

FARMER LEARNING CIRCLES IN PRACTICE

STORIES, LESSONS, AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES FOR VALUE CHAIN PEER LEARNING

Strengthening Community Connections in the Regenerative Poultry Value Chain

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Overview

This guide shares stories, insights, and practical lessons from 12 Farmer Learning Circles conducted between May 2024 and November 2025 as part of a participatory action research (PAR) project. The project aimed to strengthen community connections and promote more equitable and resilient practices in regenerative poultry farming across Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa.

The learning circles brought together regenerative poultry farmers, processing plant workers, nonprofit staff, and community members to exchange knowledge, build trust, and reflect on shared challenges and opportunities within an emerging regenerative poultry value chain. Rather than focusing only on production techniques, these gatherings created space to discuss labor, land access, ecological stewardship, market pressures, and long-term sustainability. Each circle was hosted on a working farm (or held virtually when travel posed barriers), allowing participants to see systems in practice, ask candid questions, and learn directly from one another's experiences. The approach was intentionally peer-based and relational, grounded in building strong networks and shared learning, which are essential to building viable value-chains.

If you are interested in organizing peer learning events, supporting farmer networks, or strengthening value chains in your region, this guide offers lessons drawn from our experience.



Why Regenerative Poultry?



The U.S. poultry industry is one of the most consolidated sectors in agriculture. A small number of corporations control hatcheries, feed, processing, and distribution, often limiting farmer autonomy through contract arrangements and concentrating risk at the farm level. This structure can also create dangerous working conditions in processing facilities, where speed and efficiency are prioritized over worker well-being.

Regenerative poultry aims to offer a different approach. Instead of raising birds in confinement, chickens are integrated into perennial pasture and silvopasture systems that combine native trees, shrubs, and grasses. In these systems, birds forage, fertilize the soil, and contribute to ecological cycles on diversified farms.

In the Upper Midwest, the Regenerative Agriculture Alliance (RAA) supports a diverse network of farmers adopting this model. Species such as hazelnuts, elderberries, sugar maples, and other native trees provide shade and shelter for chickens while generating additional income streams through nuts, fruit, or syrup production. Perennial systems can improve soil health, increase biodiversity, reduce erosion, and enhance long-term farm resilience. For many participants, regenerative poultry is not only ecologically important but also consists of reshaping our relationship with food and the land, as they build a new chicken value-chain.

What are Farmer Learning Circles?



Farmer Learning Circles facilitate knowledge-sharing and collaboration among farmers, aspiring farmers, workers, and community members. FLCs are gatherings, mostly on-farm, where one farmer shares their story, practices, challenges, and innovations. Other farmers and attendees come to listen, ask questions, and share their own stories. Each circle creates a space for honest conversations, practical problem-solving, and connection across farms and across the value chain.

Learning circle principles

Farmer-led

Each event is hosted and shaped by the farm itself

Cross-value-chain

Workers, farmers, and community members learn side by side

Culturally grounded

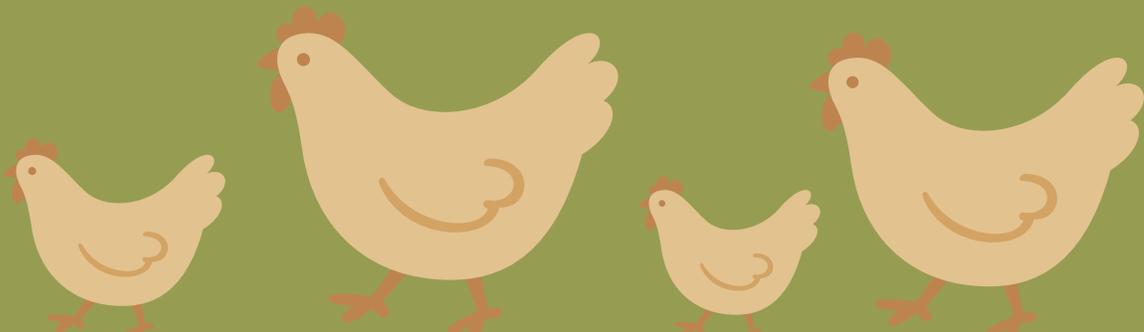
Bilingual, welcoming, and built on trust

Peer-driven

Farmers teach, troubleshoot, and support each other

Action-oriented

Conversations are based on real, on-farm changes



How to Facilitate a Learning Circle?

Based on our experience organizing and facilitating 12 learning circles, here are some steps to consider:

- 1. Identify and support a host farmer.** Discuss within your farmer network who might be interested in hosting and consider establishing an order so responsibility rotates over time. Alternatively, if you're not part of an existing network, approach a farmer willing to share their story and open up their farm. Provide a stipend to honor their time and cover basic expenses. In our project, hosts received \$200.
- 2. Invite across the value chain.** Include processing plant workers, aspiring farmers, service providers, and others working within the field or hoping to get into it. Email invites and calendar holds are helpful but personal outreach (texts or calls) can increase attendance and communicates that participation is valued.
- 3. Facilitate dialogue and shared learning.** Begin in a circle and open the floor for introductions. Each participant shares their name, background, and what they hope to learn. The host farmer then shares their farming journey, motivations, challenges, and innovations before opening to questions or comments. Follow with a farm tour that allows for experiential learning and informal dialogue. Conclude in a circle with an open discussion.
- 4. Build informal connection time.** Provide light refreshments and allow time for informal conversations. Unstructured moments deepen trust, encourage exchange, and strengthen relationships.
- 5. Provide language interpretation.** If your network includes multilingual participants, integrate real-time interpretation into the facilitation. Linguistic accessibility ensures that all participants can contribute knowledge, ask questions, and engage fully in the experience.
- 6. Collect feedback and follow up.** Distribute a short post-event survey to gather reflections and suggestions for improvement.



Sample Learning Circle Agenda

1. Welcome Circle

- Collect sign-in sheet information for follow-up and evaluations
- Opening round: each person shares their name, why they came, and what they hope to learn
- Host farmer introduces themselves:
 - *How did you get into regenerative poultry?*
 - *How long have you been farming?*
- Host shares any biosecurity guidelines before the tour begins

2. Farm Tour

- Host farmer leads participants through the farm, highlighting regenerative poultry practices
- Point out key features and address:
 - *What are you most proud of?*
 - *What are your biggest successes?*
 - *What are you working to improve?*
- Encourage questions and dialogue as you go

3. Closing Circle

- Return to the group circle and open it up for clarifying questions for the host farmer
- Closing round: each participant shares one of:
 - *One thing they learned from the host farmer*
 - *One thing they are grateful for from this gathering*
- Facilitator: wrap up with thank-yous, final announcements, and distribute post-event survey

Inside the Learning Circles



Salvatierra Farm

May 3, 2024

Salvatierra Farms, a demonstration farm for the regenerative poultry system, was founded by Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin. The presentation during this learning circle included discussions on animal welfare, bird mortality, and the balance between efficiency and care. Many workers from the RAA processing plant attended, which was important in understanding how the chickens are raised across the value chain before coming to the plant, as well as the difficulties that the farmer experiences.

Organic Compound

May 18, 2024

Organic Compound is a thriving farm and homestead centered around regenerative living. Wil and Carly Crombie hosted a farmer learning circle and presented to aspiring regenerative farmers and community members on their first flock actively ranging in their hazelnut-filled paddocks. The circle included conversations about best practices for loading birds on their “graduation day” (processing day). Since this farm is more advanced in its adoption of perennial crops (incl. hazelnuts and elderberries), this circle was valuable in showing the stacked enterprises possible.



Callejas Farm

July 13, 2024

Regenerative poultry producers, RAA staff and many of Jose Callejas' family members and friends attended his learning circle for a lively summer gathering. Jose shared family stories and photos, as well as his cultural and family history of farming. Jose presented on the history of the farm and his agricultural roots back in El Salvador, while his family shared traditional pupusas with participants. After the introduction, the group saw the farm and visited the paddocks, feeders, shade areas, etc. He demonstrated how his farm differs from other RAA systems, such as how he built new feeders that are bigger than the ones that RAA typically supplies, which allows him to reduce the labor of refilling feed.



Wild Apple Beef Farm

July 27, 2024

Stephanie Coffman, an RAA staff member and farmer, operates Wild Apple Beef with her husband, Chris. After generations of dairy farming in her family, they transitioned to pastured beef and later adapted existing dairy barn infrastructure to support regenerative poultry production. During this learning circle, Stephanie walked participants through how they converted their former dairy barn into a functional brooder space, sharing both the technical adjustments and the trial-and-error behind the process. The conversation extended beyond infrastructure to include land succession, labor challenges, and navigating government program requirements — particularly during organic transition.



RAA Processing Plant Tour

October 25, 2024

The learning circle began at the RAA processing plant, giving current regenerative poultry farmers a firsthand view of where their birds move along the supply chain. For many, this visit deepened their understanding of how on-farm decisions connect to processing logistics, labor, and product quality. The group then gathered at a nearby community center for a facilitated workshop led by Obed Azofeifa, a worker and researcher at Salvatierra Farm, RAA's demonstration farm. Obed shared his background and introduced a holistic framework of regeneration grounded in spiritual, economic, political, cultural, environmental, and social pillars. The workshop included a facilitated discussion in which farmers reflected on their own definitions of regeneration and how they are applying these principles within current structural constraints.



Feed the People Co-op

September 7, 2025

Feed the People Co-op has been raising regenerative poultry for over five years. The farm established paddocks beneath an existing forest canopy and planted hazelnuts and elderberries alongside species such as black walnut, cherry, sumac, buckthorn, and others, creating layered shade and diversified habitat. Processing plant workers and their families, including children, attended the gathering. Helen Forsyth, one of the young co-op members who runs the farm, shared their commitment to better food, dignity across the value chain, and regeneration of both soil and social relationships. Although the circle took place after the farm had wrapped up production for the season, workers walked the paddocks and toured the brooder, getting a clearer picture of how birds are raised within these perennial systems.



Henry Nisley's Farm

August 30, 2025

At this learning circle, Henry, an Amish farmer in southwest Wisconsin, shared his journey into regenerative poultry as one of the first in his community to adopt the system. In his first year of production, he is transitioning toward raising birds on perennial pastures and spoke candidly about the challenges of getting started, infrastructure decisions, and what he is learning along the way. Henry invited many neighboring Amish farmers who were curious about the model and interested in how it could fit within their own operations. The gathering became an important moment for peer exchange within the Amish community, and several attendees have since begun planning production units for 2026. For RAA, the circle marked a meaningful step in expanding outreach and strengthening relationships within a new farming community.



Patchwork Farm and Gardens

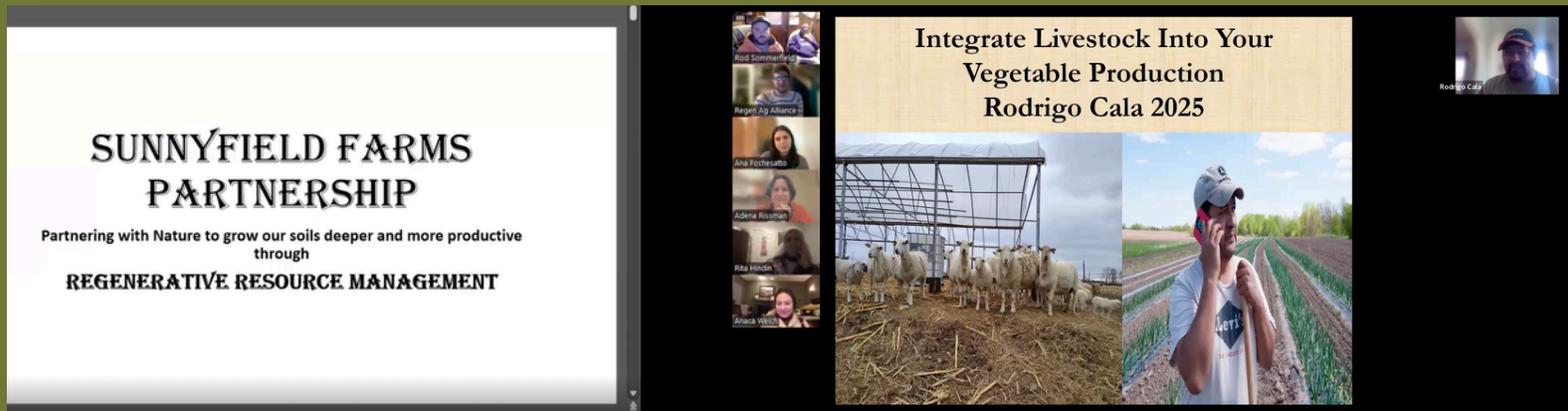
October 25, 2025

Ashley and Terry Schultze highlighted the projects underway as they prepare for chicks in the 2026 season. Participants saw works in progress, including barn modifications, fencing being installed around future pasture areas, and driveway improvements to meet township requirements. The group also walked through the forested areas of the property behind the farm where chickens will eventually roam, discussing how the landscape will function as part of their silvopasture system. Throughout the tour, participants asked questions about the transition process, startup challenges, and regulatory considerations. The gathering concluded with an open conversation about township regulations, coordination with RAA, logistical planning, and the personal motivations and satisfactions tied to entering regenerative poultry production.



Virtual Learning Circles

We hosted several virtual learning circles to reduce travel barriers and increase flexibility for participants. Given the geographic spread of the regenerative poultry community across Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and South Dakota, online events provided a more accessible entry point. While they did not offer the same place-based experience, they expanded who could participate and share knowledge. Virtual circles were recorded, and with permission from each farmer, we have uploaded their presentation to YouTube to extend access to the public.



Rod and Rick Sommerfield

February 10, 2025

Father and son Rod and Rick shared their farming journey during a virtual learning circle. As newer participants in the regenerative poultry system, they spoke about their motivations for adopting regenerative practices and their interest in integrating poultry-centered agroforestry into their operation. Following their presentation, participants engaged in a thoughtful discussion and asked questions about implementation, challenges, and long-term planning. Several of their practices sparked interest, particularly their approach to overwintering bees on the farm, which one participant described as “genius.”

[Click here to see the learning circle presentation](#)

Rodrigo Cala

May 8, 2025

Cala Farm integrates Tree Range chicken production with multiple enterprises, including vegetable production and other livestock. In his virtual presentation, Rodrigo Cala framed his approach as “Integrating Livestock Into Your Vegetable Production,” sharing how poultry can support soil fertility, pest management, and whole-farm diversification within an organic system in northern Wisconsin. The virtual format allowed a broader group of participants to join, increasing accessibility for those unable to travel while still fostering active discussion and peer exchange.

[Click here to see this learning circle recording](#)

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USDA SARE Grant Farmer Learning Circle: *Poultry-Centered Regenerative Agroforestry*

Daniel Ajpop Garcia and Arnulfo Perrera



AJ Granelli

March 26, 2025

AJ Granelli, Farm Initiative Director with Makoce Agriculture, shared his work advancing Indigenous growing practices within regional food systems on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. He discussed how these efforts support food sovereignty, community resilience, and culturally grounded agricultural models. AJ also spoke about launching his own enterprise, Homegrown Pork and Poultry, and walked participants through the process of applying for an FSA Farm Ownership loan. The virtual format allowed him to incorporate visual aids and share practical resources directly with aspiring poultry farmers, making the session both accessible and action-oriented.

[Click here to see this learning circle recording.](#)

Daniel Ajpop Garcia & Arnulfo Perrera

November 13, 2025

Daniel Ajpop Garcia, an agronomist from Guatemala, and Arnulfo Perrera of RAA hosted the final learning circle, sharing findings from research conducted at Salvatierra Farms and Wild Apple Meats. They presented observations from their feed program trials, outlining key results and practical implications for regenerative poultry production. The session concluded with a discussion of overall takeaways and how the findings could inform future management decisions. During the Q&A, participants asked detailed questions about bird weights, mortality rates, chick training, and next steps based on the research outcomes.

[Click here to see this learning circle recording.](#)

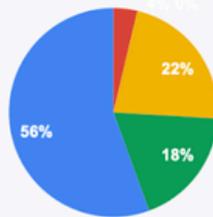
Outcomes & Participant Reflections

Evaluation data from twelve learning circles demonstrate strong engagement and positive outcomes across participants. Survey responses and interviews point to increased knowledge-sharing, strengthened cross-value chain understanding, and interest in continued participation.

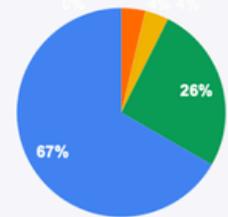
Overall, how satisfied were you with the event?



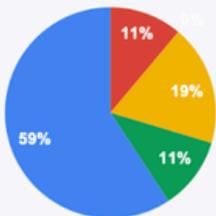
To what extent did this event help you build relationships with others in the RP community?



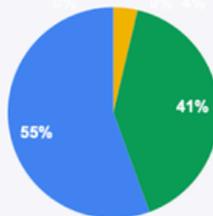
How much new knowledge did you gain about regenerative poultry practices or the supply chain?



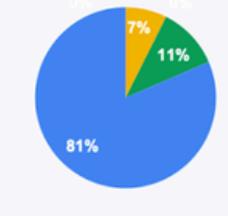
To what extent did this event enhance your sense of ownership in the decision-making processes?



How likely are you to apply the knowledge or insights gained from this event in your own work?



"This event contributed to building a more equitable and sustainable regenerative poultry supply chain."



"I feel like every year we make a little bit of progress on just getting better data tracking systems. And I think that we continued that progress really well last season and I'm really stoked to keep getting better at that this season."

-Regenerative Poultry Farmer

"It's pretty cool what they're doing up there... There were no dead birds. They were happy, happy, happy birds."

-Processing plant worker

Resources & Acknowledgements

About This Project

This research was funded by a USDA-SARE North Central Graduate Student Grant. The project uses participatory action research to strengthen community connections and promote equity in the regenerative poultry value chain.

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Key Partners

Regenerative Agriculture Alliance (RAA)
Tree-Range Farms
Stacyville Poultry Processing Plant

Learn More

NCR-SARE: northcentral.sare.org
RAA: regenagalliance.org

Thank You

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