

AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH FOR MEETING THE NEEDS OF UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS

Conference Track: Bridging the Gaps in Programs and Services

Stephan L. Tubene, Okarsamaa B. White, and Mark Rose¹
Small Farm Institute, University of Maryland Eastern Shore
Glen Burnie, MD

Abstract

Very often, underserved populations including minority, limited-resource farmers, and new immigrant farmers are not familiar with the vast array of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs and services. Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Farm Service Agency (FAS), and land-grant Cooperative Extension have made technical and financial assistance programs available to small and limited-resource farmers. However, these special audiences have refrained from participating in these programs and services for several reasons namely schedule conflict, communication failure, and lack of trust. In some cases, funds are limited making it difficult to ensure programs continuity. Resolving these issues will ensure successful programs.

1. Introduction

Reaching underserved farming populations can be challenging. Underserved farmers do not always have access to resources offered by both state and federal agencies. Assessing the needs of these farmers and responding to their needs on a timely manner is critical to farmers' success. Such clientele must be cautiously assisted using creative and innovative methods. This paper aims at (1) introducing the new audience not vested in traditional Cooperative Extension and USDA services; (2) discussing ways used to effectively reach this new audience, and (3) discussing collaborative efforts through mutual programming, resources sharing, and commitment across agencies.

2. Underserved Farming Populations in Maryland

2.1 Maryland Target and Fringe Areas

Maryland Socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers are referred to as limited-resource farmers, which include women, minority (i.e., African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians), and new immigrant farmers.

¹Stephan Tubene is the Coordinator of the Small Farm Institute, Okarsamaa B. White is the Director of the Maryland Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Project (Maryland OASDFR) at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES), and Mark Rose is Assistant State Conservationist at Maryland Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Maryland Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers (OASDFR) targets 12 counties (i.e., 5 in Maryland's Eastern Shore, 5 in Southern Maryland, and 2 in Virginia's Eastern Shore) comprising a total of 235 farmers. In addition, the Outreach project works closely with other underserved audiences (26 farmers) located in fringe areas (Howard, Montgomery, Talbot, Queen Anne's, and Kent counties).

Target region comprises:

- (1) Maryland's Eastern Shore: Caroline, Dorchester, Somerset, Wicomico, and Worcester counties;
- (2) Southern Maryland: Anne Arundel, Calvert, Charles, Prince George's, and St. Mary's counties; and
- (3) Virginia's Eastern Shore: Accomack and Northampton counties.

The targeted area has a significant number of underserved farming audiences. In general, limited-resource and minority farmers and ranchers do not usually attend traditional Extension meetings and workshops due to many reasons including time differential, communication breakdown, and previous experiences with government programs. However, small farmers participating in the Maryland OASDFR program have gained significant hands-on experience in various aspects of farming including production, marketing, finance, record keeping and farm management; acquired, owned, operated, and maintained farms; increased their participation in various USDA programs; and improved the profitability of their farms.

2.2 New Immigrant Farmers

Beside U.S. limited-resource and minority farmers, there is a growing influx of newcomers into the agricultural business commonly known as new immigrant farmers. According to NIFI (2004), immigrant farmers are immigrants and refugees, including farm workers, who aspire to have a farm business or are currently farming for the social and economic benefit of their family and community.

Immigrant farmers as well as beginning farmers, not properly framed in the Economic Research Service's farm typology (Hoppe, and MacDonald, 2001) have special needs that must be addressed by institutions interested in their survival and success (Tubene, 2002). This new category of farmers is a new rising star, which deserves much attention from policy makers and agricultural service providers. In fact, new immigrant farmers have little or no knowledge of the U.S. agriculture and U.S. farming requirements even though most of them were farmers in their homeland. Their needs must be identified within this new frame in order to better know them and serve them effectively.

Changes that have affected Maryland agriculture, namely the housing development pressure on farmland, and the downfall of the tobacco industry, have also brought new opportunities to small-scale farmers, particularly, new immigrant and beginning farmers, in terms of diversified agriculture and alternative market opportunities.

3. Reaching New Audience

Land-grant universities have an international reputation of taking the university to the people. Created by the Morrill Land-Grant College Act signed by President Abraham Lincoln in July 2, 1862; 1862 colleges became the first institutions in the nation to teach “branches of learning related to agriculture and the mechanic arts” without excluding other scientific and classical studies (Rasmussen, 1989).

The land-grant universities system was thereafter strengthened by subsequent legislations, namely the Hatch Experiment Station Act of 1887, the Second Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1890; the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, which established the system of cooperative extension services; and the Tribal Colleges Land-Grant Status of 1994 known as a provision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Reauthorization Act (NASULGC, 2005). While 1862 land-grant universities are recognized to serve predominantly Caucasian populations, 1890 and 1994 institutions serve predominantly African Americans and Native Americans respectively.

Building relationships and trust is crucial to meeting the needs of underserved audiences. However, over the years some minority farmers have lost such trust and faith in the U.S. government agencies due to discriminatory practices (Tubene, 1999; and USDA, 1999). This made it difficult for government agricultural service providers to effectively do their job of providing technical services to minority farmers.

As for any agricultural service providers, meeting the needs of underserved audiences requires careful identification and understanding of their needs. This includes understanding their daily struggles and designing programs around these specific needs. In the last five years, the Small Farm Institute, the Maryland OASDFR program, and Maryland NRCS have utilized and promoted strategies that encourage and assist underserved farming population to acquire, own, operate, and maintain farms. These innovative and non-traditional methods used to reach farmers are farm visits, one-on-one technical assistance, farmer focus groups, hands-on workshops and seminars, networking events, trials and demonstrations, on-farm research projects, and targeted scheduling strategy.

4. Leveraging Resources across Agencies

Partnerships and cooperation among agencies and organizations are key components to identifying small farmers and their needs and increase the capacity of these agencies and organizations to provide technical and/or financial assistance to small farm clientele. Limited-resource and minority farmers are underserved because of lack of interest from both farmers and government agencies. On one hand, government agencies design “one size fits all” programs; and on the other hand, limited-resource and minority farmers do not trust government programs due to past experiences. Hence, advocating for this segment of the forgotten audience is crucial to their survival. Very often, it requires lobbying government agencies and/or raising additional funds to maintain programs. It is

the duties of the Small Farm Institute and the Maryland OASDFR project to leverage resources across agencies in order to meet programs' goals.

Since 2000, three institutions joined effort to pursue common projects. In 2000, the Small Farm Institute sought collaboration from the Southern Maryland Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Council to identify technical and financial opportunities for small farmers in Maryland. Two years later, as the Maryland OASDFR was being established at UMES as an independent program (after separating from Delaware State University), RC&D became one of its Advisory Board members. Since then, RC&D was able to coordinate a link with the USDA-NRCS Maryland State Office. This link has provided technical and financial assistance to assisting the UMES program to further identify USDA farm program opportunities, alternative and agri-tourism opportunities, as well as share information concerning farm resources.

With assistance provided by the NRCS and RC&D Coordinator, many new partnerships were created and enhanced not only within USDA but also between government and private small farm interests.

5. Concluding Remarks

Underserved populations encounter many obstacles in their daily life. In Maryland underserved farming audiences are minority limited-resource farmers, new immigrant farmers and beginning farmers. Very often, they do not have resources to navigate the system to get where they are to be. Meeting their needs requires a holistic approach.

Leveraging both internal and external resources can be crucial to the survival of not only the very institutions serving underserved populations but also the underserved audiences themselves. Innovative and creative strategies used to reach underserved populations include farm visits, one-on-one technical assistance, farmer focus groups, hands-on workshops and seminars, networking events, trials and demonstrations, on-farm research projects, and targeted scheduling strategy. Better collaborative and coordinated initiatives among institutions are to be encouraged for better outcomes.

References

Hoppe, Robert and J. MacDonald. 2001. *America's Diverse Family Farms: Assorted Sizes, Types, and Situations*. USDA-ERS, Agricultural Information Bulletin Number 769. Washington, DC.

NASULGC. 2005

http://www.nasulgc.org/publications/Land_Grant/Land_Grant_Main.htm

Rasmussen, Wayne. 1989. *Taking the University to the People*. Iowa State University Press, Ames.

Tubene, Stephan. 2002. The Small Farm Institute World Wide Homepage,
www.agnr.umd.edu/mce/smallfarminstitute

Tubene, Stephan. 2001. *Agricultural and Demographic Changes in the Mid-Atlantic Region: Implications for Ethnic and Specialty Produce*. Fact Sheet 793.
University of Maryland Cooperative Extension.

Tubene, Stephan and David Holder. 2001. *Serving Small Farms in the 21st Century*.
Small Farm Institute, Maryland Cooperative Extension, University of Maryland.

Tubene, Stephan. 1999. *A Survey of Minority Limited-Resource Farmers in Anne Arundel County*. Maryland Cooperative Extension. The Small Farm Institute Report #99-1.

USDA. 1999 Class lawsuit <http://www.usda.gov/cr/OCR/Pigford/consentdef.htm>