NESAWG 2015 *It Takes A Region* Conference

Research and Assessments Work Group

First Session

Research and Assessments group goals: Assess need and measure impact

Why people have come/Who is represented at the meeting:

- conducting research in market, access, needs
- sharing about the assessment and metrics that they have
- looking to learn about methods for assessing programs
- creating assessment tools for evaluating their programs
- synthesizing data in annual reports – assessing impact of programs
- supporting programs in evaluating their outcomes
- focusing on policy and community outreach – how can we use impact data?
- looking for metrics for how effective marketing is
- looking at data and how data can inform where to put development funding
- working on marketing program to develop a sustainable agriculture certification on a state level
- interested in the FINE study and to glean insights from other participants
- working with partner organizations to
- data collection on foodsheds

- research on valuing the non-commodity outputs of agriculture – social, environmental
- school food, farm-to-school, food processor,

Molly – in the last five years, there is a lot more use of data in New England to define and measure success

- assessing trends
- evaluating progress towards goal
- to satisfy funders
- to satisfy citizen mandate

Projects to be presented in these sessions:
Jeff – co-leader of R&A working group; how libraries and librarians can support data needs; insights into what resources are available on the region; will give a progress report on NEFKE and receive feedback from WG participants to guide future development

FINE – sharing their new, user-friendly dashboard that is easy to work with, accessible; Metrics project at FINE and describe the process they went through to determine what data they wanted and how their tool would work; also challenges they faced

OFRF – Data needs at OFRF

Tomorrow's session – Hearing from Dorothy Suput of the Carrot Project; compiling data from 25 farms for insights into what leads to profitability and success

Jeff Piastrak – Mann Library at Cornell University

Northeast Food Knowledge Ecosystem (NEFKE) pilot project

Through this WG, they did a survey of about ~185 NESAWG participants

- People get their information from many places and use the data in many ways
- half said that data was not adequate for needs
- survey reaffirmed what WG was hearing in its meetings

Didn't want to make a one-off solution, so they were looking at a systems approach to finding a solution to data needs

- system that delivers information in a coherent and consistent way
- groups advocating for these types of information delivery systems (including Markets for Good)
- funders don't know if their money is making an impact

Framework for this systems approach – Knowledge Ecosystems

- get people to share information and collaborate, rather than work in silos
- more than just a list
- 3 yrs ago – convened many groups to sketch out what the knowledge ecosystem would look like (FINE included)
- JMF Funded Pilot Project (look at slide)
    - Assess data and info needs
    - identify and inventory
- Created a map of the network for NEFKE
- Pilot website for NEFKE
- NEFKE's name will be changing after the pilot
- NEFKE registry
    - enabled batch loading of information from participants
    - geolocated participants in the registry (proof of concept of what they can do with registry data)
    - One of first steps (low-hanging fruit) was to share a calendar
        - avoid overlapping events

        - aggregate calendars and feed out to organizations in the network
        - system for tagging an event so you can filter by tags
        - form for sharing events on the NESAWG website
- NEFKE Resource Library – linked with NESAWG resources and participants can add resources
- Experimented with Zotero's collaborative citation tool
    - created bibliographies with different themes
- Farm Hack Tool
- NEFKE governance group
    - used Zoom for web conferences and webinars
- Netway – (www.evaluationnetway.com) allows programs to share logic models and find synergies with other organizations' logic models
- Must share failures as well, so that others can learn from NEFKE methods
    - tried to make a dashboard, but it was not a success
- Advocating for shared data networks
    - The hope is that data infrastructure developed by NESAWG can support dashboards for other organizations

Questions from the work group participants:

- When will the data be available?
    - Shared calendar is available now
    - Registry of participating organizations is available now
    - Still deciding how to share data and provide information in a central space
        - Don't want to pull people away from partner sites
        - As the governance gets together, they will have an idea how to work with partners to disseminate data
        - Want to have shared ownership of data and have collaborative editing

Nessa Richman and Kaitlin Haskins – Farm to Institution New England (FINE)

New England Farm to Institution Shared Metrics Project

- Funders: John Merck Fund and Henry P. Kendall Foundation
- More regionally grown food is going to schools, hospitals, colleges, and other institutions
- The goal of the Shared Metrics Project is to have a comprehensive understanding of impact of Farm to Institution along the whole supply chain (producer to institution)
- Dashboard started last March, NESAWG 2015 conference is the soft reveal
    - Still a beta version – about 60-70% complete
    - Ongoing improvements
    - There will be a hard launch

- Audience is multilayered
    - Big data audience: tailored to funders, policy makers
    - State governments can compare their state to other states
    - Researchers (or anyone) can download all the clean data sets
- Data is searchable and can be filtered by interest

Process of creating this dashboard

- The people on the team are important – they bring expertise
    - Work team – Coordinator, communications, consultant, associate, data visualization
    - Advisory team
- Secondary data – from partners including USDA, Wallace Center, etc.
- FINE focused on gathering primary data
    - Surveys developed through iterative process
        - *asked survey respondents to define "local"
        - Food distributor survey
            - Summer 2015 – 21 questions, 60 responses, 56 usable responses
            - Number of responses is due to effort to follow up by phone and FINE associate manually entering survey responses during phone interviews
            - 48% sell to institutions
            - 75% plan to purchase more local food
        - Colleges and universities survey
            - No existing national and regional surveys
            - Some common questions for school, university, and hospital surveys
            - 207 responses, 105 usable responses
            - Timing was an issue resulting in lots of dirty data
            - Questions about operations, local foods (current and future)
                - avg budget $3.1M
                - 91% plan to buy more local → big and growing market
        - Producer survey
            - under development
                - working to narrow questions
                - offering incentive (raffle with five $100 winners)
                - working with state Dept of Ag to get survey out
                    - especially through direct technical assistance providers
        - Healthcare survey (Healthcare Without Harm)

    - For each survey, the dashboard will have:
        - Summary
        - Detailed report
        - Clean data set (downloadable)

Outreach & Communications (and a look at the dashboard on the website http://dashboard.farmtoinstitution.org/)

- Main page
    - 5 main categories
    - Highlight box (currently provisional numbers)
    - Context to orient people who are less familiar with food issues
    - Resource library with reports and links to relevant websites
    - Announcements
- Farm to School page (as an example, most developed so far)
    - "Region at a Glance" with 4 highlights
    - "Key Indicators" with graphs, charts, and maps that have short description/narrative
        - visuals built in tableau, allows for interactive visualization of data
- ** Looking for feedback on how data is displayed **
- Trying to make presentation of information for the 3 sectors (schools, universities, hospitals) consistent
    - May make a page for comparison of the 3 sectors

Looking forward 2nd year

- Focus on food processing, food waste, food access, and food justice
- **Looking for advisory group members**

Questions from work group participants

- What is the role of the federal government in this?
    - Example: how Farm to School moved from nonprofit to USDA
    - Add questions to the Ag Census, for example
    - Would there be any downsides to USDA taking a role?
- FINE model should be national
    - Built in to original project proposal to work with USDA after pilot to work on federal tools
    - In year 2, they will be considering how to work with USDA
- How does Metrics Projects work with policy work?
- Collaborate with USDA AMS

Diana Jerkins – Research Director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF)

OFRF (Santa Cruz, CA)– National organization for 20+ years, funds research and does policy advocacy

Reviewing funded projects of 3 grant programs (NIFA, NORA, and OFRF)

- Questions:
    - What has been accomplished?
    - What priorities have been addressed?
    - Are producers engaged as equal partners?
    - Did project yield practical outcomes for farmers/stakeholders?

USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) organic funding

- Data collection/process
    - 124 OREI and 63 ORG Transitions projects from 2002-2014
    - Review abstracts
    - Interview principal investigators and farmers on selected projects
    - Outreach – share findings at NESAWG conference, solicit input
    - Feedback to USDA for future OREI & ORG Transition program priorities
- Findings
    - Distribution of program funds
        - 26% northeast, 33% north central, 14% south, 27% west
        - 1862 land grant universities (LGUs) were primarily funded (86%) of projects; this is consistent across most USDA programs
        - 1890 LGUs – only 2 projects as principal investigators (although 1890 LGUs are associated with many more projects, just not as PIs)
        - USDA ARS – 10 projects
        - NGOs – 9 projects
        - * cautions that this analysis only looks at who leads (as PIs)

National Organic Research Analysis (NORA)

- Looking into whether the 2007 priorities were addressed/did USDA follow recommendations from 2007?
- Findings
    - Soil projects = 64% of projects → consistent with farmer needs
    - Systems approach to pest management = 70% of projects
        - Systems approach is more difficult to do – single discipline vs. multiple disciplines
    - Organic livestock and poultry = 26% of projects → consistent across all funding that there is less representation of animal ag
    - Breeding and genetics = 56% of projects

        - Mainly crop breeding (48 projects) vs. animal breeding (8 projects)
        - Push in USDA to do public breeding programs
- Crops funded
    - Specialty crops, mainly vegetables and fruit → the funding matches what the industry does
    - Agronomic crops, mainly corn, soy, wheat
        - Rice, peanuts, and cotton are underrepresented relative to demand
    - Livestock funding mostly goes to dairy
        - Strong market demand for organic pork and beef but few funded projects
- Project highlights
    - Seeds & Breeds – farmer participatory breeding
        - Organic seeds project: >$900K, 25 new varieties, engaged 200 farmers
    - Integrated research on vital topics
        - Weed management and soil quality
    - Innovative farmer engagement
        - Student research projects on working farms
        - Ag-professional teleconferences
        - Farmer-designed and farmer-led "farm walks"
- Audience for this information is mostly producers, as it is hard to get the info to the general public
- Concerns:
    - RFA emphasizes multi-institutional, multi-component projects, which may spread the money too thin
    - 1862 LGUs dominate – Is this at the expense of NGOs, non-profits, and 1890 LGUs?
    - Outcomes – How practical and practicable are outcomes for farmers?
- Recommendations:
    - Farmer participatory classical plant breeding with grant funding
    - Continue innovative approaches to farmer engagement
    - Invite/seek out underrepresented commodities and regions

Reviewing OFRF Programs

- Questions and data collection are the same as for review of NIFA programs
- OFRF funding has gone to research (62%) and education (23%), now only going to research
- Findings
    - Similar regional distribution as NIFA

    - Most common topics: soil management, disease management, crop breeding and genetics, pest management, and crop quality
- Highlights
    - 3 sweet corn varieties
    - Funding for graduate students – influential in their career paths
    - Encouraged farmer-led projects
- Outcome questions (NORA farmer survey from NOP)
    - 74% - soil health is first priority
    - Weed management is second priority

Second Session

Dorothy Suput, Founder and Executive Director of the Carrot Project

The Carrot Project

- Almost 10 years old
- Focus on long-term viability of farms → business side of small and medium farms
    - What tools do farmers need?
- Provide business technical assistance to 70 businesses per year
- Work collaboratively with lenders, investors, and non-profits

SARE-funded research:

Collected data from 25 farms and analyzed what leads to profitability and success

- Project to understand the role of financing vs. enterprise development in profitability and success
- Evaluate impact of financing and enterprise planning on profitability
- Profitability is measured after you pay yourself. Farmers are not as concerned about profits above and beyond paying themselves (making a living)
- 25 farms – all beginning farmers
    - some start-ups
    - mostly with 3-5 years of experience
    - produced all sorts of products, but lots of vegetables and some livestock
- Each farm assigned a business advisor for 2.5 year period of coaching and assessment
    - frequent meetings (phone/in person) with advisors
    - farms completed baseline survey and then were tracked for two years
    - dig down into business projections
    - sometimes business advisors had to start with the very basics – how to build data bank (of farm accounts) on which to base business decisions
- Findings (Data from this research are preliminary)
    - One cohort really excelled – moving forward, will look at how this cohort differed

        - Anecdotal analysis is that this group had bookkeeping set up and business advisors didn't have to teach as much of the basics
    - There were changes in financial stability, with the average income increasing by 135% (~$12,000)
    - Some farms were able to increase number of seasonal employees
    - Most important result = increased confidence in financial management
        - gained knowledge about business side of farming
    - Business advisors
        - about half of time spent instructing (especially for farmers without accounts → have to track $ to make decisions)
        - half of time spent coaching
    - Success really boils down to having really clear accounts
    - There was a sense that the people who got the most out of participation were those that started with good financial records and could take advantage of the coaching
- Positive habits of the farms in the study:
    - Have a feasible target for business
    - Have ability to assess finances and take on smart debt
    - Plan to pay owners and then planning backwards to know what to produce
- Common mistakes
    - Don't understand business growth trajectory
    - Not listening to advice and not seeking a second opinion
    - No financial planning
    - Taking capital expenses out of cash flow
- Next steps/next model for support = "Making It Happen" training
    - Will be piloted in December 2015
    - Performance-based training activity to share what they learned from the 25 farms in the study

Learning Development Process (Developing curriculum for "Making It Happen"

- Backward planning through identifying evaluation objectives, evaluation instruments, and instructional objectives, and then developing a curriculum
    - Start with what you want to accomplish/what you want farmers to know when they complete the training
    - By framing objectives first, the curriculum was nearly written (objectives as skeleton or outline for curriculum)
- Case Studies
    - "Heart and soul" of the training, to provide understanding of reality on one farm
    - Set of 5 with permission from farms to use their financial info publicly
    - Illustration of what common mistakes and good habits look like in practice
    - Bella Farms Case Study
        - SWOT analysis
        - initial idea (pesto/value-added) was not the best financial decision

- All "Making it Happen" activities are built on scenarios modeled on case study farm
    - example: build a new barn – draw on one farm profile as model for considering how to go about planning for this development
- Case studies make activities more meaningful and practical for farmers

Reflections

- Training is helpful for beginning farmers, but more helpful after the first few idealistic years of operation
- If a farm doesn't work as a business, it won't survive and all the other priorities/goals won't matter
- Farmers need tools and support
- Trust fund farmers can't feed our country

Questions from participants

- Who is responsible for providing business training and support to farmers?
    - Extension varies by state, but extension has been decimated financially
    - Some state extensions have expertise, some have classes, but limited capacity to serve all farmers
    - Lots of non-profits provide business support and incubators
    - Most funding for this type of support comes from the private and non-profit sectors
    - This work is essential for supporting new farmers
        - Farming is sexy, Quickbooks is not sexy
        - Farmers have to think of themselves as entrepreneurs
        - Apprenticeships have strong production training components but not mentorship in business skills
            - some farms open their books to apprentices → this should be a part of all apprenticeships
    - Some grants through Wallace Foundation and Extension to hire business consultants, but this is an exception rather than a rule
    - Farm Credit has amazing services, but they are not affordable for many farmers
    - Maryland study of farms with some poultry operations
        - peer-to-peer networks, sometimes a co-op structure
            - coping strategy originating from lack of formal structure
            - this couldn't work in competitive environment
- What about CSA accounting?
    - enter CSA up front as liability
    - some big picture comparison between the 25 farms
- Owning vs. leasing? – more than expected leased land (~2/3 of the farms)
- Any technological barriers for accounting software, etc.?
    - Not really. People who are willing to participate in research study are pretty ready to learn.

    - Barriers are really more about building habits, taking the time to do the accounting rather than the ability to use the software
    - When accounting becomes integrated, they can start to make informed decisions (success stories)
        - Could see when they were doing well and why they were doing well
        - Spent time defining roles within farm management (who would be the business person)
        - Decisions are still difficult to make, but they have a good tool to consult

Open conversation with the working group participants:

- How do we account for the "happiness factor?"
    - How much freedom/vacation time/etc. do you want?
    - Alternate measurements of success, non-financial goals
    - 8 different forms of capital for community (Wealthworks Framework)
        - How do you measure this? What data do you need?
    - New Entry Sustainable Farming Project has written quality of life questions for their upcoming program participant survey
        - Number of hours worked
        - What do you value about what you are doing?
        - Satisfaction with what you're paying yourself
    - Carrot Project and Vermont Extension have done some quality of life work
    - Book recommendation: "The Market Gardener" by John Martin
- How do we approach farmers with surveys? (So many organizations want data from farmers)
    - Must build trust
    - Make it relevant
    - Pay people for their time
        - money and acknowledgement
        - grant proposals should include compensation for farmers
    - Work with farmers to generate topics of priority to include in the surveys
    - Farmers guide process and help disseminate results
    - Make the data available to the communities from which it came
        - after all, the ultimate goal is positively impact the community through the findings
            - can this data be useful to farmers for their own application needs?
    - Developmental evaluation and participatory research
        - Farmers' questions (improves farmer buy-in) with researchers' analytical skills and resources
- We need to ask equity questions on surveys
    - Who is represented? Who aren't we serving?
    - How is/isn't service culturally competent/culturally sensitive?
    - Equity questions may pertain to consumer market and farmworker benefits, for example

- Share data between researchers
    - We reinvent the wheel and ask farmers the same questions with slightly different wording
    - Can we use farmers' time better by utilizing data from other researchers?
    - Work with farmers

PRIORITIES of the work group

- Sharing tools and metrics for non-economic analysis
- Discussion of types of tools that are appropriate for different types of farmers
    - millennial farmers – digital communication
    - older farmers – in-person interaction