

2025 02 06 VAWQP Meeting - Farm Teams Discussion

Discussion Questions

- What do we see as the benefits or challenges of farm teams?
- How do we build trust and effective communication between partners?
- What should the districts do or not do?
- Informal or more formal model?
- How do we identify and communicate resource concerns and determine priorities collectively?
- How and with whom do we share that information? Do we include regulating agencies and/or watershed groups? Who decides?

Table 1

- Too many people
 - Specific teams for farmstead, agronomic
 - Bite off more than can chew
 - Big groups are intimidating
- NRCS starts conversation
 - Bring in 1 group at a time, address 1 concern at a time
 - Summary emails
- Email chains get crazy
 - Communication on case by case
 - District POC, send out info
- District gather and disperse animal numbers and gather comprehensive data (current)
- Informal model, only pull in who you need. Not all farms fit in the same box
 - Farmer's choice?
- Regulating agencies for permitting purposes only

Table 2

- Helpful having a point person for the farms for communications (farm doesn't get overwhelmed and keeps things flowing)
- Helpful to have the point person (district) be able to access NRCS info/info on multiple sides
- Small farms especially need assistance navigating

- Having a sign up for farm to fill out with the different organizations
- Districts can request outstanding enforcement actions from VAAF as a starting point for outreach
- Navigating separation between districts and inspections/not being viewed as regulatory. Be there along with the farmer for guidance and support.
- Very farm specific in whether formal/informal
- Providing a menu of services is overwhelming for farms, maybe start with more core groups and go from there.
- Lender is important to have in these conversations with farms
- Starting with an assessment of need and forming farm team from there. Can identify key players. Trying not to have too many people at once.

Table 3

- Farmers getting help from many different partners
- New staff – who is who? Farm to know where to start in putting together a team
- Challenge – could be overwhelm the farmer with a large team
- Money is priority
- Partner database
- Establishing best communication method for them (the farmer)
- Help with what a farmer wants not what you think they need
- Don't oversell
- Let the farmer lead the conversation
- Get to know their operation
- Farmer doesn't qualify for the programs they need
- If you can't help, connect them to someone who can
- Districts know a little about a lot, NRCS knows a lot about their programs
- Develop a relationship that goes further than the contracted problem
- Districts know more producers, great range
- Conservation districts could be the point person who chooses members of farm teams
- Choosing based on trust, capacity, and timeline
- Informal – things change all the time

Table 4 (hard to read scan, look at paper copy)

- Teamwork factor
- Trust building between all
- Dividing tasks
- Priority alignment
- How to build trust?
 - Keeping lines of communication open and continually update with changes
 - Respect each other's expertise, encourage positive
 - Align on producer's priorities
- Do or do not
 - Do
 - Identify relevant parties
 - POC
 - Do not
 - Bring 30 people to a farm
- Informal/formal
 - Information would work better as it provides flexibility and adaptability to change
- Happens organically, discuss as , listen to producers and their needs/priorities

Table 5

- Benefits/challenges
 - Get on the same page with everyone
 - Make sure not doing same thing 2x
 - Farmer clearer on who they are working with
- Understanding – note focus
 - Too many same thing
- Larger group discuss -> to smaller team that works with farmers
- Within group know who to talk to for more info
- Trust – listening, not assuming wants and needs being met. Not overwhelm farmer.
Communication
- All have similar goals. Acknowledge what is achievable. Manage expectations.
- Project (watershed) in area. Other not realizing what's going on there. How to fit the project into project big picture benefits.
- How to share information that's necessary without overstepping.
- Building enough trust with farmer so can get info out to other needed in project
- Format for info and communication. Template to distribute info. Everyone adds to it.

- Regulating agencies – internal team figures out issues and talked with farmer before becoming a regulatory violation.
- Present in a way that makes it beneficial to them.
- Farmers not the only sources of fixing water quality issues or others in area can help
- Districts – help lead internal and external teams. Already have connections to farm?
- Watershed overview ahead of time. Use that info with farm teams.
- Use relationships built in farm teams to assist with permissions to view to streams etc.

Table 6

- Not a lot of room for funding coordinators, grant providers to interact at every step. Certain regulatory jurisdictions can get crossed over.
- Farm team members can help coordinate the different agencies and actors.
- Highly variable need for each farmer and projects, can be challenging as an individual team member can be hard to plan and coordinate with multiple farms
- People with time and institutional knowledge are crucial – valuable but risky
- Not what you know, who you know
- The team can be proactive with providing information on behalf of the farm
- Conflict with confidentiality among agencies and security
- Use of databases and other tools to plan

Table 7

- Formal template to include new folks and share info quickly
 - Core group of partners
 - Centralized information on involved parties
- Directory of orgs for specific purposes
 - Ag guide?
 - Lots of separate information databases
 - Lack of trust between state and farm groups prevents effective info sharing
- Virtual connection poses difficulties for fostering connections
 - Look to historical guidance from pre-covid for forming social connection
 - In-person meeting help build trust
- Districts coordinates connections, how can fed/state be involved?

- Involve farmers in decision making for when to involve regulators
- Make distinction between state programs and regulators
- Collectively determine priorities
 - Keeping open lines of contact beyond meetings
 - Strategic planning involving farm concerns, grant deadlines, etc.

Zoom Room Discussion Notes

- Diana has worked in the Farm Teams model, usually one person is the point of contact (NRCS or NRCD staff), usually not all the folks visiting the farm at once and bring in team members as needed.
- Good collaboration between NRCS and NRCDs.
- Ag producers not always certain who they should be in communication with. Would be helpful to have a staff directory.
- Benefits and Challenge of the Farm Teams:
 - So many different people at the table. There should be one point of contact that the farmer talks to, who then coordinates with other agencies and organizations.
 - How to mitigate game of telephone? Tools like the Partner Database can be helpful in tracking collaboration and work with farmers while minimizing emails.
 - Can be difficult to find the time to pull together a team. NRCS staff in particular have limited capacity.
 - Benefit is having all parties engaged with the farm aware of what other work is happening on the farm
- Formal vs. Informal Farm Teams:
 - Informal often works best for farmers and their needs
 - This can lead to a variable structure
 - Having some formalized elements, such as a specific point of contact
 - Having some pre-determined protocol that may or may not be used for each farm can be helpful. Have systems in place in case a farmer needs a more formalized farm team, but farmers are not obligated to have a very formal/intensive structure.
- Include watershed groups and regulating agencies?
 - Need privacy release form from landowner/partnership MOU, need landowner to know what they are agreeing to.
 - Farmers should understand who is involved with the farm team and why

Summary – take aways/next steps

- General interest in having more farm teams, led by district staff
- Having intake interview form/summary document with background farm and project info, farm animal numbers, land base, who is involved, etc would be helpful for partners.
- More informal/farmer driven but with some structure and communication norms from district
- Having district share meeting summaries over email to the group after gatherings to keep everyone on the same page and so there can effectively be smaller sub-teams focused on specific part of the project.