ENGAGING WITH FARMERS

Conservation planning on the small and diverse farms of Massachusetts

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts

Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts

Many Thanks TO OUR CONTRIBUTORS

This guide represents the collective efforts of a dedicated team of consultants as well as numerous outside contributors, reviewers, and workshop participants within several agencies, including the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Massachusetts Department of Agriculture (MDAR), and American Farmland Trust, as well as the Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts (MACD), which led the overall development process. In addition, this material reflects the input of many farmers operating diverse farms across the Commonwealth who took time out from their busy days to participate in a series of personal interviews with the project team. We greatly appreciate everyone's thoughtful and enthusiastic contribution to the final product. (For information on the team, see our profiles on pages 62-63 of this guide.)

– Michael Leff, Susan Phinney, Joseph Smith, Lisa Trotto, Iain Ward, and Kathryn Zichelle Sullivan

FARMERS INTERVIEWED

Morven Allen | Maple Shade Farm, Sheffield

Steve Barstow | Barstow's Long View Farm, Hadley

Jassy Bratko | High Meadow Farm, Hubbardston

Clifford & Toni Dever | Cook Farm, Newburyport

Joanne DiNardo | Sholan Farms, Leominster

Dave Dumaresq | Farmer Dave's, Dracut

Mike Dunbar | Dunbar Aquafarm, West Yarmouth

Dee Elliot | Elliot Farm, Lakeville

Lisa Evans & Tim Smith | We Grow Microgreens, Hyde Park

Dom Fernandes | Fresh Meadows Farm, Carver

Andrew Ferry | Pine Hill Dairy, Westport

Cass Gilmore | Benson's Pond, Middleboro

Joe Grady | Blue Moon Oyster Company, Duxbury Harbor

Paul Hamblin | Spring Creek Shellfish, Barnstable

Ben Haye | Maple Row Farm, Buckland

Nancy Hubbard | Hubbard's Farm, Princeton

Randy Jordan | Jordan Dairy Farms, Rutland

Jim Lattanzi | Hollis Hills Farm, Fitchburg

Maria Moreira & Jessy Gill | World Farmers, Lancaster

Michael Pineo | Pineo Family Farm, Sterling

Herb Robinson | Robinson's Greenhouse, Paxton

Andrew Rodgers | Clark Farm, Carlisle

Al Rose | Red Apple Farm, Phillipston

Phil Stevens | Carter & Stevens Farm, Barre

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTORS

Rose Arruda | Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources

Joel Betts | Worcester County Conservation District

Chief George Spring Buffalo | Chairman of the Pocasset Wampanoag Tribe of the Pokanoket Nation & COO of the Pocasset Pokanoket Land Trust Inc.

Daylight Films and Video | Video clips (daylight-films.com)

Penny Michalak | Graphic design

All photos courtesy of Diane Baedeker Petit, NRCS Public Affairs Officer, with the exception of photos on pages 18, 25, and 37 by Lisa Trotto.

NRCS MASSACHUSETTS

Thomas Akin
Rachael Barnes Phillips
Gary Blazejewski
William Breed
Courtney Brizida
Michelle Cozine
Lisa Cusson
Deron Davis
Samantha DeLuca *(intern)*
Manuel Díaz-Gonzalez
Mia Halter
Elizabeth Herzig *(intern)*
Daniel Lenthall
Melissa Mange
Morgan McKee
Mathew Miller
Sylvia Muñiz-Gayá
Kate Parsons
Maggie Payne
Diane Petit
Lisa Petruski
Robert Purcell
Jacob Rathbun
Rose Schwartz
Rita Thibodeau
Qadree Willis
Stephanie Wilsen
Daniel Wright

AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST

Emily Cole
Laura Hayes
Sarah Heller
Dylan Kirk
Nathan L'Etoile
Jack Loomis
Joao Tavares Carreiro

MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION DISTRICTS (MACD)

John Doyle
Martha Higgins
Kristen Irvin
Michael Leff
Laura McPherson
Lisa Trotto
Alex Welch

This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, under agreement number NR203A750001C010. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In addition, any reference to specific brands or types of products or services does not constitute or imply an endorsement by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for those products or services.

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This guide is posted on both the MACD website (www.massacd.org) and the NRCS website (www.nrcs.usda.gov/massachusetts).

To request the pdf by email, contact MLeffMACD@gmail.com

Contents

Introduction

Whether you are a new or long-time conservation planner – or any other professional who seeks to engage effectively with farmers in Massachusetts – this guide provides tools and strategies designed to help you evaluate and improve your interactions.

Planners strive to provide expert technical assistance, encourage participation in Farm Bill programs, and facilitate the application of conservation practices. Indeed, NRCS staff bring to their jobs a sound basis in conservation science, a knowledge of conservation programs, and experience with agency operations. Those are all invaluable skills for reaching your goals. But that's not all there is to it.

Among other things, successfully engaging with farmers also involves building trust, acting with good faith and integrity, and respecting the farmer's time, perspective, and knowledge of and experience with their own farms and farming practices. Those and other "soft" interpersonal skills, which are not often covered in your training, can be just as important as hard knowledge and experience – and sometimes even more so, if failing in those respects terminates the interaction.

Over time, better engagement will result in more conservation plans written, more program applications submitted, more practices designed with the farmer's input, more contracts awarded and financed, and more conservation practices implemented by contractors chosen by farmers and done to NRCS specifications. Ultimately, of course, all of that leads to greater conservation of natural resources in Massachusetts.

This guide was created with input from numerous farmers across the state, NRCS field and office staff, and other consultants and technical service providers (TSPs) with many years of experience working with farmers in the field, so to speak.

QUICK TIP

While this guide addresses "Planners" throughout, much of the content will be useful to anyone who seeks to engage with farmers – such as program assistants, conservation district personnel, technical service providers, engineers, and soil conservationists, among others.

By working through this guide, you will:

- gain insight into engagement methods that have proved effective,
- learn to avoid missteps that can interfere with successful interactions,
- connect these proven approaches to the NRCS Planning Process, and
- practice self-evaluation techniques to spot your weaknesses and hone your strengths.

Overall, this guide can improve your ability to engage with farmers in a more satisfying and productive way.

WHAT TO EXPECT

This guide provides background information on agriculture in Massachusetts, general information on our farmers and the farming community, descriptions of positive and negative interactions, insights from the field of interpersonal relationships, and connections between all of those elements to the NRCS planning process. In the final chapter, there's a **Self-Evaluation Worksheet** you can use to assess your engagement skills and track your improvement.

Along the way, you'll find occasional links to video clips from interviews with a number of Massachusetts farmers to supplement the topics covered and bring it all to life. Watch also for occasional boxes with **Quick Tips** and **More Info**. Finally, the guide provides references for more in-depth reading and exploration in the **Additional Resources**, where you'll also find a link to a longer video (see page 48) that introduces the farmers interviewed. In that video compilation, you'll hear more from the farmers about their operations and how they have engaged with NRCS planners and other service providers.

From beginning to end, the content is arranged to build upon the topics covered previously so you'll acquire the full picture by the time you complete the guide.

About Farming in Massachusetts

It's always a good idea to get to know your territory and your audience. So let's start at the beginning with some background on the Massachusetts agricultural scene.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AGRICULTURE IN MASSACHUSETTS

The first farmers in this region were the indigenous people who were part of the Algonquian culture. The primary nations in what is today the state of Massachusetts were its namesake, of course, as well as the Mahican, Nauset, Nipmuc, Pennacook, Pocomtuc, and Wampanoag.

The people followed a nomadic lifestyle, moving to access the foods available in each season. Their diet included salmon, cod, bass, deer, bear, nuts, berries, and even maple syrup. Over time they began to add agricultural crops to their hunter-gatherer diet. The first archeological evidence of the native people raising crops in Massachusetts is sometime between 1200 and 1500 CE. This is considerably later than the evidence of agriculture found elsewhere – as much as 1,000 to 3,000 years earlier in New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, for example.

VIDEO CLIP
Native blessing for the relationship

Corn, beans, and squash became the principal crops. These "Three Sisters" were always planted together in a small mound to take advantage of the symbiotic relationship among the three plants. The corn stalks provide structure for the beans to grow, and the beans' root system provides nitrogen to the soil. Squash vines shade out weeds and increase soil moisture. Fish and wood ash were used to fertilize the crops. Perhaps you can see the link from the growing practices of the native population to what recently is referred to as intercropping, polyculture, or sustainable or regenerative agriculture. The native people shared their successful farming skills with the early European settlers whose transplanted farming methods were not well suited to the soils and climate of Massachusetts.

More intensive use of the land began during the colonial period of the 1600s and 1700s. English colonists came to Massachusetts to extract resources for England. These settlers brought the first livestock, plows, and notions of land ownership. (They also brought diseases, of course, to which the native peoples had no immunity.) Agriculture served as sustenance and support for the settlers' other economic pursuits – primarily fishing, fur trade, lumber,

QUICK TIP

When you visit a farm, ask about its history. Most farmers love to share the history of their land. You may visit properties that were awarded by a King's grant, or one of 132 farms identified as a "Century Farm" by the Massachusetts Farm Bureau.

and whaling. The early colonists assigned and divided land so that each settler (or at least free white males) received land for tillage, pasture, hay, woodlot, and water access. They also fenced and built stone walls to demarcate privately owned land. Other lands such as the town commons were kept open for all to use. At first, the town, rather than the individual farm, was the self-sufficient unit.

80%

By 1830, 80% of land in Massachusetts had been cleared of trees for agricultural activities such as crops and pastures

This communal system did not last. Many settlers disliked communal work, and the division of land for the next generations resulted in parcels too small to support a family. Some farms consolidated into commercial enterprises to support larger town populations such as Boston, Salem, and Providence. Other small landowners and households became primarily occupied with trades such as carpentry, tanning, shoemaking, blacksmithing, weaving, or tailoring. As more immigrants continued to arrive, many settlers began to move farther from towns, clearing land for homesteads, farming for subsistence, and leading a more independent lifestyle. Overall, however, very few settlers were truly self-sufficient, living entirely off the land.

The Industrial Revolution of the late 1700s and early 1800s had many impacts on Massachusetts agriculture. For a brief period of time, commercial agriculture expanded as the development of textile mills in cities such as Lowell and Lawrence created an early demand for wool. That led to the clearing of marginal land for sheep pasture. By 1830, fully 80 percent of the land in Massachusetts had been cleared of trees. Agricultural activities in the state peaked between 1830 and 1885. The invention of the iron/steel plow, the development of the railroad, and the opening of the Erie Canal allowed for import of cheaper raw materials and agricultural products from states farther to the west. As a result, farming in Massachusetts declined precipitously. Many of the cleared marginal pastures with rocky soils were abandoned and began reverting back to forest.

The "Three Sisters" were always planted together in a small mound to take advantage of the symbiotic relationship among the three plants.

MODERN TIMES

During the 20th century, the major change in Massachusetts land use was the growth of cities and towns, accompanied by an explosion in suburban and rural housing. This growth caused agricultural acreage to decline further as it was either developed or abandoned. At its peak in the 1970s, forest covered nearly two-thirds of the state before the total area of "open space" – cleared or forested – actually started to decline. Today, Massachusetts is about 60 percent forested while agriculture now occupies 8 percent of the state's land area.

In 1977, in an effort to combat the decline of farmland, the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) established the **Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program** to keep land in agricultural use. The APR program and other conservation restrictions and easements permanently protect open space from development while keeping it in private ownership. MDAR often partners with NRCS through its Agricultural Conservation Easement Program to permanently protect prime farmland soils.

MORE INFO

An excellent depiction of the changing landscape over time can be found in the dioramas housed in the Fisher Museum at the Harvard Forest in Petersham, which can also be viewed **here**.

Land use issues are a critical factor in the viability of Massachusetts agriculture. In the more populous cities and towns, residential and commercial development are often seen as the "highest and best use" of open space. Where development surrounds those farms that remain, many newer residents are not familiar with typical farming methods, which can create challenges for those attempting to farm. Neighbors may, for example, perceive fields or cranberry bogs as open space for use by all. Other common problems include encroachment, trespassing, dumping, and complaints about common agricultural practices such as spreading manure and pest management spraying.

As available land becomes increasingly scarce, land values often rise, making farms more "valuable" for development than for farming. New farmers in particular may find it difficult to produce enough crop revenue to compete with the high prices that developers can pay. In addition, many farmers rely on lease arrangements for additional hay or crop land that can be sold out from under them at any time. An additional benefit of APR-type restrictions mentioned above is that protected properties maintain an agricultural land value, which helps the next generation of farmers better afford land that would otherwise be priced out of reach.

In addition to state laws governing business (including farming) and protecting the environment, individual towns can enact their own laws that may go beyond those state regulations. In 1972, local commissions were authorized to administer the state's **Wetlands Protection Act**. By the mid-1980s, every town and city in Massachusetts had established a **Conservation Commission**, officially charged with the protection of a community's natural resources. While there are some broad exemptions for agricultural practices, farmers are nevertheless subject to the requirements of the act.

More recently, many towns have formed an **Agricultural Commission** to help advance farmers' interests and educate the non-farming community about common agricultural concerns and practices. While AgComs have no regulatory authority, they do represent the farming community, encourage the pursuit of agriculture, and promote agricultural economic development – including the protection, preservation, and revitalization of agricultural businesses and farmland. Some towns have also adopted a "**Right to Farm**" bylaw, which supports the right to farm accorded all citizens of Massachusetts under state statute. This bylaw varies from community to community, but all serve to remind neighbors and municipal officials of the landowner's right to practice agriculture on their land.

CHANGING ROLES: CONSERVATION DISTRICTS, NRCS, AND FARM BILL PROGRAMS

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Massachusetts, like other states across the country, created Conservation Districts to work with the federal Soil Conservation Service (SCS), which was established in 1935 in response to the environmental disaster of the Dust Bowl. Conservation Districts were established, usually on a county basis, to provide a local connection between landowners, land managers, and the federal SCS, as a means to promote the protection and conservation of the nation's valuable soil and water resources. Districts were overseen by boards of volunteer supervisors who were elected from among landowners or managers within the county.

In the early days, assistance offered by the Soil Conservation Service and Conservation Districts was primarily for soil erosion, land drainage, construction of ponds, and land clearing operations, including removal of rocks and stone walls. At first, that assistance was farm-oriented, but changing patterns of land use and lifestyles over the years led to new environmental concerns and challenges that have broadened the focus of Conservation Districts.

The passage of the Food Security Act of 1985 had a significant impact on the Soil Conservation Service. The Act established conservation as a prerequisite for participation in USDA programs for the first time. Then, in 1994, Congress initiated a major reorganization of USDA and renamed the agency the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to better reflect the broad scope of its mission.

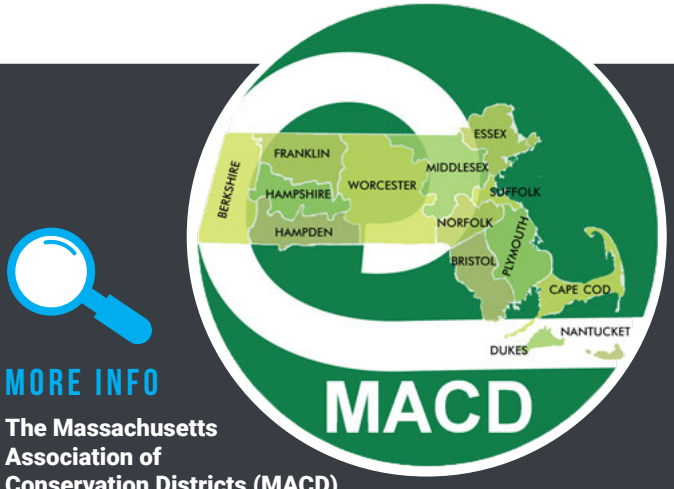
The federal Farm Bill, which directly influences NRCS programs and activities, is revisited about every five years (most recently in 2018 as of this writing). The programs supported by the Farm Bill are constantly changing to bring it up to date with existing issues, such as the current focus on energy, climate, and urban agriculture. Requests for help from NRCS have increased, particularly by units of government and urban citizens. All of this, naturally, impacts the roles and responsibilities of Conservation Planners.

As a result of that evolution, NRCS and Conservation Districts have become involved in a wide range of issues that are no longer primarily soil-based, but are related to the conservation of all our natural resources. Conservation Planners now may find themselves working in a forest, in a salt marsh, a stream, or along urban streets and parks. They have become involved in open space and resource planning, subdivision review, wildlife and fisheries habitat, renewable energy, urban forestry, and environmental education.

Originally, farmers seeking federal assistance had to go through the Conservation Districts. In the 1990s, however, the Farm Bill changed the Districts' relationship with USDA to more of an advisory role as requests for assistance were then taken directly by USDA. Around that same time, Massachusetts' state budget support for Conservation Districts began to shrink and ultimately went away entirely. It was not until 2017 that some state funding for the Districts was restored.

MASSACHUSETTS TODAY: FARMLAND AND THE BUSINESS OF FARMING

Massachusetts is a small state, and our agricultural landscape is dominated by small farms. According to 2017 data from the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, there are over 7,500 farms in Massachusetts, with an average farm size of just over 67 acres. Recent trends show an increase in the *number* of farms, but a reduction in the average size of those farms. Agricultural land occupies roughly half a million acres, only 8 percent of the State's total land area.



MORE INFO

The Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) represents the 13 Conservation Districts of the Commonwealth. That's one for each of the state's 14 counties – with Hampshire and Hampden counties having merged their Districts in 2016.

In addition to assisting and uniting the individual Conservation Districts, MACD currently provides staff to advance Farm Bill programs at NRCS Field Offices. MACD also manages various projects and programs for state agencies such as MassDEP and MDAR – as well as the development of this farmer engagement guide for NRCS.

The USDA defines small farms as those with annual agricultural sales below $250,000. By that metric, small farms account for 94 percent of farms in Massachusetts while family or individually owned farms account for nearly 80 percent of Massachusetts farms. However, fully 63 percent of farms in Massachusetts generate less than $10,000 annually. Of the remaining 37 percent, the average annual production is just over $65,000. For most farmers in Massachusetts, agriculture is not the primary source of income.

Greenhouse and nursery products generate the highest agricultural revenue in Massachusetts, followed by vegetables, cranberries, apples, other fruits, livestock and poultry, and dairy products. Massachusetts produces 25 percent of the nation's cranberries and is home to the largest cranberry marketing cooperative in the world. Massachusetts also has a thriving shellfish and aquaculture industry. According to MDAR, the output of the shellfish aquaculture industry in Massachusetts was valued at $25.4-million in 2013.

94%
of Massachusetts farms are considered small farms by the USDA

80%
are family or individually owned

63%
generate less than $10,000 annually

Once the dominant product on Massachusetts farms, dairy has shrunk to only about 10 percent of the state's agricultural economy. This sector is challenged by the low prices set by the Federal Milk Marketing Orders, which are often below the cost of production. Recent competition from plant-based milk substitutes has also impacted dairy sales. (Recent trends in agricultural enterprises can be seen in the chart on page 11.)

Many farmers in the state have sought to find new ways to attract customers and increase business. Direct sales to consumers through farm stands, CSAs, and farmers markets have grown substantially over the past 20 years. Some farms are establishing themselves as destinations for recreation and entertainment by hosting events and partnering with other community organizations and businesses, such as wineries and breweries, to attract visitors to the farm. Thanks to such innovations, direct-to-consumer sales of farm products in Massachusetts are among the highest in the country. With that approach, the farmer benefits by engaging directly with the consumer, without third-party retailers, wholesalers, or other intermediaries. Consumers purchase $100-million a year directly from farmers in the state.

MORE INFO

See the **Mass Grown Map** to locate farm products and activities and to get a picture of how farmers engage consumers in your region.

While relatively small in land area, Massachusetts is the third most densely populated state in the United States. As a result, development pressure places a high value on all available land, including farmland. According to the USDA Land Values Summary, in 2020 Massachusetts farmland was valued at $11,300 per acre, fourth highest in the nation.

Farmland ownership in Massachusetts can be divided into two categories: owner-operator farmers, and non-farming landowners (private, public, and institutional land ownership) that provide land for farmers to rent. Most farmers utilize land in both categories.

There are farms in nearly every Massachusetts town, and food-producing areas in many of our cities. These enterprises range from large tracts of land of several hundred acres to small pieces of land covered by a hoop house. Food is produced on hillsides, rocky soil, sandy soil, river bottom land, and in raised-bed gardens. Farms can be found in modest backyards and formerly abandoned city blocks. With determination and a little ingenuity, farms can fill available space of just about every kind.

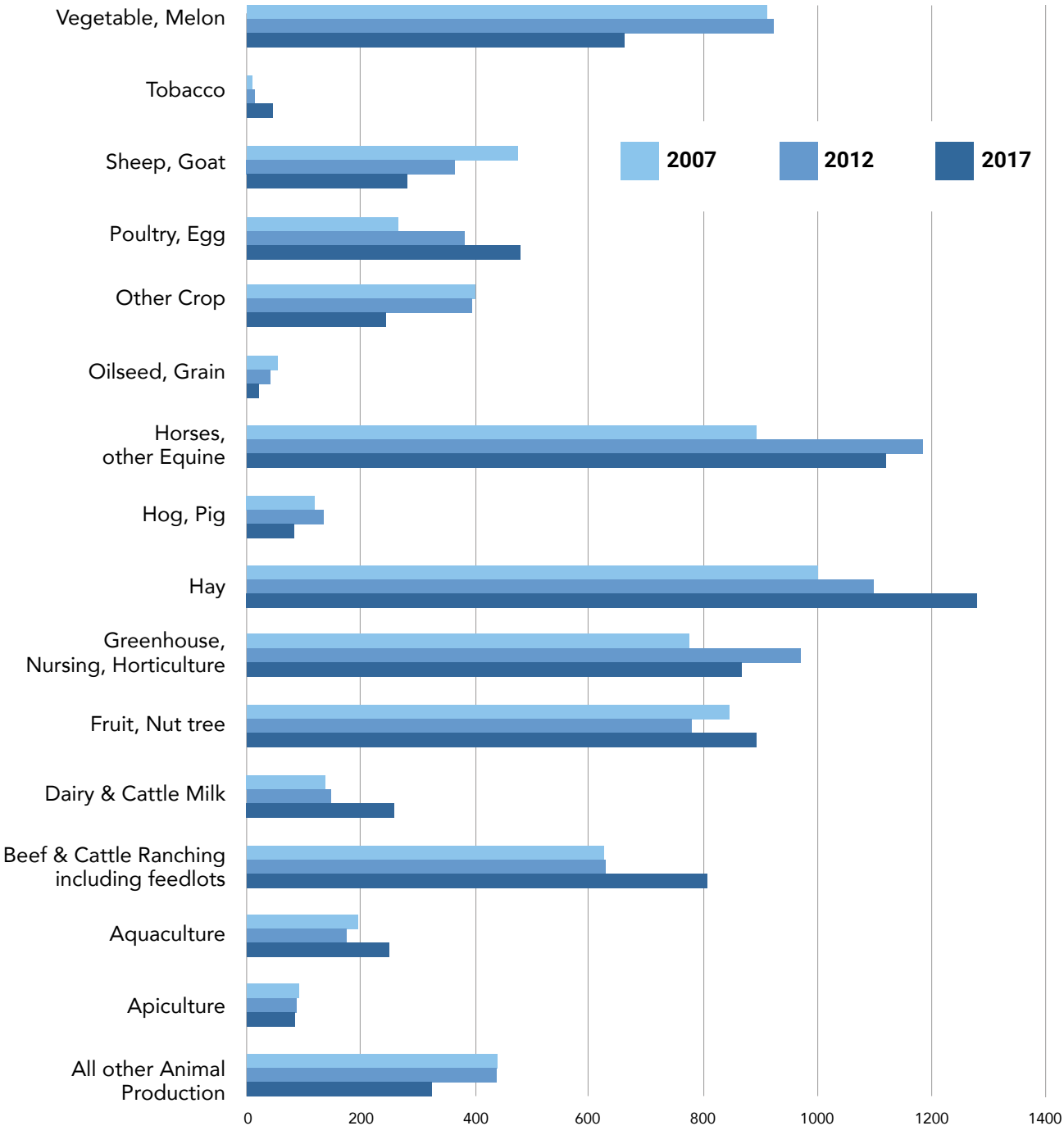
URBAN AG CONTINUES TO GROW

Urban agriculture is a growing sector across the country. The term generally refers to the cultivation, processing, and distribution of agricultural products in urban and suburban settings. That includes things like vertical production, warehouse farms, community gardens, rooftop farms, hydroponic, aeroponic, and aquaponic facilities, as well as other innovations. Urban farmers and gardeners work among diverse populations to expand access to nutritious foods, foster community engagement, provide jobs, educate communities about farming, and expand green spaces.

VIDEO CLIP
Ignorance is bliss

Many of the barriers to entry and long-term success of urban farms are the same as those in rural areas: limited access to land

NUMBER OF FARMS AND PRODUCTION FACILITIES BY TYPE
(2007, 2012, 2017)



What are the predominant types of farms in Massachusetts? *Massachusetts consists of a very diverse group of farms. If we rank farm types by the numbers of farms, the most predominant type of farm in 2017 was hay farming, accounting for 1,001 farms, or about 14 percent of all Massachusetts farms in 2017. Close behind are the farms involved in vegetable and melon farming, accounting for 908 farms, or about 13 percent. Horse and other equine farming followed, with 892 farms, or about 12 percent. Fruit, tree nut, and berry farming, which includes the Commonwealth's cranberry growers and orchards, accounted for 845 farms, or about 11.7 percent of the total. Greenhouse, nursery, and floriculture accounted for 777 farms, or about 10.7 percent. [Source: Massachusetts Agricultural Census 2017]*

"Empowering communities to grow local, healthy food goes a long way towards solving issues of food justice and access."

– Leslie Glover II, program manager, USDA Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production

and water, local ordinance restrictions, poor soil quality, and unsupportive neighbors. Other factors that often pose obstacles in urban locales include contaminated soils, shading from structures on adjacent properties, small plot size overall, and language barriers.

Private organizations have long been supporting the urban ag trend in Massachusetts. MDAR launched its urban ag program in 2013. And more recently, NRCS has also begun to offer assistance to urban farmers in order to address food insecurity and improve access to healthy foods, especially among low income and minority groups. The 2018 Farm Bill established new mandates for the development of policies and outreach relating to urban, indoor, and non-soil based agricultural production practices. As a result, USDA has created a nationwide Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production, housed within NRCS and offering various engagement and cooperative agreement opportunities as well as grants for nonprofits, municipalities, Native American tribal groups, and schools.

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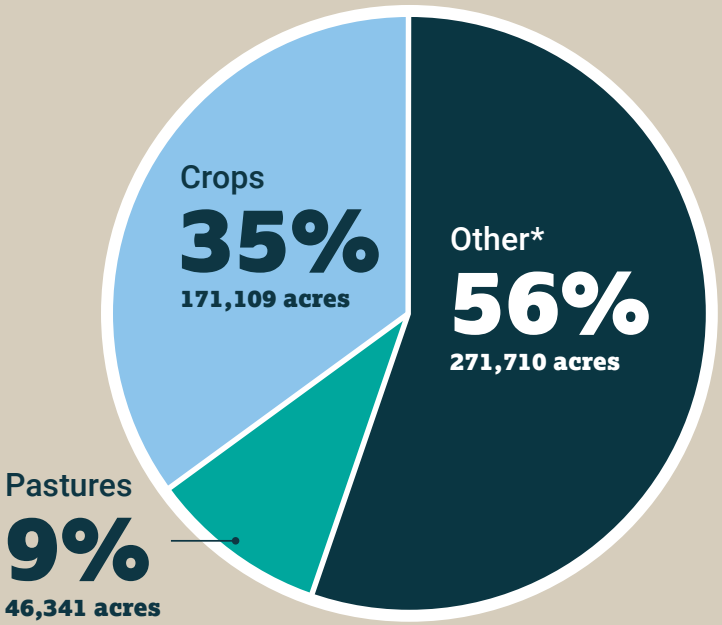
MORE INFO

More information on urban ag and helpful resources to better serve urban farmers can be found here:

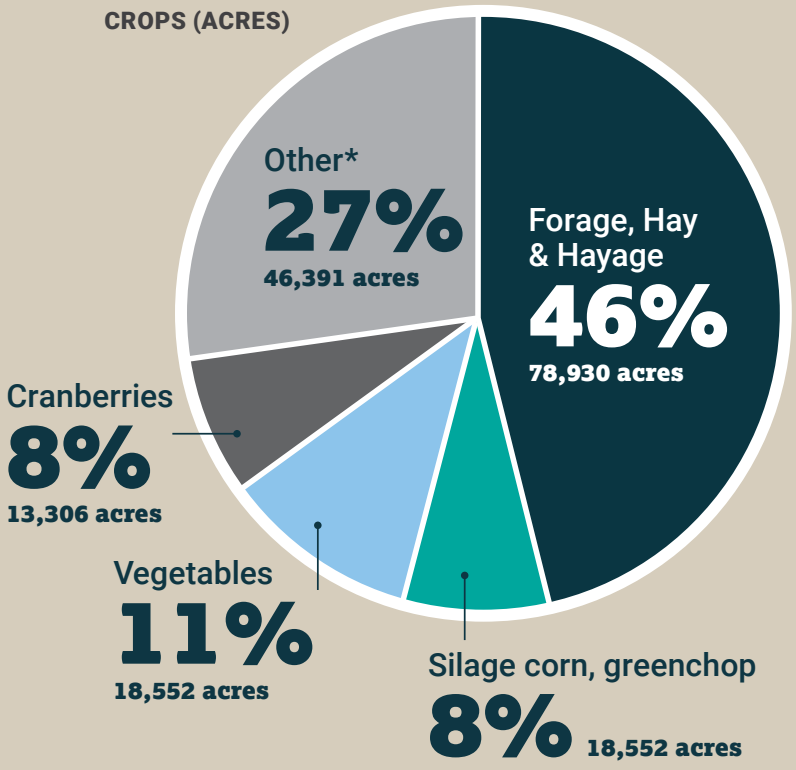
- **Urban Agriculture Grants and Engagement Opportunities**
- **USDA Urban Agriculture Tool Kit**
- **NRCS Urban Agriculture website**
- **MDAR Urban Agriculture Program**

FARMLAND (ACRES)



* Other includes headquarters and forestland

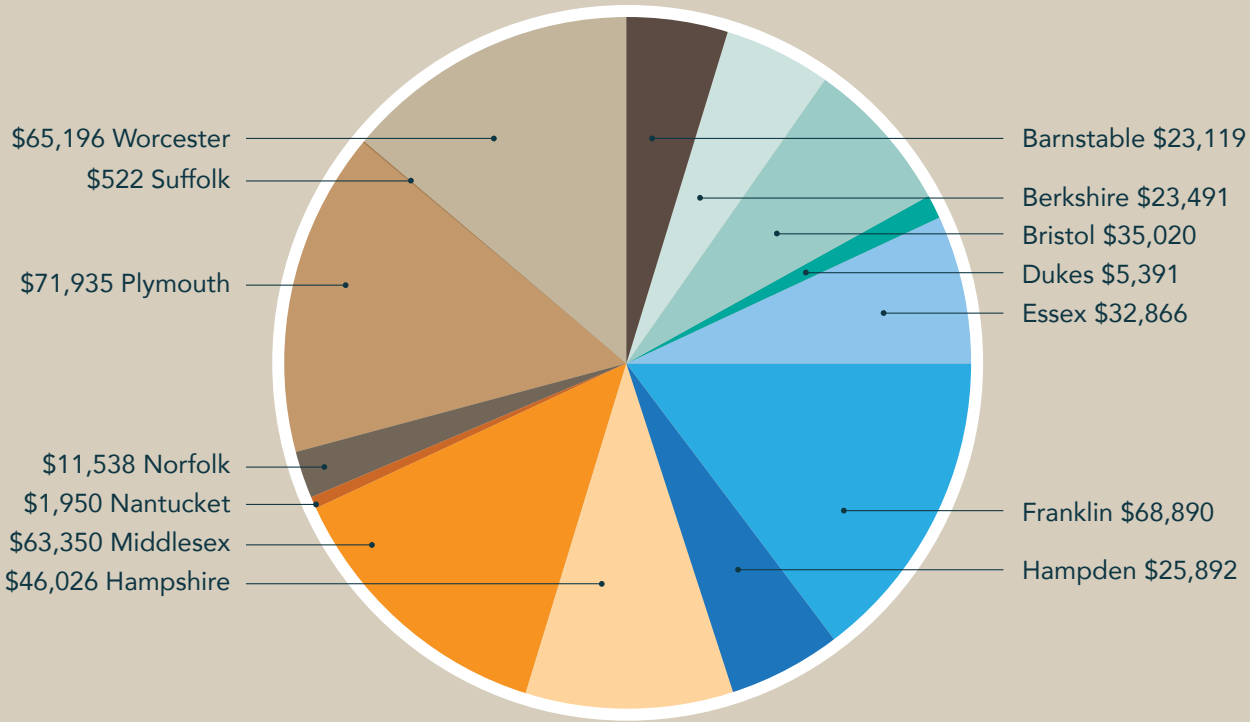
CROPS (ACRES)



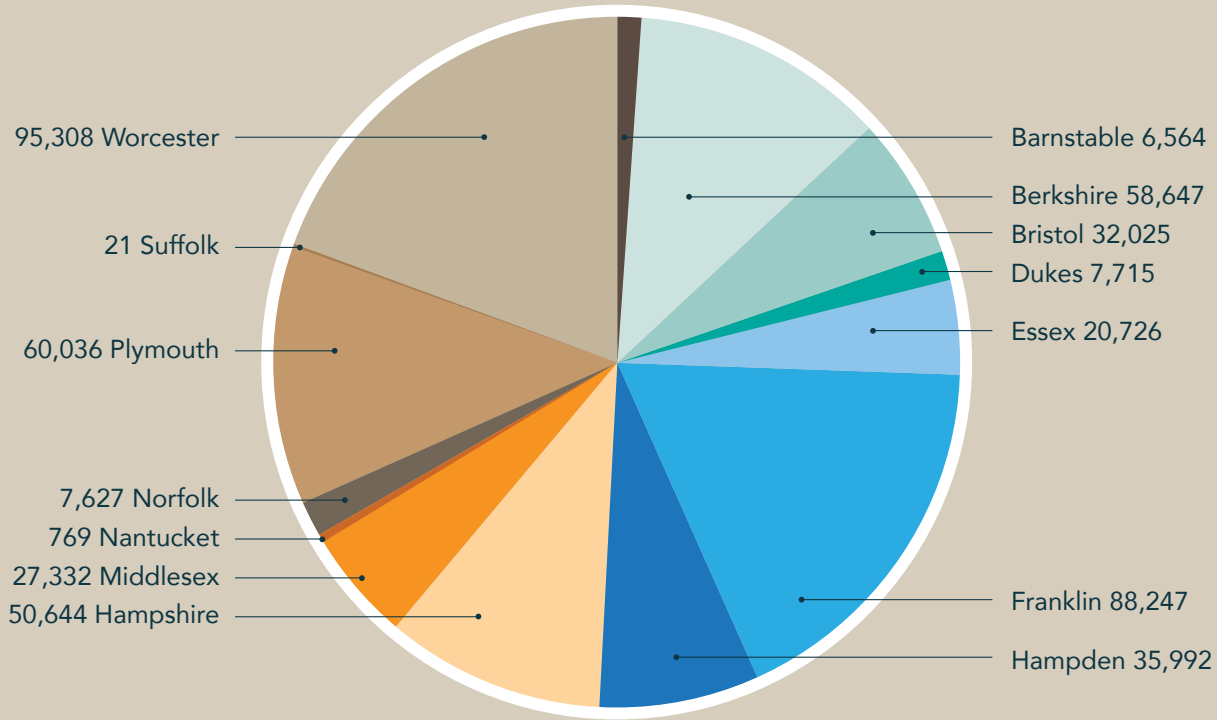
* Other can include grains, tobacco, fruit, Christmas trees, and nursery

Source: 2017 USDA Agricultural Census

SALES BY COUNTY ($1000)

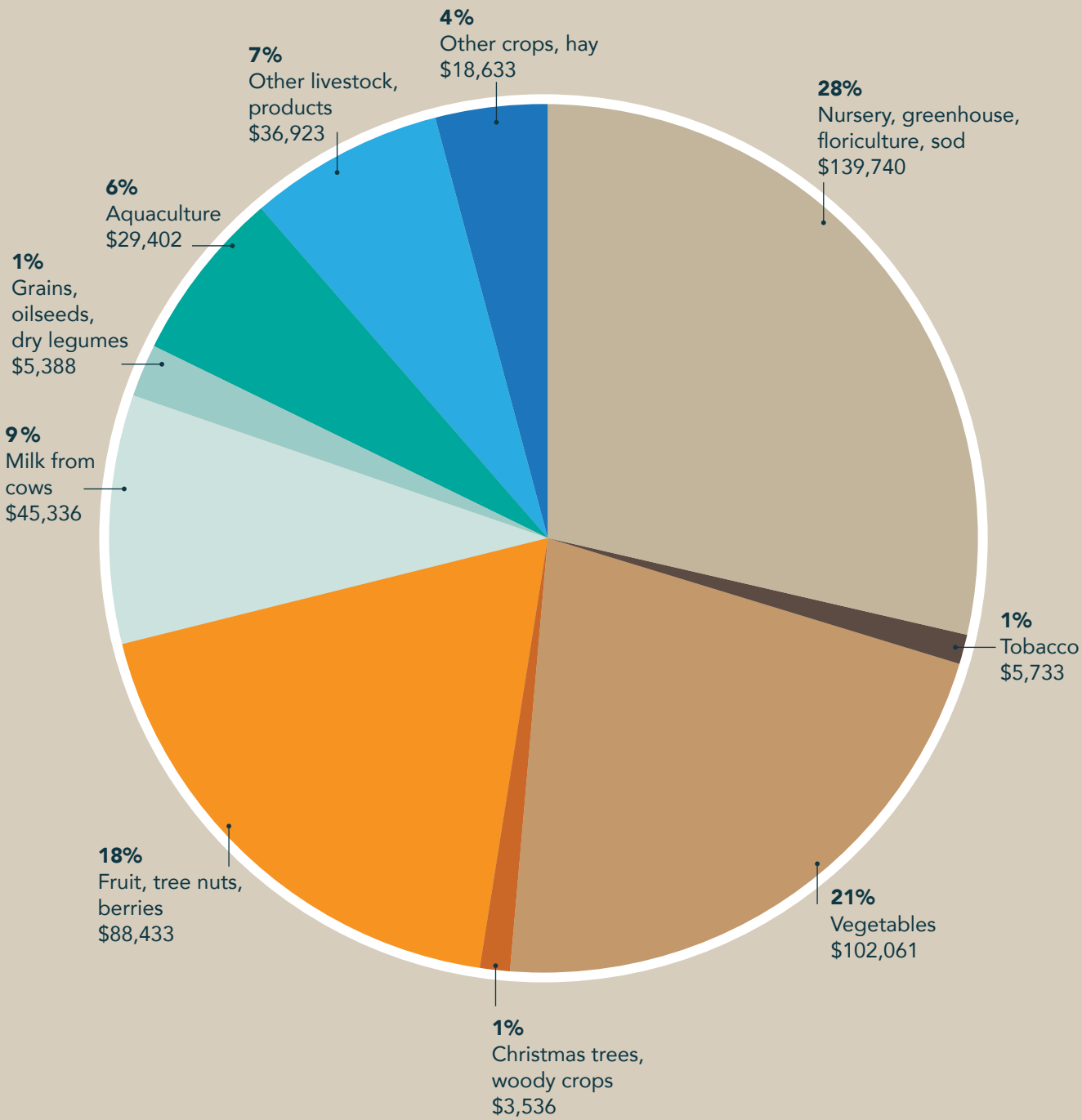


FARMLAND BY COUNTY (ACRES)



Source: 2017 USDA Agricultural Census

MASSACHUSETTS TOTAL ANNUAL SALES: $475,185,000
(CROPS BY SALES IN $1000)



Source: 2017 USDA Agricultural Census

Understanding and Working with Farmers

Now that we've looked at the overall agricultural setting in Massachusetts, let's get to know our farmers. Of course, they're as different from one another as any group of individuals.

Still, there are many shared features as well as common variations among farmers, and understanding both the similarities and the array of differences can help you gain insight into the mindset and workings of today's diverse farmers across the state.

UNDERSTANDING THE FARMER

Strictly speaking, a farmer is a person engaged in agriculture, raising living organisms for food or raw materials. The term usually applies to people who do some combination of raising field crops, orchards, vineyards, or livestock. For our purposes, the farmer is the person or persons who own or manage a farm. They are typically the decision makers for the farm. They are the people we need to effectively engage in order to accomplish our objectives.

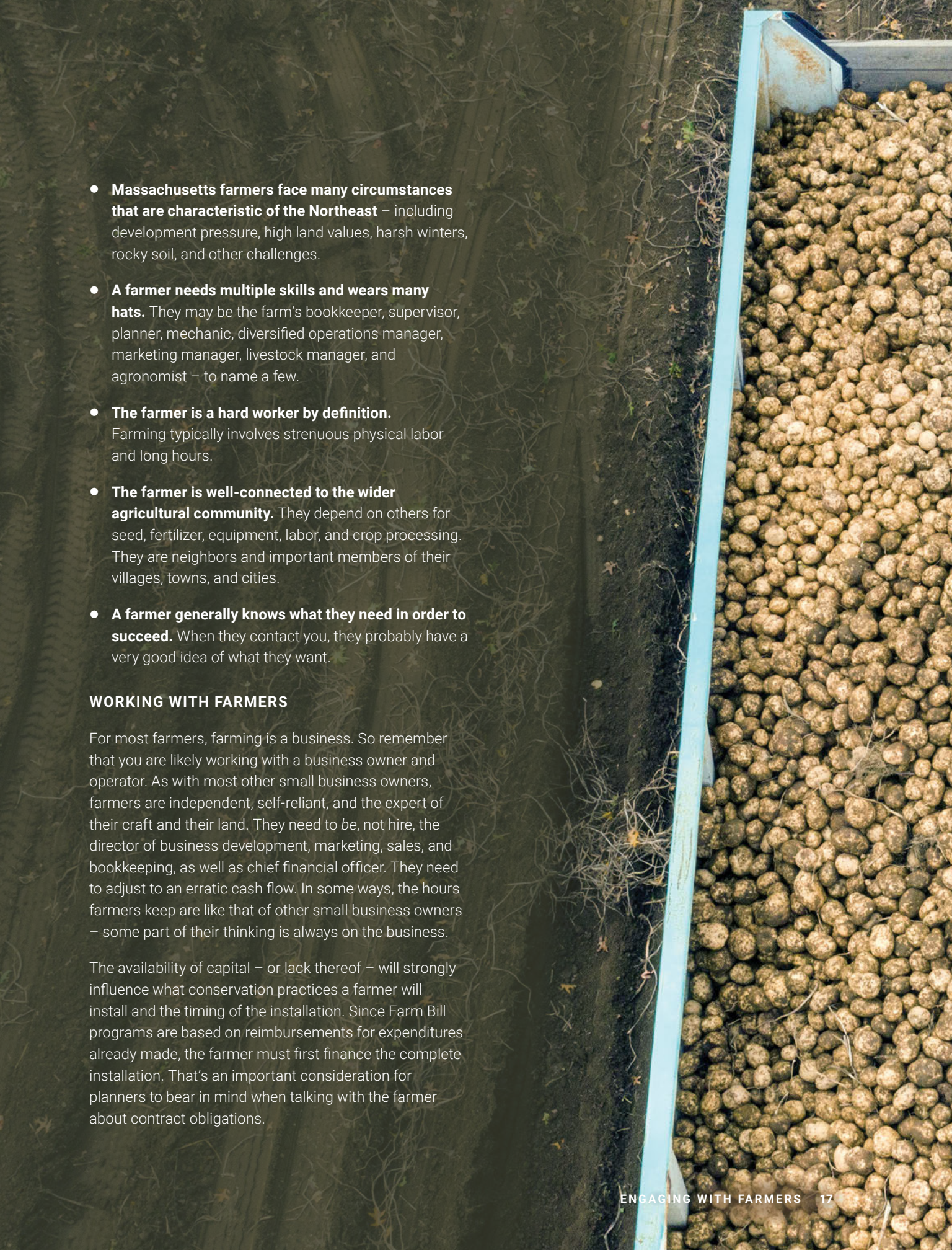
While many are full-time farmers, many more also have jobs off the farm. Some farm on leased land or lease their land to others. Some are new to farming; some operate family farms that have spanned many generations. Some farmers run the operation themselves; others farm within the structure of a guiding organization or corporation. Some farmers stick within one specialized crop; others switch from one crop to another and back again many times over the years.

Nevertheless, while it's hard to generalize about the circumstances and attitudes of a Massachusetts farmer, there are some common characteristics.

- **The farmer knows more about their land and their operation than anyone else.** If you want to know about a farm, ask the farmer. In most cases, they'll be happy and proud to tell you about it. They know the land and its capabilities because their livelihoods depend on it. They know the good spots and the bad, where it's wet, where it's productive, and where there are problems. They know the history of the land. They know what has been grown there, what has worked and what hasn't. They know where the spring sun warms the soil, the prevailing wind direction, and how water moves across the landscape.

VIDEO CLIP
Listen to the farmer

- **A farmer is subject to the natural cycle of the seasons and the vagaries of the weather.** Their schedule is often out of their hands. They must do certain things at certain times. When something needs to be done to protect the health, welfare, and productivity of the farm, they have to do it, regardless of the time of day or year. Their lives are greatly influenced by the weather, when it rains and when it doesn't, the cycles of wet and dry, freezing and thawing. When storms hit, the farmer must react to protect their land, crops, livestock, and livelihoods. A hailstorm in June may be just an inconvenience or curiosity for most people, but for the farmer with an orchard, for example, it could be the destruction of an entire crop and the loss of thousands of dollars.



- **Massachusetts farmers face many circumstances that are characteristic of the Northeast** – including development pressure, high land values, harsh winters, rocky soil, and other challenges.
- **A farmer needs multiple skills and wears many hats.** They may be the farm's bookkeeper, supervisor, planner, mechanic, diversified operations manager, marketing manager, livestock manager, and agronomist – to name a few.
- **The farmer is a hard worker by definition.** Farming typically involves strenuous physical labor and long hours.
- **The farmer is well-connected to the wider agricultural community.** They depend on others for seed, fertilizer, equipment, labor, and crop processing. They are neighbors and important members of their villages, towns, and cities.
- **A farmer generally knows what they need in order to succeed.** When they contact you, they probably have a very good idea of what they want.

WORKING WITH FARMERS

For most farmers, farming is a business. So remember that you are likely working with a business owner and operator. As with most other small business owners, farmers are independent, self-reliant, and the expert of their craft and their land. They need to *be*, not hire, the director of business development, marketing, sales, and bookkeeping, as well as chief financial officer. They need to adjust to an erratic cash flow. In some ways, the hours farmers keep are like that of other small business owners – some part of their thinking is always on the business.

The availability of capital – or lack thereof – will strongly influence what conservation practices a farmer will install and the timing of the installation. Since Farm Bill programs are based on reimbursements for expenditures already made, the farmer must first finance the complete installation. That's an important consideration for planners to bear in mind when talking with the farmer about contract obligations.

As with most other small business owners, farmers are independent, self-reliant, and the expert of their craft and their land.

MORE INFO

Regional agriculture "Buy Local" organizations connect farmers to their surrounding communities and vice versa. For more information and a list of such organizations, go **here**.

It's also important to understand the marketing channels that a farmer utilizes – whether wholesale, farm stand (direct to consumer), "agri-tainment," or other approaches – since that will also affect their cash flow, which in turn influences their participation in NRCS programs and the timing of installations. Checking social media outlets will reveal a lot about the farm's history, products, and marketing plan. In fact, in today's consumer market, the lack of a social media presence is itself somewhat revealing about the farmer's approach. It's also a good idea to review the relevant "Buy Local" organization to see if the farm can be visited by consumers and how it promotes itself.

You should also learn about the farmer's particular production schedule before scheduling a visit. That advance awareness is the first step toward developing a positive relationship with your conservation partner. All farming operations have a seasonal cycle, though not always the same one – so you must be mindful of that when scheduling meetings.

For example, all dairy farmers milk twice a day on a 12-hour rotation year-round, but not necessarily at exactly the same time of day as other dairy farmers. Asking a farmer when they milk their cows so you can schedule a meeting that won't conflict with their schedule shows that you understand their business model.

Similarly, consider the planting and harvest schedules of each farm when meeting with the farmer. Being aware of their production and marketing schedules shows that you are thinking of their financial position when it comes to signing contracts and installing practices on their land. Ultimately, this forethought on your part will yield a more successful partnership with the farmer.

Here are a few examples, to illustrate how different one farm crop can be from another in terms of seasonal schedules, and the importance of learning about typical practices in your county or region:

- **Diversified vegetable farm with small fruits:** The growing season for producers of seedlings starts in greenhouses in February, and planting in the ground can start as early as April or as late as June, depending on where the farm is located and if season extenders are used. Some annual crops are planted multiple times during the growing season. Harvest may begin in late May and end in November.
- **Greenhouse, nursery, and floriculture:** These non-edibles, used mainly for landscaping, are known as greenhouse and nursery crops and can grow year-round. Such operations typically start planting in late January or early February and are selling their goods from March through November.
- **Greenhouse and high tunnel (hoop house) edible crops:** Seedlings for a wide variety of vegetables and herbs (as well as cut flowers) are started in late January and grown through mid-spring, when they are sold to consumers.

One frequent area of farmer confusion involves the complementary and intertwined services provided by NRCS itself and the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA). Each entity is responsible for specific operations and programs but with required overlap that can seem somewhat opaque. Farmers generally do not distinguish between different government entities but lump them all together. FSA and NRCS are not clearly separate in their impressions, reactions, or attitudes. In fact, farmers may not distinguish between federal and state government employees or agencies, throwing the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR), Extension agents, and other related state agencies into the mix.

QUICK TIP

New planners are often immersed in learning the intricacies of NRCS practices and processes, which can make it tempting to share excessive details with a farmer. Resist that temptation. Those internal processes can be complex and are often in flux, which only complicates your communications.

ORIENTING THE FARMER TO THE NRCS PROCESS

VIDEO CLIP
Keep it simple

Naturally, the financial situation, ecological conditions, and land-use history varies widely among farms – and so does each farmer's history with NRCS, their familiarity with Farm Bill programs, and their knowledge of conservation practices. It's up to you to introduce and orient them to the ins and outs of navigating the NRCS process.

For example, *you* know that there are numerous professionals involved in the process at one point or another – State Office officials, District Conservationists and their field staff, Soil Conservationists, Engineers, Program Analysts, and so on, but the farmer doesn't care about all that. In fact, in all likelihood, the more the farmer hears about the number of different people involved with the ranking and administration of a potential contract, the more squeamish they may become, especially so for newer farmers.

Your job as a planner is to understand all those complexities but boil them down to the key information for the farmer at any given time – avoid acronyms and jargon, indicate timeframes for various steps in the process, repeat critical information when it's needed, and generally simplify the system.

It may also be wise to inform the farmer of the limits to your own availability, especially your ability to travel to each farm. You might acknowledge that NRCS staff capacity had diminished in recent years, which may mean that the farmer will need to travel to the Field Office, too.

More Massachusetts Data

The following charts and graphs provide some more information on Massachusetts farmers from the 2017 USDA Agricultural Census.

MASSACHUSETTS FARMS BY THE NUMBERS

Nearly all farms in MA are family farms 95%

Most farms have internet access 84%

33% of farms hire farm labor

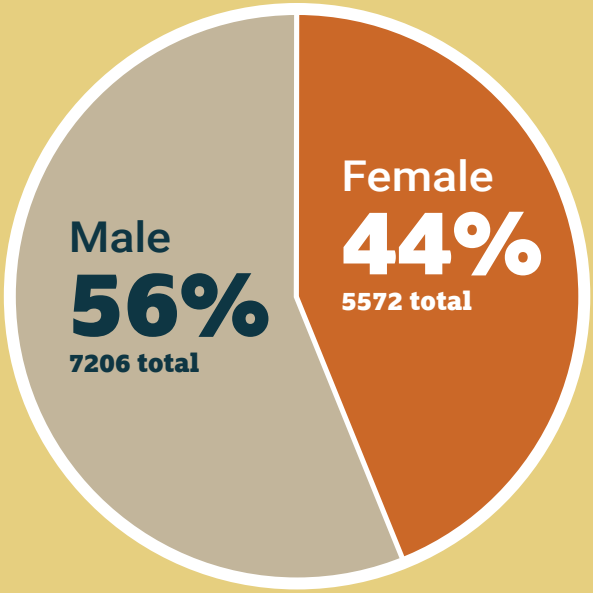
25% sell directly to consumers

3% of farms are certified organic*

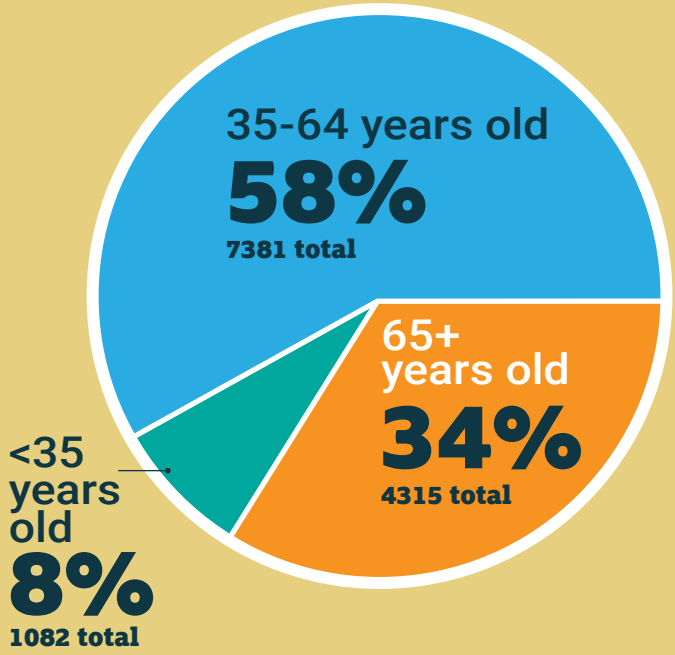
* This low percentage applies only to those farms that are "**certified organic**." Many other farmers, while not officially certified, also try to farm organically as much as possible.

Source: 2017 USDA Agricultural Census

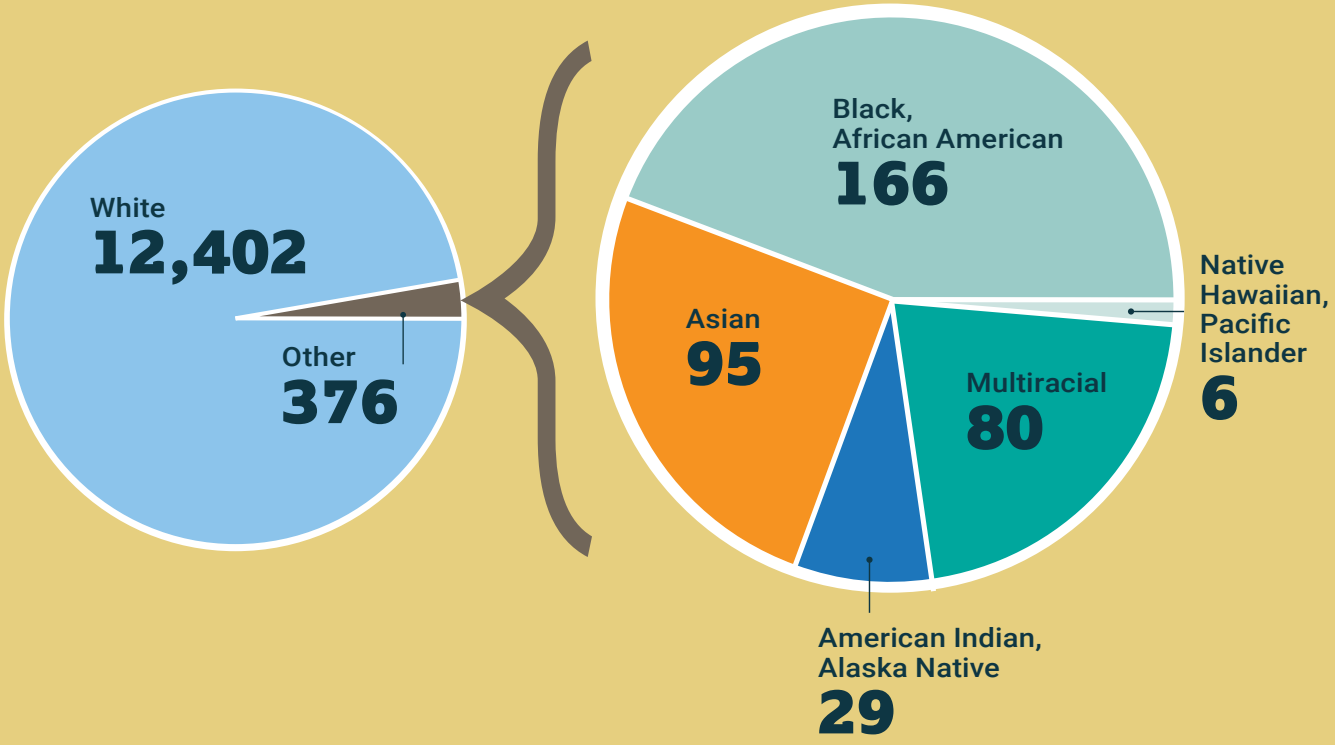
FARMERS IN MASSACHUSETTS
(TOTAL 12,778)



AGE OF MASSACHUSETTS FARMERS



NUMBER OF FARMERS BY RACE



Source: 2017 USDA Agricultural Census

The Challenge – Successful Engagement with Farmers

Most Massachusetts farmers are likely perfectly satisfied with the service they receive from NRCS. Most farmers are bottom-line people. They had a resource problem and NRCS helped them fix it.

That's all that matters. You can have a lot of success by just showing up and doing your job.

That, however, is not the whole story. Things can go wrong. No doubt some farmers are frustrated or even angry that they did not get what they wanted or believe they needed from their interaction with NRCS. A bad experience may mean that farmer will not reach out to NRCS the next time a need arises. In the tightly knit farming community, word of bad experiences may spread and influence the decisions of other farmers. We'll explore those and other common pitfalls in **Chapter 4, Unsuccessful Engagement – What Went Wrong and How to Right It**.

Just showing up and doing your job will get some things accomplished, but forming strong connections within the farming community can lead to so much more. Good relationships, based on mutual trust and respect, can give the planner a better understanding of the larger agricultural community and the issues it faces – and can encourage more openness on the part of the farmer about issues faced on their farm, with greater acceptance of your ideas and assistance. Genuine personal connections can help make you more comfortable pointing out potential problems the farmer was not aware of. And strong relationships can result in referrals to other farmers.

Building these relationships takes time and effort. We'll take a closer look at how to develop and practice those skills in **Chapter 5, Understanding the Basics of Interpersonal Relationships**. Let's start here by examining some of the characteristics of a successful engagement to give you more insight into the perspective of a farmer who contacts NRCS to request assistance with one resource issue.

VIDEO CLIP "Earned my trust"

1. **The farmer receives a timely response to their inquiry and a site visit is scheduled.**

   "The person answering the phone was knowledgeable and polite and patiently took my information and described what would happen next. I got a prompt call from the planner. I described the problem, the planner asked some questions, and then set a date for the site visit."

2. **The planner gains a good understanding of the farmer, their farm, and the resource issue.**

   "The planner arrived on time. I was still up in the barn taking care of some things, but they came out and found me. They had a basic understanding of the farm – and they knew about a visit I had from a different planner a couple of years ago, which was appreciated. The planner

VIDEO CLIP Understand the farmer

In the tightly knit farming community, word of bad experiences may spread and influence the decisions of other farmers.

listened to me and asked a few questions while I gave them a quick tour. They had brought along some maps and aerial photos of the farm that I hadn't seen before, which was really helpful."

3. **The resource concern is clearly defined and options for addressing it are discussed.**

   "The problem was something I should have taken care of a couple of years ago, but the planner didn't bring that up. I described what I thought needed to be done and they made a few suggestions that made sense. The planner explained the program they had that would fix the problem. I explained that I had cash-flow problems certain times of the year so that timing was critical, but it really needed to be taken care of this year. We talked about parts of the job I could do myself with equipment on hand, and what parts I would need to contract out. The planner gave me a list of three people who do that type of work. I also asked about a new type of solution I had heard of. They didn't know about it, but promised to look into it, see if it might fit the situation, and get back in touch with me soon."

4. **A plan and budget are developed.**

   "I was surprised when the planner got back to me the next week with answers to some of my questions. They had looked into that new solution and thought it might actually work here. The week after that, they showed up with their engineer. They both looked at the problem and took some measurements. We had a long talk about costs and different ways of handling it and the long-term upkeep that would be needed. By the time they left, I had a pretty good idea of what was going to happen and when, and I was able to start budgeting for it."

5. **The paperwork is successfully navigated.**

   "This was my first time through the application process, and I won't say it was easy or fun, but the planner introduced me to the other NRCS and FSA people that would help out, and we got through it okay. The planner made sure I understood the process, which was no simple thing. When it was approved, they let me know right away and we went over the next steps. They gave me time to review the contract and ask questions. We went over the financials again and the reimbursement process, and then we were set to go."

6. **The project was successfully implemented, and the reimbursement promptly paid.**

   "By now, I had a pretty good idea what needed to be done and when. The planner was always available for questions and even stopped by while the work was in progress. When it was done, they came by right away to give the final approval and to make sure I had the documents I needed in order to request the reimbursement, which came through pretty quickly. And as soon as all that was done, we started talking about another project I had been thinking about."

Naturally, things don't always fall into place as neatly as all that. Other competing work priorities can get in the way, create delays, and interfere with the timely and seamless delivery of services described here. That may be unavoidable. But as long as you clearly communicate appropriate expectations about the overall process and how long things generally take, you'll help the farmer feel like they are the most important person on your schedule at that moment – and that will foster the long-term rapport that you're working to build.

VIDEO CLIP
The bottom line

Unsuccessful Engagement – What Went Wrong, and How to Right It

Sometimes things don't go so smoothly. Sometimes you just don't connect with the farmer, or they're not comfortable or happy with you, for whatever reason.

It may be a small thing, but in the end, it can result in opportunities missed and work not accomplished.

Here are some of the ways an attempt at engagement can go wrong:

- **The farmer feels disrespected, misunderstood, or neglected.**

  The process is already a long one. There are waiting lists for site visits, and waiting times for evaluating and approving applications. Perhaps they haven't heard back from anyone for weeks.

- **The farmer does not understand the process or the jargon.**

  It is complicated. First you go here; then you go there. You need to bring this, and fill out that. It's confusing and, for a busy person, it can be frustrating. Then there are all the abbreviations and acronyms. It may make sense to you, but it only confuses the farmer.

  "Why do I have to fill out the exact same form twice for the same single project?"

  "I don't understand why it's such a big deal and takes such a long time to change or modify a contract, especially if the change saves money for everyone involved."

VIDEO CLIP
Dropping the ball

- **The farmer does not like or trust the planner.**

  It could just be that the farmer doesn't trust the government. Or it could be the way you dress or the way you talk. It could even be negative judgments about your age, your gender, your skin color. Naturally, we all want to make a good first impression. But inherent biases or personal prejudice against people from different backgrounds are beyond your control and need not be tolerated.

QUICK TIP

If you experience any signs of negative racial or gender bias, or any other form of prejudice from a farmer, discuss how best to approach the situation with your District Conservationist. You will have the full and vigorous support of your colleagues.

- **The planner does not understand how the farmer's situation or attitude will impact the installation of conservation practices.**

  Sometimes the planner is trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. They don't know the history of the farm or past interactions with NRCS. The farmer is tight-lipped and the right questions aren't asked.

- **There are unrealistic expectations on the part of the farmer, the planner, or both.**

  Sometimes you overpromise what can be done. Sometimes people just don't hear each other clearly and unrealistic expectations are allowed to develop.

  "How come I don't get paid when the project is done? It was weeks for me to hear back from NRCS after they gave me the final inspection and said everything was fine. When I did get a call from them, I thought they were going to tell me my payment had been issued but instead they said I had to fill out a payment application and then it would still be weeks more before I would see the money."

- **Commitments are made by either party that cannot be achieved.**

  The planner moved on to another job, leaving the farmer hanging. Or the application is not approved. The planner overstated the ease of the project, or the farmer claimed capabilities they didn't have.

- **Contracted conservation practices are not installed or are installed improperly.**

  The planner couldn't get out there during the installation and necessary corrections weren't made. There was a failure to communicate clearly, from either side.

- **A bad relationship between the parties impacts future interactions here and in the larger community.**

  Farmers talk to each other. News, especially bad news, spreads quickly throughout the community and impact the actions taken and choices made by other farmers.

IDENTIFYING, UNDERSTANDING, AND HANDLING COMMON PROBLEM AREAS

It helps to be aware of potential pitfalls in advance so you can be prepared to navigate skillfully. Here are some common scenarios to consider:

VIDEO CLIP
Lack of access for all

- **Traditionally underserved populations.** A person's gender, race, or socioeconomic status can influence their interactions with others – and vice versa. The USDA recognizes that certain populations have not always had equal access to government programs and assistance, and the agency is attempting to address those legacy issues. It's important to be aware of this history, to be knowledgeable of and honest about your own biases, and to be mindful of how they may influence the farmers you are working with. .

- **Personal finances.** Farming is a business and farmers must compete with each other in the marketplace. The protection of personal financial information is of the utmost importance. Finances are a touchy subject for anyone, and especially for those who may find themselves in a precarious financial position. Be sensitive when speaking with farmers about their finances. Stick to the project at hand. Don't ask for information you do not need. Don't make observations about someone's perceived financial position. Let them know how the information they share will be used and how it will be protected.

- **Privacy.** People's comfort level with disclosing personal information varies, but you should always assume that what you see and hear on a farm is confidential and only to be used for the purposes of the NRCS program. While you are a guest on someone's farm, you may see and hear personal things that are not always related to the job at hand – a family interaction, a bit of gossip, or a personal habit. If a farmer learns that you have shared these things with others, it will be the end of the relationship. On occasion, you may want to inform others about an experience or practice on another farm. But if that matter is at all sensitive, you must gain the farmer's approval before sharing it. If in doubt, talk with your supervisor.

- **The role and use of social media.** Social media provides an efficient way to contact and communicate with people. It can also be hazardous if you're not careful. Planners should not use their personal social media accounts to conduct official business. Always assume that information shared on social media is permanent and accessible to anyone. Just as you can research farms on social media, they can research you. Always be professional, even on your personal media, and never disclose any personal or financial information. Make sure you protect the privacy of others. Do not post identifiable photos of people or property taken in the course of official government business without the farmer's permission. And always avoid potentially harmful speech in any setting.

QUICK TIP

Always assume that information shared on social media is permanent and accessible to anyone.

- **Attitudes toward government.** You will very quickly learn that there can be a general distrust of government in the agricultural community. This can range from a healthy skepticism to outright antagonism. Some people believe that government workers are incompetent, lazy, or troublesome (which is why the statement "I'm from the government and I'm here to help" is viewed as a joke rather

VIDEO CLIP
"Keep the government off my property"

Farmers stay in one place for a long time. NRCS staff usually do not.

than a statement of fact). As someone driving a government vehicle and wearing government garb, realize that you are likely being watched and measured and talked about. Do your best to allay these biases and avoid acting officious, bureaucratic, or uncaring. (And don't be lazy.)

- **The farm is causing an environmental problem.** In some cases, conditions on a farm may be causing problems in the surrounding environment – such as contaminated runoff (fertilizer, pesticides), degraded water quality (cows in stream), or other circumstances that should be remedied. Sometimes such problems may be reported to NRCS by concerned neighbors and the farmer may be unaware of the situation or resistant to assistance. While there may be no sure-fire approach to overcoming such obstacles, you may be called upon to address the problem and communicate with the farmer. Rather than start in with a cold call, it can be more effective to develop a relationship with the farmer through other trusted farmers in the area who could serve as a liaison. Or perhaps a neighbor could pass along your business card, giving you the opportunity to follow up directly. In any case, it's important not to appear as The Enforcer – rather, you are hoping to help solve a problem. Be sure to do some research of your own in advance – and by all means discuss the specific circumstances with your supervisor.

- **NRCS staff changes.** Farmers stay in one place for a long time. NRCS staff usually do not. This is a fact of life and probably will not change. Understandably, farmers generally object to frequent staff changes, which can be disruptive to the conservation process. To help ease the disruption, learn about a farmer's past interactions with NRCS staff by reviewing all files in the office before your visit. Likewise, record as much information from your interactions as you can so that the next person in your position can quickly learn about the farmers and ongoing projects. (Guidance on how to ensure a smooth transition between planners is presented at the end of **Chapter 7, Connection to the NRCS Planning Process**.)

VIDEO CLIP
"I like consistency"

Understanding the Basics of Interpersonal Relationships

Here we'll examine the principles of interpersonal relationships as they apply to the planner-farmer relationship.

The science and study of interpersonal relationships is a broad and deep field, so this is just a basic introduction to the subject. If you wish to delve deeper, you'll find some links and reading suggestions in the **Additional Resources**.

Sensitivity to interpersonal relationships is important to your job as a planner because, frankly, you can't accomplish anything without the participation of other people, and if you can't successfully interact with or relate to others, you will be less likely to have successful outcomes.

The planner-farmer relationship is not as deep or intimate as the relationship with a spouse or partner, of course, or even with your supervisor or co-workers. But it is complex nonetheless, and deserves serious effort and attention to make it work.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS DEFINED

An interpersonal relationship is an association between two or more people formed in the context of social, cultural, and other influences. In this case, it is formed in the context of NRCS services and programs offered to private landowners, as well as in the context of the operation of an agricultural business and the protection of soil and water resources.

> *"Practice integrity. Practice honesty. Constantly."* – Advice from a District Conservationist

An interpersonal relationship may be regulated by law, custom, or mutual agreement. In this case, it is regulated by NRCS procedures, Farm Bill programs, and the needs of the farmer.

Interpersonal relationships are dynamic systems that evolve continuously during their existence. Your interaction with individual farmers is periodic and sporadic. Needs, beliefs, and circumstances change over time and between contacts, which will affect how you interact with each other.

Interpersonal relationships can grow and improve, or deteriorate and end prematurely. Even in the context of the planner-farmer relationship, you can form connections that are long-lasting and mutually beneficial. You can also create enmity that will negatively affect your conservation efforts.

QUALITIES OF GOOD RELATIONSHIPS

Healthy relationships share certain characteristics. These include:

- **Mutual respect.** Each person may come from different backgrounds or belief systems, but you treat each other as equals.
- **Trust.** Each has confidence in the integrity of the other.

VIDEO CLIP
Building the relationship

- **Honesty.** You do not lie or mislead each other.
- **Willingness to compromise.** Each values the other's input enough to be willing to incorporate it into their solution.

VIDEO CLIP
Communication is key

- **Good communication.** You keep each other up to date and let the other know when things have changed.
- **Mutual problem-solving.** Neither party dictates solutions to the other.
- **Understanding.** Each can put themselves in the other's shoes.
- **Emotion control.** Conflicts are solved calmly and rationally.

QUALITIES OF BAD RELATIONSHIPS

Some characteristics of unhealthy relationships include:

- **Control.** One person dictates what will happen regardless of what the other wants.
- **Hostility.** One person antagonizes the other or shows open disregard for the other.
- **Dishonesty.** One person lies to or keeps important information from the other.
- **Disrespect.** One person disregards the opinions and interests of the other.
- **Intimidation.** One person uses anger, threats, or power to intimidate or control the other.

In the case of both good and bad relationships, it's important to keep in mind that this is a two-way street. It takes two people to make a strong relationship. On the other hand, it can take only one to make a relationship fail. You can be doing all the right things but still receive hostility or disrespect from the farmer. However, even in these cases you must continue to behave with respect, trust, and honesty. There's always a chance that you will eventually win them over. But responding with hostility or disrespect will only ensure that the relationship goes nowhere.

STAGES OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Psychologists have identified five stages of interpersonal relationships:

1. Acquaintance

2. Build-up

3. Continuation

4. Deterioration

5. Ending

Truly successful interpersonal relationships get to the third stage (continuation), which can last indefinitely. This, however, takes time and repeated interactions. Many of your relationships will involve only a few meetings and will reach only the first or second stages (acquaintance and build-up). This is normal and acceptable. Still, if you treat each relationship as a valuable one that could ultimately become even more so, you will be more successful.

Build your relationships on the basis of talking and especially listening.

All relationships ultimately end, even if only in death. The farmer sells the farm or retires, or you move on to a different office. However, not all relationships will inevitably experience the deterioration stage. Sometimes this can result from something as simple not keeping in touch as much as you should. Other times it can be an argument or unresolved disagreement that starts to erode the relationship. If the relationship is one you value, it's important to be aware of when this erosion might be happening so you can take steps to rescue the relationship – perhaps by being open and honest with the farmer about your concerns and expressing your desire to correct the situation.

SKILLS FOR BUILDING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships require effort and no relationship is perfect. Conflict is bound to happen. Both sides have to work to maintain a positive connection. The most important thing you can do is maintain clear and **open communication**. Solid communication doesn't just create good moments, it also helps you get through the not-so-good ones. Build your relationships on the basis of talking and especially **listening**. This will help you work through issues and form stronger bonds.

Most importantly, **know yourself**, as none of this is possible if you do not understand what interests, inspires, or upsets you. Consider these questions: What motivates you as a conservation planner? Are you science-driven, relationship-driven, or driven to save the world? How do you see your role? Are you an educator, a guide, a rule enforcer? What is your experience and attitude toward farmers and farming? Be honest with yourself in answering these questions and think about how the answers affect your interactions with others.

Self-awareness is the practice of consciously being aware of what you are thinking and feeling, and why. Being aware of your own emotions and your nonverbal communication style can significantly benefit your interpersonal communication skills. You need to be mindful of yourself before you can listen or respond to others. And the subconscious messages you convey to others can impact their perception, so a lack of self-awareness can be detrimental to the success and productivity of your relationships with others.

MORE INFO

To improve your self-awareness and self-management skills, explore the "Emotional Intelligence" course available through the USDA AgLearn system.

Be conscious, respectful, and empathetic toward others. When interacting with another person, make a conscious effort to notice and read their eyes, body language, and other visual clues to help you better understand and consciously interact with them. Everyone is entitled to their own thoughts and opinions – even when they differ from yours. When you engage positive interpersonal skills, you allow others to express themselves without automatically jumping on them – indicating that you're genuinely listening to what they have to say. Wait until they finish a thought to express yours on the topic in a non-confrontational way. Always be aware of and respectful of cultural differences in communication styles and perspectives.

Empathy is the ability to emotionally understand what other people feel, see things from their point of view, and imagine yourself in their place. Essentially, it is putting yourself in someone else's position and feeling what they may be feeling. Empathy enables people to understand the emotions of others. You have not lived the other person's life or experienced what they have experienced, but you can practice empathy by actively listening to them, putting aside your own preconceptions, and relating what they tell you to similar experiences in your own life.

Actively listen to others. Much like a professional craft or trade, listening is a skill that must be developed

and honed. Every conversation you have provides opportunities to develop and build this skill and improve your craft. By listening to *understand* rather than listening to respond, you demonstrate that you value what the other person has to say. Often you may notice that while they are talking, you are already thinking of your response rather than really listening. Try to use silence to give yourself and others in the conversation time to absorb what has been said, and slow things down enough so that anyone who wishes to speak can do so.

Avoid talking over others or speaking for them. It's easy to unintentionally jump in and accidentally cut someone off while they are speaking. However, if that happens frequently, it shows a lack of listening skills and can be perceived as you not valuing what they have to say. Although this may not be what you intend to convey, it's an unspoken message that can be received loud and clear. Allow the person to have time to finish their thought and do not presume to know what they want to say. Give them the respect they deserve by giving them the time to say it for themselves.

To sum up, important relationship habits include:

- **Be honest and trustworthy.**
- **Know yourself and how others may perceive you.**
- **Put in the effort.**
- **Listen to each other.**
- **Be respectful, always.**
- **Be slow to judge.**
- **Manage expectations and emotions.**
- **Be open to feedback and constructive criticism.**

Interpersonal relationship skills should be considered a central part of your planner toolkit. As with any skill, success takes repeated practice. Be aware of how you apply these skills in all your relationships. Be willing to critically evaluate yourself and to seek advice from others. Make it a regular topic of conversation with your supervisor and co-workers.

VIDEO CLIP
Helping the next generation

MORE INFO

Check out the 1969 NRCS guide **Conservation Planning on Grazing Lands: The Art of Communication**, still valuable after all these years.

MORE INFO

See the **Self-Evaluation Worksheet** at the end of **Chapter 8** for a tool to help you assess and improve your interpersonal relationship skills.

Planner and Farmer Roles and Relationships

The interaction between planners and farmers represents a partnership. Let's look at the roles and responsibilities of each party from a few different perspectives.

Awareness of these varied perspectives can clarify your role as a planner and make you more confident and effective in it.

ROLE OF THE PLANNER

From the perspective of NRCS, you are the main point of contact with the customer and the land. You represent the agency and serve as an ambassador for the NRCS mission to "Deliver conservation solutions so agricultural producers can protect natural resources and feed a growing world." Among other things, you are responsible for (1) following NRCS procedural guidance for planning and program rules, and ultimately responsible for (2) meeting agency goals.

When it comes to following NRCS guidance and rules, you have control. You ensure attention to procedures such as Highly Erodible Land (HEL) and Wetland Compliance, National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements, Natural Heritage Endangered Species Program (NHESP) contact, and so on. You observe the rules for the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and other programs. Your role in these programs is somewhat academic and detail-oriented, requiring that you make and record science and fact-based observations and decisions. Agency staff are usually highly skilled at those particulars, having acquired the basic knowledge as part of their professional education, and learning the details through formal training and on-the-job experience.

On the other hand, while you take the lead in following procedures and rules, you have less control over meeting NRCS goals. Those goals – which may be expressed as numbers of acres enrolled in a program, contracts secured and completed, and practices installed and maintained – are not something you can guarantee. Success requires a working relationship with the farmer, and that may not be a role that you have experienced in previous jobs or in school. As described in **Chapter 5, Understanding the Basics of Interpersonal Relationships**, maintaining positive interpersonal relationships requires attention to a unique set of skills – not least of which is encouraging clear two-way communication.

In order to ensure program and contract compliance, you are responsible for clearly articulating and confirming expectations. You are responsible for providing consistent follow-up with the farmer – especially when the situation is complex or complicated, as is often the case. But try as you might, you cannot *control* what the farmer does or does not do. Success requires genuine participation by and partnership between both planner and farmer.

ROLE OF THE FARMER AND BUILDING YOUR PARTNERSHIP

The farmer's primary focus is their own operation. Farmers are responsible for the management and financial viability of their farm operation as well as the stewardship of their natural resources. Maintaining a relationship with NRCS is secondary to those primary purposes. Their partnership with an NRCS planner has to dovetail with their own objectives and must create a net benefit for the farm.

In this partnership, the role of the farmer is to share their unique and expert knowledge of their own operation and the land they farm. For the planner, the farmer is the main source of information on those matters.

Always remember that the farmer is the decision maker in the NRCS planning process. This is a significant

Always remember that the farmer is the decision maker in the NRCS planning process.

VIDEO CLIP
Don't have time

role, and it's important to respect and reinforce that responsibility throughout the process. Sometimes, the farmer or family member who interacts with NRCS is indeed the primary decision maker for the farm. Other times, your contact may be only part of a decision-making structure for a family or business. Either way, for the planning process to succeed, you must understand how decisions are made on the farm and respect the decisions the farmer makes. Your role as the planner is to facilitate decisions, not *dictate* them.

The farmer is responsible for financial aspects of conservation practices and the bearer of all financial consequences. The farmer must ensure their own compliance with laws and regulations as well as compliance with program rules and contract implementation.

The farmer is responsible for installing, utilizing, and maintaining the conservation practices that are funded by NRCS to address resource concerns. Adequately addressing those concerns rests solely on the willingness and ability of the farmer to do all those things. This will often require additional time, effort, and financial resources from the farmer.

VIDEO CLIP
"Call me"

Farmers are generally too busy to keep up with news and announcements about government programs and may not always be able to make time to go online or check their email. They have unofficially delegated that part of their operation to you, their contact at NRCS. They want and rely on the planner to reach out to them about potentially helpful programs. Sometimes, your best way to make contact may be by phone or text; oftentimes it's best to drop by the farm. Find out your partner's preferences.

WHAT IS YOUR CONNECTION TO THE FARMER?

For the farmer, you are the source of information and access to NRCS and its assistance. You are a source for reliable technical assistance and referrals. You are the conduit for money. You may be the person who certifies or critiques or rejects their practice installation and program compliance.

The relationship is professional and has mutual benefits. The benefit for the planner includes meeting NRCS goals, seeing conservation improvements, being a partner to landowners in the community, and job satisfaction. The farmer will benefit from improvements to the land and operation, and in most cases, the financial assistance that makes those improvements possible.

NRCS planners are bound by mandated **Principles of Ethical Conduct for Government Officers and Employees** – such as protecting confidentiality and making no unauthorized commitments or promises on the part of the agency. Farmers have no such formal rules. They are not bound by any obligation of confidentially. In fact, since farmer networks are generally small and closely held, you should always assume that what you do, say, and how you are perceived, will be shared with other farmers in the community.

As one farmer who works with NRCS put it, "the partnership is like a marriage based on trust and open communication." Be clear about what you can and cannot do. Don't pretend to know something you don't know. The farmer won't expect you to know everything or answer every question on the spot. In fact, a farmer may even pose questions that they

> *"Remember that NRCS is a conservation planning agency, not a funding agency."*
>
> **– Advice from an NRCS engineer**

> *Better to* **under-***promise and* **over-***deliver."* – Advice from a District Conservationist

suspect you can't answer immediately, to see if you'll just make something up! It's always okay (and safer) to tell the farmer that you'll look into a topic and get back to them. Then make sure that you do. This builds credibility and proves the partnership.

QUICK TIP

Always assure the farmer that your discussions will be kept confidential.

A hallmark of NRCS policies that has greatly contributed to the agency's success is rigorously protecting confidentiality. When the farmer knows that the discussions you have will be kept confidential, they'll gain confidence in you. They will feel a sense of security knowing that NRCS staff will not report them to the town or to any other organization for possible violations. Similarly, it's important to let the farmer know that you will not share their information with other farmers unless you have first asked and received their permission to do so.

Gaining such permission can be worthwhile since an important part of your role is indeed to encourage connections between farmers. But this requires some tact. For example, let's say you want to tell one farmer **(Farmer A)** about the experience of another farmer **(Farmer B)**. Here's one tactful way to proceed:

1) First, ask **Farmer A** if they'd be interested in talking to another farmer who has already installed or performed the practice they're considering.

2) If **Farmer A** is indeed interested, ask **Farmer B** if they would be willing to share and show their project. Respect the fact that some farmers may want to keep their methods and techniques private to avoid competition.

3) If **Farmer B** does agree, ask them for the best way for **Farmer A** to connect with them.

4) Then give **Farmer A** the preferred contact information for **Farmer B** – and the responsibility for reaching out. Sometimes you might facilitate this further, but direct farmer-to-farmer connections are often more productive without the planner present.

Never over-promise what NRCS can do for a farmer, even on things you believe you can control. In addition to avoiding disappointment, that will inspire trust in your commitments and confidence in your capabilities. Above all, never promise the farmer funding. Not only is that a set-up for failure, it's also a clear ethics violation.

HOW DO YOU FORM AND DEVELOP THE RELATIONSHIP?

When you visit a farm for the first time, adopt the attitude that "I am going to meet someone interesting."

Building a relationship is easier if you like people. A misanthrope won't go far in this job. You don't have to be overly gregarious. If you're shy, you will have an opportunity to ask questions and listen and learn without having to say too much.

Start your initial meeting with a farmer by being "professionally personal," in the words of one District Conservationist. If you can, find a point of common interest – such as growing a particular crop, appreciating a certain location, a love of cars, kids the same age, whatever you may have in common. Of course, you may not need or even have time to do that at first, since many farmers are eager to talk about their farm without much encouragement.

If you do need to spark conversation to make a connection, one low-stress way to get started is to pose basic questions. For example:

- How did the weather we've had this year affect your operation/crop/livestock? (Be sure you know what the weather has been, and thus have some idea of how it might have affected the farm.)
- How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected your business?
- Which fields are your most productive, and why?
- What crop/sales/equipment changes have you made recently?
- What are your goals and vision for the future of your farm?

- What do you want from NRCS? (Be prepared to offer some possibilities so this one doesn't land with a thud.)

TIPS FOR BUILDING A WORKING PARTNERSHIP WITH FARMERS

QUICK TIP

Always end your visit by summarizing what you are going to do and what happens next.

Every time you meet with the farmer, end by summarizing **what you are going to do**, and let them know when they should expect to hear from you next – whether by text, phone call, email, or visit. For example:

- "I'm going to request the engineer's assistance and I'll let you know as soon as they respond."
- "I'm going to get you information on XYZ. I can probably email that to you next week."
- "I'll ask my supervisor and colleagues for their guidance as soon as I get back to the office."
- "I'll ask another farmer who's done this before if they'd talk with you about it."
- "I'll send you a summary of our field visit tomorrow. Want me to send that by email, or just pop it in the regular mail?"

VIDEO CLIP
Setting expectations

Then tell the farmer **what you need them to do** – but give them only one thing to do, if possible! For example:

- "Discuss this idea with your [partner/father/sister/spouse/whoever] and the other decision makers on the farm."
- "I got their permission, so you can go ahead and call that other farmer to see what they thought of the high tunnel they installed."
- "Give this idea some consideration over the next week or two."
- "Find your soil test results from last year."
- "Get quotes from your preferred contractors for installation."
- "Call a Technical Service Provider from that list I showed you."

VIDEO CLIP
Back and forth

The idea is that you have engaged your partner in the planning process. It is not all for you, the planner, to do on your own. By getting the farmer engaged in the planning, you will have better buy-in for the installation. You will also know how they like to work. If they're not getting their tasks done, you can simply give them more time. But all of the next steps to move the process forward will not be your responsibility alone. If the farmer is too busy to handle their planning responsibilities this year, you are laying the groundwork for next year's project or contract application.

Conversely, if you are new to the project and the first time you ask the farmer to do something isn't until after the contract has already been signed, don't expect to know how they generally get things done. But as you do become familiar with their usual work patterns, you'll be better able to develop a realistic schedule for practices according to a contract timeline that stays in compliance. A farmer who is slow to get tasks done may benefit from just one or a few practices in a contract, with sufficient time between practices.

Take the lead in guiding the relationship, and be vigilant about following through on your own tasks. Whenever possible, send the farmer summaries and review discussions you had on site.

Here's a sample scenario:

> **A planner meets with a farmer, talks about what the farmer wants from NRCS, walks the fields, and returns to the office. In a follow-up phone conversation, the planner reviews the summary of the visit and asks for the farmer's input. This gives the farmer an opportunity to point out that something important had been left out of the summary, which was actually the farmer's main concern on Field 4. The planner had taken in so much information during the visit that they missed the importance of Field 4. The planner acknowledges having missed that information and asks the farmer to explain it again. The farmer follows up by sending photos, and the concerns are addressed. Everyone misses things sometimes, so it's important to include the farmer in the site visit summary.**

Here are two common perceptions – hopefully, misperceptions – on the part of farmers that can complicate the partnership:

- The farmer sees you as a barrier to their access to money. For example, one farmer who works with NRCS felt that they needed to be included in the ranking process because the planner did not know about practices accomplished in the past that would have improved the ranking score.
- The farmer sees you as a rule enforcer for things such as practice installation or wetland and endangered species issues or any law or regulation that a farmer may want to ignore.

WHAT ARE THE LIMITS AND BOUNDARIES OF THE RELATIONSHIP?

While the partnership between planner and farmer must always be professional, it's natural that the relationship may grow into mutual admiration and fondness. After all, you may work together over several years, during which the farmer may share a great deal of information about their own lives and families, in addition to the farming operation. That relationship can become off balance, or it may become an enduring friendship. All relationships, however, need healthy boundaries.

Farmers may test you to find out if you will overlook, ignore, or dismiss problems or actions. Be clear about your commitment to confidentiality to outsiders. However, you are not to keep information from your own agency. Let the farmer know when they are asking you to compromise your integrity. Say it straight out, "Please don't put me in that position. I can't lie for you, whatever the case may be."

> *Don't come in and say you have the answers. Listen to what the problem is and then come up with a solution – but make sure the farmer is part of it."*
>
> **– Advice from a farmer**

If you feel a farmer has violated your personal boundaries – such as asking questions that are too personal or inappropriate, moving into your personal space, getting you into an isolated location, or anything that makes you feel uncomfortable – say it's time to go, then leave. Talk with your supervisor and document what occurred. There are all types of people in farming and your supervisor knows this. You never have to go to a farm alone. Other difficult situations may need to be addressed – such as encountering issues involving aging, dementia, mental illness, literacy, comprehension, language barriers, and so on – and it is likely there are other avenues to handle the situation. Your District Conservationist is there to help guide you through whatever challenges you encounter.

CONTINUING THE RELATIONSHIP – MEET THEM WHERE THEY ARE

VIDEO CLIP
Connecting with the tribal community

To build a strong working relationship with your farmer partner, you need to meet them where they are – literally. While your supervisor may need to approve your spending time on these activities, it can be time well spent if you can spare it.

- **Regional Food Hubs/Farmers Markets:** Make a list of farmers markets in the area and frequent them. This is a good opportunity to strike up conversation with farmers – while stocking up on fresh food.

MORE INFO

Visit the MDAR website for an **Agricultural Industry calendar of events** as well as links to the state's **Buy Local Groups**.

VIDEO CLIP
Grower meetings

- **Attend grower meetings:** Winter is when farmers attend local and regional grower meetings. Get to know when those meetings are held and plan to attend a few – especially those that issue continuing education credits toward pesticide applicator licenses, since those generally have a large turnout. Not only will you have a casual way to meet farmers, and perhaps their families, but you'll also get an idea of the current topics of interest or concern. Moreover, attending these meetings shows farmers that you are interested in the complexities of farming, which increases your credibility.
- **Attend field demonstrations**, often referred to as "Twilight Meetings," which are usually held between May and October. Again, being present at these demos shows farmers that you are interested in learning more about their work and their concerns.
- **Check out the local Agricultural Commission**, and find out if the farmers you work with serve as members. (For more information and a listing of all towns with AgComs, go **here**.)

ALL GOOD THINGS MUST END

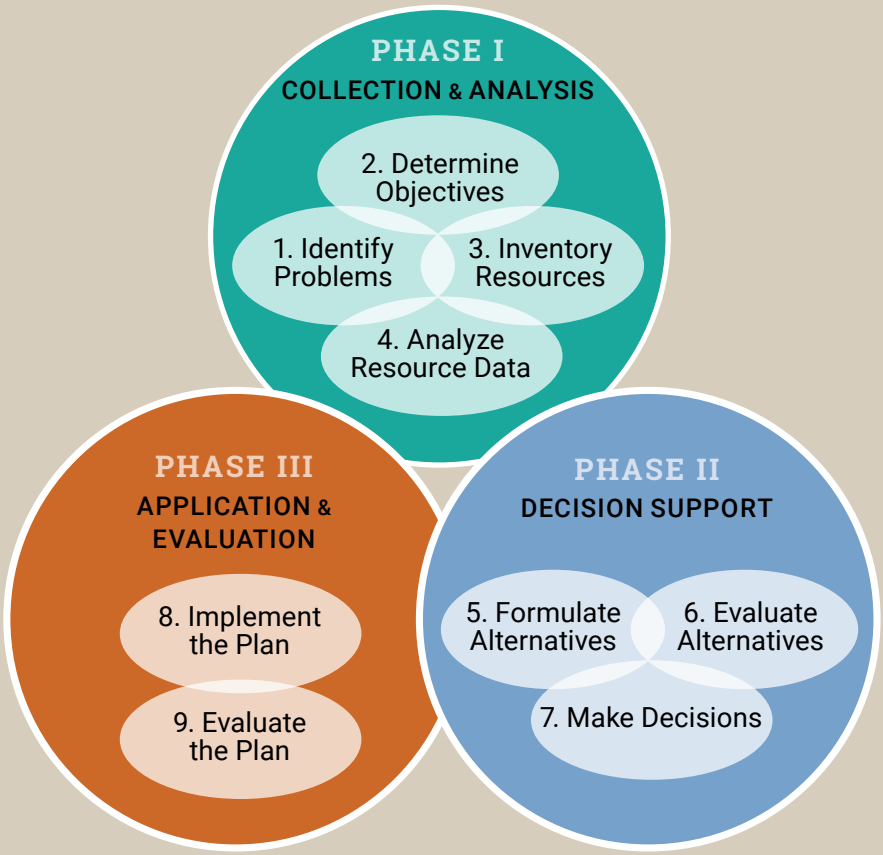
When a planner moves on, it can be difficult for farmers who have built trust and confidence in that partnership. If the time comes, it's important to acknowledge the end of the relationship directly with the farmer, rather than just disappearing. It helps to prepare for that possibility by connecting the farmer with other planners or the District Conservationist – and making sure the connection to NRCS thrives through the transition. (Guidance on how to ensure a smooth transition between planners is presented at the end of **Chapter 7, Connection to the NRCS Planning Process**.)

Connection to the NRCS Planning Process

The Conservation Planning Process illustrated below is used by all NRCS planners to provide assistance to clients.

Each step is designed to contribute elements that will eventually result in a fully implemented conservation plan. We can apply the relationship-building ideas discussed in previous chapters to the planning process outlined here because the state of the planner-farmer relationship is critical at every step.

The planning process used by NRCS is a three-phase, nine-step process. Although the nine steps are shown in sequence, in reality the process is highly dynamic. Depending on the circumstances, the process could start with any of the first three steps or even Step 9. Cycling back to previous steps is often necessary. For example, Steps 1 and 2 may not be finalized until after Step 4 has been completed. Some planning activities may involve overlapping steps, and some activities may not necessarily occur in a particular planning step each time. In addition, new information gathered at any point in the process may prompt a return to earlier steps. Being flexible and pursuing incremental change is the basis for what is called "progressive planning."



PROGRESSIVE VS. COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

Progressive planning means taking small steps and building up gradually to address all the resource concerns on a farm. This is in contrast to **comprehensive planning**, or the Resource Management System, which lays out everything that needs to be done for a single resource concern or the whole farm all at once.

How do you determine whether progressive planning or a more comprehensive approach would be better for a particular farm? If the farmer is new, has reservations about the program, or is just testing involvement with a government agency, a progressive plan may be a good place to start. Among the benefits of progressive planning is the opportunity to build a relationship and trust over time which significantly increases the likelihood that conservation practices are installed on the farm. On the other hand, if the farmer wants to address (or is being forced to address) significant detrimental resource impacts, a comprehensive approach may be better.

In practice, whichever approach you take, a farmer may come to you at any stage of the planning process. For example, a farmer may arrive at NRCS's door knowing exactly what they want. As a planner, you can see that they are at **Step 7 (Make Decisions)** because they have already recognized a problem, set an objective, collected information, analyzed the options, and made a decision about what they want to do. Nevertheless, you as an NRCS planner must still start at **Step 1 (Identify Problems)** to see if you arrive at the same conclusion.

On the other hand, a beginning farmer may have no real understanding of the land they just purchased or leased. They may not have identified problems and may have no clear objectives in mind. In this case, you can begin with Step 1 together and work your way through the steps in order. Still, you may find yourself revisiting earlier steps as new information is acquired throughout the process.

PRE-PLANNING

VIDEO CLIP
Do your homework

How you get started with a farmer will set the tone for your relationship. Being well prepared and having some background knowledge about the farm can help put you and the farmer at ease. Before your first visit, take time to read existing files on the farm and the farmer. If someone in the Field Office previously visited the farm, talk with that person to learn as much as you can about any history with the farm family and the land. Review maps and soils information. Check out the farm's online presence, such as websites and Facebook pages, which may reveal some of the farmer's values, objectives, and accomplishments.

Preparing in advance like that will help reduce the volume of information you as the planner would otherwise need to gather when you first meet the farmer. It will provide a frame of reference for what you see and what the farmer says, and it can provide information to help start a conversation.

QUICK TIP

Review **Chapter 3, The Challenge–Successful Engagement with Farmers,** before your first visit to a farm.

PHASE I
COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Understanding the Problems and Opportunities

STEP 1. Identify Problems

STEP 2. Determine Objectives

STEP 3. Inventory Resources

STEP 4. Analyze Resource Data

The first visit is a learning opportunity for both parties. It's an opportunity to break the ice, to introduce the farmer to NRCS, and to see the operation and walk the fields. It is not the time to find immediate solutions, but perhaps to brainstorm some ideas. This is a time to be a good listener. Let the first visit flow – that is, do not be bound to following a strict checklist.

VIDEO CLIP
First impressions are important

Do consider gathering some data while at the farm – but leave any tools in your vehicle until you have spoken with the farmer and established some rapport. If the farmer is comfortable with the conversation

> *The three best visual aids are your spade, the plant you dig with the spade, and the soil in which the plant was growing.* – Rhett H. Johnson, Grazing Lands Technology Institute, 1969

and the opportunity to gather some initial field data presents itself, invite them to participate in the data-collection process.
For example:

- Bring a shovel or an auger to dig small soil pits to see the soil.
- Bring two clinometers and take slopes together.
- Bring a penetrometer and have the farmer test the soil.
- Demonstrate the use of a pasture stick.

Things <u>not</u> to do when you arrive at the farm:

- Wear clothes or footwear that are not appropriate for getting dirty.
- Wear filthy clothes or muddy boots, or drive a dirty car. Aside from just making a good first impression, this also helps ensure "bio-security" between sites – both of which demonstrate respect.
- Take photographs without asking permission.
- Show up with lots of forms to fill out.

Identifying problems and determining objectives requires good listening skills. The farmer may not be able to clearly articulate their objectives, but they will most likely reveal unrecognized objectives as they tell you about their farm. It is your job to recognize and restate the farmer's objectives. If the objectives are not clear to you, help guide the farmer by asking questions, focusing on what the farmer sees as positive outcomes for the farm. Ask if they have a business plan, and if they would be comfortable sharing that with you.

Often, the farmer has a good idea of what problems they want to solve. As you tour the farm, though, you may see other issues, or you may see causes for the perceived problem that differ from what the farmer thinks. It's important that you talk about resource concerns on the farm without being overly critical or judgmental.

For instance, when you first see severe erosion, poor manure management, outdated farming practices or systems, it can be a bit shocking or at least uncomfortable. However, being judgmental or placing blame about the conditions you see is not likely to promote the positive relationship you'll need in order to help make improvements. The farmer may be anywhere on the continuum from oblivious to deeply ashamed of those poor conditions. They may have inherited the problem, or managing it may slowly have gotten beyond their abilities – either physically or financially.

Be sure to compliment the farmer on practices they are performing well. Try to talk truthfully, but don't immediately point out all the problems you may notice. Give yourself time to consider those problem areas and plan ways to discuss these more difficult issues during follow-up visits. Also, realize that some farming operations are ugly but not problematic to resources. Work together to determine on-site and off-site impacts of farming activities.

Generally speaking, running through a checklist with a farmer is a put-off, especially on a first visit. The perception may be that the farmer is being judged or graded as you are filling out the list, and their farm is being reduced to either "good" or "bad" with each mark you make. There are times during the planning process that filling out a checklist is needed and useful, but use it deliberately to demystify the process and engage the farmer without alienating them. On the other hand, bringing along a notebook with resource maps, aerial images, and a list of questions can be helpful and even engaging.

The first visit is also the opportunity for you to explain what NRCS is and what it does. Often the farmer does not know or has misconceptions about the agency and its services. It may help to work with your supervisor

VIDEO CLIP
Elevator pitch

and other field staff in advance to develop a brief "elevator speech" or summary on the topic. In any case, here are some key points you might wish to convey:

- The planner and other NRCS staff work in collaboration with the farmer as co-equal partners – that is, you are not the "authority."
- NRCS staff will help the farmer evaluate on-farm and off-farm environmental effects of farming practices. (Be prepared to mention and even name the various NRCS staff who may be involved at some point in the process.)
- NRCS technical assistance services are free of charge.
- NRCS will help the farmer identify improvements for environmental problems, and enhancements for things that are already being done well.
- NRCS offers competitive funding for conservation practices that address resource concerns or environmental problems.
- NRCS is not a regulatory agency.
- NRCS is not a business planning agency.
- NRCS is first and foremost a conservation agency, where funding assistance may be awarded as part of a conservation plan.
- The farmer makes the decision to continue with NRCS at every stage of the process.

QUICK TIP

Develop your own version of an "elevator speech." What would you include?

> *Drive slowly everywhere on farms – and whatever you do, don't run over the farmer's dog!"*
>
> **– Advice from a District Conservationist**

PHASE II
DECISION SUPPORT
Understanding the Solutions

STEP 5. Formulate Alternatives
STEP 6. Evaluate Alternatives
STEP 7. Make Decisions

The farmer is the ultimate decision maker for the farm. Your role is to help guide the farmer to the decision. You can do this by developing alternatives to consider and then providing data for the costs and benefits for each alternative. As you do this, keep in mind the specific circumstances of the farm and the farmer.

It's essential that the farmer owns the decisions that are made. This means that they understand and agree with what will be done, why it will be done, and how it will be done. It also means that they understand how the practice will be maintained into the future. Take the time to make sure that the farmer understands and agrees with these things before finalizing the plan.

Throughout this guide, the importance of building positive interpersonal relationships and developing long-term partnerships with farmers has been emphasized. At the same time, you must always remember that your primary responsibility is to NRCS and, in a wider sense, to its mission to protect soil and water quality and the health of the greater community. There may be times when you encounter conflicts between your relationship with the farmer and your responsibility to your job. Some practices may be what the farmer wants but may not be what fits a particular program. You may see things on the farm that may not be best for the greater community, and you may be torn between your desire to please the farmer and your broader responsibilities. In such cases, you should discuss the issues with your supervisor. Be open and honest about the conflict and try to find a solution together. Ultimately, you'll need to be open and honest with the farmer as well. Sometimes a friend has to say no.

It's also important to think about how to effectively communicate all the information you need to provide to the farmer. Some people are very comfortable using

You may see things on the farm that may not be best for the greater community, and you may be torn between your desire to please the farmer and your broader responsibilities.

texts and emails to communicate; others may not own a smartphone. Some people love large reports with lots of data; others can find that overwhelming. During your interactions with the farmer, pay attention to how they receive and share information. When you send reports and information, follow up with an email or phone call, or offer to make another site visit to review what you sent and to make sure that the information was received and understood.

QUICK TIP

One note of caution: All communication with clients is considered part of the government record. While a personal cellphone may be helpful for arranging a farm visit, for example, anything more than that – even text messages – may need to be transferred to official platforms. Personal notes on important conversations should be kept on file. Check your supervisor about NRCS retention policies for these and other records.

At this stage of decision making, you may document the farmer's decisions in a conservation plan and begin to assist the farmer with an application to NRCS programs, should they so desire.

PHASE III
APPLICATION AND EVALUATION

Understanding the Results

STEP 8. Implement the Plan

STEP 9. Evaluate the Plan

As the conservation planner, you will deliver the plan to the farmer and review it for accuracy and clarity. The plan contains a listing of the recommended conservation practices, the specifications or job sheet for each practice, and a schedule for implementation. There should also be a description of the impacts of the selected practices on the targeted natural resources. Find the time to sit down with the farmer to go over the plan and the contract schedule together to make sure they understand the expectations of all parties. Your involvement in the actual implementation of those practices will vary depending on whether or not the farmer actually enters into a contract with NRCS. So, this may be your last chance to talk with the farmer and answer their questions before work begins.

Remember that NRCS does not know a farmer is actually installing a practice until the farmer says so. It's important for them to contact NRCS so the agency can make sure they have a design or job sheet before implementation. In addition, it may be necessary to observe or photo-document parts of the installation process.

If a farmer is only interested in a conservation plan, the implementation of the recommended practices may be entirely in their hands. However, if the farmer is seeking funding, there is more work to be done. Many farmers – though not all – are aware that NRCS provides funding. But most farmers do not know the details or how complicated that funding can be. These financial issues have been the root of many conflicts and misunderstandings between NRCS and farmers. So careful attention to explaining the details of programs and payments will help improve relationships between planners and farmers.

Make sure the farmer understands that once their application is submitted to NRCS it will be evaluated in a competitive ranking process that is conducted only periodically by the agency. Let them know the anticipated schedule for that process, and if you think they want more details you can direct them to the **NRCS website** for a thorough description of the current ranking process and criteria. While that process in underway, you may advance the planning conversation to include evaluation of costs and potential sources of additional funding for practices being considered, and to explain

QUICK TIP

The farmer must be informed that conservation practice payments are considered taxable income.

the various conditions and obligations that are often attached to NRCS program funding. (You can do this by reviewing the program appendix with the farmer.)

The farmer must be informed that conservation practice payments are considered taxable income. In addition, if the farmer owes the government money, program payments will be garnished to that outstanding debt. This includes unpaid taxes and delinquent federal loans. Always recommend that they talk with an accountant about possible financial ramifications.

NRCS programs provide some funding, but payments for conservation practices are not intended to cover all costs. The idea is that if the project is worth doing, the farmer will be willing to invest some of their own money and labor. In addition, the farmer should understand that the reason taxpayer money is spent on conservation practices is because the entire community benefits from protecting air quality, water quality, soil quality, wildlife habitat, and so on. All this inevitably leads to discussions about money.

QUICK TIP

Farmers should discuss with their contractor in advance how delays and unforeseen costs will be worked out.

Understanding payment rates is crucial for planner and farmer alike – as is knowing the gap between the program payment and the real costs for a particular practice. Encouraging the farmer to determine for themselves the cost of a practice can be crucial to the success of a contract. The costs for each practice can be estimated, but are limited because they vary from farmer to farmer. For example, a farmer who owns and can operate an excavator will have very different costs than a farmer who has to hire both an excavator and an operator. A farmer who can construct a high tunnel on their own will have different costs than a farmer who hires a contractor for that task. The farmer can choose to add various upgrades to components of a practice that will add costs.

Costs often increase when engineering practices hit unexpected circumstances. Ideally, a full engineering design will have been developed prior to contract signing, though more often only a preliminary plan will be ready by that point. Either way, such a plan or design will help the farmer get a realistic estimate from construction contractors, which is essential before finalizing the NRCS contract. Also urge the farmer to check on the availability of contractors in order to ensure that the schedule can be met, otherwise the timing of the practice can be adjusted before the NRCS contract is finalzed.

In some cases, the conservation practice may actually have a positive rate of return, so that over time it may save money and eventually pay for itself. For example, the increase in return could come from reduced fertilizer or fuel inputs or more efficient use of time and equipment.

Once the farmer understands the upfront costs, the total costs, and future returns, you can work together to find ways to help the farmer cover costs beyond the NRCS payments rates. Using an "assignment of payment," securing grants from MDAR or other outside funds (see **More Info,** below), and seeking loans are all ways farmers can bridge financial gaps and create cash flow to get practices implemented. However, be sure to convey that there are time restrictions on how soon the NRCS funding must be used and when the practice must be installed – and let the farmer know that starting too *early* can also jeopardize the approved funding.

VIDEO CLIP
Understanding the payment process

QUICK TIP

Farmers can use an "Assignment of Payment" to help guarantee payment to a contractor and potentially waive or defer down payments. This method allows the government to issue the payment directly to the contractor or vendor, thus increasing their confidence in receiving full and prompt payment.

In addition, it's important for the farmer to know that an NRCS payment can be garnished by the Internal Revenue Service in cases of severe delinquency or nonpayment of debts owed to the government. In such a case, there would be no notification provided by the IRS to the farmer or NRCS; the payment is simply reduced accordingly or never arrives at all.

If you do move on, good records will be a great help to the next planner, and if you are still working in that office, it will help refresh your memory.

Once the farmer has looked at the details of these costs, they can make a truly informed decision whether to enter into a program contract.

Practice implementation can be the most demanding on your time as a planner. For many practices, there are critical inspection items you need to confirm as work is in progress. The more available you are and the more you can be on site to observe installation, the better. Your presence, or the presence of the engineer involved, will help avoid or catch mistakes early and will allow for the documentation of things that won't be visible upon completion. You may need to get signatures from various contractors as well. Work with your District Conservationist and engineer if needed to coordinate NRCS availability and timing with the farmer in order to achieve prompt periodic and final certifications.

Evaluation is an often overlooked but critical component of the planning process. It allows you and the farmer to assess the effectiveness of the plan as it is implemented. It's a great learning opportunity and a good way to continue to build your long-term relationship. Like that relationship, the plan is dynamic. By staying in touch and working together to improve the farm through the installation of conservation practices, you are building more opportunities for the future.

PLANNING FOR A SMOOTH TRANSITION

In regard to the farmer working with NRCS in the future, keep in mind that it's possible you may not work in that same NRCS Field Office throughout the lifespan of the planning process or EQIP contract implementation, or the next time the farmer requests assistance. Since continuity is a cornerstone of a trusting relationship, it's vitally important that your interactions with the farmer are well-documented – on your Conservation Assistance or "Cons6" notes, or through another mechanism approved by your District Conservationist. If you do move on, good records will be a great help to the next planner, and if you are still working in that office, it will help refresh your memory.

Generally, the more notes you take, the better. Here are a few specific considerations:

- Be sure to identify the resource concerns that have been observed or are currently being addressed.
- Identify the hierarchy of decision makers on the farm, including names, contact information, and preferred methods of communication.
- Note short- and long-term farming and conservation objectives, and indicate expectations that may have been set – either by the farmer or by NRCS.
- Document and track the status of planning, the application process, or project implementation.

VIDEO CLIP
When a planner leaves

MORE INFO

Let the farmer know that there may be other sources of funding they can tap to help cover the cost of conservation practices. See the **Additional Resources** section for some possibilities, including private or public grants. Having an NRCS conservation plan in hand can open the door to those and other possible sources.

Strategies for Success

The conservation of our natural resources, including the protection of our soils and our water supplies, are critically important to the health and sustainability of our society.

We face an uncertain future that will surely bring new and increased threats to these resources. In order to successfully meet these challenges, we need technical expertise in a variety of fields, including a thorough understanding of natural processes. We need up-to-date tools, hardware, and software to collect, sort, and analyze data; we need reliable historical information; and we need government programs that target critical resources and support the installation of effective conservation practices.

All of these things are essential, but to be truly successful we must also be mindful of the human side of conservation. To effectively spread the conservation message, we must successfully engage with farmers and the agricultural community. To do this we must gain a better understanding of the individuals we are trying to assist, their histories, their motivations, and their needs. We must be considerate and understanding of their situations and beliefs, and we must be aware of the dynamics of interpersonal interactions. In the end, our social skills will be just as important as our technical skills.

This guide has provided background information on agriculture in Massachusetts, general information on our farmers and the farming community, descriptions of positive and negative interactions, and information from the field of interpersonal relationships. In **Chapter 7, Connection to the NRCS Planning Process**, all of those elements were integrated into the 9-Step approach. Along the way and in the **Additional Resources** that follow, the guide provides references for more in-depth reading and exploration on those topics. Links to video interviews with a number of Massachusetts farmers have been included to supplement the topics covered and bring it all to life, and a longer video based on those farmer interviews can be viewed through the link at right.

INTRO VIDEO
Meet the farmers

In addition to reviewing the written and recorded information listed above, you should take full advantage of the experience of your NRCS colleagues. Those with many years in the field have undoubtedly encountered a wide range of situations and people, both good and bad, during their careers. They have learned, often through trial and error, what is successful and what isn't. They may

QUICK TIP

Talk with your colleagues about the successes and challenges you encounter. Seek advice from more experienced staff and accompany them on farm visits so you can see how they approach different situations. And take the time to evaluate your own performance.

even have worked with the same farms and farmers you are dealing with now.

Storytelling can be a powerful learning tool. Talk with your colleagues regularly about the successes and challenges you encounter so you can learn how they might have handled similar circumstances. Seek advice from more experienced staff and ask them to share their stories with you. When you accompany them on farm visits, watch closely to see how they interact with the farmer and approach different situations. Listen and share often – and take the time to critically evaluate your own performance on the job.

As with any discipline, your relationship and interpersonal skills require practice and attention to improve. Ideally, this topic will be one that you regularly revisit, either in a formal or an informal setting. In any case, it's a topic that should be regularly discussed among NRCS staff and supervisors.

STRATEGIES FOR SELF-EVALUATION

How do you measure success in improving your interpersonal relationships with farmers? Any meaningful evaluation must be based on established goals and objectives. From the standpoint of your employer, the basis for measuring success would be metrics such as the number of contracts executed and completed, and the number of acres of practices applied.

Those things do indeed play a role in evaluating on-the-job performance, but they do not give a clear picture of your success with the underlying interpersonal relationships that make it all possible. You can have farmers signed up for practices where your relationship was less than desirable, and conversely, you can have great relationships with farmers that don't result in the application of any Farm Bill practices.

In addition to tracking those performance metrics, you should also evaluate your success based upon the characteristics of healthy relationships introduced in **Chapter 5, Understanding the Basics of Personal Relationships**:

- Mutual respect
- Trust
- Honesty
- Willingness to compromise
- Good communication
- Mutual problem-solving
- Understanding
- Emotion control

To evaluate those defining characteristics, you should assess the personal skills that make good relationships possible. These include:

- Knowing yourself – and recognizing how others may perceive you
- Making the extra effort to guide positive interactions
- Listening closely and empathetically
- Being slow to judge
- Managing expectations
- Regulating emotions
- Establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries
- Being open to feedback and constructive criticism

To be most helpful, evaluation is a tool that must be used repeatedly. The purpose of such self-evaluations is to help you continue to learn, grow, and improve. You should not only dedicate time to it on a regular basis – whether monthly, quarterly, at the completion of the different practices, or some other interval – you should also record and track your results in order to form more specific goals for yourself, such as listening more effectively, managing your emotions, or expressing yourself more clearly.

To be truly successful we must also be mindful of the human side of conservation. In the end, our social skills will be just as important as our technical skills.

To be most helpful, evaluation is a tool that must be used repeatedly.

You can certainly enlist the aid of your supervisor or colleagues in this evaluation. What did they observe in your interactions that stood out or needed improvement? You might also seek input from the farmers you worked with. How did they feel about their interactions with you? Were they comfortable working with you? Did they feel that they were listened to and were treated with respect?

The most effective method, however, will be your own repeated self-evaluation. Taking that time is a great opportunity for you to thoughtfully and objectively consider, document, and rate your established goals, competencies, and overall performance. The purpose of the evaluation process is to highlight strengths, correct performance weaknesses, and develop and improve skills and abilities. In order to do this, you must be willing to recognize areas that need improvement or development.

CONDUCTING AN EFFECTIVE SELF-EVALUATION

Refer to the model worksheet that begins on the next page to guide your self-evaluation process. For greatest benefit, observe these basics:

- Set aside time when you can focus solely on this task.
- Eliminate distractions.
- Try to relax and reflect upon individual goals, experiences, and incidents.
- Recall both good and bad experiences.
- Review correspondence and notes to enhance your memory of the interactions.
- As mentioned above, you can seek input from co-workers or farmers to provide background for your evaluation.
- Be prepared to record important thoughts or changed goals.

Be honest with yourself. Your self-evaluation does not need to be shared with anyone; it's just for your own improvement. Think about what went right and what went wrong. Identify your own strengths and weaknesses. Think about your interpersonal skills. Did you put in the effort? Did you treat the farmer with respect? Did you listen well? Give yourself credit for where you did well and note where you fell short. Identify areas that need improvement. Re-evaluate your goals and adjust them – moving the bar higher where possible, or lowering expectations where necessary.

At its core, the success of our collective conservation efforts depends upon the repeated positive interactions that planners like you have with farmers. This guide is designed to provide perspective on forming daily habits that help foster these interactions – and ultimately advance the health and sustainability of our society.

Interpersonal Relationships Self-Evaluation

The purpose of this worksheet is to guide self-evaluation of your interactions with the farmers you serve. It can help you gain insight into your interpersonal skill level, identify weak spots, and highlight areas of growth and improvement. It's for your own personal use and not intended for sharing with others – though obviously you can, if you find that useful. It's not part of an NRCS performance review process of any kind – though NRCS encourages its conservation planners to utilize the worksheet. Be honest with yourself; there's no chance for improvement without honesty.

The topics and questions below are intended to prompt critical thinking and contemplation. They can be used to review one specific interaction or several, and over whatever timeframe you like. Ideally, you will fill out the worksheet for future reference. Or, if you prefer, you can use it just to guide your thinking. Allow yourself sufficient uninterrupted time when you will be alone and free from distractions.

Rate only yourself, not the people you interacted with. Where appropriate, add a comment on what went wrong – or right – and what you could do to improve.

Let's get started!

First, indicate the interaction/s and timeframe covered by this evaluation [CHECK ONE]:

☐ **Interaction with specific farm/farmer [IDENTIFY] :** _____
[SPECIFY DATE OR DATE RANGE]: _____

☐ **All farmer interactions during specified timeframe.**
[SPECIFY DATE OR DATE RANGE]: _____

THE SCORING SYSTEM: 1 = POOR 2 = FAIR 3 = GOOD 4 = EXCELLENT

1. Thinking about the identified interaction/s, regardless of the outcome, evaluate your success based upon the characteristics of healthy relationships introduced in **Chapter 5, Understanding the Basics of Interpersonal Relationships**.

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS	1	2	3	4	COMMENTS
Mutual respect					
Trust					
Honesty					
Willingness to compromise					
Good communication					
Mutual problem-solving					
Understanding					
Emotion control					
			TOTAL POINTS _____		AVERAGE (TOTAL ÷ 8) _____

THE SCORING SYSTEM: **1 = POOR** **2 = FAIR** **3 = GOOD** **4 = EXCELLENT**

2. Evaluate your interpersonal relationship skills based upon the identified interaction/s with farmers. Rate each item based upon how well you attained the stated quality.

PERSONAL CHARACTER	1	2	3	4
I understand myself and my own biases and motivations.				
I understand how I am perceived by others.				
I am aware of what things trigger my emotions and anger.				
I always try to be honest.				
I am always professional.				
I show empathy and compassion for others.				
I have a positive attitude.				
I am always aware of my responsibilities to my employer and their goals.				

TOTAL POINTS _____ **AVERAGE (TOTAL ÷ 8)** _____

RESPECT FOR OTHERS	1	2	3	4
I researched the farm and farmer before our meeting.				
I had all the equipment and paperwork I needed.				
I was properly dressed for a farm visit.				
I scheduled the meeting for a time convenient for the farmer.				
I showed up on time.				
The focus of the meeting was on the farm and the farmer, and not on myself.				
I respected the farmer's time.				
Establishing a good relationship with the farmer was important to me.				
I was aware of and respected our different social and cultural influences and personal backgrounds.				

TOTAL POINTS _____ **AVERAGE (TOTAL ÷ 9)** _____

THE SCORING SYSTEM: **1 = POOR** **2 = FAIR** **3 = GOOD** **4 = EXCELLENT**

LISTENING SKILLS	1	2	3	4
I gave the farmer my full attention when they were speaking. I was not rehearsing my response while they were speaking.				
I did not interrupt the farmer or attempt to finish their sentences.				
I paid attention to nonverbal signals – body language, facial expressions, and gestures.				
I made eye contact and used gestures and facial expressions to show I was interested in what was being said.				
I respected the pace of the farmer's communication and took time to quietly digest what they said.				
I asked questions and repeated what had been said to ensure I understood what the farmer was saying.				
I did not try to have the last word on the subject.				
TOTAL POINTS _____ **AVERAGE (TOTAL ÷ 7)** _____				

COMMUNICATION SKILLS	1	2	3	4
I was able to put my thoughts into words and expressed myself clearly.				
I made sure the farmer understood what I was saying.				
I spoke plainly and avoided jargon and technical language.				
I did not overload the farmer with too much information.				
I used methods of communication that the farmer was comfortable with or that they preferred.				
I answered any questions the farmer had.				
I effectively used my communication skills for a range of purposes (e.g., to inform, instruct, motivate, or persuade).				
I used appropriate methods to stay in contact with the farmer and keep them informed during the whole process.				
TOTAL POINTS _____ **AVERAGE (TOTAL ÷ 8)** _____				

THE SCORING SYSTEM: **1 = POOR** **2 = FAIR** **3 = GOOD** **4 = EXCELLENT**

EMOTIONAL SKILLS	1	2	3	4
I did not judge, demean, or criticize the farmer.				
I was not influenced by the farmer's dress, language, gender, or ethnicity.				
I was empathetic to the farmer and was able to see the issues from their perspective.				
I did not become upset by the farmer's words or actions.				
I did not express anger or frustration.				
I accepted criticism and took responsibility for my actions and statements.				
I did not avoid difficult conversations or deflect criticism.				
TOTAL POINTS _____ **AVERAGE (TOTAL ÷ 7)** _____				

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS	1	2	3	4
I clearly described NRCS programs and procedures.				
I did not overpromise.				
I did not avoid any important topics.				
I offered frank input on the financial aspects of the practices, including long-term economic impacts.				
I made sure that the farmer understood their obligations towards installing and maintaining practices.				
TOTAL POINTS _____ **AVERAGE (TOTAL ÷ 5)** _____				

You've completed your self-ratings. Tally your totals here:

CUMULATIVE SCORE ALL CATEGORIES (TALLY ALL TOTALS) _____

OVERALL AVERAGE SCORE ALL ITEMS (CUMULATIVE ÷ 52) _____

Other attributes

Relationships are complex and can't be completely covered by the points above. If there are other aspects of your relationship that influenced its outcome and would be important for consideration in future relationships, you can describe them here:

3. **Continuous improvement.** As with any skill, relationship skills will improve over time if you prioritize the effort and dedicate time to evaluation and continued practice. Use this section to summarize the items above so you can track your performance over time, remain aware of areas needing further improvement, and celebrate success.

a. Based upon your input on sections #1 and 2 above, list the skills you excelled at:

b. Now list those you need to improve:

c. Compare this evaluation with previous ones. Which skills show improvement?

d. Which skills, if any, seem to have declined?

e. Finally, list any notes or reminders to yourself for particular areas you want to focus on for future interactions, as well as any areas that you would like to learn more about.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This guide is posted on both the MACD website (www.massacd.org) and the NRCS website (www.nrcs.usda.gov/massachusetts).

To request the pdf by email, contact MLeffMACD@gmail.com

STATE AGENCIES & PROGRAMS

Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR)
https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-department-of-agricultural-resources

- **Agricultural Composting Program**
  https://www.mass.gov/agricultural-composting-program
- **Agricultural Industry Calendar of Events**
  https://www.mass.gov/service-details/agriculture-industry-calendar
- **Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program**
  https://www.mass.gov/agricultural-preservation-restriction-apr-program
- **Agricultural Business Training Program**
  https://www.mass.gov/service-details/agricultural-business-training-program-abtp
- **Urban Agriculture Resources**
  https://www.mass.gov/service-details/urban-agriculture-resources
- **Commonwealth Quality Program**
  https://www.mass.gov/service-details/commonwealth-quality-program-cqp

Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR)
https://www.mass.gov/orgs/department-of-conservation-recreation

Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game (DFG)
https://www.mass.gov/orgs/department-of-fish-and-game

University of Massachusetts

- **UMass Cranberry Station (East Wareham)**
  https://ag.umass.edu/cranberry
- **UMass Tree Fruit Station (Belchertown)**
  https://coldspringorchard.com/
- **Center for Agriculture, Food and the Environment**
  https://ag.umass.edu/
- **Stockbridge School of Agriculture**
  https://stockbridge.cns.umass.edu/
- **Forest Conservation Program**
  https://masswoods.org/

Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts (MACD)
www.massacd.org

Land Preservation
https://www.mass.gov/service-details/how-is-land-protected

Municipal Agricultural Commissions
https://massagcom.org/AgComs.php

Private Lands Forestry Program (aka Service Forestry)
https://www.mass.gov/service-details/service-forestry

FARMER VIDEO
Meet the farmers

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

American Farmland Trust
https://farmland.org/about/how-we-work/new-england-regional-office/

- **Massachusetts Coordinated Soil Health Program**
  https://farmland.org/ma-soil-health-program/

Agriculture and Commercial Horticulture Organizations and Resources
https://ag.umass.edu/resources/agriculture-resources/business-resources-for-farmers/agricultural-commercial-horticulture

"Buy Local" Groups and Regions
https://www.mass.gov/service-details/buy-local-groups

Farm Credit East
Provides credit and financial services to farmers, farmer-owned cooperatives, rural homebuyers, and agribusiness providers.
https://www.farmcrediteast.com

Farmer Veteran Coalition
https://www.farmvetco.org

Massachusetts Farm Bureau Federation
Strengthens a diverse agricultural community by supporting and advocating for Massachusetts farm families.
https://mfbf.net/about/history-of-mfbf

Massachusetts Forest Alliance
Advocates for sustainable forest management practices and working forests on public and private lands.
https://www.massforestalliance.net/

Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition
Advances land conservation across Massachusetts by providing education, tools, networking, and advocacy for land trusts and their partners.
https://massland.org/

New England Forestry Foundation (NEFF)
Helps the people of New England sustain their way of life, protect forest wildlife habitat, and mitigate and adapt to climate change.
https://newenglandforestry.org/

New England Small Farm Institute (NESFI)
Promotes small farm development by providing information and training for aspiring, beginning, and transitioning farmers.
https://smallfarm.org

New Entry Sustainable Farming Project
Provides training and support to beginning and immigrant farmers.
https://nesfp.org/#

Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA), Massachusetts Chapter
https://nofa.org/nofa-state/#ma

The Carrot Project
Supports agricultural businesses financial health through education, advocacy, and research.
https://www.thecarrotproject.org/

Urban Farming Institute of Boston
Promotes urban farming as a commercial sector and engages urban communities in building a more locally based food system.
https://urbanfarminginstitute.org

World Farmers at Flats Mentor Farm
Provides support for small-scale beginning and immigrant farmers in sustainable agricultural production and marketing.
https://www.worldfarmers.org/about/#mission

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

GRANT OPPORTUNITIES

Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR)
https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-department-of-agricultural-resources

Agricultural Grants and Financial Assistance Programs
https://www.mass.gov/guides/agricultural-grants-and-financial-assistance-programs

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Massachusetts
https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/conservation-by-state/massachusetts

USDA Rural Development
https://www.rd.usda.gov/about-rd

USDA Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP)
https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/occsp/index

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)
https://northeast.sare.org/grants/get-a-grant/farmer-grant-program

LOAN OPPORTUNITIES

USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA)
https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/farm-loan-programs/index

The Carrot Project
https://www.thecarrotproject.org/farmers-food-producers/#loan

Farm Credit East
https://www.farmcrediteast.com/

PVGrows Investment Fund
http://www.pvgrows.net/investment-fund/

Common Capital Community Development Financial Institution
https://www.commoncapitalma.org/

Coastal Enterprises Inc. Business Loan Financing
https://www.ceimaine.org/financing

Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation SBA Microloan Program
https://www.empoweringsmallbusiness.org/what-we-offer/sba-microloan-program

FARMER VIDEO
Meet the farmers

USDA & NRCS REFERENCES

Farm Bills and Farm Policy

- **Analysis of Previous Farm Bills: Historical Overviews**
  https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-commodity-policy/analysis-of-previous-farm-bills/
- **The 20th Century Transformation of U.S. Agriculture and Farm Policy**
  https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/44197/13566_eib3_1_.pdf?v=1625.5

Confidentiality

- **Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002**
  Sec. 2004. Administrative requirements for conservation programs
  https://directives.sc.egov.usda.gov/ViewRollUp.aspx?hid=21872&sf=1

Farm Statistics and Farmer Demographics
https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/Massachusetts/index.php

The Art of Communication
https://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/references/public/UT/Art_of_Communication.pdf

USDA NRCS Urban Agriculture

- **Urban Agriculture Toolkit**
  https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/urban-agriculture-toolkit.pdf
- **NRCS Urban Agriculture Website**
  https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/landuse/urbanagriculture/
- **Urban Soils**
  https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/natural-resource-concerns/soil/urban-soils

HISTORY OF AGRICULTURE AND LAND USE IN MASSACHUSETTS

"Stone by Stone: The Magnificent History in New England's Stone Walls,"
Robert M. Thorson, 2004

"Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England,"
William Cronon, 1983

"Rural Economy in New England at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century,"
Percy W. Bidwell, 1916 (reprinted 2018)

"The Market and Massachusetts Farmers, 1750-1855," Winifred B. Rothenberg, 1981

Massachusetts Agriculture Snapshot 2021 (MDAR)
https://www.mass.gov/doc/snapshot-of-ma-agriculture-presentation/download

Historic Sites

- **Hancock Shaker Village** (Hancock MA)
  https://www.nps.gov/places/hancock-shaker-village.htm
- **Harvard Forest** (Petersham MA)
  https://harvardforest.fas.harvard.edu/visit
- **Historic Deerfield** (Deerfield MA)
  https://www.historic-deerfield.org
- **Mashpee Wampanoag Museum** (Mashpee MA)
  https://mashpeewampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/museum
- **Old Sturbridge Village** (Sturbridge MA)
  https://www.osv.org/
- **Pioneer Village** (Salem MA)
  https://www.pioneervillagesalem.org/
- **Plimoth Patuxet Museums** (Plymouth MA)
  https://plimoth.org/

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Workplace Interpersonal Relationships
University of California
(discussion with an agricultural focus)
https://nature.berkeley.edu/ucce50/ag-labor/7labor/12.htm

Introduction to Building Interpersonal Relationships
Ohio State University
(guide with a workplace focus)
https://onpace.osu.edu/modules/transitioning-to-the-workplace/building-interpersonal-relationships/introduction-to-building-interpersonal-relationships

Interpersonal Relationships
Lumen Learning
(general exploration of the topic)
https://courses.lumenlearning.com/interpersonalcommunicationxmaster/chapter/interpersonal-relationships/

Interpersonal Skills
SkillsYouNeed.com
(discussion of interpersonal skills with self-evaluation)
https://www.skillsyouneed.com/interpersonal-skills.html

Developing Your Emotional Intelligence
Gemma Leigh Roberts
(online course on emotional intelligence)
https://www.linkedin.com/learning/developing-your-emotional-intelligence

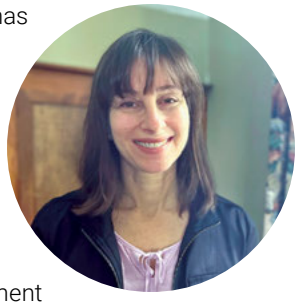
OUR TEAM

MICHAEL LEFF is Executive Director of the Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts (MACD). In that role, he supports the sustainability of Conservation Districts throughout the Commonwealth and works closely with numerous partnering organizations – including NRCS, the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR), MassDEP, and others. He is also sole proprietor of Ecological Connections, an environmental consulting service dedicated to making connections across landscapes and between people. Before returning to New England in 2015, Michael held various environmental positions in the Greater Philadelphia Area – including serving as Founding Ambassador of the Delaware River Urban Waters Federal Partnership for the U.S. Forest Service, Environmental Programs Manager at the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, Watershed Program Manager with the PA Environmental Council, and Land Manager at Awbury Arboretum. Prior to his diverse environmental career, Michael worked for many years in all facets of communications and editorial services. He holds a B.A. in psychology from the University of Virginia.

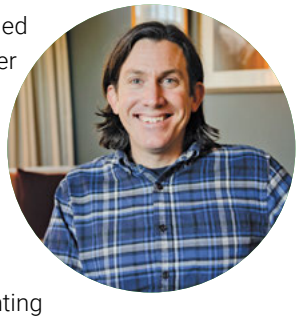
After finishing her agricultural degree at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, **SUSAN PHINNEY** returned to her home territory of New England, where she started a consulting business to preserve farmland through business planning and land conservation practices. Phinney found common interests at the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources and joined the Department to offer business planning services to farmers. Over her nine years with MDAR, Phinney was also involved in resource management programs, including the launch of a new water quality improvement grant program which complemented the USDA-NRCS Farm Bill programs. Inspired by the growing "buy local" movement in Massachusetts, Phinney switched her focus and was hired by Whole Foods Market as the company's first "Forager," seeking out locally grown or crafted products in New England. Most recently Phinney has been consulting with farmers and farm service providers in Massachusetts while raising a small herd of meat goats in Worcester County. Phinney has been a Worcester County Conservation District Supervisor since 2011.

JOE SMITH is the owner of Woodsman, Inc., an environmental consulting firm specializing in monitoring and documenting protected properties in Massachusetts. Since 2010 Joe has written over 200 Baseline Documentation Reports for farms protected by Agricultural Preservation Restrictions. Joe is a Massachusetts Licensed Forester and an award-winning artist known for his New England landscapes. He is a returned Peace Corps Volunteer (Micronesia, 1977-79) and has also worked as a forester for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management, and the Trust for New England Forestlands. He has been a supervisor with the Worcester County Conservation District since 1995 and is the past chair of the State Commission for Conservation of Soil, Water, and Related Resources, as well as a past president and board member of the Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts (MACD).

LISA TROTTO has served as the Administrator of the Worcester County Conservation District for several years. In addition to her routine business duties in that role, she promotes conservation programs and services to landowners in central Massachusetts. Lisa is also the Administrator of the Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts and an MACD contractor monitoring lands with Agricultural Preservation Restrictions on properties located predominately in western Massachusetts. Lisa owns Wachusett Honey and is the resident beekeeper at Sholan Farms in Leominster, Massachusetts. Prior to her 20 years in the field of conservation, Lisa's background is in banking, mortgage lending, and retail management. She is an accomplished classical pianist who today enjoys playing music from the '70s and '80s.



Kathryn Zichelle Sullivan has over 20 years of experience in land management and conservation. She currently works as a private consultant, doing a variety of environmental projects, including agricultural easement monitoring, property baseline assessments, and farmland restoration plans. She also runs the annual plant sale fundraiser and develops educational programming for the Worcester County Conservation District. Kathryn served as a Soil Conservationist with NRCS for over 17 years in Massachusetts. In that capacity, she worked directly with farmers and landowners, guiding them through all phases of the planning process and through Farm Bill programs to reach their conservation goals. Kathryn was awarded a State Senate citation for "Dedicated Leadership and Commitment to Supporting Small Scale Farmers in Massachusetts and Ensuring Access to USDA-NRCS Programs for All Farmers" in 2017. Her academic foundation includes a bachelor's degree in Soil and Plant Science, and a master's degree in Anthropology.



IAIN WARD is a USDA-NRCS certified conservation planner, a family farmer advocate, and a farmer himself. His work has been featured in *NPR*, *Business Wire*, *Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*. Iain has worked extensively with Ocean Spray both as a strategic advisor, and on the Grower Council representing Massachusetts grower-owners. In addition to owning his own first-generation cranberry and livestock farm for 14 years, he has helped farmers with planning, conservation, and diversification across the United States and Canada. With a mom from England and a dad from the Bronx, Iain grew up in a small New England town surrounded by dairy farms and cranberry bogs. In less than 20 years, real estate developments replaced many of those small farms, along with his childhood memories. When family farms disappear, the direct connection to our food source goes away, and small towns lose their rural character. Today he is on a mission to protect and conserve the environment by helping family farms steward their land and continue to prosper.

FARMER VIDEO
Meet the farmers

This guide is posted on both the MACD website (www.massacd.org) and the NRCS website (www.nrcs.usda.gov/massachusetts).

To request the pdf by email, contact MLeffMACD@gmail.com

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts