

What is a Farm Incubator (FI) and Why is it Needed?

The changing agricultural demographics in Minnesota (and nationwide) challenge the sustainability of our state's food system, as well as the resilience of our rural communities.

The U.S. is losing mid-sized and small farms at an alarming rate.

Local fruit/vegetable growers and livestock farmers' needs greatly vary from conventional farmers.

Our project seeks to bring more beginning and transitioning farmers onto the land by focusing on and overcoming the key challenges that preclude access to land and assets, community connectedness, and opportunities to practice knowledge and skills.

It is further recognized that:

Land access can be an expensive investment and challenge to locate and secure

Solution: Increase access to land by:

- Identifying existing landowners who may share similar values to that of the FI Project
- Partnering with existing landowners on opportunities to have beginning farmers on their property
- Identify core values of landowners and potential opportunities whereby landowners may transition their land to a beginning farmer or hold in trust
 - Assist in fostering relationship between landowner and beginning farmer
 - Assist in creating criteria and/or models for land transition agreements while protecting existing landowner and beginning farmer

Farm equipment can be an expensive investment

Solution: Increase access to farm equipment by:

- Establishing a basic set of farm equipment that multiple beginning farmers share when beginning farmers are growing near of each other (one property that is divided amongst growers)
- Creating a farm equipment library by identifying what equipment might be in the region and could be shared or rented amongst growers
- Partnering with existing farmers who may mentor beginning farmers on troubleshooting their operation in the absence of equipment

Having immediate access to multiple existing markets is critical to the long-term success the beginning farmer and Farm Incubator model

Solution: Develop opportunities for the farm incubator program to be connected to area Food Co-ops and Food Hubs such as: Prairie Roots Coop (Fargo), Manna Food Co-op (Detroit Lakes), Venn Hagen (Alexandria), farmers markets, individual and multi-farm Community Service Agriculture (CSA) and/or direct sales

- Access to funding through established market streams listed above

Creating a formal business plan is critical to the long-term financial viability of local foods operation

Solution: Provide educational opportunities for beginning farmers to:

- Develop core values and mission for their farming operation
- Create short and long-term goals that will assist beginning farmer in reaching sustainability
- Learn from existing local producers in the region who can share life and practical experiences through mentorship opportunities

Providing necessary educational and mentoring opportunities are critical to long -term success

Solution: Engage local growers to serve as mentors to beginning farmers to:

- Formalize education and training opportunities that address managing land, build community, accumulate assets, and otherwise grow into a professional farmer
- Provide opportunities to learn practices regarding permaculture, organics, soil management, hydroponic/aquaponic/aeroponic systems, and livestock care.
- Partner with programs like Deep Roots Farmer Development program, MN Sustainable Farming Association

Collaboration with multi-stakeholders around the state of MN and region is vital to securing resources and ensuring long-term solutions.

- Partner with organizations who bring years of experience, resources and knowledge such as but not limited to: Northern Plains Sustainable Agricultural Society, Minnesota Sustainable Farming Association, Land Stewardship Project, Northern Small Farming Association, MN & ND Department of Agriculture, NDSU and UMN and their Extension systems

Local leadership is necessary to guide the process and protect established mission and values. Local leadership is currently being provided by:

Jason Bergstrand, PartnerSHIP 4 Health jason.bergstrand@co.clay.mn.us and Verna Kragness, Northern Plains Sustainable Agricultural Society vernakragness@npsas.org

The incubator farm allows for beginning farmers the ability to access land, acquire knowledge and assets while providing a safety net through an internship model. This approach provides the resources necessary to the beginning farmer to achieve long-term success while also reducing the risk to private landowners partnering in the program.

Furthermore, the farm incubation model provides an opportunity to grow regional wealth, invest in youth and adults that are seeking a non-traditional career path, protect the environment, invest in sustainable farming practices, strengthen local food distribution systems while building community wellness & resilience.