**NCR SARE Research and Education Proposal--2014**

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**Brokering relationships between livestock producers, non-farming landowners, and beginning farmers**

**Start date: October 1, 2014**

**End date: September 30, 2017**

**Project Duration: 3 years**

**Project Coordinator:**

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**Institution name: Southwest Badger Resource Conservation and Development Council**

**Institution Official Information: Cara Carper, Executive Director**

**Type of project is "Research" or “Education."**

**Systems Category:**

**Animal Production**

**or**

**Education and Training**

**or**

**Natural Resources/Environment**

**Commodity Category:**

**Beef**

**or**

**Hay and Forage Crops**

**Participating Institutions and Organizations:**

**Southwest Badger RC&D**

**Iowa State University**

**University of Minnesota**

**University of Wisconsin**

**Land Stewardship Project**

**Green Lands Blue Waters**

**Cooperative Development Services**

**Project Abstract (400 words): currently 353**

This project takes new approaches to addressing fundamental issues of soil conservation and land access by creating a forum for people to bring together resources—land, expertise, livestock—to establish and manage profitable livestock operations. The project will utilize a variety of activities to explore opportunities to utilize contract grazing to form such partnerships between non-farming landowners, livestock producers and beginning farmers.

Contract Grazing is a livestock production system in which land ownership, livestock ownership, and management of the system may be de-coupled. Contract Grazing (also known as Custom Grazing) is a livestock production system in which land ownership, livestock ownership, and management of the system may be de-coupled. This arrangement can involve as many as three separate entities carrying out three distinct roles: a land owner, a livestock owner, and a grazier (the grazing manager) who provides the pasture management expertise.

This project targets non-farming landowners, who may control more than 50% of the arable land in some areas. Contract grazing may represent a good opportunity for these landowners to partner with livestock producers who wish to expand their grazing acreage. Many acres of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) grasslands are held by non-farming landowners. As CRP contracts expire, we have an opportunity to preserve these grasslands for use as pasture by brokering contract grazing partnerships. For example, between 2013 and 2015, in just five counties in SW Wisconsin, more than 23,000 acres of Conservation Reserve Program grassland contracts will expire.

In our experience, many non-farming landowners may have several goals for their land that encompass not only income generation, but also aesthetics, environmental stewardship, or avocation. Contract grazing may be an attractive alternative to renting for annual crop production that also provides benefits for livestock producers and beginning farmers. This project promotes contract grazing to capture some of these acres for use in forage production by pairing up non-farming landowners with like-minded livestock producers. As producers take advantage of expanding pasture acreage, and perhaps increasing herd size, they may take on apprentices, thus creating opportunities for beginning farmers to gain marketable skills as grazing managers and providing a stepping stone into farming.

**Project Description (100 words): currently 124**

This project will foster the establishment of contract grazing as a model for livestock production in Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin by encouraging partnerships between livestock producers, beginning farmers, and non-farming landowners. Using contract grazing, it is possible to achieve the goals of increasing the number of grassland acres available for livestock production, increasing the capacity of producers in the region to produce cattle, providing a means of supporting beginning farmers in their efforts to get established in farming, and providing non-farming landowners with an income and other benefits from well-managed grazing on their land. Project partners in Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin will carry out conferences, workshops, and create other opportunities to broker relationships among target audiences to support formation of successful contract grazing relationships.

**Project Outcomes (400 words): currently 362 words**

This project seeks to raise awareness of the opportunities that contract grazing can provide for three distinct audiences: non-farming landowners, livestock producers, and beginning farmers. The ultimate goals of this project are to increase the acreage of well-managed pasture in the three-state region and to increase the production of high quality beef by increasing herd sizes and/or helping new beef farmers get established.

1) Non-farming landowners will gain additional choices for land management decisions. These landowners may have several goals for their land that encompass not only income generation, but also aesthetics, environmental stewardship, or avocation. They will gain knowledge of ways of generating rental income while achieving environmental goals by maintaining or establishing grasslands on their property. They will gain an understanding of how to access to information and make connections with the agricultural community and as a result, will make better informed decisions about managing their land.

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. Contract grazing provides opportunities to consider expanding their herd size or provide reserves of forage under drought conditions. This may present opportunities for growth of their business and/or bringing on a partner. They will gain knowledge of their cost of production and determine the most profitable size for their operation based on economies of scale.

3) Beginning livestock farmers will have the opportunity to gain skills in livestock farming under the mentorship of experienced livestock farmers. The biggest hurdles to getting established as a beginning farmer are access to land and access to capital. Contract grazing may offer opportunities for beginning farmers to gain skill in managing livestock, pasture, and a livestock business without the need to own land. Partnerships with established livestock producers may provide opportunities to build equity in the form of cattle.

**Method/Approach (400 words): currently 433**

This project seeks to bring together landowners, livestock producers, and beginning farmers to explore new partnership-based models of livestock production using contract grazing. It will build on and integrate several existing successful projects including the Southwest Badger RC&D Grazing Broker project, Green Lands Blue Waters Perennial Forages working group, and two beginning farmer schools (Land Stewardship Project’s Farm Beginnings Program and UW’s WI School for Beginning Dairy and Livestock Farmers). Existing resources we will utilize include the GLBW contract grazing fact sheets and the Grazing Broker project’s landowner profile tool.

**Planned activities:**

1) A research project to determine effective ways of identifying and reaching non-farming landowners and a survey of them to assess their interests in contract grazing and determine their educational needs in managing their land.

2) A regional contract grazing conference, whose goal is to identify and bring together people who are already doing contract grazing or interested in it (livestock producers, landowners, and livestock managers) to find out who they are, find out what their educational needs are and provide a forum for communication among them.

3) Conduct one or more series of three workshops in each state: one for non-farming landowners to introduce managed grazing and assist them in identifying financial and other goals for their land. A second workshop will target livestock producers interested in renting grazing land to introduce managed grazing with a focus on stewardship and increase understanding of the economics and legalities of leasing land. The third workshop will bring together participants from the previous two workshops for a 'speed dating' or meet and greet session. We have conducted this type of series in Wisconsin and had a very positive response.

4) Develop, in cooperation with livestock producers and beginning farmer programs, a trial program for mentoring beginning farmers in existing livestock operations and helping them gain skills and maybe build equity in the mode of share milking arrangements. Some of the funding requested will go toward paying the mentor farmers for their work in these arrangements.

5) Products to be developed:

a. Customizable contract grazing lease templates: taking the best of existing examples of pasture

lease forms, develop a customizable lease form suited to this area and this specific purpose.

b. Producer profile form: a ‘resume’ of the producer and a grazing land needs summary to

complement the existing landowner profile which provides a description of the land being offered for rent and the objectives of the landowner.

c. A land connection website where landowner profiles and producer profiles can be posted, including maps of locations and links to aerial photos of the properties.

**Relevance (250 words): currently 173**

This project will provide livestock producers access to additional grazing acres, reducing production risk and providing opportunities for herd expansion. It provides environmentally friendly alternatives to non-farming landowners wishing to generate income and conserve soils by renting expiring CRP acres and other idle and crop land for managed grazing. It provides opportunities for beginning farmers to gain access to land and to gain skills in managed grazing through mentorship arrangements with experienced livestock producers. It does these things by brokering contract grazing relationships among these parties, thus demonstrating a sustainable model for livestock production that can support local communities. Meanwhile, niche markets for beef are growing rapidly and opportunities for expansion or entry into these premium markets are available. The grass-fed beef market is estimated at about a billion dollars a year, with more than 60% of that demand currently being met by imports (Dr. Allan Williams, pers. com.). The North Central Region could become a major supplier of grass-fed beef with at least three companies currently sourcing grass-fed cattle in the region.

**Impact (400 words): currently 255**

There are almost 50,000 beef operations in WI, MN, and IA (2007 Census of Agriculture). An analysis of Census cost of production data suggests that farms over 50 head benefit dramatically from economies of scale (http://datcp.wi.gov/uploads/Farms/pdf/2011BeefGrazingSummary.pdf). Only about 17% of beef operations in the region are that size or larger. Challenges to growth include variable profitability, lack of access to reasonably priced pasture and hay ground, and lack of managed grazing knowledge and/or availability of skilled labor. This project seeks to build and test a model that addresses these challenges by bringing together three beneficiaries:

Non-farming landowners: Few educational programs or research projects address the needs and interests of non-farming landowners, in spite of the fact that they control 55 to 65% of the arable land in some regions. Cooperative Development Services estimates that there are 200,000 individual parcels under lease in the Upper Mississippi basin with an average size of 200-225 acres. The research and survey planned for this audience will provide valuable information on the goals that these landowners have for their land and provide them access to alternatives to renting for annual crop production.

Livestock producers: Livestock producers in the region will gain a better understanding of their cost of production and will learn how to identify, assess, and gain access to land they can rent to secure additional grazing or hay production.

Beginning farmers: Beginning farmers will be partnered with mentor farmers and will gain skills in managed grazing, providing them with opportunities to embark on a profession of livestock and grazing management or to establish their own farming operation.

All groups will gain an understanding and comfort-level in interacting and partnering with the others.

**Suitability of Method (400 words): currently 285**

This project takes new approaches to addressing fundamental issues of soil conservation and land access by creating a space for people to bring resources—land, expertise, livestock—together to establish and manage profitable livestock operations. The project will utilize a variety of activities to explore opportunities to form such partnerships.

Information gained from previous SARE projects can be blended in this project, although we found none that focused on bringing these three groups together for mutual benefit. Several previous NE region SARE projects have focused on providing access to land for beginning farmers, but no projects with this focus have been conducted in the NC region. Several SARE projects on transitioning CRP acreage back into agricultural production were conducted in the 1990s. We can build on this knowledge as we work with landowners whose CRP contracts are expiring by providing them with alternatives to renting for corn production. Several SARE projects have focused on grazing management for beef production, including our 2010 Grass-fed and Organic Beef: Production Cost and Profit Potential project. We learned from that project that many beef producers would benefit from keeping better track of their cost or production, could reduce risk by accessing secure sources of low cost forages and grazing, and could potentially become more profitable by achieving economies of scale.

Activities planned include conducting research to fill information gaps (survey of non-farming landowners), traditional educational activities such as landowner workshops and contract grazing conferences, and facilitation processes such as ‘speed dating’ sessions that bring landowners and livestock farmers together. We plan to build into the project some level of flexibility so that we can adapt our activities to the emerging needs of these audiences as we understand them better.

**Evaluation Plan (150 words):**

Each of the groups targeted by this project will be evaluated individually to assess changes in knowledge and behavior changes as a result of learning. These evaluations will take the form of written surveys immediately following and several months after events. In-depth interviews or focus groups will be used to evaluate impacts of mentoring arrangements and of landowner/livestock producer partnerships established as a result of the project.

**Outreach (150 words):**

We will create case histories of successful partnerships formed as a result of the project and document other outcomes and behavior changes. We will share the results of our project through press releases, partner organization websites, and other media platforms. We will seek out opportunities to share information on the project at state level and regional conferences in the three states. Examples of these include the Wisconsin Grazing Conference, Minnesota’s Graze Fest, and others???

**Estimated Budget:**

**Indirect costs (up to 10%):**

**Experience and Roles (500 words):**

**Project Coordinator:**

**Major Participants:**

**Individual Collaborators:**

**Farmer/Rancher involvement and compensation**

**Statement about use of Genetically Engineered Organisms or controversial technologies**

**Past, Current, and Pending SARE projects:**

**Statement regarding resubmitted ideas:**