



## **Advancing Conservation by Supporting Farmer-to-Farmer Learning in the Next Farm Bill**

Adopting conservation practices benefits both individual farmers through reduced input costs and increased resilience to extreme weather, as well as society through improved water and air quality, carbon sequestration, and more. In fact, AFT case studies reveal an average return of \$3 for every \$1 invested into soil health practices. And yet, these practices remain underutilized. For example, as of the 2017 USDA Census of Agriculture, cover crops—which are proven to reduce soil compaction, erosion, and nutrient loss and increase water infiltration and holding capacity—were only planted on 6% of cropland acres.

Farmers face numerous barriers in adopting conservation practices, especially during the transition process, including cost, risk, lack of access to the right equipment, insecure land tenure, and limited support or technical assistance. And the informational resources that are available online or through consultants and service providers are often too general and do not reflect the unique circumstances of an individual farm or farmer. In a recent survey of over 10,000 young farmers across the country, 15% cited “farming skills” as their top challenge within the last year (National Young Farmers Coalition, 2022). **Farmer-to-farmer education provides a way to overcome many of these barriers by better communicating the benefits and challenges of practice adoption and addressing perceived risks to yield, labor costs, and product quality that can prevent farmers from trying a new practice with information borne out of lived experience.** It can also help reach new farmers that are already invested in implementing conservation practices, but don’t have access to traditional training networks. In another recent survey, AFT New England found that more than 50% of farmer-respondents were getting their technical assistance and education directly from farmers they know (compared with 20% from NRCS), and over a third identified a consultation with an experienced farmer as one of the most helpful forms of technical assistance.

Farmer-to-farmer learning is a crucial part of an all-hands-on-deck approach to providing culturally relevant technical assistance. For example, research findings have identified [Learning Circles](#), and the connected networks of women in agriculture they foster, as effective tools in building power among agricultural women and in inspiring action to support sustainability on their land (Carter et al. 2017; Carter 2019; Eells and Soulis 2013; Petrzalka et al. 2020; Wells 1998). Similarly, farmers of color often report a lack of trust and disinterest in engaging with government technical assistance due to gaps in cultural understanding, language barriers, and experiences of marginalization and bias (Washington State Department of Agriculture, 2022). However, they report comfort in receiving that support from a known and trusted person. Current funding and opportunities are not enough to realize the full potential of this transformational strategy. **Building on existing farmer-to-farmer education to help producers overcome the cultural, knowledge-based, and risk-related barriers they face is a cost-effective way to increase adoption of conservation practices.**

Farmer-to-farmer learning happens formally, like at demonstration plots, soil health field days, and trainings, and informally, like at social gatherings, coffeeshops, and along fence lines. While both are important, regular and coordinated networking can provide multiple benefits:

- An inexpensive way, relative to traditional USDA or Extension-funded research programs, to advance knowledge of how to adopt conservation practices long-term, especially for cropping systems and/or geographic contexts that require under-researched tailored approaches
- Providing culturally appropriate education and social support with accompanying mental health benefits
- Supporting communities that have been historically marginalized from traditional conservation programs by building on existing community leadership in grassroots and alternative structures

Farmer learning networks are also highly adaptable and can quickly be pivoted or reenergized to meet multiple needs including for land access and emergency response. Successful peer-to-peer learning can also increase interest in NRCS conservation contracts<sup>1</sup> and can help bring more people with practical, on-the-ground experience into the Technical Service Provider program. **But regular, coordinated farmer-to-farmer education exists in very few communities, and can be hard for many farmers to find and tap into.** It also takes purposeful design to create successful farmer-to-farmer education networks.

**In the 2023 Farm Bill, AFT and the National Young Farmers Coalition recommend creating a new Technical Assistance program that will augment existing farmer-led education networks and build capacity for new ones—particularly for communities historically marginalized from existing systems—as a key strategy to increase adoption of conservation practices.** Through this program, NRCS in each state would enter into cooperative agreements<sup>2</sup> with community-based organizations that are able to identify and build on established and burgeoning peer-to-peer networks, and/or create new ones. These organizations would be chosen for their ability to provide culturally relevant assistance to support farmers of different cropping systems and approaches, and to reach farmers from marginalized communities such as women, farmers of color, immigrants farmers, etc.

Each cooperative agreement holder would be responsible for connecting farmers with mentors or group learning opportunities and for building capacity for these networks within their defined area with the goals of increasing long-term adoption of conservation practices. Responsibilities could include:

- Boosting farmer access to peer education that will lead to increased conservation practice adoption by learning from those willing to share information about existing peer-to-peer networks and events, providing referrals, and identifying and working to fill gaps
- Maintaining and promulgating a list of groups or contacts coordinating peer-to-peer events, networks, and educational opportunities. Facilitating mentor/mentee matchmaking
- Coordinating peer-to-peer facilitation<sup>3</sup> training and resources to build the skills of network leaders and members for effective education, emphasizing bottom-up learning and cross-training from existing groups as well as research-informed approaches
- Administering Re-Grants to facilitate the growth of existing and new education networks, with funding targeted to building up small-scale efforts that support historically marginalized producers without match requirements. These re-grants could support:
  - Events and convenings to build farmer-to-farmer relationships and capacity for peer-to-peer conservation learning in the state or region
  - Farmer stipends, at market rate, for participation in conservation trainings, educational skill-building activities, and for sharing their expertise with their peers
  - Other locally identified activities and innovative approaches to increase conservation practice adoption and that will build farmer-to-farmer connections in the state or region

**To pilot this opportunity, we recommend that Congress dedicate at least \$45 million annually to support this program in the 2023 Farm Bill. This will empower USDA to enter into up to three cooperative agreements to build peer-to-peer learning in each state.**

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<sup>1</sup> Note: this alone does not solve bottleneck issues or systemic exclusion issues, but it can help expend financial assistance if farmer mentors or network members have experience, or are provided with the opportunity to gain experience with NRCS staff, applications, and practices.

<sup>2</sup> One organization cannot serve all the needs of, or reach, all producers.

<sup>3</sup> Facilitation is a specialized skill that is cultural, situational, and language-relevant. In other words, there are many ways to do it right.