

ACTION PLAN TO IMPLEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

EXPANDING EXISTING EFFORTS

Match Farmers with DRWI Technical Assistance Providers

Expand upon or create programs that work with farmers to implement agricultural best management practices (BMPs) by matching farmers with the “right” technical assistance (TA) organizations or professionals.

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Introduction

Agricultural lands restoration through BMP implementation is a cornerstone strategy of the William Penn Foundation’s Delaware River Watershed Initiative (DRWI). The work involves many facets of planning, including landowner relationships, conservation planning, BMP engineering and design, permitting, project management, and project evaluation. Given the demands of their work, farmers are often too busy, or unsure of how, to address the challenges of improving water quality or ensuring regulatory compliance while taking advantage of cost-share funding programs and managing project implementation. However, through the DRWI, many nonprofit organizations have already begun to build extensive landowner relationships that would enable them to serve in a TA role. Such responsibilities could include managing partner organization relationships, ensuring regulatory compliance, and providing access to private funding programs to help fill gaps in public cost-share programs. The funding piece is particularly critical, since narrow farming profit margins often make providing the match for conservation funding unfeasible.

Farmers look to TA providers for the valuable service they provide. Historically the TA role has often been filled by for-profit entities and government agencies. However, these groups have limitations. Government agencies are bound by their programmatic funding and rules, while for-profit entities are bound by a landowner’s willingness and ability to pay. Nonprofits are not bound by these constraints and can work with farmers to facilitate their participation in water quality restoration practices. Notably, nonprofits can provide TA throughout all phases of BMP projects, including: the assessment phase; conservation planning; BMP implementation; and finally, project evaluation.

TA Needs for Farmers

The farming community is in need of new opportunities to receive the right TA for various reasons, including:

- Farmers are busy. New conservation practices are not often a high priority.
- Farmers are often unaware of all BMPs they could be doing. Information is extensive and diverse in sources. Navigating is often difficult and program based. There is a reason that both private and government agencies exist to provide assistance. However, government assistance is not easy, straightforward, efficient, or ensured, while private assistance is expensive and profit driven.

- Farmers are often an insular community and wary of interlopers. Additionally, farmers are anxious about their economic and regulatory future. On the other hand, farmers have demonstrated a willingness to share issues and concerns on their lands with trusted nonprofit partners that they would not with government agencies out of fear of fines or notices of violation.
- Many farmers are reluctant to participate in Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs due to required upfront personal funding. Nonprofits participating in the DRWI can secure matching funds that can fund all, parts of, or upfront seed money to begin a BMP implementation project that otherwise will never get started due to economic constraints.
- Some farmers are unwilling to participate in government programs due to cultural and/or religious considerations (e.g., Plain Sect, Mennonite, etc.).
- Some farmers and landowners are unable to participate in government programs due to programmatic funding rules (income limits) but still require some cost-share assistance to encourage participation.

Proposal

This proposal recommends providing funding for nongovernmental organizations active in William Penn Foundation's DRWI to provide TA to farmers in their service areas. These organizations have a deeper programmatic knowledge and ability to leverage resources for added benefits. As the DRWI is collaboration based, this proposal would utilize partners' strengths to maximize the value of TA services. In particular, nonprofit DRWI partners fill a critical gap in the provision of TA created by government agencies that are either unaware of, or unable to access, DRWI funding.

As part of this TA program, a nonprofit would first assess all aspects of a farm operation and then remain "embedded" throughout BMP implementation. The embedded phase will incorporate the other key stages of TA: planning, BMP implementation, and evaluation.

TA Process: Assessment, Planning, BMP Implementation, Evaluation

Assessment

The project will utilize a farm assessment document, or assessment tool, that can be completed with basic farming knowledge; competency in the assessment process is trainable. An assessment tool would be customized for the DRWI but broad enough to permit regional or geographic specifics. Similar assessment documents include the PA Water Quality Action Packet for Agriculture created by Bradford and Lancaster County Conservation Districts, the Farm Conservation Planning Workbook developed by NRCS and Lancaster County Conservation District, and the Brandywine Conservancy's Agricultural BMP Assessment Guide. A DRWI assessment document will standardize planning language, format, metrics, and quality. The tool will ensure compliance with NRCS Farm Bill program funding. Further, in the past, the above-referenced assessment tools have been eligible for funding reimbursement as a deliverable in Farm Bill programs. The TA assessment phase can be employed at a variety of scales, e.g., hydrologic unit code, cluster focus area, or municipal boundary. Assessments may require more or less time, depending on several on-farm factors, including operational acreage, land use, intensity of use, existing BMPs, and resource concerns. Upon completion, the assessment will provide an inventory of known and needed BMPs, a key element in delivering the right TA to ensure efficient, effective, and cost-sensitive projects.

Conservation Planning

A key component of BMP implementation is the preparation of NRCS-level conservation plans. This serves as the basis for the implementation of BMPs. The options for funding BMP implementation include direct landowner payments, private foundation grants, and public cost-share programs (e.g., Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Regional Conservation Partnership Program, and Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority). Often it takes a combination of all sources. The assessment tool captures much of the information needed for conservation plan development. The TA provider, with landowner permission, could work with a certified NRCS conservation planner to provide the information, develop the plan, and coordinate the work with the landowner. Additional planning efforts that may arise from the assessment phase include: prescribed grazing plan, manure management plans, nutrient management plans, comprehensive nutrient management plans, and fiscal planning and economic analysis.

BMP Implementation

The BMP implementation phase is often the most resource intensive for farmers, placing additional demands on their limited time. The embedded TA provider will become an asset to the farmer as a project resource. Pressing needs farmers may express include: assistance with coordinating planning, collecting bids, and translating government programs; farmer expectation management; and big-picture problem solving. Similar work has demonstrated that farmers appreciate the continuity and responsiveness provided by embedded DRWI participants. Throughout the project, the TA provider will help facilitate relationships between the farmer and other professionals involved in the project, including planners, surveyors, engineers, contractors, and government agency officials. Lastly, should budgetary challenges occur, DRWI nonprofits can provide knowledge of additional funding sources to avoid situations that could stall project completion.

Evaluation and BMP Monitoring

Upon project completion, the TA assessment can begin again with a re-evaluation of the farm's implemented BMPs, new resource concerns, or emerging opportunities. This last phase, which often occurs when a farmer has been left by the other project participants, affords farmers additional opportunities to discuss agricultural restoration and ensures continued BMP improvement. Ultimately, delivering the right TA throughout the BMP implementation process will help promote clean water, a sustainable agricultural economy, a secure foodshed, and opportunities for new partnerships and conservation work within the Delaware River Watershed

Work Plan

Assessment Phase:

- Assessment Tool development
- Farm Assessment: 4 hours field work, 6 hours data analysis, 3 hours mapping, 2 hours admin = 15 hours/farm

Planning Phase:

- Per Farm: assessment analysis = 10 hours/farm
- NRCS-certified conservation plan (varying funding sources available) = typically \$1,500/farm

BMP Implementation Phase:

- Dependent on prescribed BMPs

Evaluation Phase:

- Per Farm: 4 hours field work, 3 hours data analysis, 2 hours mapping, 1 hour admin = 10 hours/farm

Anticipated Outcomes

Upon receiving TA, farmers will have inventories of known and needed BMPs, as well as the planning documents required to meet their regulatory and operational objectives. Motivated farmers will identify new opportunities to improve water quality throughout and after the BMP implementation process, evaluating and celebrating successes. Ultimately, “a local culture of implementation” in the agricultural community will arise as word of mouth spreads knowledge of BMPs to family, friends, neighbors, and community members. Meanwhile, opportunities are likely to emerge with new funding partners: municipalities, public and private water providers, and commercial and institutional water users.

Published to Web: November 13, 2017