



How a Farmer-Led Initiative is Building Opportunity for Non-Traditional Farmers

By Harriet Behar

FARMER ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Midwestern agriculture famously produces vast quantities of row crops, hogs, and poultry. In Minnesota, more than 18 of the 25 million acres in agriculture statewide are dedicated to corn, soybeans and a small handful of other grains, according to the 2022 Ag Census.¹ This is compared to less than 1% of that amount (174,341 acres) in vegetables and melons. Indeed, the U.S. Farm Bill has shaped this landscape over time by tailoring federal support in the Midwest to favor large-scale row crop farmers.

And yet smaller-scale, diversified farmers—often younger than average for a U.S. farmer, and often People of Color and New Americans who grew up in agricultural communities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—are a growing force that is changing the face of agriculture across the U.S. As evidence of this shift, the annual Emerging Farmers Conference in Minnesota convenes over 200 Midwest farmers per year, who collectively speak over nine languages, to learn new production and marketing techniques.

These diverse farmers also want to know how to access the state, federal, extension, and NGO resources needed to build successful businesses and manage the multiple risks of farming. Go Farm Connect, a 2-year-old program run by Renewing the Countryside, which is a major sponsor of the Emerging Farmers Conference, is designed to help farmers do just that.

1. www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Minnesota/st27_1_048_048.pdf

WHAT IS GO FARM CONNECT?

We reach out to Historically Underserved farmers (in particular, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), take the time to get to know them, their farms, the obstacles they face, and their goals, and help them figure out how the USDA can support them—whether through an FSA loan, disaster assistance, or through NRCS technical assistance and conservation practice cost share.

Go Farm Connect is powered by 36 “Connectors,” who are community leaders working throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin to reach farmers at events like the Emerging Farmers Conference, and also within their personal and local networks. As a group, the connectors speak multiple languages, including Swahili, Arabic, French, Spanish, and Hmong, allowing them to connect with farmers from these language backgrounds. The connectors, many of whom are themselves farmers, work 1-on-1 with their farmer clients to help them understand and access USDA programs and connect with local USDA staff.

Renewing the Countryside

is a non-profit organization whose mission is to provide inspiration, ideas and assistance to individuals and communities who are looking for sustainable ways to strengthen their rural communities and reduce poverty.



CONNECTORS SUPPORTING UNDERSERVED FARMERS

Connector Nura Ahmed farms at Frogtown Farm in St. Paul. As a child in her native Sudan, she loved helping her uncle, a vegetable farmer, at harvest time. When she moved to the U.S. many years ago, settling into a new country with different systems and customs was stressful. Eventually she discovered the urban farm and started spending time there because she found it healing. She sees fellow immigrants blossoming in the same way she did because they've reconnected with the land. "This year I have one farmer from Liberia and I can see she has the heart [to farm] – she wakes up early and works all day" at Frogtown Farm. Nura is coaching her on things like how and why to keep expense and harvest records - key information needed to access FSA loans and programs.

In addition to individualized work with farmers, the connectors also organize group events, including field days featuring USDA-funded projects, and introductory group visits to local USDA Service Centers. The latter have been particularly well received - by farmers and USDA staff alike. In January 2024, about 20 farmers, half of which were Hmong, attended an event at the Dunn County Service Center in Wisconsin. For many, it was the first time stepping inside a USDA office. When they arrived, they received a folder with their name on it and a map of their farm inside (name and address had been provided at registration), along with information about relevant USDA programs and services. After welcomes, introductions, and presentations by USDA staff, the farmers were invited to speak one-on-one with the staff present, and even to start filling out applications.

"This Go Farm Connect event helped me locate the local FSA/NRCS office and learn more about financial resources for farmland and equipment purchases, and cost-sharing for conservation projects on my farm. It was helpful to meet office staff in person, knowing that they are eager to help and willing to answer any questions I might have," said one participant. Other farmers commented that having personalized folders waiting for them made them feel "like royalty" or at least thoughtfully attended to by USDA staff, who were themselves appreciative of the opportunity to connect with farmers they may not otherwise have reached.



Getting to the point where any farmer feels welcome walking into a USDA Service Center is at the heart of Go Farm Connect. The large federal agriculture agency has a checkered history with regard to fair distribution of resources, as documented in class action lawsuits by Black farmers and other marginalized groups who experienced discrimination in their attempts to access USDA loans. Yet, while overt racial prejudice may be rarer today, other kinds of obstacles remain.

One is simply that FSA programs are largely geared toward large scale, conventional, commodity agriculture systems and farmers, and it can be challenging even for agency staff to know how to adapt them to small-scale, direct market farms. In this context, what counts for a less conventional farmer is finding a USDA agent who will take the time to get to know her and to help her identify the USDA resources that align well with her goals and capacity.

A smile and a willingness to help go a long way toward making farmers feel welcome and comfortable, as Project Manager Sara George discovered in 2021 when she began accompanying fellow farmers into their first meeting with USDA. "The most important thing in working with farmers new to FSA was body language. Farmers always appreciated that the USDA staff took notes, and were paying attention." By contrast, what drove farmers out the door, sometimes never to return, was a response like this: "Go to our website for the answer to your question."

Connectors Supporting Underserved Farmers, cont.

Sara asked these farmers to share what the experience of visiting a USDA Service Center was like for them - how did you feel walking into the office, how did it feel setting up an appointment? She captured this feedback (confidentially) and shared it back to FSA – the positive and the negative, which has helped build a sense of trust and collaboration between Go Farm Connect and USDA staff in Minnesota and Wisconsin. “I love this project,” Sara said, who envisions a long-term partnership between Go Farm Connect and USDA, noting that USDA staff has started referring farmers to the Connectors. “They know we are going to help our farmers, no matter what it takes.”

Since getting started in late 2022, the Go Farm Connect program has provided 1-on-1 technical assistance to about 360 farmers, the vast majority of whom are members of Socially Disadvantaged (SD) groups that have been subject to racial/ethnic prejudice. In addition, the connectors introduced well over 100 beginning and SD farmers to USDA programs and staff members through events such as field days and USDA office visits. 🌱



Harriet Behar, OFA Farmer Services Consultant and one of OFA's founding members has been involved with federal, state, and local policy advocacy for over 30 years. She runs organic Sweet Springs Farm in Gays Mills, Wisconsin.

United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program
Transition to Organic Partnership Program



HOW DOES THE PROGRAM WORK?

Sara George, Kriss Marion, and Connectors, Kifah Abdi and Matt Hardy, presented an informative webinar on their Go Farm Connect program to more than 20 organizational participants recently. They shared slides chock full of images, demonstrating through pictures both the challenges faced by beginning farmers, and the opportunities connecting new and beginning farmers with USDA programs can provide.

“We are documenting the struggles. Part of our mission is to “feed back” to USDA regarding what is not working for new farmers,” Kriss Marion shared. The team did just that. Sharing examples such as language barriers, full-time work schedules in addition to farming, and learning to note and document farm costs, like labor, were challenges addressed by the program. “It takes a helluva lot of radishes to make a house payment,” noted Sara George.

She also highlighted the approach of the team in working with new farmers who often speak multiple languages and come from various cultural backgrounds. “We are moving at the speed of trust.”

Don't worry if you missed this impactful program. You can learn from Go Farm Connect's creative practices by [watching their video here](#).



WATCH NOW

