



Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program

Findings from 2016-2021 project reports

JANUARY 2024



Center for Farm
Financial Management

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A third of the United States' 3.4 million farmers are over the age of 65. USDA-NIFA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) fosters a new generation of beginning farmers and ranchers (BFRs) by providing grants to organizations for education, mentoring, and technical assistance initiatives that meet the unique needs of BFRs. This study uses reports submitted by projects funded between 2016 and 2021 as the primary data source to document BFRDP's outcomes, determine the keys to success for projects and participants, identify BFRs' ongoing needs, and establish recommendations for improvement. These findings are intended to improve understanding of BFRDP's impact and to improve the program itself.

PRODUCERS REACHED

Between the years 2016 and 2021, a total of 261 standard BFRDP grants were awarded. Data from 147 project reports indicate a total of 78,889 unique participants were reached. Overall, BFRDP programming helped 4,398 unique participants start farming/ ranching (reported by 155 projects), prepared 22,072 participants to start farming/ ranching (reported by 153 projects), and improved the farming/ ranching success of 19,840 participants (reported by 152 projects).

PRODUCER PERSPECTIVES ON PROGRAM PRIORITIES

Results from a survey of BFRs suggest a strong consensus among participants about the program's priorities being met.

- 89% of survey respondents said that they agreed or strongly agreed that their participation in BFRDP *gave them the knowledge, skills, or tools needed to make informed decisions about their farming or ranching operation*
- 84% of survey respondents said that they agreed or strongly agreed that their participation in BFRDP *improved their success in farming or ranching*
- 84% of survey respondents said that they agreed or strongly agreed that their participation in BFRDP *helped them continue farming or ranching*
- 75% of survey respondents said that they agreed or strongly agreed that their participation in BFRDP *helped them expand their farming or ranching operation*
- 66% of survey respondents said that they agreed or strongly agreed that their participation in BFRDP *helped them start farming or ranching*

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Implemented new farming and ranching practices: BFRDP projects facilitated the adoption of various best management practices, including conservation practices, that led to improved yields and operational efficiency.

Made informed decisions: Participants were empowered with the knowledge and resources to make informed decisions, resulting in better planning and management.

Improved profits and financial outcomes: BFRDP participation increased income, revenue, or profits for BFRs. Participants converted hobby farms to profitable operations, diversified their businesses, engaged in financial planning, and created value-added products to generate income.

Expanded use of government programs: Projects addressed the need for more awareness and the inaccessibility of some government programs by providing BFRs with one-on-one assistance and connecting them to the right resources leading to increased participation in USDA, FSA, NRCS, and other relevant programs.

Developed and used business plans: Projects provided training, resources, and technical assistance related to business and financial planning, leading to participants developing plans and using them to secure loans, grants, and government assistance.

Improved knowledge and understanding: Projects consistently achieved increased knowledge, awareness, and understanding among participants, with data from 148 RVS reports indicating that 45,897 unique participants increased their understanding of farming and ranching topics.

Increased number of farmers/ ranchers and farms/ ranches: Many projects worked toward BFRDP's goal of supporting BFRs in establishing successful enterprises. Data from 147 RVS reports indicates that BFRDP programming helped 4,398 unique participants start farming/ ranching, prepared 22,072 participants to start farming/ ranching, and improved the farming/ ranching success of 19,840 participants.

Built support networks and a sense of community: BFRDP projects have successfully created support networks for BFRs, connecting them with local farmers, mentors, and experts, who not only provide crucial resources and information but also contribute to a sense of community, ultimately helping participants succeed.

Diversified and entered new markets: Many projects reported addressing the challenge of limited market access for BFRs by facilitating connections, providing marketing skills, and identifying new opportunities, resulting in diversified market access for participants.

Accessed land and secured land tenure: Projects addressed the challenges of accessing and obtaining farmland by providing training, technical assistance, and facilitating land transfers, resulting in long-term land security and affordable tenure for BFRs.

Deepened interest and confidence in farming/ ranching: BFRs reported that their BFRDP participation deepened their interest and confidence in farming and ranching, leading to increased enthusiasm and preparedness for future success.

KEYS TO PROJECT SUCCESS

Experienced and committed staff established in the community: Project staff with expertise, field experience, and established community relationships representing diverse backgrounds contribute greatly to project success.

Effective partnerships: BFRDP projects rely on effective partnerships, which are leveraged to provide comprehensive support to BFRs.

Program evaluation and use of findings: Effective evaluation is crucial in developing projects that meet the unique needs of BFRs and continuously improving these projects.

Adaptive and responsive programming: Projects designed around participant needs and priorities, with a measure of flexibility, ensure progress for participants of all experience levels.

History of working with target audiences: Organizations with an established presence in their communities and experience working with their target audiences were able to be more effective.

Setting clear expectations: Successful BFRDP projects clearly communicate their expectations of participants and project partners, fostering a mutual understanding of goals among all stakeholders.

KEYS TO PARTICIPANT SUCCESS

Networking and community-building: Connecting BFRs with peers, experienced farmers, and professionals facilitated problem-solving and resource sharing and built community.

Farmer-to-farmer learning: BFRs benefit greatly from the practical insights of experienced farmers, which also helps develop a deeper understanding of the realities of farming/ ranching.

Individualized support: One-on-one assistance tailored to participants' backgrounds, skills, and goals leads to the most impactful support for BFRs and significant outcomes.

Experiential education: Experiential learning activities, such as hands-on training, skill development workshops, and participant-led demonstrations, are essential for participants' success.

Culturally and locally relevant content: Culturally relevant programming that integrates local languages, customs, and traditions enhances participants' experiences.

Other keys to participant success are access to a broad spectrum of experts and resources and facilitating participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Offer guidance on measuring outcomes: Project leaders recommend additional guidance and tailored resources for program evaluation that address the unique challenges of monitoring outcomes in farm programs.

Promote engagement and collaboration among grantees: Regular opportunities for engagement among BFRDP grantees could foster collaboration and maximize the impact of projects operating in the same region or engaging similar audiences.

Increase RVS submission rates: Communicating reporting expectations to grantees, incentivizing participation, providing tools and support, and demonstrating the value and utility of RVS data should be done consistently to improve RVS submission rates.

Emphasize farm/ ranch financial viability: To meet BFRDP's long-term goal of building the next generation of farmers, emphasizing financial viability in the RFA could be considered. A new reporting metric related to "increased operational financial viability" could be introduced to underscore this.



Consider options to support BFRs long-term: To provide BFRs with the long-term support needed for success, project leaders recommend allowing projects demonstrating substantial progress to reapply for extended support or introducing other funding mechanisms that allow for long-term BFR engagement.

In conclusion, the findings of this report highlight the BFRDP program's effectiveness in achieving its primary goal of improving BFRs' success by providing tailored education, mentoring, and technical assistance through a range of projects nationwide. The insights shared by project leaders about the factors contributing to project and participant success will help strengthen future initiatives. While the program addresses one critical barrier to BFRs' success by providing education, mentoring, and technical assistance, support from other programs is vital to address the systemic challenges that BFRs face. The conclusions drawn from this report underscore the value of BFRDP and emphasize the need for continued funding to sustain agricultural production in the United States.



INTRODUCTION

The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) is a USDA-NIFA (United States Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture) program that supports the delivery of education, mentoring, and technical assistance for beginning farmers and ranchers (BFRs) in the United States and its territories that are entering, establishing, building, and managing farm and ranch enterprises. It is a competitive grant program for partnerships led by or that include nongovernmental organizations, community-based organizations, and school-based agricultural educational organizations with expertise in agricultural training and outreach for BFRs. The program's goal is to help BFRs enter and/or improve their successes in farming, ranching, and management of nonindustrial private forest lands through support for projects that provide education, mentoring, and technical assistance to give BFRs the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to make informed decisions for their operations and enhance their sustainability.¹

Since 2014, the Center for Farm Financial Management in the Department of Applied Economics at the University of Minnesota has served as the BFRDP Clearinghouse. A key function of the Clearinghouse is to provide the Results Verification System (RVS) to BFRDP. RVS is a reporting tool that BFRDP grantees use to develop progress and final reports. In 2021, the Clearinghouse was commissioned to conduct a study of Standard BFRDP projects funded between 2016 and 2021, using RVS as the primary data source. The study aimed to document program outcomes and identify the keys to success for project teams and participants. The findings from this study should be used by stakeholders to better understand BFRDP's impact and improve the program.

¹ Updated program details can be accessed at <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/grants/programs/beginning-farmer-rancher-development-program-bfrdp>

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study came from three sources, namely RVS, which served as the primary data source, and two surveys that provided supplementary data:

1. Results Verification System (RVS):

BFRDP projects are directed to submit three reports in RVS over the three-year grant term. This includes two annual progress reports and one final report. 159² RVS reports submitted by BFRDP projects funded between 2016 and 2021 served as the primary data source for this evaluation. This includes 29 reports from the 2016 BFRDP projects, 28 from the 2017 projects, 18 from the 2018 projects, 12 from the 2019 projects, 40 from the 2020 projects, and 32 from the 2021 projects. The 159 RVS reports analyzed were a mix of final and progress reports. When available, final project reports were used in the analysis. The most recently submitted progress reports were used to analyze projects that submitted progress reports but not a final report. As of 2023, the final reports for three-year Standard projects funded in 2021 were not due, so the most recently submitted progress reports were used in these cases. Overall, the 159 RVS reports analyzed comprised 130 final reports and 29 progress reports.

RVS reports contain both quantitative and qualitative data. Appendix A lists the various sections of an RVS report. Quantitative data were analyzed in Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) statistical software and Microsoft Excel, and a thematic analysis was conducted with the qualitative data in MAX Qualitative Data Analysis (MAXQDA) data analysis software.

2. Survey of project leaders

In April 2023, a Qualtrics survey was distributed to leaders of BFRDP projects between 2016 and 2021. Project leaders included project directors and staff, and partners listed as contact persons. In May 2023, three reminders were sent to survey non-respondents, after which the survey was closed. Prior to distribution, the survey was pilot tested by four project leaders and evaluators whose feedback was incorporated into the final survey. The survey distribution list contained 408 valid email addresses, and 188 valid responses were received, resulting in a response rate of 46%. The survey instrument can be found in Appendix B.

² A total of 261 Standard BFRDP grants were awarded between 2016 and 2021

Quantitative survey data were analyzed in SPSS statistical software and Microsoft Excel, and a thematic analysis was conducted for open-ended survey questions in MAXQDA data analysis software.

3. Farmer and rancher survey

Since the Clearinghouse does not maintain farmer and rancher contact lists, this survey was distributed through Project Directors. The survey was piloted with project leaders, and the feedback received was incorporated into the survey. Project leaders were asked to share the anonymous Qualtrics survey link and information about the survey's purpose with their project participants. The survey was available in English and Spanish. Nine hundred forty-four valid responses were received; a response rate could not be calculated since the number of survey recipients is unknown. The survey instrument can be found in Appendix C, and the summary statistics are in Appendix D.

Like the other data sets, quantitative survey data were analyzed using SPSS and Microsoft Excel, while open-ended survey questions were thematically analyzed with MAXQDA.

Certain data quality and availability issues were encountered during this study. These issues and caveats are detailed in Appendix E and should be considered when reviewing the results contained in this report.





OVERVIEW OF FUNDED PROJECTS

This section primarily presents data from the quantitative components of RVS. This overview shows the geographic reach of BFRDP, the number of producers engaged, and the actions taken by producers.

Between the years 2016 and 2021, a total of 261 standard BFRDP grants were awarded. These grants were awarded over six years as follows:

- 35 projects in 2016
- 34 projects in 2017
- 33 projects in 2018
- 29 projects in 2019
- 46 projects in 2020
- 84 projects in 2021

To meet the legislative requirement for regional balance, BFRDP projects were implemented across the nation and its territories. The geographic distribution of BFRDP projects is depicted in Figure 1.

As previously noted, this analysis is based on the available 159 RVS reports (out of the 261 projects), and the following results in this section are derived from these reports.

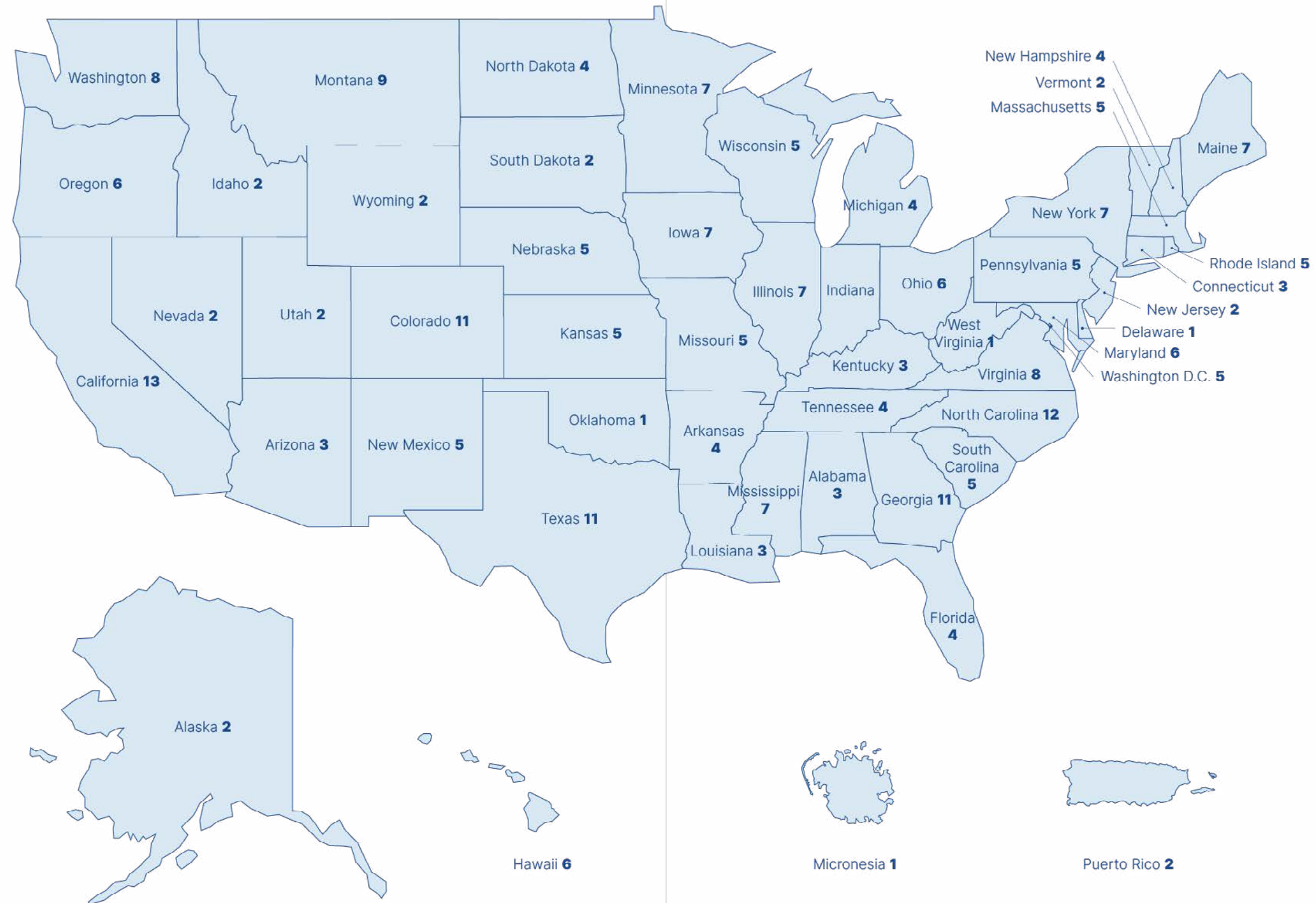


Figure 1: Geographic distribution of the 261 BFRDP Standard projects funded between 2016 and 2021.

The Number of Producers Reached

The 147 projects that provided this data reported a total of 78,889 unique participants ranging from 2 to 7,660 and an average of 537 participants per project³. Overall, BFRDP programming helped 4,398 unique participants start farming/ ranching (reported by 155 projects), prepared 22,072⁴ participants to start farming/ ranching (reported by 153 projects), and improved the farming/ ranching success of 19,840⁵ participants (reported by 152 projects).

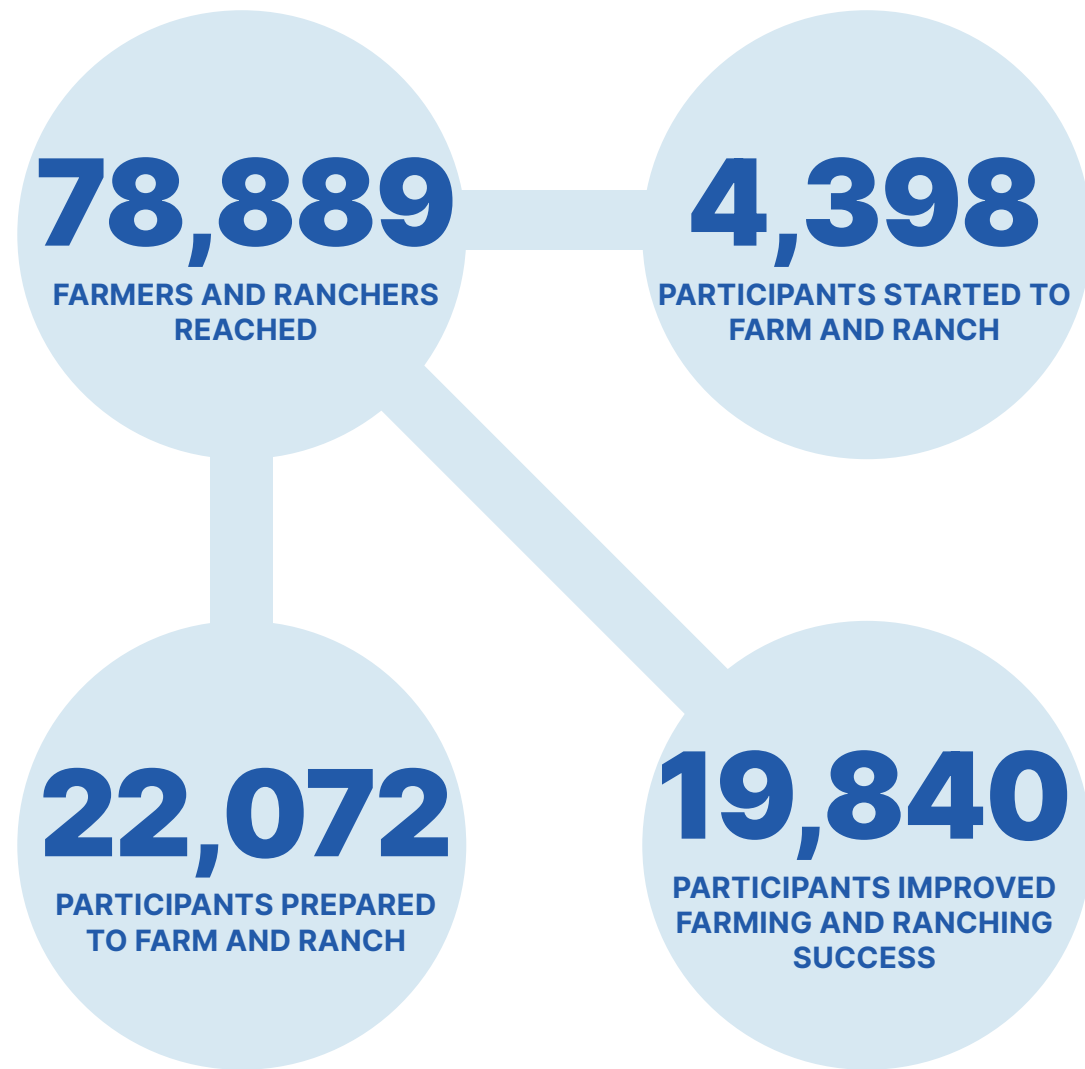


Figure 2: Producers reached as reported in 147-155 RVS reports.

³ Two outliers that reported having reached 41,304 and 16,436 producers were excluded from this result.

⁴ Three outliers that reported having helped 41,275, 12,216, and 53,491 producers prepare to start farming/ ranching were excluded from this result.

⁵ Four outliers that reported improving the success of 4,637, 4,220, 2,809, and 11,666 producers were excluded from this result.

Additionally, 71% (96 of 135 respondents) of surveyed project leaders reported that more than half of their participants are still farming/ ranching. 50 project leaders also reported that 3,090 producers who started farming/ ranching while participating in BFRDP projects continued to farm/ ranch for three or more years.

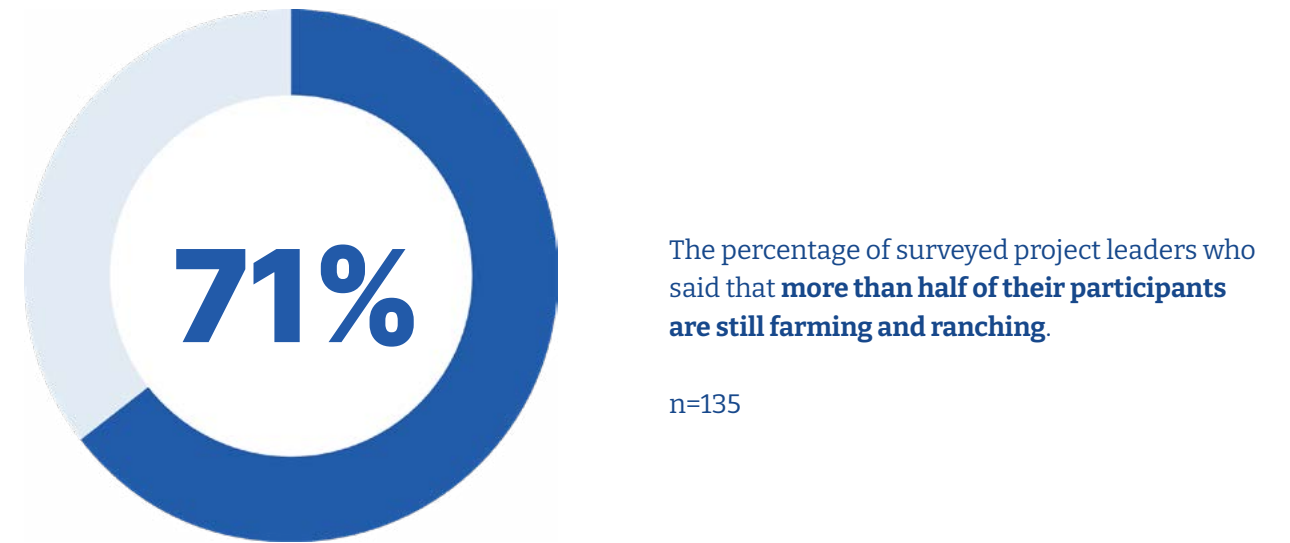


Figure 3: Participants currently farming/ ranching as reported by 135 project leaders.

OF PRODUCERS WHO STARTED FARMING/RANCHING WHILE PARTICIPATING IN BFRDP...



Figure 4: Participants that continued to farm/ ranch after participating in BFRDP as reported by 50-71 project leaders.

Educational Topics Delivered

In RVS, each reported Result is associated with a corresponding Topic Area, Topic, and Producer Action. The five Topic Areas are Production, Business Management, Marketing, Legal, and People. With 139 of 153 (91%) projects programming in this, Business Management was the most widely addressed Topic Area. A breakdown of the Topic Areas addressed is shown in Figure 5, and a further breakdown of Topics within Topic Areas is presented in Appendix F (table 1).

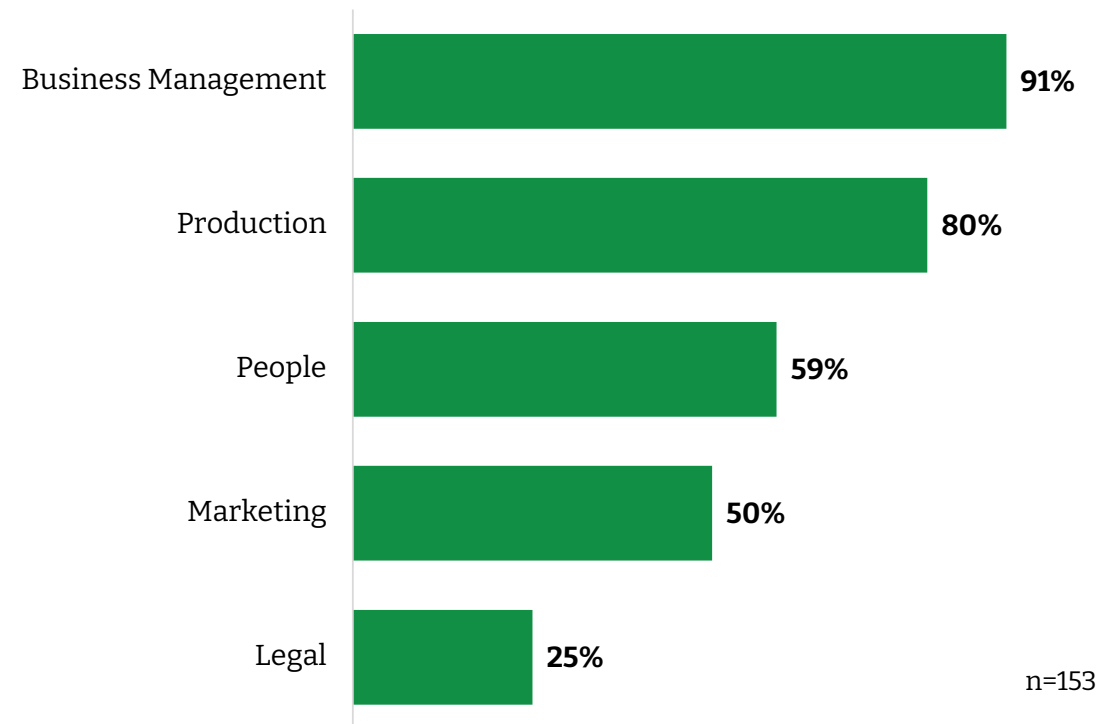


Figure 5: Number of projects programming in the five Topic Areas

Actions Taken By Participants

Each reported Result in RVS was also assigned one of four Producer Actions, namely, Understand, Develop, Decide, or Implement. As might be expected, almost all projects (143 of 148 projects or 97% of projects) reported results that included increased “Understanding” as a Producer Action (Figure 6). Project leaders reported that at least 45,897 unique participants improved their understanding, 12,464 participants implemented a new practice, 5,677 participants developed something new, and 7,038 participants made informed decisions⁶ (Figure 7).

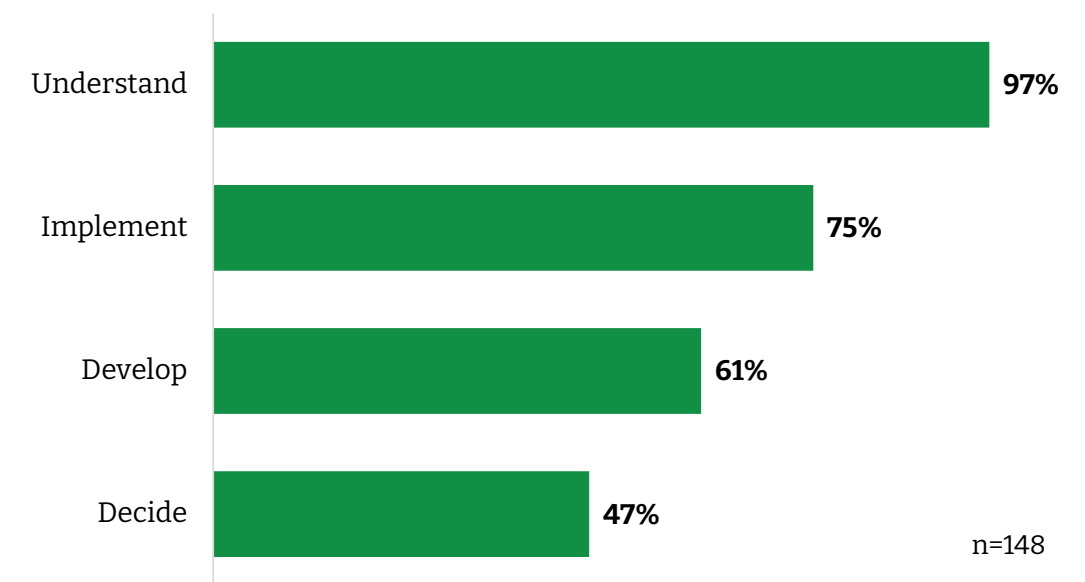


Figure 6: Producer actions reported by 148 projects in RVS.

⁶ Four outliers that reported the “understand” producer action for 940,569, 168,000, 40,796, and 12,216 participants were excluded from this result. Four outliers that reported the “implement” producer action for 512,020, 116,195, 25,000, and 4,256 participants were excluded from this result. One outlier that reported the “decide” producer action for 39,019 participants was excluded from this result.

Primary Audiences

Projects reported up to five farmer and rancher audiences strategically targeted with their planning, outreach, or delivery. Of the 155 projects that reported their target audiences, more than half of them reported working with small farms (79% or 122 projects), limited resource producers (65% or 100 projects), women (58% or 90 projects), and specialty crop producers (56% or 87 projects). The remaining audiences and the number of projects targeting them are presented in Figure 8.



Figure 7: Producer actions reported by 148 projects in RVS.

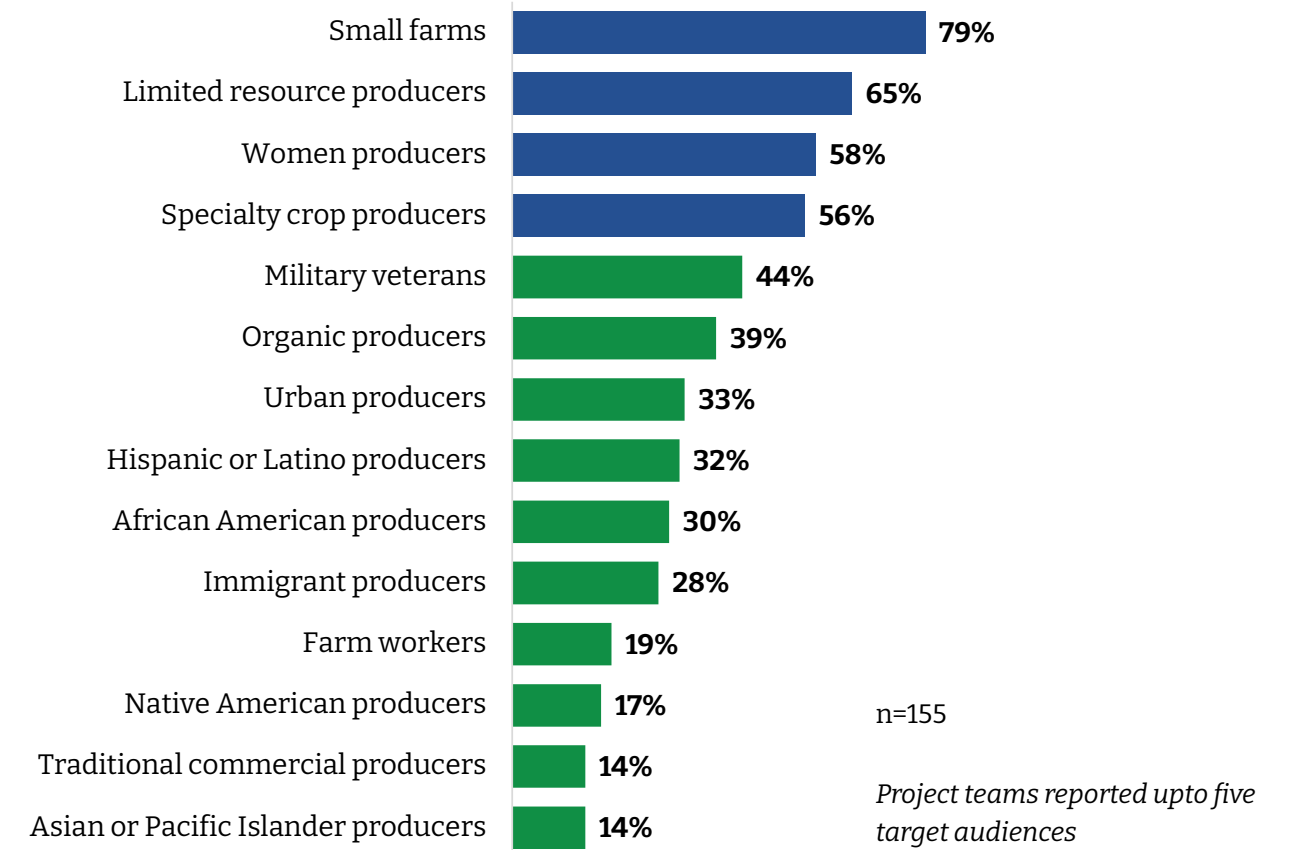


Figure 8: BFRDP projects' primary target audiences..

Educational Delivery and Reach

A combination of delivery methods, including online courses, webinars, workshops, and one-on-one meetings, were used to engage participants. Figure 9 depicts the geographic spread of BFRDP-related events.

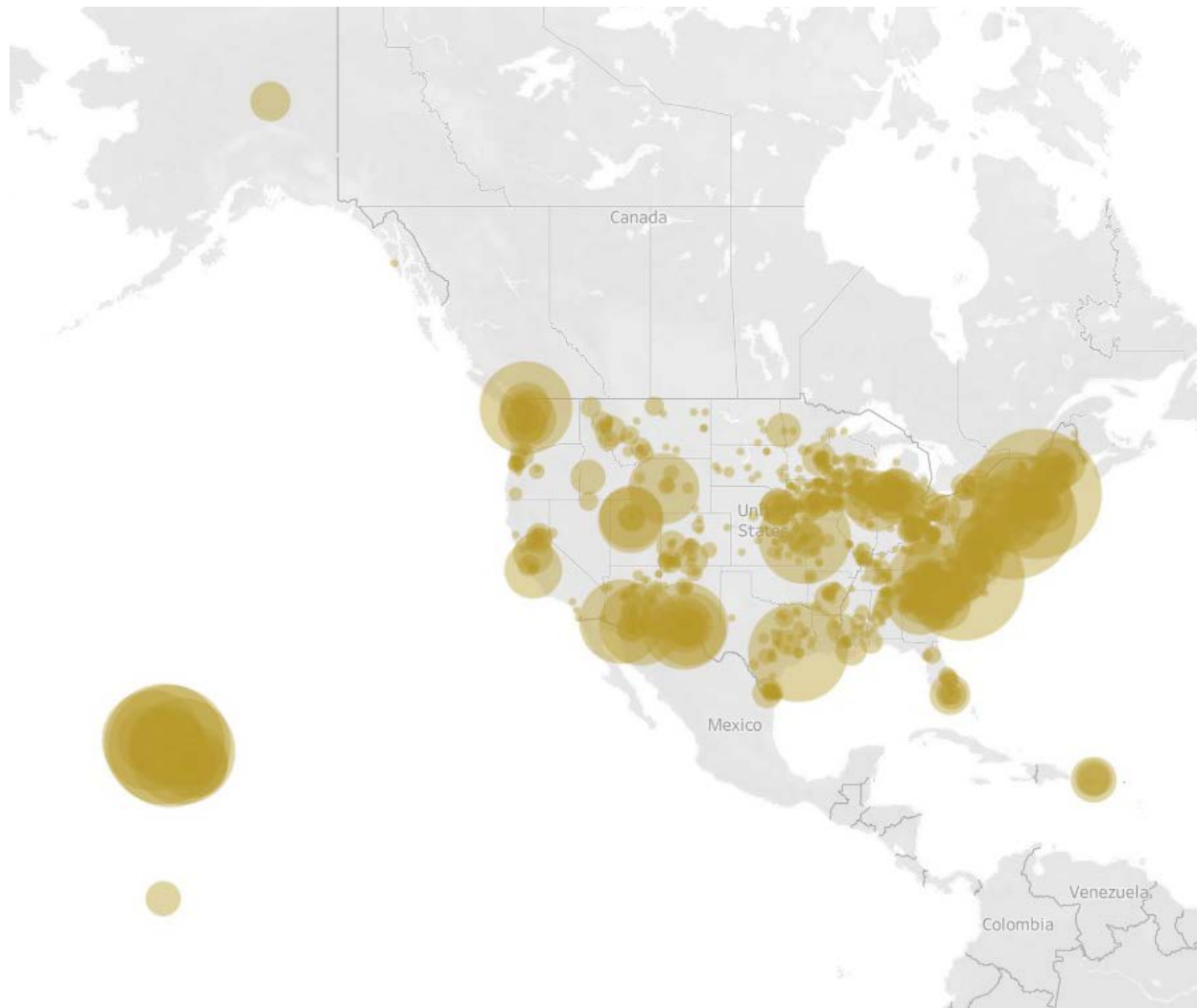


Figure 9: Geographic spread of BFRDP-related events





PROGRAM OUTCOMES

This section describes the key themes related to outcomes as reported in RVS, the project leaders' survey, and the BFR survey. Accompanying quotes have been slightly edited and abridged for clarity.

Results from the BFR survey suggest a strong consensus among respondents about the program's key outcomes being met.

YOUR PARTICIPATION IN BFRDP...

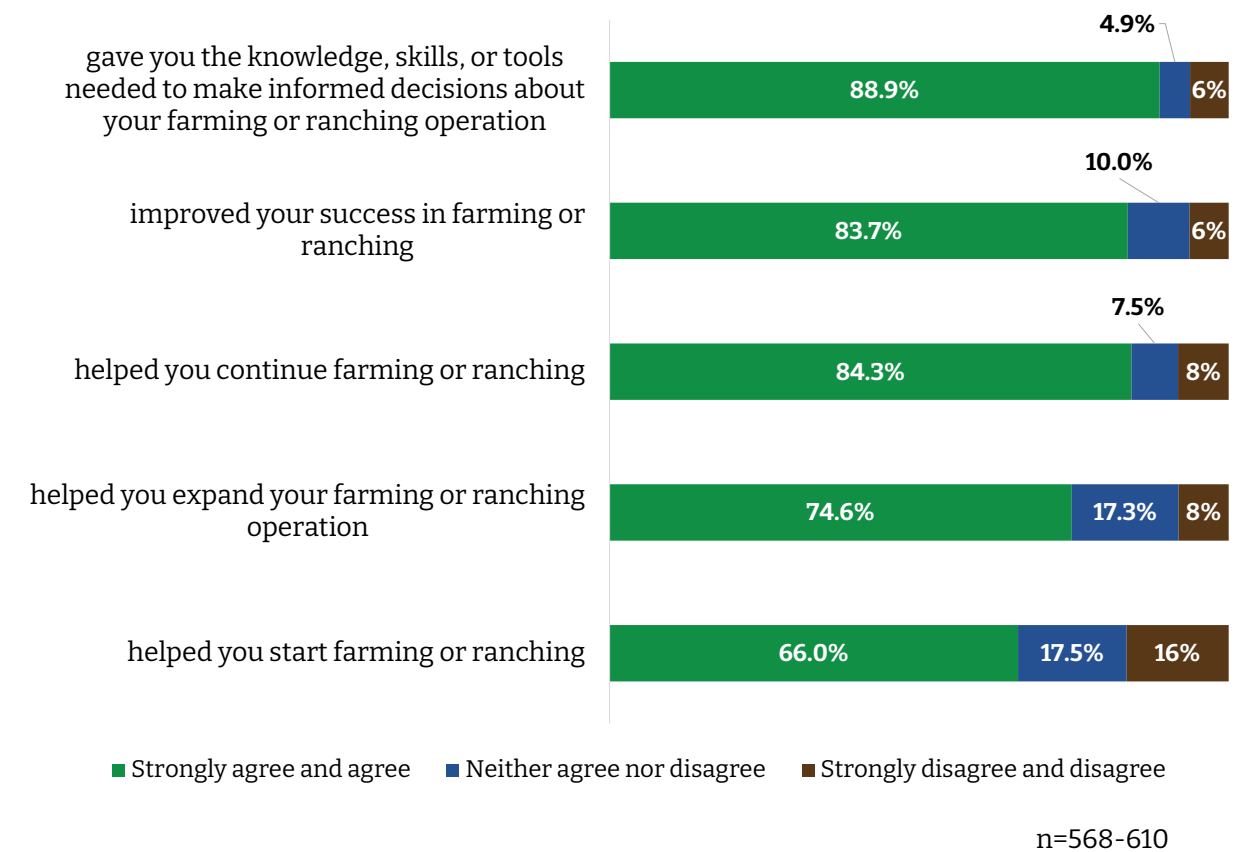


Figure 10: The extent to which BFR survey respondents agree or disagree with these statements

Implemented New Farming and Ranching Practices

Promoting the adoption of new farming/ ranching practices, especially sustainable agricultural practices, was the stated outcome of many BFRDP projects. A broad range of projects, such as those focused on urban farming, organic farming, traditional field crop farming, and forest and land management, reported educating and supporting participants in implementing new practices. 148 projects reported in RVS that 12,464 unique participants implemented something new as a result of their participation. Additionally, 75% of these projects reported “Implement” as one of their Producer Actions.

The project team at **Indigenous Food Hub** reported that after the training on irrigation techniques to conserve water, several participants converted from flood irrigation to micro irrigation.

Similarly, the team from **The Beginner Farmer Support Collective** reported that seven of their participants adopted a range of practices including cover crops, composting, scheduled irrigation, and capturing and storing water in an effort to conserve water. They also reported the implementation of rotational grazing on a 17-hog farm they support. These farmers used rotational grazing as a creative way to maintain their no-till practice while also managing invasive reed canary grass.



Another example of the adoption of weed management practices comes from a farmer who participated in the **Increasing Independence and Income for Asian refugee farmers in North Carolina** project:

“This year I don’t need to weed as much because the program introduced me to using black plastic landscape fabric. So, I saved a lot of time on weeding, and I also understand that I don’t need to over water.”

A farmer who participated in **Beginning Farmer-Rancher Training Program: Hawaii Island** reported adopting a conservation practice saying:

“I learned about the NRCS EQIP (Natural Resources Conservation Service Environmental Quality Incentives Program) and the Agricultural Management Assistance programs and applied for a high tunnel grant. I received the grant and started growing veggies. The high tunnel has given me the opportunity to test various seeds and implement soil health and composting techniques that we discussed in the program.”

Two farmers from Columbus, Missouri who participated in the **Farm Management Educational Program for BFRs in Mississippi** also reported installing high tunnels. After their participation in the BFRDP project, this mother-daughter team expanded their small operation to grow saffron via a traditional production system. They also added vertical farming with aeroponic towers and a high tunnel to produce microgreens, herbs, and melons.

Other examples of practices implemented by BFRDP participants relate to pest identification and management (such as pesticide and fungicide application), production and cropping techniques (such as cover crops and no-till), site selection and testing, post-harvest handling, and regenerative grazing.

Made Informed Decisions

BFRDP projects provide farmers and ranchers with the knowledge, tools, resources, and advice to make informed decisions regarding their operations and businesses. Making informed decisions help farmers and ranchers have a better chance at success and sustainability. BFRDP projects facilitate better decision-making in a variety of ways. Some examples are pairing farmer/ rancher apprentices with experienced mentors, offering tailored technical assistance, making connections to relevant federal and state agencies, providing on-site consultations to discuss challenges and improvements, setting up incubator farms that allow for trial and error, organizing field days on established and successful farms, building supportive networks of peers and experts, and connecting participants to available resources. 148 projects reported in RVS that 7,038 unique participants made informed decisions as a result of their participation.

Some participants of **Field School: A Beginning Farmer Training Program** offered by the Appalachian Resource Conservation and Development Council reported making better financial decisions as a result of the project. In a survey, the project leaders said that many of their students changed their business plans significantly and developed plans for financial sustainability after attending their business intensive. One farmer specifically reported making decisions related to taxes and insurance:

“Field School was so informative and many of the presenters had a direct impact on us. After the tax presentation, we sought out a tax expert with experience filing Schedule F. After the insurance and liability presentation we switched insurance companies to one that offers farm insurance and increased our liability coverage. Listening to real farmers discuss their operations has provided us with the kind of first-hand knowledge we needed to make informed decisions for our farm business.”

Other BFRDP projects enabled participants to make informed financial decisions related to land access. A flower farmer in Munroe, Maine, who was looking for farmland said about his participation in **Access to Land for New England’s Beginning Farmers: Phase 3**:

“When land up the road came on the market, I knew it was the right one because of the pre-work by the Land For Good staff and their lease tools. While the real estate game can feel demoralizing as a land seeker, Land For Good and their staff have made me feel empowered at each step so I can make informed choices for the future of my business.”

The project team at **Facilitating Success For Beginning Farmers And Ranchers In Washington’s Remote Island Communities** also helps participants access secure farmland. A team member provided this example of helping a farmer navigate this process:

“Sam was determined to build on her farming experience and launch her own farm on Lopez Island. I met with her to clarify her short and long-term goals, the type of farmland that would help her achieve those goals, and whether to purchase or lease farmland. Together we researched potential land opportunities (including land currently on the market and land that a landowner might be willing to sell or lease), the costs to purchase vs lease, and what it might cost to establish the necessary infrastructure. Eventually, Sam decided to avoid the debt of purchasing farmland and instead chose to lease 15 acres of land for her sheep and market garden with an opportunity to expand when her herd has grown.”

Another example of an important decision that BFRDP projects helped participants make is around enterprise selection. Project leaders reported that participants often reconsidered their original plans after learning about risk management alternatives and controls. A report from the **Building Farm Foundations and Planning for Success: Beginning Farmer Training for Military Veterans in the Intermountain West** team included this example:

“One of our participants had several different enterprises in mind for his farm before the training. After the training, he came back with narrowed-down goals for his farm based on the worksheets that were provided. The following year he developed a successful layer (egg production) business. He attributes the success, in part, to the training he received at “Armed to Farm”.

Finally, many beginning farmers and ranchers who participate in BFRDP are faced with making difficult decisions about their readiness to start or grow their businesses and operations. BFRDP projects give participants tools to assess markets, land, and personal goals and expose them to the realities of farming/ ranching. Participants who decide to farm/ ranch do so with a strong understanding of their business. Those who decide not to farm do so after careful consideration of the risks and their readiness and an understanding of the additional experience or training needed to re-enter farming. A participant in **Ensuring Beginning Farmers’ Long-Term Commercial Success** who decided not to pursue farming said this about her decision:

“The Beginner Farmer Training helped me realize what a realistic path might look like for me as I start my farming journey. I do not have a farm, but learned a lot about what the next steps would be if and when I want to take that leap. This program can benefit both those who have serious plans to start farming in the short-term, as well as those who are considering this as a dream for the future.”

Improved Profits and Financial Outcomes

BFRs experienced increased income, revenue, or profits or an overall improvement in their financial situation due to their participation. Some ways in which this was achieved were by converting hobby farms to profitable operations, diversification, better business planning, and creating value-added products.

Of the 398 farmers/ ranchers who answered this survey question, 89% said their participation in BFRDP contributed to increasing their farm or ranch profitability.⁷

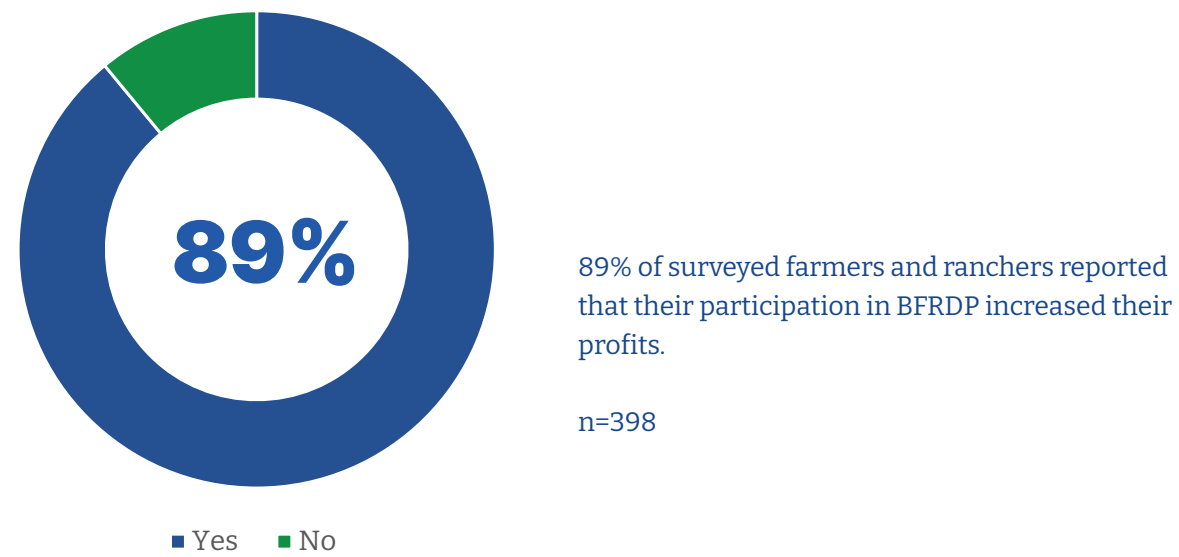


Figure 11: Whether farm/ ranch profits increased as a result of BFRDP participation

⁷ 69 respondents said they did not know whether their participation in BFRDP contributed to increasing their farm or ranch profitability, and 26 respondents said that they did not participate or did not remember participating in BFRDP.

Of the 253 farmers/ ranchers who answered this question, 17% said that their profits increased by more than 50% as a result of their participation in BFRDP.⁸

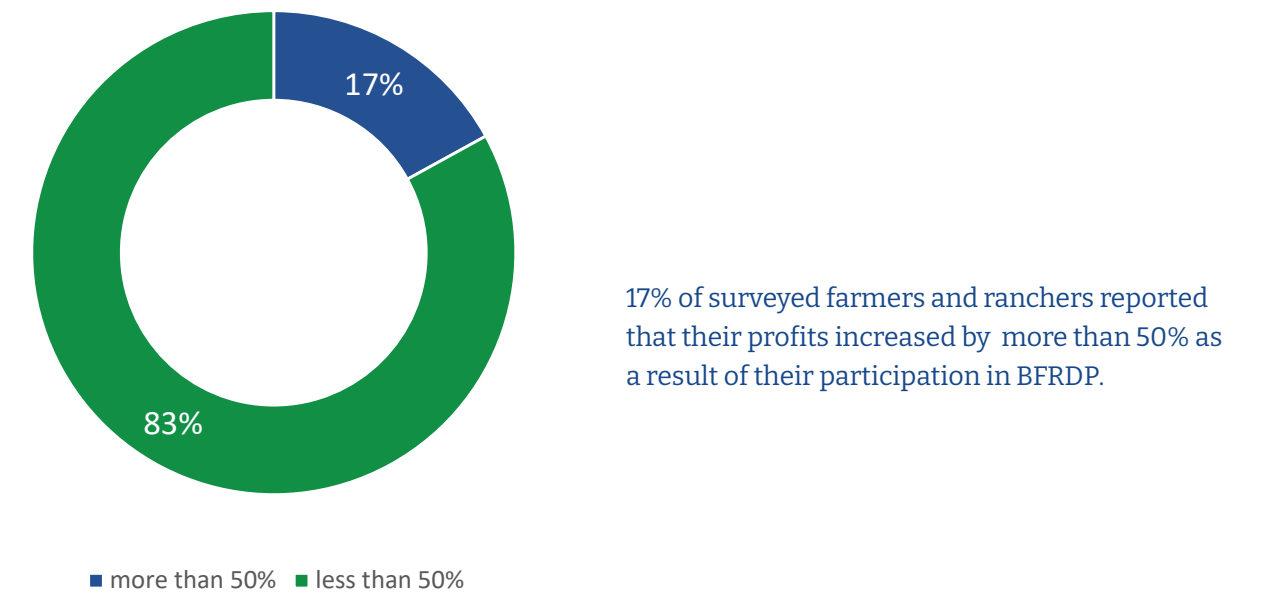


Figure 12: How much farm/ ranch profits increased as a result of BFRDP participation.

⁸ 92 respondents answered “Don’t know” to the question “How much did your farm or ranch profits increase as a result of your participation in beginning farmer and rancher programs?”

New Roots and Shoots: Building on Refugee Farmer Success in Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Markets provides immigrant and refugee BFRs with land access through three incubator farms, along with training and technical assistance. The project report states that 23 BFRs established new farm businesses, and 38 increased their income for at least two years. In 2022, the project team reported that BFRs generated almost \$350,000 in sales across all market channels. The report included this story of BFRs who increased their sales:

“Two BFRs primarily grew produce for their household and sold a limited amount at a farmers market, generating an average of \$500 in sales annually. Business planning support and a larger production site allowed them to produce a higher quantity and variety of produce that they sold at New Roots farmers markets. In 2022, they sold over \$2,000 to market customers and food distribution programs. In the future, they plan to sell to wholesalers, Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), local retailers, and to four Whole Foods Markets in Salt Lake County.”

Additional instances of BFRs increasing their income were shared by the team at **New Roots for Refugees:**

- A farmer from Nepal maintained a 1/4 acre incubator plot and, in 2016, sold about \$4,000 at farmers markets and wholesale. In 2017, he made significant shifts in his farm management and grew white oyster mushrooms to supplement his diversified vegetable production. By July 2017, he had already made \$4,699 in revenue, and in his final year in training, he was on track to make over \$12,000.
- A BFR joined the New Roots for Refugees program in 2018, during which he made about \$5000. In his second year, he started selling directly to a Thai restaurant in addition to a farmers market and CSA. In his second year, his sales increased to over \$7,000

Growing Tomorrow’s Farmers: Beginning Farmer Training and Farmland Access for Socially Disadvantaged Populations offered training, technical assistance, and mentorship to low-resource BFRs in Western New York. BFRs gained land access through incubator-, community-, and demonstration-plots. Forty-two participants were reported to have increased farm sales, and 35 earned income from community plots. In 2021, Providence Farm Collective, the organization leading the project, purchased \$18,000 of produce from participants, which was sold through various market channels. Yields in 2021 were 403% higher than in 2020, and sales also increased by 473%. In 2022, sales increased by 242% from \$29,306 in 2021 to \$70,855 in 2022. The project report included this success story:

“Many incubator farmers in our program speak limited English, making it difficult for them to sell at farmers markets or wholesale. So many of our farmers sell what they can to Providence Farm Collective for produce aggregation and resale. One of our farmers went above and beyond in 2021 by processing her harvests into value-added products; the most successful of these was chopped B-grade collards! Through her hard work, her sales increased from about \$300 in 2020 to nearly \$2,000 in 2021. Her yield increased by nearly 600% from 340 lbs. in 2020 to 2,415 lbs. in 2021.”

The project **Increasing Independence and Income for Asian Refugee Farmers in North Carolina** is a farm incubator for refugee farmers. Produce is sold through various market channels like farmers markets, an online marketplace, and wholesale. Total farm income steadily increased from \$90,122 in 2016, \$118,188 in 2017, \$114,457 in 2018, \$158,378 in 2019, and \$187,136 in 2020, leading to growth in farmer income.

Two more success stories come from a participant and project leader of **Regional Resilience: An Integrated Approach to New Farmer Training in the Chesapeake** and **Global Gardens New Farmer Training Project**, respectively:

- *“I don’t know where I would be without the Beginner Farmer Training Program. My sales doubled the year I did Level 1 and then doubled again the next year during Level 2. This is a direct result of a better understanding of farming in my area regarding seeds, nutrients, pests, and farming practices.”*
- *“A BFR has provided a CSA pickup at our local hospital for several years. She has great member retention and has increased her membership from 40 to 53 members over the past two years. With over \$15,000 in CSA sales in 2017, she made a down payment on a house and said her farm income made it possible!”*



Expanded Use of Government Programs

BFRs are often unaware of USDA, Farm Service Agency (FSA), and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) grants, loans, and cost-share programs or face difficulties in accessing them. To address this, BFRDP projects help their participants understand their options, connect them to local agents and offices, and help them navigate the application process.

A Beginning Farmer Program for Socially Disadvantaged and Limited Resource Producers in Arkansas conducted on-site visits to recommend conservation practices for participants interested in NRCS's EQIP (Natural Resources Conservation Service Environmental Quality Incentives Program) program and offered support in developing farm business plans for USDA loan applications. They reported that four participants received \$450,000 in EQIP funding and five received \$500,000 in USDA loans. They also assisted four ranchers in successfully applying for FSA's Livestock Forage Disaster Program. The project team at **New Roots for Refugees** also reported that four of their participants received EQIP funds to build high tunnels on their farms adding that, *"Without the assistance of our part-time staff member under this grant, these farmers would not have been able to navigate the process of applying for EQIP funds on their own."*



The team at **Facilitating Success for Beginning Farmers and Ranchers in Washington's Remote Island Communities**, in collaboration with their regional USDA rural development office, offered a workshop on USDA's Value-Added Producer Grant. One of the attendees, an immigrant from Botswana who farms on Whidbey Island, worked with the project team to successfully apply for this \$49,000 grant. She used this grant as working capital to expand her operation, produce value-added kale and beet chips, and join Seattle's Pike Place Market. Another workshop attendee who also successfully applied to the Value-Added Producer Grant said:

"Thank you for raising my awareness of this funding and supporting my efforts to apply for it! Without the local workshops and support, we would never have applied. Now we will have the funding we need to hire help and improve marketing and packaging and be able to move our operation to the next level!"

Another example of this outcome comes from a participant in **Bundling Selected USDA Programs and Application of Cooperative Approach to Enhance Beginning Farmers in Developing Viable Farms in Treasure**:

"I have attended several workshops provided through the North-South Institute and have applied for the USDA Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program and FSA Microloan Programs. This will assist in advancing our farm's irrigation system, as well as purchasing farm materials and tools such as plastic, mulch, fertilizer, and pesticides. We are also looking to utilize these funds to purchase a farm van, shed for storage, and for farm labor."

Developed and Used Business Plans

In their reports, project leaders consistently mention the challenge of business planning as a key issue for BFRs. To effectively address this, many projects prioritized business and financial planning in their educational and consulting efforts. BFRs who developed business plans often use them to apply for loans, grants, and government assistance programs.

The project team at **Growing Good Farmers, Growing Good Food: A Comprehensive Training Program for Ohio's Organic and Sustainable Beginning Farmers** worked with aspiring and early-career farmers, providing them with education about business planning, among other activities. They reported that 14 of their aspiring farmers improved their understanding of “the management skills needed to operate a commercial agricultural business,” and 103 early-career farmers developed “new business management knowledge and skills.” One early-career farmer who attended a farm business workshop used the knowledge she gained to create a marketing plan for her farm. She followed this up by attending an advanced whole farm planning course, after which she developed a business plan for her farm. She said of her experience with business planning:

“More than anything else, this course has given me confidence in my decision-making skills. In particular, the parts on finances and enterprise budgeting were invaluable- they are an integral part of my business plan and loan application. The holistic planning part was vitally important because it put the nuts and bolts of my business structure into the larger context of ecosystems, community, and quality of life. This helps tremendously when we are tempted to focus on short-term gains that might have far-reaching undesirable consequences.”

Building Entrepreneurial, Farm Management and Land Stewardship Capacity for South Carolina New and Beginning Farmers offers tailored agribusiness training to farmers with varying levels of experience with business planning. “*Exploring Farming as a Business*” is provided to farmers who do not have a business plan and have less than three years of farming experience. “*Taking Your Farm Business to the Next Level*” is for farmers who have more than three years of experience and involved training in advanced agribusiness topics. The project team reported that their efforts resulted in 119 farmers increasing their understanding of successful business planning practices. One project participant said:

“The business plan I created required a lot of information, thought, and time. However, the process helped me learn a great deal about the intricacies of my business. I submitted this business plan with minor changes and a forest management plan to the South Carolina Conservation Department. During a visit, the Conservation Agent shared his positive impression of my plans. The thoroughness of my plan allowed him to get insight into my personal goals. As much as I stressed over...developing the plan...it really paid off.”

Participants of **Growing Self-Reliant Farmers** received comprehensive training related to whole farm and business planning. The project team reported that 21 farmers completed their own whole farm business plans, and 35 farmers developed marketing and production plans as part of their business plans. One participant shared how they used their business plan:

“I came into this program with a significant amount of farming experience, but I didn't know where to start when it came to creating a comprehensive farm business plan. I now not only have a complete plan, but I've also been able to present it to a land trust and am the top candidate for leasing land from them next year!”

Finally, a farmer who purchased land in 2018 and participated in **Open Books: Open Farmland: Increasing Farm Economic Viability in Northern Illinois and Southern Wisconsin** said that he credits the project for an easy and successful farmland loan application process, saying,

“I had everything in order. When I presented them with my business plan and farm financial records (which I organized because of the program), the loan officer did not ask for more information! I was confident in my understanding of my farm business.”



Improved Knowledge and Understanding

Project leaders' most frequently reported outcome was increased knowledge, awareness, and understanding among participants. 51 of 188 surveyed project leaders identified this as a significant outcome. Increased knowledge was reported for topics ranging from production practices, conservation agriculture, business and strategic planning, farm economics, decision-making, risk management, and soil and pasture management.

Data from 148 RVS reports indicate that 45,897 unique participants increased their understanding, with 97% of projects reporting "Understand" as a Producer Action.

Growing Tomorrow's Farmers: Beginning Farmer Training and Farmland Access for Socially Disadvantaged Populations is one of many projects that reported increased participant knowledge. Specifically, one of their intended outcomes is: *"With mentorship, training, and technical assistance, BFRs will acquire skills and competencies essential for sustainable crop production and small farm business management."* In support of this, the team reported that 120 participants increased their knowledge of production practices, and 77 increased their knowledge of farm business practices. An incubator farmer participant shared their insights:



This season, I learned more about growing crop families together. I learned new harvesting techniques, about crop quality for sales, and about post-harvest techniques."

The team behind **Farm School NYC 2016-2019: Enhancing Educational Experiences, Resources, and Support for Beginning Urban Farmers** reported that 257 students gained knowledge and skills through courses on producing food sustainably and developing and managing innovative marketing activities. Students reflected on their knowledge gains:

"After taking the soils course, I have a better understanding of how to use and apply compost, assess my soil, and troubleshoot poor crop yield."

"I learned a lot during this course. I will be able to approach soil from a different perspective, to observe and think about ag practices that focus on the sustainability of the soil and the livelihood of communities. Other new knowledge that I will be able to use is soil testing for nutrients and heavy metals and composting."

Regenerative Poultry and Vegetable Farming in the San Luis Valley for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers, which had the stated goals of introducing poultry farming and ensuring participants have the knowledge and skills to launch successful food-related enterprises, reported these successes:

- 90% of participants agreed the course had helped them understand what resources and markets are available for raising meat birds and the difference between conventional agriculture.
- 100% of participants agreed the project helped them understand why food raised with regenerative agricultural practices is better for the consumer and that it has or will improve their farming success.
- 100% of participants agreed that the project helped them understand the requirements of poultry processing compliance in Colorado.
- 100% of participants agreed that the project increased their knowledge of enterprise budgets for poultry processing.

Increased Number of Farmers/ Ranchers and Farms/ Ranches

BFRDP was established to support BFRs that are entering, establishing, building, and managing successful farm and ranch enterprises. In alignment with this, most funded projects stated increasing the number of farmers/ ranchers, farms/ranches, or farm/ ranch businesses as a medium- or long-term outcome. BFRDP programming helped 4,398 unique participants start farming/ ranching (reported by 155 projects), prepared 22,072 participants to start farming/ ranching (reported by 153 projects), and improved the farming/ ranching success of 19,840 participants (reported by 152 projects). Overall, BFRDP reached 78,889 unique participants (reported by 147 projects).

Over the course of the three-year grant period, **Ensuring Beginning Farmers' Long-Term Commercial Success** reached more than 5500 participants by offering programming for first-year and intermediate-level farmers. The project involved specialized training, mentorship, access to markets, and needs-based participant support stipends. As a result of this project, 127 participants started farming, 900 were helped in preparing to start farming, and 4,637 participants improved their farming success. The project leaders offered this participant's story:

“A farmer with significant prior experience managing flower farms in other states completed our level 2 program. Her aim was to learn the business startup skills necessary to launch her own operation. She was paired with a mentor farmer who guided her through startup costs, recordkeeping, and business management skills. She was also connected with land for leasing through our program. She has already started farming the land and has launched her own small flower farm in Baltimore County, MD.”

The same project team also reported this story of a participant who did not start a farm but learned critical skills to sustain farming operations:

“An urban farmer in Washington, DC, gained experience working on a larger scale through our Level 2 Beginner Farmer Training Program. She learned critical skills with farm equipment and tractor operation. She has since taken on a farm management position at a 2-acre urban farm project at a middle school in an underserved neighborhood. In addition to growing food for sale, she oversees a broad range of community outreach and educational programming at the farm.”

The **Farmer Education and Enterprise Development for Beginning, Socially Disadvantaged Farmers in the Salinas Valley** project aimed to train farmers to plan, launch, and establish independent organic businesses. They helped incubate 86 farm businesses, 57 of which were still operational at the end of the grant term. The project team shared this story about beginning farmers expanding their operations:

“Luis Silva, Misael Morales, and Gerardo Acevedo operate Silva Organic Farms (organic celery, strawberries, mixed vegetables), Chelito Organics (organic mixed vegetables, baby bok choy, specialty produce), and Acevedo Organic Farm (organic strawberries, mixed vegetables) respectively. They were seeking to expand their operations to meet the demand for their products. The challenge was finding reasonably priced land parcels small enough for their operations but large enough to allow for expansion. With the help of the project team, the three farmers came together to lease 60 acres of certified organic land, with 20 acres allotted to each business. They share water and equipment and have established an annual rotation system. Misael wants to make organic produce more accessible, Gerardo hopes to establish stronger market channels, and Luis is mentoring his son Hugo in preparing to eventually pass on the business.”

Arcadia's Veteran Farmer Program reported that of their 101 participants, 42 started farming, 84 were prepared to start farming, and 42 improved their farming success. The project's stated goal is to launch veterans into new careers in agriculture and increase the likelihood of their success. A veteran participant shared this story:

“This June, we purchased our 22-acre farm in Henry, Tennessee. We have started with two beehives for honey, chickens for eggs and meat, guinea hens for protection and pest control, and runner ducks for pest control. We also have two horses, which has been a lifelong dream of mine. Thank you for all you have helped us achieve!”

Some projects reported that although their participants had not started their own farms/ ranches, they were successfully pursuing careers in the agricultural sector. Two success stories shared in project reports are summarized here:

- A participant in **Food Sovereignty: Growing Urban Farmers and Farms** completed a 12-week course and a hands-on workshop on building cold frames and movable hoop houses. She then left Maryland to work as the farm manager at an urban farm in Los Angeles.
- A participant in **Reducing Barriers for Disadvantaged and Beginning Farmers in Greene County Missouri** who was a lead farmer on the team took advantage of professional development opportunities to build his expertise and confidence. He then took on a management role with an urban farm in Springfield, where he helped build the community's local food system.

Built Support Networks and a Sense of Community

BFRs often lack access to networks for resources, materials, information, or support. Farmer networks serve as repositories of information about practices, technology, programs, and equipment, and access to this expertise is crucial for success. To address this, many projects facilitated connections for BFRs with networks of peers, professionals, service providers, or agency staff, which helped participants integrate into the local or regional agricultural community. Project leaders reported that these networking and community-building activities help BFRs feel less isolated and more equipped to succeed.

In the case of **Reducing Barriers for Disadvantaged and Beginning Farmers in Greene County Missouri**, participants had the opportunity to connect with local food systems and agricultural experts and mentors from the University of Missouri Extension, FSA, and other organizations. Results from a program evaluation show that *“the vast majority (of participants) indicated that a connection to the farming community was a significant benefit to their involvement with the project.”*

In addition to hosting networking events, the team at **Growing Good Farmers, Growing Good Food: A Comprehensive Training Program for Ohio’s Organic and Sustainable Beginning Farmers** established an online networking platform through Facebook, allowing participants to stay connected. They reported that 524 early career farmer participants were part of this network. One participant expressed:

“The course has put me in a network of like-minded entrepreneurs and sustainable farmers who are always eager to help. Moral support counts for a whole lot more than most of us realize. Resource people are an absolute necessity to starting and running a farm business.”



Diversified and Entered New Markets

A persistent challenge for BFRs is limited access to secure market channels and new market opportunities. This is especially relevant for small-scale BFRs who struggle to reach profitable markets capable of handling small volumes. BFRDP projects address this by helping participants foster relationships with buyers, develop marketing skills, identify new market opportunities, and establish connections with existing markets. According to reports, BFRDP participants accessed various markets, including online marketplaces, schools, nonprofits, wholesalers, direct-to-consumer platforms, farmers markets, CSAs, grocery stores, and produce auctions.

Participants of **RU Ready to Farm: Getting Rooted in the Garden State** gained access to a 1-acre plot and markets for selling produce. The project team reported that their participants accessed two markets: a CSA and local food banks. Participants bundled their harvests into CSA-style bagged produce shares in the summer and actively marketed this to customers. Over ten weeks, they served 46 customers about 6,715 lbs. of produce with an estimated total value of \$15,730. After the CSA ended, they donated about 1,000 pounds of produce to local food banks.

The project **Enhancing Success for Beginning, Socially Disadvantaged Farmers through Customized Resources, Hands-On Training, and Comprehensive Supports** offered a training program to BFRs at their incubator farm, the Big River Farms, and provided access to built-in markets. In 2019, their 18-week CSA had 147 members, generating \$78,148 in gross income. BFRs also sold aggregated produce at four farmers markets, resulting in a \$6,732 gross income. Sales to local food hubs brought in \$3,670 gross income for participants. A new direct-to-consumer market opportunity was developed, offering discount wholesale groceries to state-wide communities. In 2020, during the COVID pandemic, opportunities arose to sell produce through the food hub, and the CSA program grew to 240 members. Three incubator teams independently started their own CSAs, and additional funding enabled the food hub to purchase produce worth \$68,000 (23,000 pounds) from project participants to distribute to local food shelves.

The project **A Comprehensive Approach to Growing Successful Beginning Meat Producers** aimed to increase the number of BFRs successfully and profitably raising meat. To circumvent processing bottlenecks, the project used MeatSuite, an online direct-to-consumer market platform. A BFR who had success using MeatSuite said:

“My brother and I own a century farm with a herd of 60 cattle. We got our meat handler registration in 2018 and were relatively new to direct marketing. Prior to joining MeatSuite, we sold some meat off-farm and at the farmers market, but our customer base was limited. Last year, we tried MeatSuite to help sell our meat in bulk. All of a sudden, we were reaching people who we never would have reached before. In fact, we have had customers drive an hour away to buy our meat!”

Supporting Beginning Farmers in Scaling-up into Wholesale Production provided support and training to BFRs navigating new market opportunities and connected participants to wholesale opportunities. The project team shared a participant's success story:

“A farmer in Missouri who had been farming for five years was selling at farmers market and had a small amount of restaurant sales. Through the help they received from this project, they connected with some larger wholesale markets. Over three years, with technical assistance and mentorship, they scaled up two crops to meet the wholesale demand. They also started growing tomatoes and salad greens and increased their overall sales through this market channel.”



Accessed Land and Secured Land Tenure

Accessing and securing farmland and improving land tenure pose significant challenges for BFRs in establishing their operations. Many BFRDP projects actively address this obstacle by equipping BFRs with the skills to locate farmland, training landowners in land transfer, identifying affordable farmland, developing land transfer strategies, creating land-link and land-match initiatives, assisting BFRs in negotiations, and coordinating land transfers. These projects aim to ensure long-term land security and affordable tenure for BFRs while maintaining farmland in agricultural production.

A key objective of **Expanding Integrated Solutions to Achieve Farmland Access for New Farmers** is to prepare BFRs to seek land and assist them in obtaining improved leases or purchasing land. In the first year of the grant, they reported that 900 individuals learned about farmland access resources, 149 received individualized support, 56 signed leases, and 3 purchased farmland. The project report included this notable story about improving land security for 13 HMoob farmers in McFarland, Wisconsin.

“A group of 13 HMoob (White Hmong) farmers reached out in August 2021 for support in a land displacement situation. They had been farming on 3 acres of land for over 20 years, leasing through seasonal handshake agreements. A few years ago, it was bought by the Village of McFarland with a plan to turn it into a community park. Working with the HMoob farmers and the Village of McFarland, we leased an 8-acre parcel of land from the McFarland School District. This will increase growing space for these and other farmers for the next 5-7 years.”

Similarly, **Accelerating Farmland Access in Vermont** offers technical assistance covering land assessment, access, transfer, and financing. They reported assisting 40 retiring farmers in transferring their land to new owners and helping 62 BFRs acquire land. The project team shared this success story:

“We worked closely with two farm seekers who had been looking for their own land for years as they worked on a wholesale vegetable farm. In 2018, they connected with a successful and long-standing greenhouse and produce business, which the retiring farmers had listed on Vermont Land Link. To make this project successful, the BFRs needed help with writing a business plan to access financing for the property and communicating with the sellers. These farm seekers began working with us in 2017 and closed on this property in 2019. Since then, they have made changes to their operation and increased their direct sales channels.”

Access to Land for New England’s Beginning Farmers: Phase 3 aims to enable New England BFRs to access land to start or expand their farm businesses. They reported that 213 BFRs accessed farmland and improved tenure security, and 48 transitioning farms completed transfer or succession plans. The project team helped these BFRs in their journey toward owning farmland:

“A BFR couple heard about a farm listing with 50 acres of woodland, 20 acres of pasture, and a farmhouse with a barn attached. The farm was a certified organic livestock farm with diverse terrain, perfect for animals and vegetables. Working with the project team, the BFRs discussed different paths to ownership and found a solution with a lease-to-own model. The project team helped craft unique lease provisions like ensuring rent payments would go towards the principal, an option to buy, and a right of first refusal clause and coached them through negotiations. In November 2018, they finalized a USDA Farm Service Agency loan to purchase the farm and secure it long-term for their family and community.”

The project team also helped a retiring farmer transfer their land:

“A retiring farmer needed assistance with transfer planning and help recruiting a farmer so his well-established farm could remain in dairy as a valuable resource for their community. Our team helped the farmer clarify his transfer goals, develop a transition plan, publicize his transfer opportunity, and connect him with other advisors. Throughout the process, the farmer had intensive meetings with our staff and advisors, often at his kitchen table in the comfort of his home. Our team also fielded inquiries from prospective buyers, facilitated meetings, and eventually handled the details of the complicated transfer of this farm’s assets and business to the young, incoming farmers. It took three years of hard work and support to make this a successful transfer.”

Deepened Interest and Confidence in Farming/ Ranching

Project leaders report that many participants approach them with curiosity and passion but limited exposure to farming/ ranching. Even if these participants do not start farming/ ranching during their enrollment, they leave with an increased interest in pursuing it in the future.

A BFR who took part in **Fastrack Farming: A Training Program for Socially Disadvantaged and Military Veteran Beginning Farmers During the COVID-19 Pandemic** left the project feeling more driven to pursue farming:

“As a newcomer to the region, connecting with experienced farmers was an invaluable experience. First-hand accounts of the trials and successes of farming truly changed the way I think about it. I have come away with a renewed sense of purpose and drive for launching a sustainable farm operation in the future.”

BFRs also reported increased confidence in their production, business, marketing, and decision-making skills.



Strengthening Farmer Entrepreneurship through Regional Resources, Linkages, and Networks offered 100,000 hours of instruction to 500 BFRs, leading to the establishment of 40 new farms and improved success for 245 farmers. One participant expressed an increase in confidence in a variety of skills:

“I learned a lot about cover cropping this season, and I feel much more confident using cover crops to manage weed pressure and build soil. I have become much more comfortable driving different kinds of tractors and using implements. I also feel more confident projecting cash flows, expenses, etc.”

A couple who formed an LLC and started farming garlic on leased land after having participated in **“Facilitating Success for Beginning Farmers and Ranchers in Washington’s Remote Island Communities”** shared about their journey:

“Starting a farm seemed out of reach, expensive, and complicated. Organic Farm School taught us that small-scale farming is attainable and that there are plenty of funding opportunities to help new farmers get started. The program helped channel our enthusiasm and passion for farming by giving us direction, confidence, and knowledge. It helped us understand farming as a business and provided us with a host of resources to turn to as we started our career.

A BFR reported feeling more prepared after participating in the **Organic Farming Certificate Program**:

“The Rodale Institute Farmer Training Program provided me with a massive amount of exposure to the organic farming movement and has shaped how I see my future within it. I have learned amongst an amazing group of peers who are now all able to develop better business models. I now have a solid business plan and a better understanding of how to begin an agricultural enterprise.”

Less frequently highlighted by project leaders were other outcomes, such as improved legacy planning, elevated quality of life, and expanded access to infrastructure and equipment.



KEYS TO PROJECT SUCCESS

This section describes the key themes related to project success as reported in RVS and the project leaders' survey. Accompanying quotes have been slightly edited and abridged for clarity.

Experienced and Committed Staff Established in the Community

Project Leaders consistently indicated that staff who are experts in their field, are dedicated, and have established relationships in the community are responsible for project success. Not only do team members have extensive expertise and field experience, but many are active farmers themselves, allowing them to offer support that meets the unique needs of BFRs. Staff and their organizations often have strong connections with the regional agricultural community, giving them access to people, markets, and other resources. Other project leaders said that having staff who represent the community they serve, such as veterans, immigrants, refugees, etc., and can relate to their cultures and traditions is also a key contributor to success.

Effective Partnerships

BFRDP projects often involve partnerships among local, regional, and statewide entities such as universities and colleges, Extension agents, NGOs, businesses, local schools, farms, farmers markets, food hubs, etc. These collaborations allow BFRs to access a continuum of services and resources, including technical assistance, land and market access, training, etc., that they need to succeed. By building on each other's strengths, BFRPD projects and their partners can better meet their participants' diverse needs.

In discussing the keys to their program's success, the team at **Building Place-Based Mentorships for Beginning Grain Farmers with Special Support for Beginning Women Farmers** noted:

“Our organizational partnerships (three key partners on our proposal, including us) have been key to the project's success. We all have strong connections with local/regional growers and other agriculture-oriented organizations that we leverage for recruitment, content development, and delivery. It is these relationships that “ground” the project and lead to the most relevant and helpful delivery possible for our BFRs.”

Program Evaluation and Use of Findings

Project leaders who used findings from needs assessments to inform their program design, used formative evaluations to refine their projects, and conducted summative evaluations to understand the outcomes of their work recognized program evaluation as a key to success.

Conducting a needs assessment with key stakeholders (or engaging farmers directly in project design) and using the findings in program development can ensure that projects are tailored to address participants' needs. Using participant feedback to improve programming allows projects to be responsive to participants' emerging needs. Reflecting on their experiences, the project leaders of **A Comprehensive Approach to Growing Successful Beginning Meat Producers** noted that:

“Having an evaluator compile results, manage evaluations, track progress, and turn that information into effective reports really helped us keep track of where we were and how people were responding.”

Adaptive and Responsive Programming

In order to best serve their participants, project leaders said that it was important for their programming to adapt and respond to BFRs' needs and priorities. Allowing participants to guide the project direction and “meeting BFRs where they were at” meant that all participants made progress regardless of their level of experience. With this built-in flexibility, projects were able to accommodate various learning styles and preferences, all while meeting the project goals.

History of Working With Target Audiences

Organizations with an established presence in their target communities and a history of community engagement are well-equipped to recruit, engage, train, and communicate with their target audiences. Furthermore, when project staff represent the communities they serve, it lends credibility to the project and leads to genuine engagement.

In their report, the project leaders of **Going Whole Hog: Sustainable Livestock and Agroforestry Training for Military Veterans** attributed their success to “*strong partnerships with organizations that have a long history of training military veterans in agriculture.*”

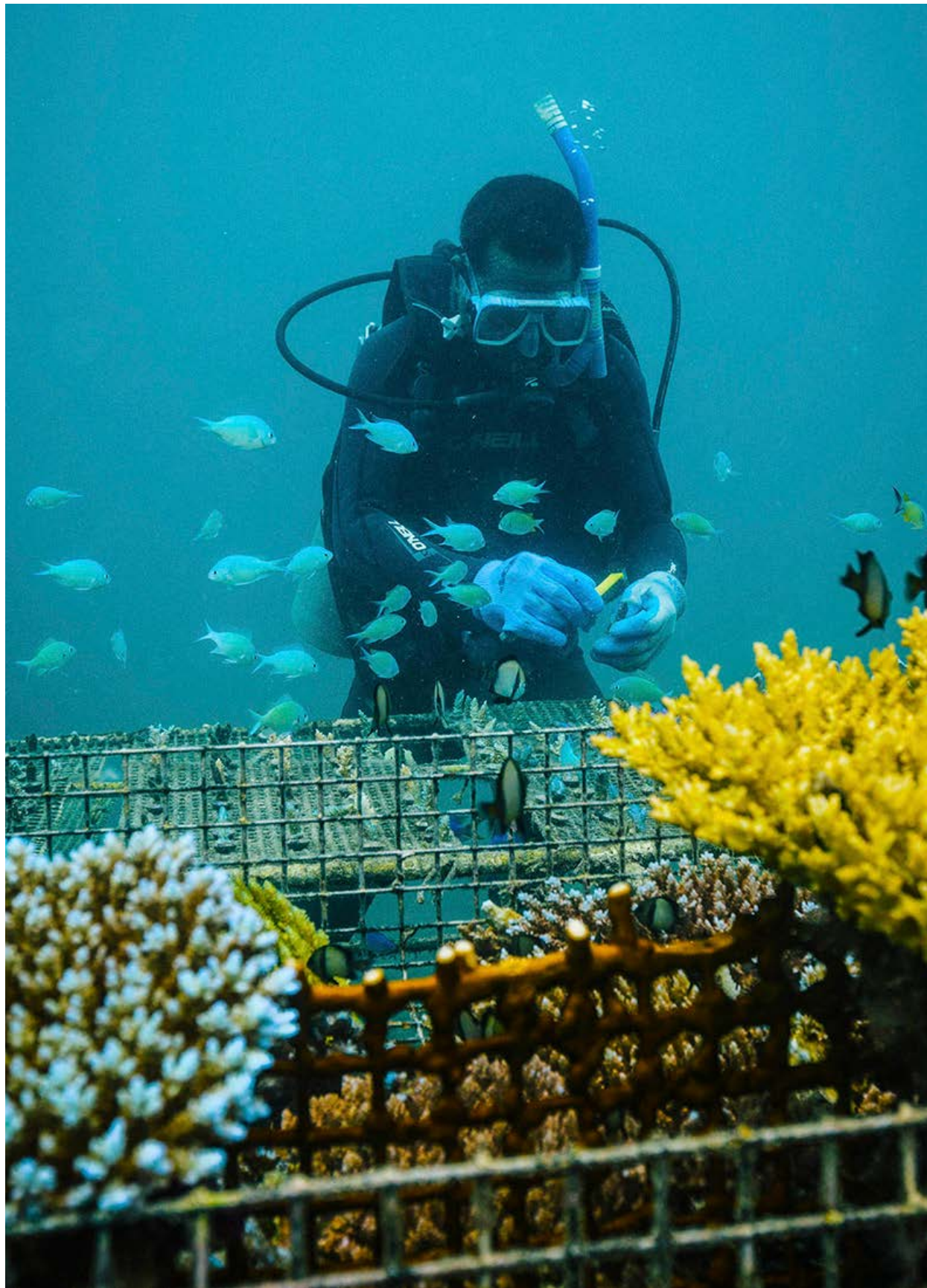
Similarly, the team at **Feed Rhode Island: Growing Sustainable Farms** said about the keys to their success:

“Our staff are experienced in providing training and technical assistance to immigrant and refugee farmers. The trainings our staff ran better matched the learning styles and educational needs of this special population. We also worked closely with the University of Rhode Island Extension Office to advise extension agents on how to work effectively with these farmers.”

Setting Clear Expectations

BFRDP projects that set rigorous requirements and require a strong commitment must clearly communicate their expectations of participants to attract the right BFRs. Project leaders said that they had the most success when they detailed their expectations to participants and had a mutual understanding of participants' expectations for the project. Expectations should also be clarified to all project partners (farmer mentors, host farms, educators, partner organizations, etc.) so that they are in agreement about their role on the team.





KEYS TO PARTICIPANT SUCCESS

This section describes the key themes related to the keys to participant success as reported in RVS and the project leaders' survey. Accompanying quotes have been slightly edited and abridged for clarity.

Networking and Community-Building

Many BFRDP projects involved network or community-building activities to connect BFRs with peers, experienced farmers, project alums, industry professionals, educators, agency staff, customers, and community organizations. These activities were prioritized because BFRs often rely on their networks to problem-solve, share resources, offer support, and find community, especially during times of uncertainty or isolation. A BFR who participated in **Beginning Farmer-Rancher Training Program: Hawaii Island** described the value of networking, saying:

“One of the main reasons I enrolled in the program was to get to know the agricultural community on the Big Island. This program exposed me to a wide variety of practices, people, farms, and businesses. The speakers were extremely knowledgeable and very open to answering questions as well as being contacted in the future. These networking opportunities are invaluable.”

BFRDP projects that used a cohort model were especially effective in building community among participants and project alumni. This sense of community fostered accountability, led to increased collaboration, and improved morale during stressful conditions. Project leaders of **RU Ready to Farm: Getting Rooted in the Garden State** said of the value of community building among project cohorts:

“The project focuses on establishing trust and a sense of community with the participants. One of the most important aspects was the establishment of a “sense of community” with current and past project participants as well as with our staff and area farmers. By establishing a sense of family and open communication, students had the support that they needed to move forward with this new career in farming.”

Farmer-to-Farmer Learning

BFRDP projects that incorporated mentorships or apprenticeships reported that participants appreciated learning from more experienced and successful farmers/ ranchers. Interacting with established farmers/ ranchers gave BFRs an understanding of the realities of farming/ ranching.

In discussing the keys to their participants' success, the project leaders of **GoFarm Incubator Expansion Project** stated:

“The primary factor in the success of our participants was the incorporation of farmer mentors. We paid successful local farmers to mentor our apprentices on topics from production planning, site prep, planting, IPM, harvesting, post-harvest handling, market channels, winter prep, and more. Farmer mentors helped our apprentices succeed in the field and at market, and also created a sense of community.”

Similarly, the project team at **Aquaculture Boot Camp 2: Enhancing the Sustainability of New and Limited Resource Aquaculture/Aquaponic Farmers with Innovative Training** reported:

“Our internship program that provides apprentice-type training opportunities for next-generation aquaculture/aquaponic farmers contributed to our success. Having farmers who are already successful in the industry as mentors further enhanced this effort. It is important for beginning and limited-resource farmers to obtain research-based information from universities, but it is equally important for them to gain insight into real-world aquaculture and aquaponic issues. Having farmer mentors co-teach and open their operations to train and assist new farmers provides sustainability to this effort. The relationships built yield long-term results, leading to the development of a stronger and more cohesive aquaculture/aquaponic industry composed of many new producers.”

Individualized Support

BFRDP participants come to the program with varying levels of experience, different skills, specific needs, and individual goals for their enterprises. To cater to the diverse needs of these participants, project leaders found that providing personalized one-on-one support tailored to each BFR's unique circumstances was highly effective. Furthermore, when this individualized assistance was combined with on-site visits, BFRs could receive feedback on the specific challenges they encountered and be directed to the most relevant resources.

In reporting the keys to their participants' success, the project team at **Athens Land Trust Beginning Farmer Development Program** stated:

“The workshops, curriculum, and resources that are the foundation of our program continue to meet the needs of farmers in our network, especially insofar as they are

coupled with one-on-one support. Providing ongoing, individualized coaching and support to new and beginning farmers, with an emphasis on socially disadvantaged farmers, is a strategy that addresses the unique needs of traditionally underserved or marginalized producers who don't meet thresholds of eligibility for other programs or otherwise fall through the cracks. Hands-on technical assistance and farm business support have had the single greatest impact in supporting new and beginning farmers in our region. This targeted and deep work with farmers on their farms and around local markets has helped farmers increase production and financial sustainability.”

Similarly, the project team at **New Roots and Shoots: Building on Refugee Farmer Success in Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Markets** reported:

“The focus on intensive 1:1 technical assistance, whether in the field or by phone, was successful in supporting farmers with tailored support for their production challenges and opportunities. This individualized time was particularly useful for farmers who have been farming in the 3-7 years range, as it addressed key bits of feedback that they couldn't otherwise get from a group class that might cover more basic elements of the issue or even a video on a topic made for a broader audience.”



Experiential Education

In their reporting, project teams consistently attributed experiential learning activities as a key to participants' success. This included hands-on activities, skill development workshops, participant-led demonstrations, farm tours, equipment handling, etc.

Describing the keys to their participants' success, the team at **New Roots for Refugees** reported:

“We pair training with hands-on learning whenever possible, as we have found that visual demonstration and hands-on practice are the most effective ways of teaching when there are language, literacy, and cultural barriers. This was especially true in regard to farmers learning new machinery. Some farmers who were hesitant at first to try the tractor and tiller became much more willing as they watched other farmers do it and had several opportunities to practice.”

The team at **Growing Self-Reliant Farmers** reported a similar key to success:

“The major keys to success for participants include immersive education methods. Learning by doing has proved to be the most effective method for education with a lasting impact. While there are reading materials for participants and a few lessons that take place in a sit-down “classroom” setting, 90% of the schedule is made of up hands-on participation in the fields, CSA, markets, building projects, hand skill sessions, or ecological workshops.”

Finally, a report of the Skagit County Beginning Farmer Development Program stated:

“Keys to success for participants was the hands-on learning format of the classes. This was critical in developing skills that can be applied to future poultry processing activities. Students received safety training with propane and knives and were able to apply concepts learned in the lectures immediately to the processing environment. The practicum format helped students absorb and understand the information and witness its importance in a real-world setting.”

Culturally and Locally Relevant Content

Projects have reported that offering culturally relevant programming that integrates aspects of a community's language, customs, traditions, and beliefs, helps participants have a more meaningful and resonant experience. In response to a survey question about the keys to their success, the team at **Business Development with Native American Beginning Farmers and Ranchers in Arizona** said,

“We provide education from a Native lens. The examples we provide are of Tribal farmers and ranchers in Tribal communities. Our trainers have experience working with many tribes, and we understand the specific challenges of Native farmers and ranchers, so it's easy to relate.”

The team at **Agroforestry Training for Native Hawaiians to Increase Economic Opportunity, Food Security and Cultural Connection** shared a similar position:

“The key to the success of this project is the combination of utilizing ancestral knowledge with current farming methods. The enthusiasm and commitment on the part of the participants come from a great desire to meld these traditional Hawaiian practices with modern-day techniques.”

Project leaders also highlighted the value of offering programs in participants' native languages and developing resources specific to regional climates, geographies, and markets.

Sustained, Long-Term Participant Engagement

BFRs often need ongoing support for years before they gain the expertise, confidence, and knowledge to build and maintain a stable business. Project leaders said that offering regular learning opportunities, ongoing consultations, and multiple check-ins and follow-ups over many years are needed for BFRs to succeed.

The project leaders of **Accelerating Farmland Access in Vermont** said about their success:

“The capacity of the project partners to provide services to farmers over many years is at the heart of our program's success and the success of the producers we work with. It allows us to train and retain staff to build our capacity. We can introduce concepts and tools early in a farmer's career and then build on those skills as they engage more deeply.”

Access to a Broad Spectrum of Experts and Resources

Participants enroll in BFRDP projects at different stages in their business development, seeking specific types of support. Programs that provide a continuum of services by giving BFRs access to a wide range of experts and resources are best able to help their participants succeed. Most commonly, projects achieve this by partnering with organizations that specialize in different aspects of farm/ranch business support. Working collaboratively, these partnerships help BFRs find the best solutions to any challenges they might face.

In discussing the keys to their success, the project team at **Farming for Prosperity: Immigrant and Refugee Training Program in South King County** reported:

“A key to success is each partner organization's defined expertise that combined to make an array of resources available to our participants. Highline College Sustainable Agriculture Program brings expertise in commercial organic production education, Northwest Agriculture Business Center brings in-depth expertise in farm business development, and the other grant partners bring cultural and linguistic expertise to provide interpretation and translation.”

In response to a survey question on the keys to their success, the project team at **Accelerating Farmland Access in Vermont** answered:

“The highly collaborative nature of our project was one of the main reasons for our success. We combined land access expertise, business coaching expertise, and transfer planning expertise so farmers had a continuum of services and key technical help to make land access deals happen. We focused on getting into the weeds with farmers to make sure they were supported throughout the full land access process by highly knowledgeable technical experts rather than only providing general education.”



Facilitating Participation

To be able to fully participate in BFRDP projects, many BFRs, especially those with limited resources, need financial support. Projects that provided stipends or scholarships to assist with expenses such as travel and course fees for those in need found that this support played a vital role in their success.

Organic Farming Certificate Program's project leaders described financial support as a the key to their participants' success:

“The keys for successful participants were a positive attitude, an eagerness to learn, and the ability to work hard. The fact that we have paid internship programs is extremely beneficial. The funding provided stipends for the veterans in the program and for staff support. This BFRDP funding provided an opportunity for veterans to apply for a long season of 35 weeks and experience an entire growing season in Pennsylvania, whereas in prior years, due to funding limitations, the veterans were generally limited to about 16 weeks per season or a partial season.”

Beefing Up Livestock, Poultry and Agroforestry Enterprises for Military Veteran Farmers also attributed their participants' success to financial support:

“Offering stipends has allowed several military veterans to be involved in various programs that would otherwise not be possible for them to attend. The competitive scholarships offered to attend the conferences over the years allowed veterans to network and engage in education to start up or improve their farming enterprises.”



CHALLENGES TO LONG-TERM SUCCESS FOR BEGINNING FARMERS AND RANCHERS

This section describes the key themes related to challenges to BFRs' success as reported in RVS and the project leaders' survey. Although these challenges are well-established, this data demonstrates that BFRs continue to face systemic hurdles that need to be addressed. Accompanying quotes have been slightly edited and abridged for clarity.

Land Access and Secure Land Tenure

Ninety six of 188 respondents (51%) of the project leaders surveyed said that access to land is one of the most significant challenges to long-term success for BFRs. Of the 71 farmers/ ranchers who responded to the survey but no longer farm/ ranch, 10 of them (14%) said they quit because they lacked access to land. Most BFRDP participants are first-generation farmers/ ranchers or from non-farming backgrounds and face significant obstacles in acquiring productive land needed to transition from small-scale or hobby gardens to larger-scale operations. This challenge is compounded by farmland price inflation, loss of farmland to development, and an inability to compete with other buyers. Although leased land can be more affordable, secure land tenure is a significant barrier. Securing and negotiating long-term lease agreements is complicated and can be tenuous, whereas short-term leases can discourage investment in the operation.

An excerpt from a 2023 evaluation of alumni conducted by the team at **Tools for Successful Agricultural Entrepreneurship on Large Landscapes** states:

“By far, the biggest challenge that alumni face that prevents them from wanting to stay in farming/ranching is the high cost of buying or accessing land. Almost all alumni recognized that they earn a minimal income, meaning saving to buy land is out of their reach. This is particularly challenging if they eventually want to own their own farming/ranching operation in the arid west, which typically requires large acreages to be financially and ecologically sustainable.”

Accessing Capital and Credit

BFRs who are successful at small scales find that scaling up their operations requires capital and credit, which they often lack access to. In a survey, 68 of 188 (36%) project leaders said that access to capital and credit is a significant challenge for BFRs.

Once land is acquired, developing and operating a farm involves expenses related to clearing, plowing, planting, pest management, and investments in infrastructure for irrigation, storage, processing, etc. Ranchers too have additional upfront costs from purchasing breeding stock and farm vehicles, fencing, etc. Many BFRDP projects work with historically underserved and under-resourced populations for whom the high start-up costs can be an unsurmountable challenge. Even for farmers/ranchers whose operations get off the ground, it can take a few years to become profitable, during which time they need access to capital or credit to support themselves and their families.

The project director of **Establishing a Statewide Beginning Farmer Training Program in Kansas to Assist Beginning Farmer Development and Increase Business Success** said about startup costs:

“Due to extremely high start-up costs in monoculture row crop agriculture, conventional wisdom seems to be that almost no new farmers can gain access to enough land or equipment to conventionally grow crops on a scale that gives them the profitability they need to stay in business without inheriting a farm from their parents or other family relations.”

Navigating Government Programs and the Regulatory Landscape

Although many government programs support farmers/ranchers, many BFRs are either unaware of them, not eligible to apply or find the process intimidating and cumbersome. 20 of 188 (11%) project leaders cited this as a significant challenge for BFRs. BFRDP projects that engage English language learners or people with low computer literacy especially find that their participants need extensive support with paperwork and record keeping. Additionally, farmers/ranchers operating small parcels of land or growing unconventional crops continue to struggle to meet the eligibility requirements for government programs.

Similarly, BFRs must navigate complex federal and local bureaucracy, regulations, policies, and laws. For example, small and unconventional farms/ranchers are sometimes restricted by zoning laws, leading to them feeling unsupported or disenfranchised.

Securing Reliable and Diverse Markets

Identifying existing diverse, established, and secure markets and developing new market opportunities is critical to BFRs' success. Many BFRs have small operations and struggle with sustaining profitable markets, given their small volume. Other challenges include the lack of market opportunities, adapting to changing markets and their pressures, and being priced out by larger corporations. 38 of 188 (20%) surveyed project leaders cited access to stable markets as a significant challenge for BFRs.

Lack of Proficiency in Business and Finance

To succeed, BFRs need to develop their skills in managing their operations' financial and business aspects. This challenge is being addressed by many BFRDP projects that provide education around concepts like pricing of goods, budgeting, financial record keeping, maintaining cash flow, business planning, labor management, cost and revenue projections, risk management, maintaining compliance and certifications, etc. Without this targeted support, many participants stumble when transitioning from being farmers/ranchers to running farming/ranching businesses. 23 of 188 (12%) surveyed project leaders cited the lack of business and financial literacy as a challenge for BFRs.

Maintaining Profitability and a Stable Income

Another significant challenge for long-term success for BFRs is financial profitability and making a stable income to support themselves and their families. 21 of 188 (11%) surveyed project leaders noted this as a significant challenge. 16 of the 71 (23%) farmer/rancher survey respondents who no longer farm/ranch said they quit for financial reasons. Small-scale farmers/ranchers often have small profit margins and face many financial pitfalls from which they cannot recover. Many BFRs need to supplement their on-farm income with a second job, which hinders them from investing time into scaling up or growing their businesses. Financial instability leads to farmers/ranchers being unable to save for retirement, pay off student loans, prepare to start a family or pay their employees a living wage, all of which leads even those passionate to pursue alternatives.

A project report from the team at **Growing Sustainable Farms: Training, Land, and Resources for Beginning Socially-Disadvantaged Farmers** states that:

“A major issue for farm sustainability is financial profitability. The small profit margins for vegetable production mean that new farms must scale up to remain independent businesses. Most of our beginning farmers cannot afford to leave their full-time jobs when they start farming, so it is difficult to find the time to scale up. Hence the farm revenue does not reach the point of becoming profitable. This profitability issue is difficult to address as we cannot provide the farmers with financial support beyond guaranteeing markets for their products through the food hub. We professionals need to work on this issue to identify creative solutions that can bridge this financial gap for start-up farms.”

Finding Farm/ Ranch Labor

As businesses expand their operations, they need access to a trained farm/ranch workforce. Many BFRs encounter challenges in recruiting, housing, managing, and affording labor. 18 of 188 (10%) project leaders stated that access to labor is a significant challenge for BFRs. A BFR survey respondent who farmed for four years said they quit farming because they “*couldn’t find sufficient help, and it was impossible to keep the business going and still pay a living wage to my workers.*”

Dealing With Extreme Weather Events and Climate Change

As climate change brings about more unpredictable and extreme weather events, many farmers/ ranchers who experience crop or livestock loss do not ever financially recover. Severe weather-related events like droughts, floods, storms, or extreme temperatures cause loss of property and products, and many BFRs do not have the resources to rebuild. For BFRs to succeed long-term, they must be trained in and implement climate mitigation strategies. 16 of 188 (9%) project leaders stated that climate change and extreme weather are significant challenges for BFRs.



Accessing Ongoing Technical Assistance and Training

For BFRs to stay innovative, competitive, and updated with advances in agriculture, they need ongoing access to affordable educational opportunities and one-on-one technical assistance. To increase accessibility, these resources should be culturally and locally relevant and available in participants’ preferred language. 13 of 188 (7%) project leaders surveyed said that access to technical assistance and educational opportunities are significant challenges for BFRs.

Lack of Support Systems

BFRs, especially those not from farming backgrounds, do not have established support systems to lean on when they have questions or need advice. BFR support systems can include family members, technical experts, experienced farmers/ ranchers, mentors, community members, and other BFRs, who can help them feel connected to the community. 12 of 188 (6%) project leaders surveyed said that lacking support systems is a significant challenge for BFRs.

Burnout and Work-Life Balance

Farming/ ranching’s long work hours and everyday stressors can cause BFRs to experience isolation and physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion. Unforeseen weather events, financial losses, breakdown of personal relationships, the stigma around mental health, and economic changes can compound the problem. This challenge is even more relevant for BFRs from marginalized communities. 11 of 188 (6%) project leaders surveyed said burnout is a significant challenge for BFRs.

Access to Agricultural Infrastructure and Facilities

BFRs, primarily those in rural areas, do not have consistent access to processing, storage, transportation, distribution, and equipment repair facilities, which is especially important to those in value-added production. This is a significant barrier for BFRs looking to scale up or grow their businesses.

Lack of Social Services

8 of 188 (4%) project leaders surveyed said that systemic issues like the cost of childcare and healthcare and large student loan debts lead BFRs to move away from careers in farming/ ranching.

Other challenges to BFRs’ long-term success mentioned by project leaders are access to water, inability to compete with corporate farms, lack of production knowledge, low computer literacy, and inadequate risk management.



KEY EDUCATIONAL NEEDS FOR BEGINNING FARMERS AND RANCHERS' SUCCESS

Project leaders surveyed were asked about the key educational needs for the long-term success of BFRs. The following topics with examples were suggested by the 188 survey respondents:

1. Financial and business management and planning (61%)

Business planning; record keeping; accounting; tax planning; investing; profit margin analysis.

2. Markets and marketing (28%)

Accessing direct and wholesale markets; marketing strategies; market readiness; e-commerce; branding; market analysis and trends.

3. Production (23%)

Region- and soil-specific practices; soil science; pest management; organic farming; soil and water conservation; irrigation options; regenerative practices.

4. Land access, tenure, and succession (15%)

Land trusts; heirs property; estate planning; secure land tenure.

5. Accessing capital (13%)

Finding financing; loan and grant applications.

6. Available government programs (12%)

Applying to programs; navigating incentive programs.

7. Communication and decision-making (6%)

Networking; customer service; social media skills

8. Farming/ ranching laws and regulations (5%)

Legal risk management; heirs property laws; regulation compliance; liability.

9. Climate-smart and conservation agricultural practices (5%)

Conservation planning; sustainable cultivation; climate change adaptations; climate-resilient practices.

10. Labor management (5%)

Understanding fair labor laws; finding labor.

Along with recommendations of topics, project leaders also suggested that all educational programs should be culturally responsive, offer personalized assistance, incorporate on-farm and hands-on activities, promote networking, and engage BFRs over multiple years.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been compiled from project leaders' responses to the survey question: "What recommendations, if any, do you have for improving BFRDP?" and observations by the Clearinghouse team.

1. Offer Guidance on Measuring Outcomes

Project leaders consistently expressed a need for additional guidance and support in program evaluation. Some of them pointed out that metrics like "started farming/ ranching," "helped prepare to start farming/ ranching," and "improved farming/ ranching success" were not adequate in capturing the progress made by their participants. To effectively measure "success" for the diversity of BFRDP projects and participants, distinct evaluation designs and methods are required. Therefore, project leaders suggest that tailored evaluation resources and trainings be developed to help them assess the impact of their work.

In 2018, an Educational Enhancement Team project called "Gaining Results through Evaluation Work (GREW): Evaluation Support for Beginning Farmer and Rancher Programs" created evaluation tools, resources, a webinar series, and a learning community to help BFRDP project teams conduct evaluations effectively. These products are available on the GREW website: <https://agroecology.ucsc.edu/education/bfrdp/index.html>. To increase awareness and utilization of these tools, they should be shared regularly on relevant BFRDP listservs, websites, webinars, or other events.

Another challenge that project leaders face has to do with evaluating programs involving farmers/ ranchers. These evaluations present unique challenges like low response rates, low long-term engagement, limited broadband access, resistance to evaluation, language barriers, etc. Establishing best practices to assist project leaders in addressing these challenges will result in improved evaluation and reporting data. Project leaders also noted that many BFRDP project outcomes take years to materialize and can only be measured after the end of the grant term. Projects, therefore, need support, financial and otherwise, to pursue evaluations that measure medium- and long-term outcomes.

2. Promote Engagement and Collaboration Among Grantees

While the annual BFRDP Project Directors' meetings provide grantees with networking opportunities, project leaders express a need for more frequent opportunities to meet with their peers. The benefits of this would be facilitating information exchange and fostering collaborations. Prioritizing this recommendation would enable projects that, for example, operate in the same region or engage similar audiences to coordinate efforts and maximize their impact.

3. Increase Results Verification System Submission Rates

RVS complements REEport and is specifically designed to capture the outreach and educational outcomes of BFRDP projects. Incomplete, inconsistent, or missing RVS reports limit the ability to understand and document BFRDP's impacts. Greater participation in RVS reporting should be fostered by consistently conveying reporting expectations, incentivizing reporting, addressing grantees' concerns around reporting requirements, providing relevant tools, support, and feedback on reports, and demonstrating the use and value of RVS data.

4. Emphasize Farm/ Ranch Financial Viability

An increased emphasis on financial viability is warranted to advance BFRDP's goal of building the next generation of farmers and ranchers to continue agricultural production. Economic viability is the cornerstone for any farm/ ranch operations to stay in business long-term. To ensure that projects serve BFRs who aim to establish financially viable enterprises, the Request for Applications could mandate applicants to outline their strategies for recruiting and assisting these farmers/ ranchers. Moreover, projects should be directed to specifically report their progress in helping participants establish financially viable operations. Introducing a fourth reporting metric, such as "increased operational financial viability," alongside the existing three metrics (started farming/ ranching, helped prepare to start farming/ ranching, and improved farming/ ranching success) can further underscore its significance. If implemented, guidance on defining, measuring, and monitoring financial viability is necessary to assist projects in their applications and reports.

5. Consider Options to Support Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Long-Term

The complexities of establishing and maintaining agricultural operations require substantial time and investment from BFRs before their businesses achieve sustainability. While some projects secure multiple rounds of funding that allow for long-term engagement with BFRs, project leaders report that those who receive three-year grants are limited in their ability to achieve meaningful outcomes. Survey respondents propose that projects demonstrating substantial progress could be allowed to reapply so that they can offer more comprehensive support to their participants. Additionally, including a Request for Application requirement for projects to describe their plan for prompt implementation of their proposals could prioritize projects capable of achieving meaningful progress within the three-year timeframe.

Most new businesses, including farm businesses, fail within their first few years of operation. To deal with this, a new grant type within BFRDP could be introduced to support projects that provide consistent, extended, one-on-one expert support beyond BFRs' first few years of farming/ ranching. The eligibility criteria for this specialized support could require that BFRs have successfully established a financially viable operation with the capacity for scaling up and future growth.



CONCLUSION

This report's findings demonstrate that BFRDP is effectively meeting its primary goal of "helping BFRs in the United States and its territories enter and/or improve their successes in farming, ranching, and management of nonindustrial private forest lands." The program has increased BFRs' access to education, mentoring, and technical assistance by funding a broad range of projects nationwide that offer tailored support and employ different approaches in their programming to diverse audiences. Reported outcomes of these efforts align with the program's overarching goal to increase BFRs' knowledge, skills, and access to tools to help them make informed decisions for their operations. Project reports also provide valuable insights into the factors contributing to project and participant success, serving as a foundation for strengthening future initiatives. Over the years, BFRDP projects have established an expansive repository of tools, resources, and curricula tailored to meet the specific needs of BFRs. By building on this knowledge base, future projects can better position themselves to serve BFRs and ensure sustained success.

In conducting this study, it also becomes apparent that measuring the precise extent to which BFRDP helps BFRs start, continue, and improve their operations is challenging. BFRs continue to face considerable challenges to success, many of which are systemic. BFRs need substantial and long-term access to multiple support systems to address these interrelated systemic challenges. BFRDP effectively addresses one critical barrier to BFRs' success by providing education, mentoring, and technical assistance. While this support is vital, it may not be sufficient to ensure long-term success for BFRs. Along with BFRDP, other initiatives such as FSA Farm Loans, Rural Development grants, microloan programs, and cost-share programs also play an essential role in BFRs' journeys, but without comprehensive data from these programs, it is challenging to identify the patterns that lead to success or failure. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that BFRs' success depends on support from multiple programs, with one key element being the education, mentoring, and technical assistance offered by BFRDP.

The report consolidates and documents key findings from project reports to enhance understanding of BFRDP's accomplishments and underscore its value in sustaining agricultural production in the United States. Continued funding for BFRDP will help build on successes, tackle ongoing challenges, develop more successful farmers/ ranchers, and provide critical ongoing support to BFRs.

APPENDIX A: SECTIONS OF A RESULTS VERIFICATION SYSTEM REPORT

Project Information

- Project title
- Project mailing address
- Project people (Project Director, Co-Project Director, Project Contact)

Progress Notes

A narrative report describing what the project did during the previous year, what was accomplished, and challenges encountered.

Educational Materials

- Title
- Author(s)
- Publisher
- Publication Date
- Abstract

Promotional Materials

- Title or description
- Purpose/audience

Evaluations and Reports

- Title or description
- Public access
- Date
- Comment

Audience Emphasis

- Organic producers
- Specialty crop producers
- Urban producers
- Small farms
- Traditional commercial producersFarmworkers
- Military veterans
- Immigrant producers
- WomenFarmworkers
- Military veterans
- Immigrant producers
- Women
- African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native American
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Limited resource producers

Participants Served

Record the total number of unique participants who participated in your program:

Enter the cumulative number of participants who as a result of your program:

	Target	Actual
Started farming		
Helped prepare to start farming		
Improved farming success		

Results

Proposed result	Topic	Producer action	When measured	Estimated number	Actual number	How verified

Steps

- Steps taken to help participants

Delivery

Meetings

- Date
- City
- State
- Number of attendees
- Meeting length (hours)

Webinars

- Date
- Number of attendees
- Webinar length (hours)

Websites

- Enter the cumulative total number of visits for your project’s website

Online courses

- Enter the cumulative total number of online course participants for this project

Project Summary

- Enter a project summary for your project

Project Comments

- Describe any unexpected results of the project.
- What were the keys to success for your participants?
- How would you improve this project if you were to do it again?

Individual Stories / Examples of Success / Quotes

- Stories, examples or quotes collected that help describe the program’s impact on participants.

APPENDIX B: PROJECT LEADERS SURVEY INSTRUMENT

1. Based on your experience, what are the key educational needs for the long-term success of beginning farmers/ ranchers?

2. What are the most significant challenges to long-term success for beginning farmers/ ranchers?

3. What are the most common reasons some beginning farmers/ ranchers quit farming/ ranching?

4. Approximately how many of your participants:

	0% - 25%	25% to 50%	50% to 75%	75% to 100%	Don't know OR did not measure	Not applicable
a) were already farming/ ranching when they started your project						
b) started farming/ ranching during your project						
c) are currently farming/ ranching						

5. Approximately how many of your participants who started farming/ ranching while in your project:

	Number of participants	Don't know OR did not measure	Not applicable
a) continued farming/ ranching for 3 or more years			
b) continued farming/ ranching for 1-3 years			
d) continued farming/ ranching for 1 year or less			

6. What were the most significant outcomes of your project?

7. Thinking about your project's successes, what specific aspects of your project or organization contributed to these successes?

8. What recommendations, if any, do you have for improving BFRDP?

9. The USDA BFRDP clearinghouse provides resources (like FarmAnswers.org), tools, and information to help farmers succeed. What can the clearinghouse do to better support the delivery of BFRDP projects?

10. The BFRDP Education Teams identify gaps in programming for beginning farmers/ ranchers and the professionals who work with beginning farmers/ ranchers and develop suitable curricula to address these gaps. What, if any, educational gaps would you recommend the Education Teams potentially address?

APPENDIX C: BEGINNING FARMER AND RANCHER SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Are you currently a farmer or rancher?

- Yes
- No

If "Are you currently a farmer or rancher? = No"

For how many years did you farm or ranch before you stopped?

- You never started farming or ranching.
- less than 1 year
- 1 to 3 years
- 4 to 6 years
- 7 to 10 years
- more than 10 years

If "Are you currently a farmer or rancher? = No" and "For how many years did you farm or ranch before you stopped? = less than 1 year or 1 to 3 years or 4 to 6 years or 7 to 10 years or more than 10 years"

Why did you stop farming or ranching?

If "Are you currently a farmer or rancher? = Yes"

How many years have you been farming or ranching?

- less than 1 year
- 1 to 3 years
- 4 to 6 years
- 7 to 10 years
- more than 10 years

If "Are you currently a farmer or rancher? = Yes"

On average, how much of your annual income comes from farming or ranching?

- None
- 25% or less
- 25% to 50%
- 50% to 75%
- 75% to 100%
- Don't know

If “Are you currently a farmer or rancher? = Yes” and “On average, how much of your annual income comes from farming or ranching? = 25% or less or 25% to 50% or 50% to 75% or 75% to 100% or Don’t know”

Records indicate that you participated in or attended a program(s) that was designed to educate, mentor, and/or provide technical assistance to beginning farmers and ranchers. Did your participation in beginning farmer and rancher programs contribute in any way to increasing your farm or ranch profitability?

- Yes
- No
- Don’t know
- You did not participate or do not remember participating in any beginning farmer and rancher programs

If “Are you currently a farmer or rancher? = Yes” and “Records indicate that you participated in or attended a program(s) that was designed to educate, mentor, and/or provide technical assistance to beginning farmers and ranchers. Did your participation in beginning farmer and rancher programs contribute in any way to increasing your farm or ranch profitability? = Yes”

How much did your farm or ranch profits increase as a result of your participation in beginning farmer and rancher programs?

- 10% or less
- 10% to 20%
- 20% to 30%
- 30% to 40%
- 40% to 50%
- more than 50%
- Don’t know

If “Are you currently a farmer or rancher? = Yes” and “Records indicate that you participated in or attended a program(s) that was designed to educate, mentor, and/or provide technical assistance to beginning farmers and ranchers. Did your participation in beginning farmer and rancher programs contribute in any way to increasing your farm or ranch profitability? = Yes or No or Don’t know”

To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements?

Your participation in beginning farmer and rancher programs:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don’t know/ Not applicable
a. helped you start farming or ranching						
b. helped you continue farming or ranching						
c. helped you expand your farming or ranching operation						
d. gave you the knowledge, skills, or tools needed to make informed decisions about your farming or ranching operation						
e. improved your success in farming or ranching						

If “Are you currently a farmer or rancher? = Yes”

What do you produce? (Select all that apply)

- a. Livestock (cattle, sheep, goats, etc.)
- b. Poultry (chicken, turkey, etc.)
- c. Field crops (corn, soybean, wheat, rice, hemp, etc.)
- d. Specialty crops or horticulture (fruits, vegetables, nuts, flowers, nursery plants, etc.)
- e. Aquaponics, aquaculture, or hydroponics
- f. Other; please specify:

If “Are you currently a farmer or rancher? = Yes” and “What do you produce? = Livestock or Poultry or Field crops or Specialty crops or horticulture or Aquaponics, aquaculture, or hydroponics”

Approximately, what is the size of your farming or ranching operation?

- Number or head of livestock
- Number or head of poultry
- Field crops in acres
- Specialty crops or horticulture in acres
- OR Specialty crops or horticulture in sq. ft.
- Aquaponics, aquaculture, or hydroponics in pounds per year

If “For how many years did you farm or ranch before you stopped? ≠ You never started farming or ranching.

Thinking back to when you started farming or ranching, what is the one tool, resource, or piece of information you would have found most useful in managing your operation?

In which state(s) or territories do you/ did you primarily farm or ranch? (Select all that apply)

Alabama
Alaska
American Samoa
Arizona
Arkansas
California
Colorado
Connecticut
Delaware
District of Columbia
Florida
Georgia
Guam
Hawaii
Idaho
Illinois
Indiana
Iowa
Kansas
Kentucky
Louisiana
Maine
Maryland
Massachusetts
Michigan
Minnesota
Mississippi
Missouri
Montana
Nebraska
Nevada
New Hampshire
New Jersey
New Mexico
New York
North Carolina
North Dakota
Northern Marina Islands
Ohio

Oklahoma
Oregon
Pennsylvania
Puerto Rico
Rhode Island
South Carolina
South Dakota
Tennessee
Texas
U. S. Virgin Islands
Utah
Vermont
Virginia
Washington
West Virginia
Wisconsin
Wyoming
Other; please specify

Your age (in years)

- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 and over

Your gender:

- Male
- Female
- Prefer to self-describe
- Prefer not to answer

Which category best describes you? (Select all that apply)

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin
- Middle Eastern or North African
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other race, ethnicity, or origin; please specify
- Prefer to self-describe
- Prefer not to answer

If you have any other comments about your participation in beginning farmer and rancher programs, please mention them here:

APPENDIX D: BEGINNING FARMER AND RANCHER SURVEY SUMMARY DATA

Are you currently a farmer or rancher? (n=944)

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	691	73.2%
No	253	26.8%

For how many years did you farm or ranch before you stopped? (n=253)

	Frequency	Percent
You never started farming or ranching	177	70%
less than 1 year	16	6.3%
1 to 3 years	26	10.3%
4 to 6 years	15	5.9%
7 to 10 years	13	5.1%
more than 10 years	6	2.4%

How many years have you been farming or ranching? (n=690)

	Frequency	Percent
less than 1 year	85	12.3%
1 to 3 years	237	34.3%
4 to 6 years	173	25.1%
7 to 10 years	87	12.6%

On average, how much of your annual income comes from farming or ranching? (n=689)

	Frequency	Percent
None	187	27.1%
25% or less	277	40.2%
25% to 50%	42	6.1%
50% to 75%	46	6.7%
75% to 100%	113	16.4%
Don't know	24	3.5%

Records indicate that you participated in or attended a program(s) that was designed to educate, mentor, and/or provide technical assistance to beginning farmers and ranchers. Did your participation in beginning farmer and rancher programs contribute in any way to increasing your farm or ranch profitability? (n=493)

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	354	71.8%
No	44	8.9%
Don't know	69	14.0%
You did not participate or do not remember participating in any beginning farmer and rancher programs	26	5.3%

How much did your farm or ranch profits increase as a result of your participation in beginning farmer and rancher programs? (n=345)

	Frequency	Percent
10% or less	59	17.1%
10% to 20%	70	20.3%
20% to 30%	52	15.1%
30% to 40%	16	4.6%
40% to 50%	13	3.8%
more than 50%	43	12.5%
Don't know	92	26.7%

To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements?
Your participation in beginning farmer and rancher programs...

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know/ Not applicable
a. helped you start farming or ranching (n=627)	37 (5.9%)	58 (9.3%)	101 (16.1%)	147 (23.4%)	233 (37.2%)	51 (8.1%)
b. helped you continue farming or ranching (n=623)	29 (4.7%)	19 (3%)	44 (7.1%)	222 (35.6%)	272 (43.7%)	37 (5.9%)
c. helped you expand your farming or ranching operation (n=620)	27 (4.4%)	19 (3.1%)	98 (15.8%)	184 (29.7%)	240 (38.7%)	52 (8.4%)
d. gave you the knowledge, skills, or tools needed to make informed decisions about your farming or ranching operation (n=624)	29 (4.6%)	9 (1.4%)	30 (4.8%)	180 (28.8%)	362 (58%)	14 (2.2%)
e. improved your success in farming or ranching (n=621)	30 (4.8%)	8 (1.3%)	60 (9.7%)	214 (34.5%)	289 (46.5%)	20 (3.2%)

What do you produce? (Select all that apply)

	Frequency
Livestock	196
Poultry	148
Field crops	131
Specialty crops or horticulture	453
Aquaponics, aquaculture, or hydroponics	44
Other	110

Approximately, what is the size of your farming or ranching operation?

	Sum	Average	Maximum	Minimum	Median
Number or head of livestock	17877	132.8	5000	1	30
Number or head of poultry	24563	481.6	5000	4	41
Field crops in acres	26678.3	416.8	4500	0.01	32
Specialty crops or horticulture in acres	2298.8	23.5	118	0.02	2.0
Specialty crops or horticulture in sq. ft.	435501.3	6133.8	43560	0.0625	1800
Aquaponics, aquaculture, or hydroponics in pounds per year	50560	3160	13000	60	700

In which state(s) or territories do you/ did you primarily farm or ranch? (Select all that apply)

State	Frequency
Alabama	4
Arizona	1
Arkansas	5
California	5
Colorado	23
Connecticut	85
Delaware	3
District of Columbia	7
Florida	29
Georgia	2
Guam	23
Hawaii	53
Idaho	1
Illinois	25
Indiana	2
Iowa	8
Kansas	4
Kentucky	30

Louisiana	4
Maine	21
Maryland	89
Massachusetts	10
Michigan	30
Minnesota	24
Mississippi	22
Missouri	31
Montana	3
Nebraska	4
New Hampshire	3
New Jersey	7
New Mexico	5
New York	7
North Carolina	22
North Dakota	2
Northern Mariana Islands	1
Ohio	47
Oklahoma	1
Oregon	1
Pennsylvania	4
Puerto Rico	50
Rhode Island	1
South Carolina	51
South Dakota	14
Tennessee	21
Texas	37
Utah	2
Vermont	3
Virginia	9
Washington	11
West Virginia	2
Wisconsin	30
Wyoming	5
Other	19

Your age (in years) (n=863)

	Frequency	Percent
18-24	21	2.4%
25-34	156	18.1%
35-44	223	25.8%
45-54	195	22.6%
55-64	149	17.3%
65 and over	119	13.8%

Your gender (n=857)

	Frequency	Percent
Female	481	56.1%
Male	348	40.6%
Prefer to self-describe	10	1.2%
Prefer not to answer	18	2.1%

Which category best describes you? (Select all that apply)

	Frequency
American Indian or Alaskan Native	21
Asian	26
Black or African American	147
Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin	119
Middle Eastern or North African	2
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	26
White	514
Other race, ethnicity, or origin	26
Prefer to self-describe	11
Prefer not to answer	37

APPENDIX E: DATA QUALITY AND AVAILABILITY ISSUES

RVS DATA: Of the 261 BFRDP Standard projects funded between 2016 and 2021, only 159 projects reported data in RVS. In cases where final project reports were unavailable, the most recently submitted progress reports were used in the analysis. Of the 159 reports analyzed, 130 were final, and 29 were progress reports. Annual progress reports likely do not reflect the complete project data. In the case of 2021 projects, only progress reports are available for the three-year Standard projects since the final reporting deadline has yet to be reached. Not all projects completed every section of their RVS reports; in some cases, incomplete reports were submitted, impacting data availability. RVS data was not reviewed for accuracy. Other than excluding outliers from some analyses, the data was used as reported. As a result, there is a possibility of inaccuracies in the data.

SURVEY OF PROJECT LEADERS: One challenge encountered during this survey distribution was that some project leaders' contact information was outdated or inaccurate. Some project leaders were no longer working at the organizations involved with BFRDP or had changed their email addresses. In some instances, many years had passed between when project leaders worked on BFRDP projects and when they received the survey, which could have impacted data accuracy and the response rate. Regarding 2021 projects, project leaders did not have access to some of the data required to complete the survey since their projects are ongoing.

FARMER AND RANCHER SURVEY: Since this survey was distributed through Project Directors (and not through Qualtrics), there is no record of the number of recipients. This also meant that non-respondents could not be sent targeted reminders, which is known to impact response rates. Since the survey had to be completed online, it was only accessible to farmers and ranchers with broadband access and to technologically savvy people, limiting survey participation. It is established that many farmers and ranchers do not have reliable internet access, so they might not have received or been able to complete the survey. Accurate and updated farmer and rancher contact information is extremely hard to maintain, which presents a major hurdle to survey distribution. Drawing from their experience, Project Directors shared that surveys (particularly online) were ineffective in engaging participants. Some Project Directors might have hesitated to share the survey due to concerns about survey fatigue or because they had not engaged participants for an extended period. Finally, farmers and ranchers who participated in BFRDP projects many years before receiving the survey might not have recollected their experience or been motivated to respond. Given these apparent flaws, the report uses data from this survey sparingly. However, summary statistics are presented in Appendix D for reference.

APPENDIX F: RESULTS VERIFICATION SYSTEM SUMMARY DATA

TABLE 1: EDUCATIONAL TOPICS

Risk Area	Number of Projects
Business Management	139
Production	123
People	90
Marketing	76
Legal	38

Business Management Topic	Number of Projects
Business and strategic planning	117
Access to land	56
Financial records and analysis	51
Cost of production and farm financial benchmarking	29
Acquiring and managing credit	23
Asset management, including leasing and renting	21
Value-added enterprises	19
Economics of input decisions	11

TABLE 1 (continued)

Production Topic	Number of Projects
Product and enterprise diversification	53
Organic production	47
Vegetables	38
Soil management	28
Livestock	27
Conservation	26
Urban farming	24
Pest, weed, and disease management	24
Field Crops	17
Water management	17
Economic risk of new technologies	7
Pasture / Rangeland	7
Trees-Ornamentals	5
Fruit-Nuts	5
Insurance products	4
Agri-tourism	2

People Topic	Number of Projects
Mentoring, apprenticeships, and internships	60
Interpersonal, family, and business relationships	33
Labor supply, recruitment, and retention	14
Health, stress, and well being	13
Employee management and communication	12
Transferring the farm	11
Farm safety	7

Marketing Topic	Number of Projects
Marketing plans and strategies	61
Local, regional, and direct marketing	43
Branded, certified, or identity preserved marketing	12
Analysis of market fundamentals	9
Contract production	2

TABLE 1 (continued)

Legal Topic	Number of Projects
Federal and state farm programs	21
Food safety liability	15
Contracts and leases	9
Personal and business liability	6
Labor regulations	2
Environmental regulations	2

TABLE 2: PRODUCER ACTIONS

Producer Action	Number of Projects
Understand	143
Implement	111
Develop	90
Decide	69

TABLE 3: AUDIENCE EMPHASIS

Audience	Number of Projects
Small farms	122
Limited resource producers	100
Women	90
Specialty crop producers	87
Military veterans	68
Organic producers	61
Urban producers	51
Hispanic or Latino	49
African American	47
Immigrant producers	43
Farmworkers	30
Native American	27
Asian or Pacific Islander	21
Traditional commercial producers	21

Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program

Findings from 2016-2021 project reports

JANUARY 2024

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