



GNF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERIES #204A

PROGRAM: EXPLORING THE SMALL FARM DREAM: IS STARTING AN AGRICULTURAL BUSINESS RIGHT FOR YOU?

ORGANIZATION: NEW ENGLAND SMALL FARM INSTITUTE

TARGETED TO: PROSPECTIVE FARMERS, OR EXPLORERS, AND EARLY STAGE PLANNERS.

DATES: EXPLORING THE SMALL FARM DREAM IS PRESENTED IN EARLY SPRING AND FALL IN BELCHERTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS. AT OTHER TIMES AND IN OTHER LOCATIONS, IT IS PRESENTED IN COLLABORATION WITH COSPONSORS. A SELF-STUDY WORKBOOK IS AVAILABLE YEAR-ROUND.

Need

People from non-farming backgrounds often lack the necessary information to make informed decisions about starting a commercial agricultural enterprise. Few written materials provide this information, and most service providers don't target Explorers or Planners. Consequently, a certain number of start-up farmers fail each year simply because they didn't understand such things as the effect farming might have on a family's lifestyle or the implications of a marketing and distribution choice.

The New England Small Farm Institute (NESFI) staff noticed that many participants in its agricultural business-planning courses for start-up farmers were explorers and unable to fully benefit from the business planning process. NESFI staff decided to design programming targeted to the needs of this group.

Program Development

NESFI developed the short course "Exploring the Small Farm Dream: Is Starting an Agricultural Enterprise Right for You?" and a workbook with the same name for the single purpose of helping Explorers decide whether or not they want to farm as a business.

Many prospective farmers know that they love to grow crops or raise livestock. But do they know what is required to start and operate their small-farm dreams as commercial agricultural businesses. Exploring the Small Farm Dream is designed to help participants become aware of the reality of operating small farms as commercial agricultural businesses and to decide if they really want to embark on that path.

The course and workbook help Explorers identify and assess personal motivations for starting an agricultural business and to clarify their values. Participants also assess their business and farming skills and identify available resources.

Based on this information, they decide whether or not farming as a business is right for them. Based on that decision, they identify the next steps.

Exploring the Small Farm Dream serves as a reality check for most participants. Some decide to pursue their small farm dream and start a farm business. Most, however, choose to move more slowly toward that goal, maybe by saving money for a few more years or by working as a farm employee to gain needed practical experience. Still others decide that gardening, homesteading or working in an agriculturally related field suits them better than commercial farming would.

Funding

Exploring the Small Farm Dream is supported by the Growing New Farmers Project with additional support from the Claneil Foundation, Country Bank for Savings, the Northeast SARE Program and program fees.

Partners

NESFI developed Exploring the Small Farm Dream in collaboration with the Pioneer Valley Enterprise Program, a project of the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute.

NESFI recently piloted its instructor and delivery-partner training programs with the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Jersey. It is now seeking other organizations that would like to offer the course in the Northeast. In addition, NESFI is collaborating with the Hartford Food System to translate the materials into Spanish.

Outreach

As of May 2003, NESFI has taught the Exploring the Small Farm Dream course six times to more than 71 participants. In its three years, response to the program has been excellent, and NESFI anticipates a need for the course across the Northeast. To meet that need, NESFI plans to reach out to other service providers as delivery partnerships.

With little promotion, NESFI has sold more than 60 workbooks for self-study. NESFI plans a promotional campaign to let more aspiring farmers know about this resource.

At several conferences, NESFI staff has offered a mini-version of the course as a workshop. It will continue to offer these.

Analysis

Successes: Exploring the Small Farm Dream meets a real need. Of the 71 course participants who completed evaluations, 100% felt that they were better able to assess farming as a business. Participants rated the course very highly for usefulness, overall quality, quality of instruction, value of information and workbook quality.

Self-study readers have found the Exploring the Small Farm Dream workbook very helpful.

Other service providers agree that this population exists and is not currently well served. The course and workbook will be valuable aids, they say.

Challenges: Refining the course and workbook involved extensive piloting, evaluation, editing and reviewing, all of which took longer than the Institute anticipated.

Next Steps

NESFI's plans to identify and train a group of service providers to deliver the course throughout the Northeast. The Institute is currently completing a manual for Explorer instructors and cosponsors, and we have piloted a "train the trainers" session.

Beginning in fall 2003, additional training sessions are planned for instructors and delivery partners from across the region.

NESFI is also in the process of conducting a survey of self-study readers to determine how well the workbook has met their needs.

Additional Resources

- Small Farm Development Program components include:
 - Small Farm Education and Training. Technical, business and management skills; courses and workshops; publications, learning tools; and advising.
 - Lampson Brook Teaching Farm. Site-based, intensive short courses. Full -season residential training is being developed.
 - Small Farm Training and Support Network. Regional network of on-farm mentors, instructors and cosponsoring organizations.
 - Small Farm Resources. A 5,000 volume library, on-line card catalogue, referrals, and customized searches.
 - New England Land Link. Matching farm properties and farm seekers, workshops, publications, advising, lease models and facilitation.
 - Northeast Workers on Organic Farms. Apprenticeships.

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