

## Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program Farmer Grant Report

### 1. Project name and contact information

Project Title: MADE in Schoharie County Livestock Internship Program  
Project Leader: Carol Clement  
Address: 989 Broome Center Road, Preston Hollow, NY 12469  
Telephone: (518) 239-6234  
E-mail address: HeatherRidgeFarm@aol.com  
Grant Number: FNE06-568

### 2. Goals

The farmers of MADE in Schoharie County sought funds to assist them as they created a Livestock Internship Program devoted exclusively to pasture-based agriculture. Their hope was to create a program that paired interns with mentors in a daily work environment which included hands-on experience with livestock, meat cutting and marketing. Further, the program was designed to enable everyone to come together for formal learning sessions on a bi-weekly basis, where the students and farmers had the opportunity to learn about the myriad subjects associated with pasture-based livestock farming, including such topics as Holistic Resource Management, grazing land management, business planning and marketing, livestock nutrition and health, and meat science. The overall goal was to foster a new generation of agriculturists while easing the workload of farmers.

### 3. Farm Profile

MADE in Schoharie County is a community coalition of pasture-based livestock producers dedicated to supporting one another in whatever capacity necessary as we pursue the ideals of sustainable farming. Most of us raise the same products – grassfed beef, lamb, pork and poultry, to be marketed directly to the consumer through farmers’ markets and on-farm retail sites. Much of the meat we process ourselves using on-farm cutting facilities. Since our inception in 1999, our respective businesses have flourished. Many of us began farming while working at salaried jobs, but have now managed to make successful full-time transitions to our businesses.

The trouble we face is that, while we’ve grown wise and experienced in our work, we’re not getting any younger. Like so many other farmers across the country, we’re faced with a need for energized, enthusiastic and helpful labor. Further, confronted with the reality that we cannot steward our land forever, we now wish to help a new generation of farmers find their place on green pastures.

### 4. Participants

Our technical advisor was Roy Bessire, Agricultural Program leader from Greene County Cooperative Extension. Mr. Bessire assisted us with our program design, with efforts to

procure funding, by serving as an instructor in one of our workshops, and by performing the duties of an ombudsman, helping farmers and interns to work together harmoniously. We found other cooperators along the way. Phil Metzger of the South Central RC&D and Seth Milner from University of New Hampshire Extension service aided us in planning and delivering a holistic management workshop, free of charge. Also, the Northeast Livestock Processing Service Company offered a carcass grading and pasture management workshop free of charge, that ran in tandem with our meat science workshop, creating a weekend-long seminar for our interns (and many other farmers) on meat quality and preparation. Other participants included the four participating host farms, the workshop educators, the five interns, and approximately 20 farmers from outside the group who signed up to participate in various program workshops.

## 5. Project Activities

We engaged in an ambitious recruitment agenda, essentially putting out a nation-wide call for applicants using every sustainable farming contact, list-serv, website and publication we could think of. We had an extensive application (with lots of long-answer questions) that we knew would require a serious time commitment to complete, thus screening out the less-than-serious applicants. We met as a group and evaluated the completed applications, then set up a single interview day, where candidates were brought to each participating farm, given tours, chances to ask questions, served lunch, and then given individual interviews before a panel of farmers. Outside interviews were set up for any interns who could not make the initial interview day.

Once positions were offered to the successful applicants, each farm was responsible for negotiating the compensation package with their chosen student. Most of the students began work in May.

While we intended on having regularly biweekly workshops, this proved challenging, owing to busy summer schedules. We did complete the series of seven workshops, which typically occurred on Sundays. Some weeks went by with no workshops, some weeks there were workshops every single Sunday. The workshops took place in the following order:

1. Introduction to Holistic Management
2. Meat science
3. Tour and evaluation of regional farmers' markets
4. Monitoring the farm and family ecosystem
5. Grazing land management
6. Holistic Financial Management
7. Marketing and business planning

We made a point to share a meal (contributed by the host farms) at all the workshops, creating extra time for socialization.

Throughout the program, interns and hosts completed periodic evaluation forms. One form was completed outlining the learning and performance goals at the outset of the

work experience, a second was completed mid-term, focusing on areas for improvement, and a final evaluation took place at the end of the 15 week period. In addition, the educational coordinator did two focus groups, one with the interns, and one with the farmers, to discuss ways the program could be improved in future years.

## 6. Results

We were pleased with the results of our program. One of our interns realized that a career in farming was not a good match for her – a successful realization, we feel, since it saved her a lot of time and expense later in life! Another one is not ready to begin farming, but has begun talking to her family (dairy farmers) about taking over a portion of her family's acreage for pasture-based livestock farming when she is ready to start up (she just graduated from college and is planning on doing some traveling first). A third intern, trained in the industrial agricultural model, left his work on a conventional dairy, took a considerable cut in pay to join our program, and has decided, as a result of it, to begin a pastured poultry business. He has no land of his own, so he was worked out a trade agreement with a dairy farmer in his own community, swapping labor for use of a portion of the land. Two other interns, self-titled “mid-life career changers” took sabbaticals from their careers to explore grass-based agriculture. They have since decided to purchase land in New York State and begin their own pastured livestock business. They are still trying to find property.

Other results were fun realizations from the students – All commented on the surprisingly long hours, on the attention given to marketing and retail display presentation. Several of them seemed surprised that as many hours had to be devoted to farm and product appearance as to livestock stewardship. Also, the younger students admitted to never having thought about the origins of their food. One girl remarked, “one day I found myself standing in Wal Mart buying a cucumber. And I suddenly asked myself, ‘why was I doing this,’ when I drive by six vegetable farm stalls on my way to and from work?”

The farmers had their own realizations. They said that having to teach interns made them notice their own shortcomings on the farm, and to work toward improving their own stewardship and marketing skills. They also commented on the need to improve their communication skills when working with novice farmers, and talked about the measures they took to accomplish this.

One last unexpected result was the cross-farm pollinization. We scheduled workshops at each of the different farms so that the students would get exposure to each operation. What we didn't expect was that the students would focus on different aspect of each farm's production, and bring those questions back to their host farms, suggesting improvements. The farmers then seemed to become committed to attending the workshops to glean these lessons as well.

## 7. Conditions

A critical condition to the success of our program was the collaboration among the participating farmers. We are an unusual group in that we've worked together for 8 years now, and despite the increasing pressure for grass-based farms to compete for business, we are able to cooperate with each other. Each of the farmers in the group makes a point of not interfering with another participating farmer's markets, and all farms rely on one another to help meet product demand, respond to family and farm emergencies, source feed and various farm products and implements, and discuss our troubles and successes. In short, we are like family. We trust each other implicitly, and are able to speak freely. This made it easier for us to work together in this new endeavor, and admittedly, it presents challenges to us as we consider opening our program to farmers from the outside.

## 8. Economics

All the farmers remarked that having the labor enabled them to either expand their operations, or focus on efforts that made them more profitable. Having a responsible person handling daily chores, for example, freed up a farmer for more marketing, for giving more time to customers, for nursing injuries, or for spending time with family.

The trouble we've run into, however, is expanding our program. We would like to include other farmers in our learning group, but we have not found any who are willing to take on the expense and paperwork of officially hiring an intern. We found that economics were extremely important for our students. They remarked that it was the combination of pay and education that made our program competitive. Since all of these students have daily living expenses, they are not in a position to accept work without pay. Also, they pointed out that there was a psychological factor involved – getting compensated for their work helped them to shoulder their responsibilities. The farmers, too, demonstrated the importance of paying for their help. The farmers who did not pay their intern remarked that they felt uncomfortable asking her to perform extra duties; while those who were compensating their students felt more comfortable assigning greater responsibilities, and offering the interns performance feedback. Those who were paying also seemed to be constantly focusing on how to work more effectively, how to improve their and their students' performances, how to make the most of the program.

## 9. Assessment

We have several new ideas for our program, if we are able to run it in subsequent years. First, both the farmers and interns suggested that they would like to have on-farm work days, where the entire learning group periodically takes a day off to do in-depth projects at each farm. Farmers liked this idea because they wanted to spend more time learning how other operations worked, and because it would help each host farm to tackle difficult projects with the extra help. Students liked the idea of having an opportunity to work on other farms. They craved more in-depth knowledge of each of the different businesses, rather than simply knowledge of their host farm. The interns also asked if they could be

in charge of the learning days – using them as an opportunity to plan projects, budget accordingly, organize labor, etc. We plan to adopt this idea in future programs.

One of our downfalls was that we did not plan for any safety training, which we should have been required to do when we purchased workman's compensation. Luckily, we had no injuries during the program, but farmers remarked that, because there was no safety training day, a lot of time was devoted to stopping work to introduce the students to safety principles. Also, the students remarked that they would have found such a course helpful, particularly with regard to safe animal handling. Several students came to the program with no livestock experience, and without instruction, found it difficult to make themselves immediately useful on the farm.

We still wish to keep our program relatively small. This makes it easier to plan work sessions, to have a more focused learning community, and to commute to workshop sites. Still, we would like to expand our numbers slightly; however, we run into difficulty finding farmers who are willing to make the economic commitment that we now feel is imperative to farmer/intern success. We have not yet resolved how to overcome this. One consideration is that, with time, and more successful seasons, other nearby farms will slowly accept this idea and join us. However, immediate adoption by neighboring farms after only one year is probably not a reasonable expectation.

## 10. Adoption

We admittedly all had little interpersonal glitches to overcome as we learned to work with our students. Nevertheless, the program proved enormously helpful to us, enabling us to improve our farms and ease our labor burdens at relatively low cost. Our plan is to continue to work together as a learning group, recruiting interns, offering educational workshops, and adding the new element – on-farm work days, for next year.

## 11. Outreach

As mentioned earlier, our outreach was extensive. At the beginning of our program, we sent out two press releases – one long story announcing our program, and then later a second one with our workshop schedule. Both press releases are attached. These were sent to personal contacts at agricultural colleges, professional organizations, and farmer-to-farmer networks; as well as to list serves such as SANET-ML, SAED-SHARE-L, GRAZE-L, beeftoday-L, Sheep-L, Sustag-L, AGENVR-L, Agric-L, etc. In addition we posted with numerous websites and farm organizations, including justfood, org, farmtotable.org, holisticmangement.org; NOFA-NY, Regional Farm and Food Project, Cornell Small Farms Program, ATTRA, American Grassfed, US Grassfed Society, Foodroutes, Grassfarmer.com, and IATP.org. We also sent stories to Progressive Farmer Bulletin, Mother Earth News, Small Farm Journal, Small Farm Today Magazine, Country Folks and every local and regional newspaper we could think of. Many of these sites, list-servs and journals ran our story as submitted, much to our delight. A second story was later released, announcing our workshop schedule, and sent to most of the same places. Copies of both stories are attached.

Throughout the program, we also periodically distributed press releases announcing individual workshops. These were distributed to regional sites only.

## 12. Report Summary

The goal of this project was for a small group of pasture-based livestock farmers to cooperatively recruit interns for a 15 week program involving on-farm labor and a series of seven educational workshops. Through the use of press releases, personal and professional contacts and numerous agricultural organizations, websites and list-servs, we conducted a nation-wide recruitment effort seeking interns who were serious about pursuing careers as pasture-based farmers. We had a good-sized applicant pool to choose from, and we had a successful first year, perhaps learning more from our interns than we may have taught them. Several of our interns are now planning their own grass-based livestock enterprises. In future years, our hopes are to refine our communication skills to work more effectively with our interns, to provide a farm safety and livestock handling workshop, and to organize on-farm work days involving all the host farmers and students. We hope to eventually have a few more farms join our group, and to persuade all farmers that offering a compensation package is critical to farmer-intern success.

Submitted by  
Carol Calvert  
11/1/06