

LOCAL FARMER NETWORKS: AN OVERVIEW OF COMMON ACTIVITIES

Before you begin, evaluate what you and your group of farmers want from a local network.

Organizing a network usually means a degree of extra work, but often the benefits from participating in a local network outweigh the costs. So what are the benefits you're looking to gain? To help you think about this question, take a look at this [Goals x Activities Matrix](#).

Below is a brief guide to some of the kinds of activities that farmer networks might take on. This list is not meant to be exhaustive or definitive, but a brief overview of some of the most common activities. Each activity has slightly different goals, benefits, and level organization required.

As you read, consider on your own and with fellow farmers:

- What are some of the obstacles (big and small) that face farmers in our area?
- Where is there room for cooperation that will lead to mutual benefit?

SOCIAL AND INFORMAL NETWORKS

Example: Calling neighboring farmers for advice; a group of farmers takes turns hosting potlucks

Many farmers have found it valuable to have a group of other farmers that they could call on for advice on topics ranging from weed and pest control to equipment to record keeping. This could be a very loose ad hoc network, based on one-on-one interactions, or it could be more organized, maybe with an online list-serve, or a directory or phone tree for everyone to keep in touch.

Hosting a farmer potluck can be a good way to get farmers together. Potlucks are an opportunity to have fun, relax, and enjoy the fruits of your labors (literally!). Additionally, it can turn into a time to swap information and tips that can help your farm run more smoothly.

Benefits

- You can learn from the successes (and mistakes) of others.
- This information is likely to save you time and money.
- It is informal, flexible, and dynamic. There is no expectation of a certain level of participation, and farmers can give or get as much out of it as they want.
- Farmers say they gain an important sense of community and mutual support
- It can be a source of fun and inspiration.
- Having a social network makes it easier to coordinate CNG inspections

Tips/Things to keep in mind

- Take the initiative, start talking! Communication is essential.
- Email is often the easiest way to keep in touch, but be sure to reach out and include the folks who rely more on the phone or face to face interactions.
- Don't be afraid to talk with farmers that have slightly or even quite different production practices than you. Many solutions and approaches to problem-solving can be transferable.

EDUCATIONAL NETWORKS

Examples: Farm tours, seminars, workshops, discussion groups, conferences

Organized educational activities can be good opportunities for growers to learn new information and concepts, and gain new skills. Activities could include on-farm tours, presentations from local experts on specific topics, round-table discussion groups, and/or conferences. Some models, such as the Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training (CRAFT), focus specifically on providing additional training for farm apprentices or new farmers. Topics can range from soil fertility to equipment selection to administrative tools and business management.

Benefits

- You can gain knowledge that will save you time and money.
- You can learn from the mistakes of others: “Networking with other farmers is key to success, especially because beginning farmers can learn from the mistakes of others — although they should expect to make plenty of their own.” From Tom Larson, SARE profile.
- Educational events can be great networking opportunities; contacts made here can become the basis for new business relationships or other forms of cooperation.
- When experienced growers share their knowledge, it contributes to the viability of new farmers.
- All of this helps to strengthen the sustainable farming movement, promotes local food security, and contributes to a sense of community.

Things to Consider

- This will likely require some investment of time and/or money. Consider: Is there a way these costs can be shared? How much can I invest?
- Talk to the relevant state and local agencies and local agriculture groups in your area (Extension, NRCS, etc.). You maybe be able to get their help to organize, publicize, or fund presentations.
- If you're leading a farm tour, don't be afraid to talk about things that you've tried that have *not* gone well. This can be even more valuable learning opportunities than the successes. Furthermore, this could be a chance for you to get advice from others and do some group problem-solving.
- Get together in the slow-season to plan the events for the rest of the season.
- Many growers combine potlucks with formal educational activities, to make them informative as well as fun and sociable.
- Consider how to balance inclusivity and focus. How do you and other farmers want to focus your group: CNG and organic growers? Any farm in the area? Only vegetable operations or livestock too? Depending on your scale and style of production, there may be more to learn from/share with a conventional farm than an organic backyard gardener OR the other way round.
- Try to get both new and established growers involved. New farmers bring fresh energy and may have new ways of approaching problems, while established growers have time-tested experience to share.

JOINT-PURCHASING

Example: Three farms combine their orders for potting soil and seed potatoes.

Transportation costs for things like soil amendments, animal feed, cover crop seeds, and other supplies can be enormous. Sometimes they are as much or even more than the cost of the order itself. In addition, suppliers often offer a better price per unit for larger volume orders. So there can be a big financial benefit to placing multi-farm orders. Usually, one person must volunteer to collect everyone's orders, be the contact person for the supplier, and serve as the delivery and pick up site. Communication and timeliness is essential for it to run smoothly.

Benefits

- Often, you can get a better price per unit when you order in larger volumes.
- Delivery costs are reduced.
- Everyone benefits.

Things to Consider

- Keep in mind that the person coordinating the order is taking on some extra work. Make sure that person has the time and skills to do it well. Decide if some compensation (for example, bartering services or giving them a larger percentage of the cost savings) is appropriate.
- Participating farmers should take special care to be on time with their orders, if they're not they can hold up the process for everyone.
- Check and re-check your order before it is finalized, to avoid miscommunication and mistakes.

BARTERING SERVICES OR EQUIPMENT

Example: A farmer swaps extra greenhouse space in exchange for the use of the neighbor's potato digger

Having certain skills, infrastructure, and equipment can go a long way in improving farm efficiency and productivity. But it's hard and often cost-prohibitive for farmers to own all the infrastructure and tools they could use. Bartering services, tools, and equipment from neighbors is a way for farmers to have access to these time-savers, without having to buy everything up front. For example, a small grower might get a neighbor with a tractor to do the first plowing in spring in exchange for a share of the vegetables; or a pair of young farmers might volunteer to do some tomato trellising on their neighbors farm in exchange for the use of some equipment. The possibilities are limitless!

Benefits

- Bartering can be particularly beneficial for beginning or smaller farmers, who might not have the capital to invest in large equipment or infrastructure projects.
- Interactions can be dynamic and flexible, negotiated on an as needed basis or develop into a regular understanding.
- Barter agreements are often made easier by having an established social relationship already.

Things to Consider

- Make sure the trade is mutually-beneficial.
- Communication and having a clear understanding of expectations is very important.
- When lending equipment, discuss what the understanding is if an implement is damaged while it's being borrowed.

STARTING A NEW MARKET

Example: Starting the first winter market in your area

If demand exists, new farmers market can be an added source of revenue for multiple producers. This could be the first one in the region or perhaps at a new location or time during the week. As the demand for local foods has increased in the last several years, some farmers have found that winter markets, online markets, and local food storefronts have also been good channels to reach consumers. Sometimes farm enterprises that already have an on-farm store will stock products from other local farms in addition to their own.

Benefits

- Having several different products and vendors available in one place is a bigger draw for customers.
- It capitalizes on the heightened consumer awareness of locally and sustainably produced food.
- Provides new revenue. Some farmers have reported that sales at new winter markets were 2-5 times higher than from regular summer markets.

Things to Consider

- Before beginning, conduct market research try to ensure that there is sufficient consumer demand to support a new market
- Running a market requires significant amount of organization as well as time and money investments. Hiring market staff may be necessary.
- Make sure that you understand permitting process in your area, the fees that might be involved, and the insurance necessary. There are many resources available on this topic.

POOLING PRODUCTS

Example: A fruit farmer and a vegetable farmer team up to supply a single CSA; three small farms pool their heirloom tomatoes to offer a larger volume to the local health food store.

Two of the biggest hurdles for small farms that want to supply restaurants, institutions, or natural food stores are limited quantity or limited variety. Pooling products can be a way for small farms to gain access to these and other marketing channels. It takes some coordinating, but opening new markets can make it worthwhile.

Benefits

- Offering a greater variety of products may attract new customers and accounts.
- By offering a larger volume small farms can access larger accounts.
- It can save time and money by reducing the transaction costs for things like transportation, taking orders, and organizing the deliveries.
- From the perspective of a buyer for restaurants or health food stores, it's much more attractive to coordinate with one point person that can organize a larger volume order, instead of several smaller-volume producers.

Things to Consider

- Organizing this can take up a fair bit of time and running around. Make sure that whoever is coordinating the orders knows what they are getting into, has the time and the skills to do it effectively, and that they are compensated adequately.

COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH NETWORK

Example: Together five farmers choose 8 varieties of potatoes to grow and each keeps records on growing conditions, yield, and taste to find the best varieties.

It's clear that there is a need for agricultural research that is focused on small-scale sustainable farming, and that addresses local challenges. In response, some farmers have formed groups to coordinate and conduct randomized and replicated trials on topics ranging from crop varieties to soil amendments to cover crops to pasture management practices.

Benefits

- Farmers can gain insights that can save time and money, and allow them to achieve higher yields.
- Share the burden of conducting the research with other farmers: “If you don’t make mistakes, you’re not trying hard enough,” he says. “I just don’t like to make big, ugly, expensive ones. We take the tactic of trying very small-scale experiments and keeping track of the results.” Tom Larson, SARE profiles
- Get more accurate results by spreading the trials out over several farms.
- By sharing your results you can improve farm viability for everyone.
- This approach fills the need for rigorous research that is relevant to sustainable farming, and applicable to your local conditions.

Things to consider

- As a group, this requires a fair amount of careful design and planning, be sure that you and your group are prepared to take that on. It can be very useful to consult with academic researchers, especially during the experimental design phase.
- For the individuals conducting the trials, make sure everyone shares the same understanding of the procedures and what the expectations are.
- How will you share your findings with others, maybe through hosting field days, give a presentation at a conference, or simply talking with other farmers in your area?
- Would your project qualify for a SARE grant to support your efforts?

PUBLIC AWARENESS EVENTS AND CAMPAIGNS

Example: Holding a public screening of Food Inc; hosting a locavore dinner

In teaching people why it’s important (and delicious!) to eat local, you can stimulate the market for all local food producers. There is a wide array of possible activities that will raise public awareness about local food and sustainable farming. These can include activities such as coordinating panel discussions, distributing ‘Buy Local’ bumper stickers and flyers, writing an op-ed for the local paper, publishing a directory of local producers, and organizing farm-centered festivals and open houses.

Benefits

- Educating consumers increases their commitment to local food and sustainable farming movements, and stimulates the market for all local producers.

Things to Consider

- It may be useful to partner with other institutions, such as the local library, public access TV station, consumer organizations, churches, and/or non-profits to organize and host events and publicize events.

ADVOCACY / LOBBYING

Example: A campaign for local farmland preservation

The local food movement has made farmers its heroes. Farmers can leverage this distinction to draw attention to issues that are important to them. They can play a unique role in motivating the public to push for policies that benefit small, sustainable farmers at the local, state, and national level. This could include a broad spectrum of issues like local farmland preservation or Food and Farm Bill reform.

Benefits

- By joining together, your voice becomes louder.
- You can be a force for change that will benefit your farm, the farms of others, and the whole community.

Things to Consider

- Farms that are nonprofits may not participate in direct advocacy; however, you may make your group aware of any important events or new developments.

JOINT ADVERTISING

Example: Maple producers in the Adirondack region all pay into a fund for billboards advertising Adirondack maple syrup.

Small producers may find it useful to band together and promote a specific products or products from a particular region. Publishing a directory of local producers or hosting a weekend of local farm “open houses” are other ways to promote local food together.

Benefits

- It gets the word out about local food and builds a brand based on the region. In this way it stimulates the market for everyone in the region.
- By pooling resources for advertising, you may be able to afford more effective advertising.

Things to Consider

- How will you structure and organize the necessary funds?
- Consider if it would be beneficial to incorporate as a non-profit business association.

JOINT STORAGE OR PROCESSING FACILITIES

Example: Multiple farms raise the capital to construct a shared facility for cold storage

While storage and processing facilities can add a tremendous amount of value for a farm business, even small infrastructure projects can be too expensive for some farms to take on themselves. These projects can include things like a shared CSA distribution center, cold storage and/or root cellar storage for winter marketing, a warehouse that can manage distribution to retail outlets, and a certified community kitchen to prepare foods.

Benefits

- Allows more people access to facilities that can make your farm business more profitable because the initial investment can be shared.

Things to consider

- This is an advanced form of network. Good relationships, a high level of trust, and very clear expectations are required to make this work.
- Depending on what project is chosen, it can be expensive. It will require serious amount of organization and may even require a dedicated staff

COMMUNITY SERVICE ACTIVITIES

Eg. Farmers coordinate the delivery of unsold farmers market produce to a local food pantry or shelter.

Access to fresh and sustainably grown food is still out of reach for many in the US. Some farmers donate the produce that is not sold at market to local food pantries. Others may coordinate with volunteer crews of gleaners and donate the produce that would otherwise go unharvested.

Benefits

- Helps to improve access to fresh healthy food in the local community
- It reflects well on whatever farms participate and may help cement customer support/loyalty.

Things to Consider

- When approaching institutions that are possible recipients of donations, try to estimate the volume and type of food that will be available (or if it's unpredictable, make sure they know that too!)
- Ask if there are certain kinds of produce that they can/can't use. (Better in your compost pile than in the garbage dump)
- Make sure they have the facilities to handle fresh produce.
- Work out a rough schedule – when can they accept donations? Are there times when they cannot?

COORDINATING THE PRODUCTION OF INPUTS LOCALLY

Example: Several farms save seed from different varieties and then share their stocks the next season.

Small sustainable farmers may not need to buy large volumes of expensive chemicals like conventional farmers do, but the operation of most farms still requires the purchase of inputs like compost, potting soil, seed, transplants, feed or replacement livestock. Often these inputs are transported long distances and come with a large fee for transportation. In the case of chicks and transplants, the long distances can result in higher mortality. By coordinating and supporting the production of these inputs locally, farmers may be able to save on transport fees, and will contribute to a greater degree of local food sovereignty.

Benefits

- Contributes to a greater degree of food sovereignty, keeps money in the local economy
- Farmers could save money on transportation

Things to Consider

- Could be a natural outgrowth of a social or educational network. It's useful to have a foundation of good relationships and trust that the latter bring before coordinating this.
- Start small with one type of input and a few farms, and then expand from there.