NCR SARE Research and Education Pre-Proposal--2015

Contract Grazing: Improving the resilience of the livestock sector in the North Central Region

DRAFT
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Start date: October 1, 2015
End date: September 30, 2018
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: Education.

Systems Category: Education and Training

Commodity Category: Hay and Forage Crops

Participating Institutions and Organizations:
Laura Paine and Cara Carper, Southwest Badger RC&D
_____, Practical Farmers of Iowa
Terry VanDerPol, Land Stewardship Project
Jane Jewett, Green Lands Blue Waters
Joe Sellers, Iowa State University
Jim Paulson, University of Minnesota
Nadia Alber, University of Wisconsin
Greg Nowicki, WI Grass-fed Beef Coop

Project Abstract (250 words): currently 249
Contract Grazing (also known as custom grazing) is a system in which land ownership, livestock ownership, and pasture management are de-coupled. It is a flexible business model that spreads financial risk over multiple entities, providing benefits not only to the partners, but to the environment and the local economy.

An estimated 60% of arable land in the upper Mississippi basin is controlled by non-farming landowners, for whom managed grazing may be an attractive alternative to renting for annual rowcrop production. As grain prices fall and beef prices continue to rise, many acres of marginal land could be reseeded to soil conserving grasslands using EQIP and other cost-sharing programs. Well-managed grazing can also increase productivity of underutilized grasslands, while providing high quality wildlife habitat and an income for both landowner and livestock producer.

Contract grazing can improve the resilience of the livestock sector by providing a framework for partnership among livestock producers, beginning farmers, and non-farming landowners. This project will educate livestock producers on the potential of this business model to improve economic performance of their operations and provide land access and mentoring for beginning farmers.

Project activities include a regional contract grazing conference and local workshops designed to meet the unique educational needs of the livestock community in each state. Outcomes include increased awareness and utilization of contract grazing among livestock farmers in Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota, opportunities for beginning farmers to gain both access to land and management skills as a stepping stone to livestock and farm ownership.

Project Description (75 words): currently 74
This project will foster establishment of contract grazing as a model for livestock production in Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Contract grazing can increase grassland acres available for livestock production, increase livestock production capacity, help beginning farmers get established, and provide non-farming landowners with an income and other benefits from well-managed grazing on their land. Project partners will carry out a multi-state conference, in-state workshops, and build a producer network to support successful contract grazing relationships.

Project Outcomes (100 words): currently 98 words
The livestock industry will gain resilience through increased access to land for forage production. Livestock producers will use contract grazing (CG) to improve their economic performance, including expanding herd size, diversification, or establishing forage reserves. Beginning livestock farmers will gain access to land using CG. Through mentoring relationships with experienced livestock producers, they will gain skills in managing livestock, pasture, and the livestock business as a stepping stone to farm ownership. Non-farming landowners, a largely unknown and underserved audience that controls an estimated 40 million acres in the region, will use CG to maintain well-managed, income-generating grassland habitat.

Method/Approach (200 words): currently 199
This project expands and integrates successful programs for livestock producers and beginning farmers in Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Contract grazing is used in Iowa, but is uncommon in the other states. This project creates a regional network for sharing information among farmers, gaining skills in CG and increasing access to land for forage production. Partners will develop an online toolbox, including identifying and modifying existing resources and creating new materials, creating a 'one-stop-shop' for resources needed for successful contract grazing partnerships.

1) A regional contract grazing conference will bring together livestock producers, landowners, livestock managers, beginning farmers, and agricultural educators who are doing or are interested in contract grazing. The conference will provide a forum to gather experienced contract graziers and those interested in starting, to form a network for sharing information and resources.

2) In-state workshops. Partner organizations will conduct local workshops and other educational activities tailored to the unique needs of each state's livestock community. Practical Farmers of Iowa, the Land Stewardship Project, and Southwest Badger RC&D will partner with Land Grant Universities and Extension to develop programs. Partners will work with existing beginning farmer training programs in their state to provide mentoring opportunities for beginning farmers.

Relevance (200 words): currently 187
This project educates beginning farmers, livestock producers and non-farming landowners on the opportunities available through contract grazing. An estimated 40 million acres in the Upper Midwest, are owned by non-farming landowners. Many landowners are unaware of alternatives to renting for cash grain production, and may be interested in soil conserving perennial forages or supporting a beginning farmer. As grain prices fall and beef prices remain high, this is a good time to begin converting marginal land back into perennial forages by connecting these landowners with like-minded producers.

Contract grazing can provide significant benefits to the livestock sector. Access to land has become a major hurdle for the next generation of farmers. This project provides beginning farmers a means of securing land through partnerships with non-farming landowners, and of gaining skills in managed a livestock enterprise through mentorship arrangements with experienced livestock producers. For established livestock producers, access to additional grazing acres can reduce production risk and provide opportunities for herd expansion or bringing on the next generation. Success depends on making a good match: distance, level of landowner involvement, and production costs are all factors. Producers will gain skills in assessing potential partnerships and making sound leasing decisions.

Impact (200 words): currently 200
This project demonstrates contract grazing as a business model that provides benefits to livestock producers, beginning farmers, and non-farming landowners. Cooperative Development Services estimates there are 200,000 parcels under lease in the Upper Mississippi basin with an average size of 200-225 acres, representing at least 40 million acres. Capturing 10% of those parcels for perennial forage would help meet land stewardship goals and could contribute to making the region a major supplier of sustainably produced livestock.

Non-farming landowners have few educational programs that address their land management needs. Outreach to this audience will provide valuable information on these landowners' goals, provide them alternatives to renting for annual crop production, and help them connect with likeminded producers.

Beginning and experienced livestock producers will learn how to identify, evaluate, and gain access to rental land for grazing or hay production. By addressing the barriers of land access and availability of skilled labor, contract grazing can increase the resiliency of individual livestock operations and the industry as a whole. The region is home to more than 81,000 livestock and dairy producers. Backgrounding beef cattle, finishing for grass-fed beef, and raising dairy heifers are enterprises that are suited to contract grazing.

Suitability of Method (200 words): currently 198
Contract grazing can strengthen the livestock sector by bringing together people with complementary resources—land, expertise and labor, livestock—to establish mutually beneficial partnerships.

We found no previous SARE projects that focused on bringing these three groups together within a contract grazing framework. Several SARE projects have focused on land access for beginning farmers or grazing management for beef production. Through our 2010 project, Grass-fed and Organic Beef: Production Cost and Profit Potential, we learned that many beef producers could reduce cost of production and risk by accessing secure sources of low cost forages and grazing land, and could potentially become more profitable by achieving economies of scale.

Our team includes a diverse group of partners, including universities, beginning farmer programs, and regional non-profits. We will work closely with beginning farmer programs to extend and enhance their training by identifying mentor farmers and increasing awareness of the contract grazing business model.

Planned activities include a regional networking conference and local workshops designed to meet the needs of livestock producers in each state. We will build into the project some flexibility so we can adapt our activities to the emerging needs of these audiences as we understand them better.

Estimated Budget
See spreadsheet

Team members (150 words): currently at 150
Wisconsin:
Laura Paine, Southwest Badger RC&D: 22 years' research and education experience in managed grazing, grass-fed beef producer.
Greg Nowicki, WI Grass-fed Beef Coop : 100+ members, input on educational programs, publicize events, and provide farmer mentors.
Nadia Alber, University of Wisconsin School for Beginning Dairy and Livestock Farmers: identify mentoring opportunities and will incorporate contract grazing information into trainings.

Iowa:
Meghan ___ and Luke Gran, Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI): coordinate workshops and provide communication to 1500+ members.
Joe Sellers, Iowa State Extension Beef Specialist: 26 years experience, coordinate with PFI to conduct Iowa activities.

Minnesota:
Terry VanDerPol, Land Stewardship Project: coordinate workshops, mentoring opportunities for Farm Beginnings students.
Jane Jewett, Green Lands Blue Waters: website development and management, workshop coordination, and writing and editing publications, operates a small, diversified livestock farm.
Jim Paulson, University of Minnesota Extension: sustainability in cattle production including high forage based systems and grazing.

Farmer/Rancher involvement and compensation (100 words): currently 100 words.
The team includes Jane Jewett, Laura Paine, and Terry VanDerPol, who are beef producers. Other producers from each state will participate in planning workshops and the conference. Farmer mentors will be compensated. We have budgeted $500 per year for two years for each of six farmer mentors. Our budget also includes resources for the conference and workshops, so that registration costs are minimized. Presentations will include farmer panels, including presenters such as Bill Sproul, a large contract grazier from southern Kansas. Greg Nowicki, president of the Wisconsin Grass-Fed Beef Coop, will bring a strong farmer voice to the project.

Statement regarding resubmitted ideas (100 words): currently 100 words.
A version of this proposal was submitted in 2014.
Long-term sustainability of the project. We have eliminated the brokering aspect and focused on CG education tailored to producers in each state. Once CG awareness and knowledge increases, connections will be made through existing communications structures.

Can CG capture environmental benefits? With declining grain prices and increasing beef prices, this project will transition marginal land back into perennial cover through well-managed grazing.

Can CG really work? Providing education on lease arrangements will help producers evaluate the roles of distance, trucking, cattle chores and other issues in establishing a good rental partnership.