Midwest Perennial Forage Working Group
Conference call re: SARE R & E Proposal
October 1, 2013

Present on call:

Laura Paine (Wisconsin DATCP)
Terry VanDerPol (Land Stewardship Project)
Joe Sellers (Iowa Beef Center)
Dick Cates (Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, UW-Madison)
Jim Paulson (U of MN Extension)
Jane Jewett (Green Lands Blue Waters)

Laura briefly reviewed the draft proposal she sent out in advance of the call. (Draft available online: <http://misadocuments.info/midwest_perennialforage_docs.html>)

Focus first on the three main proposed outcomes:

1) Non-farming landowners will gain additional choices for land management decisions.

2). Livestock producers will learn about how to use contract grazing to improving the resilience and economic performance of their operations by providing access to additional grassland acreage.

3) Beginning livestock farmers will have the opportunity to gain skills in livestock farming under the mentorship of experienced livestock farmers.

Terry: Asked are we talking about building skills in pasture/livestock management, or about creating opportunity for grazing? Tall order to train people in the skills if they’re starting from zero; may be beyond the scope of this grant.

Joe: Agree it may be too encompassing. For #3, “Opportunity to gain knowledge of business and production models for contract grazing.” Note that in #1, landowners need to gain knowledge of ways to gain rental dollars, but also need ways to gain connections with livestock producers who can match their goals for land management.

Discussion about potential partners and avoiding duplication of effort. How can this project add value to existing beginning farmer work?

* Build connections with non-operating landowners
* Potential access to land
* Understanding of different business model
* Shift in the way people do business; the way people think about what’s possible
* Doesn’t take the place of beginning farmer training; it’s an enriching add-on
* Contract grazing is an opportunity for prospective farmers who want their own cows and can’t capitalize it any other way: start out grazing someone else’s cows.

Existing beginning farmer work:

* Iowa: Iowa Extension and Iowa Beef Center, Young Farmers Network
* Wisconsin: Wisconsin School for Beginning Dairy & Livestock Farmers
* Minnesota: Land Stewardship Project’s Farm Beginning

Moving on to Planned Activities (see draft proposal; Planned Activities #1-5):

#1: Research project on how to reach & educate non-farming landowners.

* Cooperative Development Services is putting a lot of focus on these non-farming landowners. LSP is trying to work with them too, but they are very hard to reach. Possible to reach through Farm Service Agency if you pay for a mailing.
* It may make sense to try out some different ways of doing this, to try to find a way that’s effective.
* Reaching landowners and convincing them to sign grazing contracts is the ultimate goal, but that’s such a new idea that the first step is to just get the contract grazing concept talked about.
* Dick: You can’t really lose by attempting this.
* Joe: Reaching non-farming landowners may be the most important item, but has the lowest chance of success.
* Terry: Worthwhile to have a “lessons learned” document come out of #1.

#2: Regional contract grazing conference.

* Yes. Good idea. Bring landowners, farmers, graziers, Extension, NGOs – anyone with a stake in this – together. The more the better.
* Timing? Funds would come available in fall of 2014; look at possible late June 2015 for a 2-day conference.
* Joe suggested sponsoring some speakers or farmer panels at existing conferences to get visibility for contract grazing. (May include in Outreach section).

#3: Smaller-scale, in-depth workshops.

* Build off of format used by the Grazing Broker project in WI. Series of three workshops in each state: first, landowners; second, livestock owners; third, bring landowners + livestock owners together for networking.
* Geographical area, or ideal number of people? WI tried to limit it to a 4-county area, but it pulled in people from all over. About 20-25 people per workshop would be good.
* Larger regional conference coming first could help generate speakers and other help and interest for the smaller workshop series.

#4: Trial program of mentorships/apprenticeships/equity-building effort for beginning farmers

* Could add value to existing mentorship programs like Farm Beginnings
* Would be useful to develop a decision tool about contract grazing for beginning farmers.
* Dick Cates: The WI School has a handbook for mentor-intern relationships. It’s somewhere on the CIAS site; Dick will send it out to the group. This could be the basis for developing some tools focused on contract grazing.
* Possible wording: “Build a new business model for beginning farmers.”
* Jane: Would it be possible to write in grant funding to recruit and sponsor some contract grazing mentors for Farm Beginnings and/or the Wisconsin School for Beginning Dairy & Livestock Farmers? Dick and Terry thought so, although these two efforts have different ways of handling mentorship.

#5: Products to be developed:

* Website with producer profiles or “resumes” and land/landowner profiles. Not clear if this is within the scope of this project; it may be a 2.0 that requires additional funding; Laura will check with Cara Carper of SW Badger RC & D about what it would take to do this.
* Report on methods of finding non-operating landowners
* Business model and documents for beginning farmers

Impact:

Draft focused largely on grass-fed beef. Suggestion to include dairy replacement heifers as a specific focus; there are a lot of them and they represent a good opportunity for a contract grazing situation. Potentially more profit in grazing dairy heifers than in some other grazing options. Also suggestion to include backgrounding of steers on pasture; try to push more steers into longer grazing before they go to a feedlot.

Laura requested a paragraph about experience and roles from each collaborator and some help with creating a budget. Budget limit for SARE R & E is $200,000. Jim Paulson and Dick Cates agreed to read and edit the proposal. Joe Sellers will talk to the Young Farmers Network folks. Jane Jewett will get information about cost of a research project on non-farming landowners and on sponsoring mentors for Farm Beginnings.