**Building Farmers in the West, classroom program evaluation**

Our evaluation of classroom programs delivered under this grant covers 168 program participants from four states: Colorado (117); Utah (4); Wyoming (8); Arizona (39).

Colorado had three different program sites: Denver (delivered 1 time per year over 3 years), Larimer County (delivered 1 time per year over 3 years), and Chaffee County (delivered 2 times over the three-year project period).

Overall the classroom program reached 115 beginning farmers (68%); 43 intermediate-level farmers (26%); and10 advanced-level farmers (6%). Colorado reached the greatest proportion of beginning farmers (70%), while Wyoming reached the greatest proportion of intermediate farmers (37%).

In general, farmers and ranchers entered the classroom with relatively few years of experience in direct market sales. For example, Utah farmers entered the course with the longest average experience in direct market sales at 2.5 years, with Wyoming farmers having 1.6 years’ experience prior to the class, followed by Arizona (1.3 years on average) and Colorado (1.1 years). Across the Colorado programs, Larimer County farmers had the greatest direct market experience at 1.5 years and Chaffee County farmers had the least at less than one year.

In addition to being less experienced in direct market channels, most participants hadn’t identified which specific channels they would use, with 23% selling to individuals, 17% selling in farmers markets, 14% selling in restaurants, 12% selling through roadside stands, 12% through CSAs, and 8% through wholesale channels. Participants did indicate that they were interested in selling into different channels. For example, 56% were interested in selling through restaurants, 52% through farmers markets, 44% directly to individuals, 38% through roadside stands, and 32% through wholesale channels.

After taking the class, however, participants had re-oriented both marketing and production. Participants primarily wanted to pursue farmers markets (65%); direct to consumer sales (61%); followed by restaurant and CSA sales (both at 59%). Forty-six percent indicated that they were interested in selling through wholesale channels, increasing from 32% at the beginning of the course.

Prior to taking the majority of class participants were intending on producing vegetables (52%); herbs (38%): eggs (25%); fruit (18%); flowers (17%), meat (12%); valued-added products (8%); and dairy (3%). They were interested, however, in producing herbs foremost at 52%; followed then by vegetables (49%); fruit (48%); value-added and eggs (39% each); flowers (37%); meat 29%); and dairy (18%). After taking the class, participants moved back toward vegetables (82%); herbs (78%); fruit (55%); flowers (53%); eggs (43%); value-added products (42%); meat (40%) and dairy (19%), reflecting the production and marketing analyses they conducted to develop their business plans.

Intentions to follow all elements of a business plan for their proposed farm businesses varied. For example, 83% were going to follow a production plan; 79% a financial plan; and 78% a marketing plan. Sixty-five percent exited the class with a business plan for their operation. An 18-month follow-up evaluation indicated that 68% still had a business plan in effect, but only 53% were following a production plan; 44% were following a financial plan; and 38% were following a marketing plan.

In terms of knowledge gained, participants ranked their greatest gains in accessing local resources/technical support (agency, Extension, etc., with a mean rank of 4.01 out of 5, with 5 being very proficient in the subject matter); followed by learning how to showcase product variety & abundance at direct markets (3.73); and developing business plans (3.60). They ranked as their lowest areas of knowledge managing labor force & assessing seasonal labor requirements (3.28), and assessing operation specific/applicable taxes (3.06)—both subjects that were not always covered uniformly at different program sites.

When asked to evaluate the types of networks they gained through the classroom program (both human resource and inputs to production and marketing), 81% of participants said they gained information not directly taught in the business planning courses (where to obtain seed-81%; insect/disease/weed management advice-74%; scale-appropriate equipment—66%). Sixty-six of all participants also indicated they learned where to obtain marketing advice and business management support. Fifty-nine percent learned where about credit or capital providers and 55% knew where to obtain tax planning advice. As a result of the course, 88% of all participants said they had increased their network of farming colleagues; 94% said they would recommend the course to other famers or potential farmers; and 85% indicated they planned to farm following the course. Only 7% knew at the end of course that farming was incompatible with their long-term goals.

After 18 months, we re-surveyed all class participants to determine some of the longer-term changes in practices and access to resources that might be attributed to the program. Other direct changes in planning and management that participants could attribute to taking the Building Farmers and Ranchers course included: improved overall business management practices (68%); improved record-keeping and budgeting (65%); accessing local resources and technical support (48%); and establishing new markets for one or more products (41%). Twelve percent of participants applied for an FSA or NRCS loan or grant program following the course.

In assessing outcomes with significant impacts participants’ farm businesses, communities, and families, 85% indicated the Building Farmers program improved their farming, marketing and food systems community; 56% said their farming operations were more efficient; 53% said their farming operation was more economically viable; and 21% said employee/employer relations had improved on their farms. Looking more broadly beyond the business, 41% said their quality of life on their farm had improved; and an equal proportion also said their families’ goals were easier to achieve as a result of participation in the BFW program.

A final element of our 18-month follow-up evaluation involved requesting that participants provide a sense of how farm or ranch operations may have improved since they attended the course. Overwhelmingly, participants cited that they had either experienced an increase or no change to operations, but very few found there was a decrease or negative effect from, or following their participation. For example, 6% cited a decrease in the range of varieties grown (which could be a strategic repositioning rather than a negative impact), 3% cited a decrease in the number of farm enterprises, and 3% indicated a decrease in land area cultivated. On the other hand, 53% indicated that they had increased their investment in infrastructure and equipment (while 18% said no change in this area); 47% determined they had increased their customer base (and 15% said no change); 41% found an increase in the variety of marketing outlets used (and 29% said no change in this markets); 41% said they had increased the range of product varieties grown (while 24% said no change); 38% said they had increased their land area under cultivation (while 26% said no change in land area); 29% said they had increased their amount or options for financing (while a greater proportion-32%-said no change); and similarly, 26% said they had increased their number of farm enterprises (while a greater proportion-41%-said they had not changed them since taking the course).