

How Forming a Cooperative Network Improved Services and Outcomes for Farmers

Abstract

The Beginning Farmer Resource Network of Maine (BFRN) is a model for maximizing resources and improving farmer services through increased statewide communication and collaboration among a diverse group of agricultural service providers. Formed in 2012, BFRN is a cooperative network with shared leadership and no financial overhead. In a 2018 survey regarding BFRN's impacts, 92% of members (22 of 24 responding members) said they were more effective and efficient. The survey results also indicated that over 800 farmers had made positive changes as a result of members' participation in BFRN. BFRN's continuing high level of activity is a testament to the value this network model offers to participating organizations, agencies, and institutions.

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Identifying a Need for Coordinated Programming

Starting in the mid-2000s, Maine experienced a rapid increase in new and beginning farmers. The number of farms and the number of young farmers (under 35) increased in the state by 13% and 18%, respectively, from 2002 to 2007 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2009). In response to these changes, University of Maine Cooperative Extension offered a 2-day professional development retreat in 2012 for Maine's diverse array of agricultural service providers (ASPs) to increase their understanding of the unique challenges, opportunities, and resources for beginning farmers and their capacity to serve this group. The training followed the Reading the Farm program model, whereby participants work as a team to conduct whole-farm analyses of case study farms (Mallory, White, Morris, & Kiernan, 2011).

A key issue participants discussed was how difficult it is for beginning farmers and ASPs to know about and navigate the variety of resources that exist for beginning farmers. Participants identified the need for a statewide network to coordinate agencies and nonprofits working with Maine's beginning farmers. Six months later, we and other training participants initiated the Beginning Farmer Resource Network of Maine (BFRN).

Forming the BFRN

According to its mission statement, "BFRN is a coalition of Maine agriculture agencies and organizations working together to connect aspiring and beginning farmers to resources for farm business success" (BFRN, n.d., para 1). The 14 original members devised three key guiding principles establishing that BFRN

- will continue only as long as it has value to its members,
- will have no financial overhead to support its work, and
- will rely on members for shared leadership.

Thus, BFRN operates as a "cooperative" network, as opposed to a "coordinating" or "collaborative" network (Vandeventer & Mandell, 2011), with member groups maintaining their autonomy and working together for the single purpose of supporting beginning farmers.

For the first 2 years, BFRN had a chair or cochairs who coordinated all meetings and activities. In 2014, we held a 2-day strategic planning retreat to develop a more sustainable organizational plan that includes committees with specific work plans.

Currently, there are 25 members representing state and federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, and Extension. BFRN activities include

- holding bimonthly meetings that involve member updates, coordination of activities, and professional development trainings;
- maintaining an online directory of beginning farmer resources and assistance options (<https://extension.umaine.edu/beginning-farmer-resource-network/find-resources-and-assistance/>);
- referring farm clients to one another as appropriate; and
- conducting coordinated events that BFRN members work together to deliver, such as multiple days of hands-on in-depth workshops at the annual Maine Agricultural Trades Show.

Network Impacts

BFRN has become a model for maximizing resources and improving farmer services by increasing statewide communication and collaboration among Maine's ASPs. Effective networks such as BFRN have the capacity to support individual efforts and streamline collective work (Gianatti & Carmody, 2007).

Results from a February 2018 survey indicate the impacts of this network model (Table 1). The survey was distributed to 48 current and past members of BFRN, and 24 responses were received.

Table 1.

Beginning Farmer Resource Network of Maine (BFRN) Impact Survey Results ($n = 24$)

Impact**Indicator(s)**

More effective and efficient ASPs

92% of respondents ($f = 22$) reported that participating in BFRN made them more effective in their work as ASPs by facilitating their ability to

- make new connections with other ASPs,
- know personally who to refer clients to,
- keep up to date with programs and resources, and
- have an online clearinghouse of available resources.

BFRN members reported time savings of, on average, 6 hr per month as a result of BFRN.

More successful beginning farmers

As a result of members' participation in BFRN, over 800 farmers made changes (e.g., business planning, accessing technical assistance), affecting about 40,750 ac and 47,265 animals and resulting in a total value over 5 years of \$8,178,000.

Expanded programming for beginning farmers

BFRN members conducted 11 new educational programs and acquired eight new grants. Funded-project topics include supporting farm communication, farm business planning, and beginning farmer curriculum training for ASPs.

BFRN maintains a continuously updated online resource directory that garnered 22,865 unique page views in 2017.

Note. ASP = agricultural service provider.

Quotes from survey respondents highlight the value of BFRN to their work:

"I am more effective because: 1) I can provide beginning farmers a personal referral to other service providers, which makes my clients feel well cared for; 2) I feel I am supported and can safely test new ideas and tools with this friendly and wise cohort group of service providers . . . 3) I have benefited from training . . . and 4) I have an 'inside track' when trying to expedite collaboration with another entity (write a fact sheet, co-sponsor an event, troubleshoot an issue to advocate for a beginning farmer in distress, etc.)."

"My referrals to other agricultural service providers are wonderfully targeted now. Also, I have acquired a great understanding of how agricultural service providers can operate as a team on behalf of beginning farmers."

"The relationship and trust that has formed between BFRN members is really what makes the referral process tick. . . . It is also inspiring to be part of a team that is pulling for beginning farmers. It helps you get up and do the work every day, even though it is quite difficult."

What to Consider When Establishing a Network

Networks such as BFRN work well when a need is clearly defined. For BFRN, the Reading the Farm experience provided ASPs from a variety of organizations the opportunity to organically identify a need for coordinated programming, as well as to begin to form working relationships and trust with one another. The rest of the process was guided by the first leaders who, as skilled facilitators, realized the importance of being intentional about the mission and guiding principles of the network.

The BFRN model has many benefits for individuals, their organizations, and the collective:

- The network does not compete with member organizations for limited resources.
- The network is not reliant on grant funding to continue.
- The network's mission is synergistic with individuals' work plans and their organizations' missions, and it is shared by ASPs across different content areas (business planning, agricultural production, family communication).
- The network increases members' job satisfaction by building professional connections.
- Trust is established through the variety of opportunities to partner and share responsibility.

Potential drawbacks to this model include the following circumstances:

- The network is reliant on "in-kind" contributions of member time for rotating leadership and project implementation.
- The network is reliant on one organization to host and maintain the website.
- Developing consensus on how to operate the network and implement collective efforts takes time and commitment.

Conclusion

BFRN has become a model for maximizing resources and improving farmer services by increasing statewide communication, coordination, and collaboration among ASPs. Networks such as BFRN provide a recognizable first point of contact for clients and are particularly valuable in times of need for their ability to offer coordinated programs (Kilpatrick, Willis, Johns, & Peek, 2012). Finally, networks can provide leadership in identifying and responding to emerging issues.

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Recommendation for Further Reading

For additional information about forming networks, consult *Networks That Work* (2nd ed.), by P. Vandeventer and M. Mandell, 2011, Community Partners, Los Angeles, CA. This book has specific guidance and considerations for groups coming together with a shared purpose in mind.

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