

Outreach and Technical Assistance Program for Strengthening Capacity of Virginia's Limited Resource Farm Producers (LRFP): Implications for Knowledge and Practice in Agriculture

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Summary of Program

This was a capacity-building program funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and awarded to the College of Agriculture at Virginia State University (VSU)—one of Virginia's two land grant institutions¹, and the current author is the Principal Investigator/Project Director of the program. Its implementation was originally scheduled to run for three years from August 2012 to August 2015, but was extended for an additional one year through August 2016. The implementation was done in partnership with the various academic, research and extension units of VSU, including Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE)², in collaboration with several USDA agencies—particularly Farm Service Agency (FSA) and National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). In addition to its primary goal aimed at improving the under-representation of minority farmers in USDA agricultural opportunities, the program also required that VSU students majoring in agriculture be directly involved in program-related hands-on and skill-building activities—for the purpose of preparing Virginia's young-generation workforce for the entrepreneurial and workforce needs of twenty-first century American agricultural industry.

Goals and Activities

The outreach and technical assistance program addressed service delivery gaps suffered by Virginia's minority farmers and land-owners, primarily the Limited Resource Farm Producers (LRFPs)³. Its goal and activities were directed at rectifying the anomaly of LRFP poor participation rate in USDA agricultural programs and opportunities, and recommending strategies for increasing their participation. Along this line of goal, the following objectives were: highlighted: [1] conduct outreach activities for the purpose of gathering and analyzing information on LRFPs—helpful for understanding important characteristics and attributes pertaining to the audience; [2] investigate underlying factors responsible for the poor participation rate of LRFPs in USDA agricultural programs and develop outreach strategies for

¹The two land-grant institutions in the State of Virginia are Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University and Virginia State University.

²VCE an educational outreach program of Virginia's land-grant universities—Virginia Tech and Virginia State University—and a part of the National Institute for Food and Agriculture. Through the platform, the two universities in collaboration with NIFA and other national and state agencies, collaborate together and mobilize resources for addressing food security and other related needs facing the State of Virginia.

³According to the USDA (see following website: http://lrftool.sc.egov.usda.gov/LRP_Definition.aspx), a Limited Resource Farmer or Rancher or Forest Owner is: (1) "A person with direct or indirect gross farm sales not more than \$173,600 (for FY2016) in each of the previous two years; AND (2) "A person with a total household income at or below the national poverty level for a family of four or less than 50 percent of county median household income in each of the previous two years".

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rectifying the anomaly; [3] equip LRFPs with requisite skills needed for acquiring and running farm enterprises on a profitable basis; [4] train and enhance the ability of LRFPs to implement profitable alternative enterprises and environmentally sound production practices; [5] improve the knowledge and skills of LRFPs in food safety and value-added product development practices.

Program implementation involved a broad mix of training, outreach and technical assistance activities that included the following: surveys; data analysis; farm production and financial record-keeping workshops; farm conferences; one-on-one home and farm visits; on-site farm demonstrations and field days; computer literacy workshops; other training activities directed at improving farmers' technical competency in farm production, management, financial accounting, and marketing. Efforts were also directed at educating and incentivizing non-active land-owners to re-direct idle farmlands back into production uses—either through community garden projects or state-sponsored farmland preservation programs.

Target Population

The target farming population consisted of LRFPs and other minority farmers and landowners spread across 20 counties in south-central, south-western, south-eastern, and eastern regions of Virginia. It consisted of about 1,500 socially disadvantaged and underserved farmers and ranchers—a population that was included, based on their disproportionate representation in USDA agricultural programs and opportunities. While nine are located in south-central, the remaining eleven are spread across the eastern and other southern regions of the state. With an average unemployment rate ranging between 7.3 and 8.8⁴ percentages (except for a lower 6 percent in the eastern region), unemployment rate in the project area is well above Virginia's and U.S. national respective averages of 3.7 and 4.9 percentages⁵. In view of its unstable demographic and economic landscape and the negative impact of anti-smoking legislation on tobacco trade, the region is located in the epicenter of Virginia's worst unemployment crisis and rural-urban youth emigration. The demographic population of the region's LRFPs falls within the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) age bracket of 65 years and older⁶—an underlying demographic trend caused by the increase in the number of aging farmer-producers at a time of simultaneous decline in the number of younger generation entering into agricultural workforce. The generational decline in the farming workforce can be rationalized along the line of changing generational perception about farming and cultural shift affecting youth reluctance to seek opportunities in farming. Most of the farmers are retired landowners and tobacco farmers, who in the past, made a living from tobacco either through direct sales or land rentals and who upon finalization of government-negotiated tobacco buyout and settlement arrangement, withdrew their lands from active farming. Notwithstanding though, that many of the region's landowners have retired from active farming, their ownership of vast arable farmlands continue to represent a huge potential of underutilized opportunities for immediate and extended families who could be trained in asset transfer and farm management skills—needed for putting the idle farm estates back into active farming.

Program's Accomplishment

The following were accomplished under the program's stated goals:

1. *Conduct outreach activities in the project area for the purpose of gathering and analyzing information on the target audience, helpful for understanding important characteristics and attributes pertaining to the target audience:*
 - In the course of program implementation, outreach events were conducted to investigate the poor participation rate of LRFPs in USDA agricultural programs and opportunities. The outreach primarily consisted of one-on-one and group surveys, gathered through farm and home visits and conferences.
2. *Investigate underlying factors responsible for the poor participation rate of target audience in USDA agricultural programs and develop outreach strategies of technical assistance helpful for rectifying the anomaly:*

⁴Virginia Local Market Information (www.VirginiaLMI.com) Community Profile, Virginia Employment Commission Local Area Unemployment Statistics, page 13.

⁵US Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov)

⁶Mary Ahearn and David Newton, Beginning Farmers and Ranchers, USDA Report from Economic Research Service (www.ers.usda.gov), Economic Information Bulletin No. 53, May 2009. Page 17.

- Surveys gathered, provided useful data for investigating the anomaly of LRFP underrepresentation in USDA agricultural programs and opportunities. Analysis of the data identified the following as possible causes for LRFP farmers' under-representation in USDA agricultural programs: historical distrust of government stemming from past years of discrimination; poor education suffered by LRFPS affecting their ability to participate effectively in USDA programs; lack of qualified/experienced USDA liaison personnel that could help bridge the historical mistrust gap between USDA agencies and minority farmers and who understood LRFP cultural concerns; the continuing perception by many LRFPS that USDA educational workshops are routine exercises merely staged for political and data-collection purposes and not so much for the genuine purpose of addressing LRFP concerns. Other elaborate details pertaining to the study were presented at the 2016 conference of Society for Advancement of Management (SAM), held at Arlington, Virginia (April 7-10), and have been published in SAM 2016 conference proceedings.
- 3. *Equip target audience with the requisite skills needed for acquiring and running farm enterprises on a profitable basis:*
 - In collaboration with USDA agencies, training events were conducted for the purpose of training farm producers in requisite skills needed for acquiring and running farm enterprises on a profitable basis. They included computer training workshops, community gardens, and other workshops addressing a variety of topics, including the following: farm ownership and asset transfer; financial management and accounting strategies; market diversification and penetration strategies; production and management strategies (i.e. high tunnel design and construction, forest management, pasture management, strategies for small ruminant farming, etc.). Producers were also trained in 43,560 (square foot) gardening/demonstration project—a VSU-pioneered farm-cultivation procedure that demonstrate and train farmers on farm intensification strategies for grossing \$1.00 farm revenue per every square footage of farm acre.
- 4. *Train and enhance the ability of the target audience to implement profitable alternative enterprises and environmentally sound production practices:*
 - In the course of the program, VSU Small Farm Outreach agents conducted on-farm demonstrations across the project area on the production of high-value alternative enterprises and provided technical assistance in various alternative agriculture specialty areas. Participants were trained in environmentally sound production practices for improving productivity, reducing costs, and boosting profit margins. They also received hands-on training in selecting alternative crops and livestock species. The enterprise selection training workshops covered a wide range of specialty crops and livestock, including organic crops and livestock production, aquaculture, small ruminant (meat goat) production, and pastured poultry production. Other specialty crop-types highlighted in the workshops include high-tunnel production systems, fresh vegetable production, energy crop production, berry production, agri-tourism, spices, and herbs.
- 5. *Improve the knowledge and skills of the target audience in food safety and value-added product development:*
 - In the course of the program, numerous workshops were hosted and farmers were trained in food safety and value-added product development strategies. The workshops covered a range of diverse issues, and included good agricultural practices certification, nutrient management, and value-added marketing strategies. The trainings were done in collaboration with value-added product development experts from VCE, USDA, and representatives of the local farming community with hands-on experience in value-added product development strategies.

Implications for Knowledge and Agricultural Practice

The program has extensive implications for knowledge and practice in agriculture. Among them, the following:

1. The results are instrumental in helping to better understand the reasons for the continuing under-representation of minority farmers and landowners in USDA agricultural programs, and will be useful in helping to strategize policies for addressing, and hopefully, correcting the behavior. A succinct summary of the results is provided under program's accomplishments, narrated above. They were presented at 2016 SAM conference and will be published in the proceedings of the conference.
2. As part of the program's goals, aimed at training Virginia's agricultural landowners and families in food sufficiency and nutritional adequacy strategies, several community garden projects were launched or implemented through the program. The projects are

in different stages of operation and it is envisioned that they will grow beyond the initial four-year funding period and will continue to provide a training and learning support platform for food production and income support needs in farming communities across Virginia for years to come. Participants (both full-time and part-time farmers/land-owners) were trained in food-production, crop-cultivation, and market diversification/penetration strategies, and were actively involved in experiential-learning field days from which they acquired sufficient skills necessary for replicating the concepts they had learned in other farming communities across Virginia.

3. Through the program, Virginia youth, particularly students majoring in agribusiness and other agricultural disciplines were provided opportunities to participate in projects that fostered hands-on and technical skills in farm management and agribusiness ownership. The effort is instrumental in helping to prepare the state's future agricultural workforce for farm ownership and management needs facing twenty-first century agriculture both at state and national levels.
4. As a result of the program, more farmers from Virginia acquired entrepreneurial and technical skills for running their enterprises on a more profitable basis. They received trainings in electronic accounting, book-keeping methods, and financial literacy improvement strategies. By participating, they also improved their eligibility for USDA funding and grant programs. Given the knowledge improvement benefited from the program, it is expected that agricultural bankruptcy and farm failures in rural Virginia will be reduced, and generally, there will be an increase in the number of farmers that run their operations on a more sustainable, profitable basis.
5. Through the program, Virginia's farmers received additional trainings in market diversification and market penetration strategies, necessary for accomplishing its regional goals in food security and nutritional adequacy. In recent times, trainings in market diversification strategies have become an important part of Virginia's food security and nutritional adequacy program—given the increasing diversification trend in the ethnic make-up of the state's population, which is rapidly shifting in favor of its minority ethnic groups, particularly, its Hispanic and Asian immigrants.
6. The program also provided an important platform for training Virginia farmers in strategies for penetrating rural areas that are included in the state's food-desert program, and thus helped to increase the access of rural residents to needed supply of fresh grocery and fresh produce. Considering the hands-on emphasis and successful outcome of trainings provided through the program, it is envisioned that the 45,360 (square-foot) community gardening projects implemented through the program will become community-styled prototypes that will be replicated across food deserts in countryside Virginia.

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4. US Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov).
5. Virginia Local Market Information (www.VirginiaLMI.com), Community Profile, Virginia Employment Commission 3. Local Area Unemployment Statistics, page 13.