

Reflections on Developing and Running a Farmer Education Network



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For more information about the Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems, see casfs.ucsc.edu, or contact us at casfs@ucsc.edu, 831.459-3240.

Cover: Jim Leap teaching a beginning farmer workshop on irrigation systems at the CASFS/UCSC Farm, University of California, Santa Cruz. *Photo by Martha Brown.*

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Introduction

The Central Coast Farmer Educator Network (FEN) started in 2010 as an informal network of farmer educators from California's Central Coast region (mainly Santa Cruz, Monterey, and San Mateo Counties). This group met periodically at a happy hour to discuss working with the farming population and agricultural education strategies.

In 2012, the FEN was formalized thanks to support from a Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) grant to the Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems (CASFS) of the University of California, Santa Cruz. Entitled *Building a Foundation for New Farmers: Training, Resources, and Networks*, the grant enabled what had been an ad hoc group to coordinate its efforts through quarterly professional meetings and ongoing communication.

The FEN's goal has been to move the large array of farm educators in the Central Coast region from occasional, collegial work to regular, focused collaboration in service of beginning farmers. The intent of this collaboration was to provide more effective education for the region's beginning farmers in a number of ways, including:

- familiarizing those involved in the FEN with the work of each organization,
- building on the collective group's resources,
- increasing beginning farmers' awareness of the FEN's work and of resources and programs available to them,
- streamlining scheduling of educational programs, and
- reducing redundancy in educational offerings (e.g., workshops, field days).

The majority of the FEN's work took place at quarterly meetings and at a meeting of farmer educators from the larger region held at the Ecological Farming Conference (EcoFarm) that takes place annually in Pacific Grove, California.

The online FEN calendar, hosted on the CASFS Grow a Farmer website (growafarmer.org), provided a central location for each of the FEN participants to advertise their activities to the region's beginning farmer community, as well as a "clearinghouse" for those planning workshops and other education efforts to track activities and avoid redundancy.

This brief guide provides an overview of what has been learned about implementing the Farmer Education Network in order to help other beginning farmer (BF) educators create more effective education and collaboration efforts in their locales.

Context for the Central Coast Farmer Education Network

Thanks in part to the presence of UC Santa Cruz and its long-running Apprenticeship training program for organic farmers (offered through CASFS), the Central Coast region of California features a high concentration of beginner farmers and numerous sustainable agriculture organizations. Given these factors, the Central Coast FEN offers an interesting case study for other regions with or without similar characteristics.

Each year the CASFS Apprenticeship program trains dozens of new farmers, a number of whom try to start or work for a farm in the region after graduating. These and other Central Coast beginning farmers face challenges typical for many entering the field, including intense competition for land and local markets from established organic and conventional operations, expensive land lease/purchase options, and lack of agricultural labor, to name a few.

In addition, a number of CASFS and UCSC agroecology alumni, along with others interested in creating a more sustainable food system, have started and developed Central Coast-based organizations that benefit sustainable agriculture and farmers of all types. These include the California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), the Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF), the Ecological Farming Association (EFA), the Wild Farm Alliance (WFA), and various programs of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) and the Agricultural Land-Based Training Association (ALBA).

Before the Farmer Education Network formed, these organizations worked independently of each other with mild sporadic collaboration; thanks to the FEN, communication and collaboration amongst these groups have increased substantially, creating a better-coordinated suite of programs and services for the region's beginning farmers.

SETTING UP AND RUNNING THE FARMER EDUCATION NETWORK

CASFS solicited the three groups that were originally part of the BFRDP proposal (CCOF, EFA, and CAFF) for ideas on what other groups should be invited to the initial FEN meeting. After the first meeting participants spoke with other professional contacts and attendance doubled. Over the three years of the grant, participation continued to snowball—as we added additional groups, they brought more contacts to the table.

The Central Coast FEN now includes 13 member organizations (see page 8), and we expect that number may grow as the quarterly meetings continue. It bears noting that the meetings of a California-wide Farmer Educator Network held annually at the Ecological Farming Association conference (EcoFarm) drew just under 40 organizations serving beginner farmers across the state.

MEETING STRUCTURE

With partial salary support from the BFRDP, one staff member from the California Certified Organic Farmers was primarily responsible for organizing the FEN meetings. This responsibility included –

- Setting meeting times,
- Booking conference room space
- Notifying participants of time and place
- setting up media conferencing software for off-site participants (in this case, GotoWebinar)
- Setting the agenda
- Facilitating the meetings
- Taking notes and sending out notes immediately following the meetings
- Serving as a hub/contact person for groups attempting to contact each other about events or collaboration opportunities
- Maintaining the list of participating organizations, staff changes, and current contact information

The FEN began by meeting quarterly, for 1.5 hours. For a period of time the meetings went to 2 hours because people felt that 1.5 hours was not enough time to present each organization's activities. The meetings were reduced to 1.5 hours after some time as the agenda (and organizational check ins) were shortened. Most meetings were held from 10:30–noon so that members could continue their conversations and networking over lunch.

Meeting dates were set a year in advance so they could be placed on people's calendars. The 3rd Thursday of the month was chosen for consistency. Meeting reminders were sent out a week or more before the meeting.

Meeting agenda items were solicited from group members through a reminder email. Agenda items were modified as needed at the beginning of the meeting. Agenda items originally included updates on education activities from each organization, and any other announcements people cared to share.

Beginning in the second year, other components were added to the meetings; these included –

- One or two organizations sharing their goals and activities in more depth via a 20-minute presentation, often illustrated with Powerpoint
- Presentations on BFRDP evaluation results and other outcomes from beginning farmer education efforts
- Guided discussions on best practices in education, with educators reflecting on what they've learned through their experience; discussions took place in both small and larger groups
- Presentations and feedback on projects and grant proposal efforts

ONLINE CALENDAR OF EVENTS

The BFRDP supported development of an online calendar (growafarmer.org/calendar/) that features educational events sponsored by the FEN groups, along with other Central Coast region events for beginning farmers. The calendar is hosted on the CASFS Apprenticeship alumni site, Grow a Farmer (growafarmer.org). This site also serves CASFS alumni with job and land postings, and a broader beginning farmer audience with resource lists and a national calendar.

LESSONS LEARNED

SCHEDULING, AGENDAS AND STRUCTURE

- Setting the quarterly meeting dates a year in advance and on a consistent day helped the FEN participants incorporate the meetings into their yearly calendars. This saved time in scheduling and led to increased meeting attendance.
- The whole group set the agenda for each meeting: emails were sent out before the meeting asking for agenda items, and the agenda was revisited at the meeting itself. As per good meeting protocol, meetings were more productive when this format was followed.
- One staff member from California Certified Organic Farms (CCOF) facilitated each meeting, creating a consistent and reliable meeting structure.
- It was critical to have a dedicated, paid staffer who was responsible for making sure that the meetings took place, although it bears noting that the meetings will continue past the end of the BFRDP funding with donated time from CCOF (see below).

REGULARLY SCHEDULED IN-PERSON MEETINGS

- The success of the FEN was based in part on the ability of participants to travel to meet in person. We have had people participate from farther away (using GoToWebinar). However, there was not consistent participation from those who could not easily travel to the meeting site in Santa Cruz.
- The group found that the relationship building was stronger when participants met face to face. E.g., following meetings there were always informal conversations that built on the more formal discussions taking place at the meetings.

ANNUAL MEETING AND BEGINNING FARMER MIXER AT ECOFARM

- The annual meeting at EcoFarm gave organizations outside of the Central Coast region the chance to network. During that two-hour annual meeting, organizations introduced themselves to each other, created a matrix of organizational overlap amongst non-profits,

and talked about major stumbling blocks in their BF education work. The group also collaboratively worked on grant proposals and brought new staffers into the informal community.

- EcoFarm's Beginning Farmer Mixer provided the chance for FEN groups to introduce themselves to the community of beginning farmers attending the annual conference. In addition to our usual regional FEN groups, several national groups also have attended this conference and mixer, including the National Young Farmers Coalition and World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF).
- The mixer included short presentations from each organization and a chance for informal mixing during the beer and music session that followed. Some years the group has tried different types of more structured networking, to varying degrees of success. The one more successful networking approach seemed to be a form of "resource speed dating" that provided participants with a way to identify themselves (tag/ribbon) as a new farmer, seasoned farmer, or organization with resources for farmers, and then provided questions for networking as beginning farmers move in a circle around room to quickly meet the stationary organization representatives and seasoned farmers.

COLLABORATIVE EVENT SCHEDULING

- The last quarterly meeting of every year worked as a "look-forward" meeting, to plan workshops and educational programs for the following year. We found this especially helpful for farmer education groups, as many farming organizations work on a farming calendar (more workshops during the winter) rather than a calendar year. By planning as far ahead as possible, the various organizations were better able to coordinate programming and reduce redundancy. Groups gave brief updates on progress of educational efforts at subsequent meetings.

BUILDING COLLABORATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Sharing ideas for educational programs for the coming year helped create the schedule and clarify the topics for each organization, as they could see what each group was focusing on. In addition, the meetings provided a context for sharing ideas on what type of training beginning farmers in the region had expressed interest in, and how the groups could work together to respond to those needs.
- Quarterly meetings also provided a great opportunity for professional development. Members appreciated the chance to talk about, and get feedback on, how to structure activities, best practices for webinars and workshops, best ways to reach the beginning farmers in the region, and other relevant topics.
- The in-depth presentations from each organization helped the whole group identify avenues for collaboration and how to use their resources to help beginning farmers. This led to collaborative programming, with groups teaming up to present educational offerings for the region's farmers, as well as a more consistent evaluation process for the programs offered.
- The same CCOF staffer who organized the quarterly meetings also served as a point of contact for FEN members planning events and shared upcoming event information with the rest of the group and with the online calendar administrator. This too helped minimize redundancy and scheduling conflicts.

CALENDAR ADMINISTRATION AND DISSEMINATION

- A shared FEN online calendar provided both a central location for beginning farmers in the region to get information on educational opportunities, and a clearinghouse for FEN members to check upcoming activities to avoid both redundancy in programming and scheduling conflicts.

BENEFITS TO PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Members of the FEN found that participation helped them provide better services to their beginning farmer audiences in several ways.

- By learning about other group's activities and strengths it enabled participating members to collaborate and put on workshops they would not have otherwise offered.
- It helped participants better understand resources available through participating organizations, and better direct beginning farmers on how to get their needs met. As one member noted, some beginning farmers become overwhelmed trying to find resources on the internet, and being able to articulate resources available from FEN organizations has been very helpful. Getting farmers the specific names and contact information of people they need to talk to is particularly important, as personal connections are invaluable.
- It increased the number of people participating in collaborative funding/programming opportunities.
- It identified professional development needs of beginning farmer educators, which facilitated developing funding proposals and sharing existing resources to meet those needs.
- It helped participants collaborate more effectively on educational offerings to reduce redundancy. Said one participant, "When they first started meeting, people were just becoming aware of what each group was actually doing. It really helped us align with each other's agendas."
- It provided more information about beginning farmers' needs—as FEN members shared what they knew from their constituencies—which helps to better focus educational offerings, programs, and fundraising to address those needs.
- It continues to help maintain continuity of communication and connection amongst organizations.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING COLLABORATION AND EFFECTIVENESS

In evaluating the effectiveness of the Farmer Education Network, members were asked what changes or additions would be most helpful for them. These suggestions include –

- Bring business cards or 1–2 page summaries of services to the meetings to share with other organizations, so that they in turn could share them with their own beginning farmer audience.
- One way to connect to a larger region or other regions is to designate one organization to share information about the network more broadly. Choose an organization that already has a broader constituency.
- Discuss grant proposals that organizations intend to apply for in the future, explore options for collaboration, and update people on results.
- Create and disseminate a listserv for all FEN users, with one organization responsible for maintaining an updated list of contacts.

NEXT STEPS

All of the organizations in the Central Coast Farmer Education Network voiced interest in continuing to meet and collaborate following the end of the 3-year BFRDP funding. As previously mentioned, CCOF has stepped up to make sure that the quarterly Central Coast FEN and annual California-wide BF educator meetings continue to happen. It is crucial to most groups of this type that a paid staffer houses the effort for coordinating these meetings in the long term.

CASFS will continue to maintain the online FEN calendar for the short term. However, there is now a statewide calendar available through FarmsReach and administered by a paid staff member that serves a similar purpose, so at some point in the future the FEN group may decide to focus on sending events to the statewide calendar and use the Grow a Farmer website and CASFS staff time for other educational efforts.

Name	Website	Mission
Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA)	albafarmers.org	Our mission is to advance economic viability, social equity and ecological land management among limited-resource and aspiring farmers. We work to create opportunities for family farms while providing education and demonstration on conservation, habitat restoration, marketing and whole farm planning.
ATTRA, National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT)	attra.ncat.org	The ATTRA project has served as the premier source of information about sustainable agriculture for U.S. farmers and other agriculturists for more than twenty years.
California Farmlink	californiafarmlink.org	The mission of California Farmlink is to link independent farmers and ranchers to the land and financing they need for a sustainable future.
Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF)	caff.org	Founded in 1978, the Community Alliance with Family Farmers is a California-based nonprofit that advocates for family farmers and sustainable agriculture.
Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems (CASFS), University of California, Santa Cruz	casfs.ucsc.edu	The mission of the Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems (CASFS) is to research, develop, and advance sustainable food and agricultural systems that are environmentally sound, economically viable, socially responsible, nonexploitative, and that serve as a foundation for future generations.
California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF)	ccof.org	CCOF advances organic agriculture for a healthy world. We accomplish our purpose through certification, education and advocacy.
Ecological Farming Association (EFA)	eco-farm.org	EcoFarm's mission is to nurture safe, healthy, just, and ecologically sustainable farms, food systems, and communities by bringing people together for education, alliance building, advocacy, and celebration.
Farmers Guild	farmersguild.org	To establish an integrated network of social and professional hubs across California where farmers connect, collaborate and find the resources they need to thrive within local food webs that stimulate stronger local economies, create social equity and sustain our natural resources.
Kitchen Table Advisors	kitchentableadvisors.org	Kitchen Table Advisors envisions a new generation of thriving small-scale, sustainable farms that produce healthy food and form the foundation of regional food systems.
Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF)	ofrf.org	The Organic Farming Research Foundation's mission is to foster the widespread adoption and improvement of organic farming systems.
Pie Ranch	pieranch.org	Pie Ranch cultivates a healthy and just food system from seed to table through food education, farmer training, and regional partnerships.
Potrero Nuevo Farm	potreronuevofarm.org/farm/	Committed to sustainable agriculture, fair accessibility to food and ecological land management.
Wild Farm Alliance	wildfarmalliance.org	Our mission is to promote a healthy, viable agriculture that helps protect and restore wild Nature.