent evaluation system.

NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

Findings:

A. Alabama Small Farm Stakeholder Meeting in Montgomery (n = 52, one event)

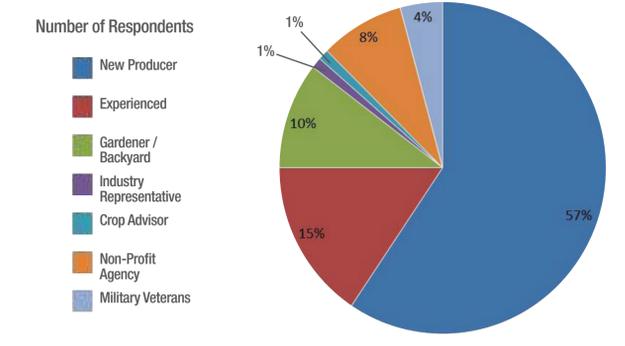
The purpose of this meeting was to promote communication and collaboration among small farm stakeholders. We developed a course of action for the identified priorities:

- Marketing: Development of an online tool to assist producers in determining a suitable market for their products and marketing their products
- Business Planning: Promotion of AGPLAN.umn.edu, an online tool for developing a farm business plan
- Farm Services Case Management: Development of a filing system and standards of procedures as a data management system.
- Communication: Recruitment of potential new and beginning farmers; hands-on producer training; promotion of the BF electronic curriculum across all stakeholder groups.
- Economic Development: Groundwork for training/networking interns and aspiring and beginning farmers; development of the farming narrative as an economic development activity.

B. Workshop Surveys (n = 46, five events)

- Survey respondents included 19 direct participants and 103 indirect beneficiaries. There were 46 survey respondents at the BF workshops with a response rate of 52%.
- Respondents included 57% beginning farmers (<10 years experience), 15% experienced producers looking for new information, 10% market gardeners, 4% military veterans, and 14% others.
- Nearly 41% of respondents were organic or naturally grown producers, 18% transitional, and 27% conventional producers looking for new ideas.
- Respondents farmed about 458 acres (average 9 acres per farm) with estimated farm gate value of \$2 million.
- Respondents had a range of farming experience and learning styles: 52% grew up on a farm, 28% managed farms, 27% get information from books, and 31% get information from workshops and classes.
- 42% of producers indicated the workshop to be their first hands-on training, with a great need for on-farm follow-up services.
- Major challenges for beginning farmers include access to capital (60%), land (38%), farm labor (34%), information about basic crop production practices (34%), marketing avenues (35%), insurance and food safety requirements (48%), and value added agriculture (38%).

Beginning Farmer Workshop Participants (2015-2016)



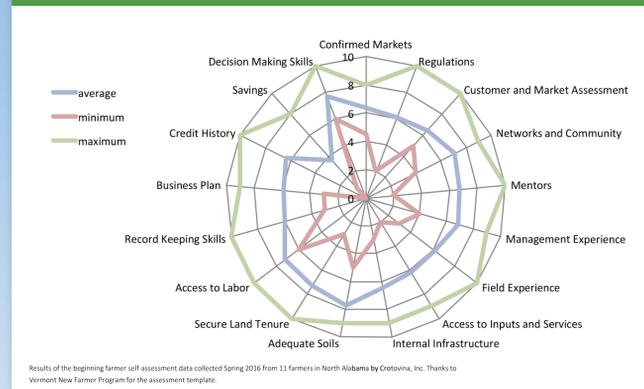
C. On-farm Assessments by TAPs and Regional Extension Agents (n = 19)

- We have developed a planning system for farmers based on an initial business assessment adapted from the Vermont New Farmer Program's tool. We have identified and ranked 17 different aspects of farm business,

including decision-making skills, access to capital, land and infrastructure, production skills, and access to markets.

- TAPs have identified the specific needs and skills of 19 beginning farmers. We have developed a system to track this information and progress internally using Salesforce. We are developing protocols to share certain information with a range of partners, including food hubs, federal and state agencies (including the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries), nongovernmental organizations, and other businesses.

Farm Business Self-Assessment



PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS

- Alabama Extension has also developed an introductory video for producers (<https://youtu.be/HMUbaBaS6A>), project logo, website (www.aces.edu/beginningfarms), and a communication tool kit that include templates for the electronic curriculum and mobile phone app (under development).
- The website and welcome video views totaled 2,789 since December 2015. We have access to 1,868 subscribers through social media pages for rapid information transfer.
- Alabama IPM Communicator, a weekly e-newsletter (www.aces.edu/ipmcommunicator), is a critical tool for beginning farmers. We currently have more than 2,200 subscribers with 35% beginning farmers.
- Crotovina and Farmscape Solutions have developed a unique set of tools to document on-farm services and important outcomes as described earlier.
- The BF electronic curriculum is under development. We anticipate availability in October 2016.
- The BF mobile phone app development is also underway. We anticipate availability in December 2016.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

- TAPs have directly assisted 12 beginning farms in north Alabama and 7 producers in south and central Alabama with crop production and business plan development (map below). Regional Extension agents and the PI have assisted six additional farms. All these efforts have led to 90% adoption of information and network with additional farmers in need.
- Post-event surveys at Extension workshops indicated 90% increase in awareness about BF resources with 33% increase in knowledge about crop production and pest management practices.
- Overall satisfaction was 80% with requests for continued training from Extension and collaborators.
- Beginning farmers are aware of and utilizing major educational publications that include Southeastern Vegetable Handbook (45%), Alternative Vegetable IPM Slide Chart (30%), High Tunnel Crop Production Handbook/iBook (22%), and the IPM Communicator e-newsletter (23%). These publications have been linked to the BF website and FarmAnswers.org to make them available nationally.

CONCLUSION

Overall, beginning farmers in Alabama have started to use the on-farm consultation and technical training for sustaining their business. In addition to the targeted assistance, we continue to work more broadly to help connect partners, leverage resources, and make accurate information available to the farmers who need it. We are meeting the objectives of the grant and going beyond to help strengthen the community and local food systems by connecting producers to food banks, schools, institutions, and new markets. We also have strong support from the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries, the Farmer Markets Authority, and other statewide agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Services Agency to continue to develop content for the electronic curriculum, website, and field training of new farmers.



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