

Beginning Farmer Learning Network Meeting

March 8, 2013

Voorheesville, NY

ROUNDTABLE SESSION: FULL-SERVICE APPROACHES TO NEW FARMER TRAINING

Panelists: Beth Holtzman (VT New Farmer Network) and Sara Runkel (The Seed Farm)

Sara Runkel – The Seed Farm

→ 501 (c) 3

→ Initiated by county of Lehigh, PA

→ Mission: start/grow new sustainable farm businesses/farmers, support growth of local food system

→ Grew out of Lehigh County Farmland Preservation Program – operates on Lehigh County Land

→ Idea is to support the next generation of farmers (88% of today's farmers did not grow up on farms)

Programs

- New Farmer Training Program
- Farm Business Incubator Program
- Specialized equipment demonstrations for vegetable production (on all scales) – part of and funding by a BFRDP grant

Site

- 40+ acres, 2 ponds, only 20 tillable acres (projected 5-6 farms on site)
- Lots of site improvements
 - Well, electric, parking lot, greenhouse, pole building, covered washing/packing area, walk-in cooler (funded largely by County)

NEW FARMER TRAINING PROGRAM

→ Management and equipment training targeted to people with production experience (at least 1 full season)

→ Part-time, March through November

→ Participants pay for program (as of last year) – people who invest are more likely to take it seriously

→ Targeted and hands-on

→ Goal – to move them into the Incubator Program or onto their own farms

→ 600 hours in the field and 100 hours in the classroom (or 16 hours/week and 4 hours/week)

→ Lots of equipment and tractor training

→ FOCUS IS ON MANAGEMENT

OFF-FARM:

- Penn State classes (exploring the small farm dream, introduction to vegetable production, planning the small farm)
- Farm visits
- PASA workshops
- Other Extension classes

ON-FARM:

- Soil fertility management
- Disease/pest management
- Weed management
- Crop and business planning
- Marketing – harvest and post-harvest handling
- Decision making skills
- Equipment use and tractor maintenance
- Tractor safety
- Etc.

→ Crop project – each participant chooses a crop group and is responsible for that crop (developing crop plan, purchasing seed, management, etc.)

→ Management areas – each participant is responsible for a management area, more on the infrastructure level (irrigation, high tunnels, greenhouse, farmers market, compost, cover crops, wholesale)

Trainee Evaluation/Measuring Progress

→ Pre-season and post-season survey with 10 core areas and 10 skills within each core area (helps get a sense of where they are before and after, and gives participants a sense of what will be covered)

INCUBATOR PROGRAM

→ Goal – to start new farms, overcome land/infrastructure constraints (not currently addressing access to capital)

→ About 5 participants in program each year

→ On-going mentoring

→ Pay out for land, tractors rented by the hour (year 1-3 is subsidized, year 3-4 is closer to market rate to give participants an idea of real costs)

After the Seed Farm

→ 70% of participants have pursued careers in agriculture

Challenges

→ Transitioning people out of incubator program

→ Filling spots in the incubator program/apprentice recruitment

- Looking to partner with other farmer training programs to recruit their trainees
- Audience is limited as a non-residential, part-time program (almost all participants also work part or full-time)
- Audience limited because focus is on Lehigh County (though people do travel for the program)

→ Funding and fundraising

- Need to tap into private donors

- Need to make more financially self-sustaining (i.e. charge fees for programs)
- As of last year, charging fee for programs – on a sliding-scale, scholarships available (ideally for most if necessary)

Other Notes

→ Audience – ages 23 to mid-50s, but mostly late 20s to early 30s (mostly 1st career choice)

→ Long-term goal – to be a model to be adapted (an example of great collaboration between the county, extension, and a non-profit)