

The Maryland Grazers' Network

Context, steps, and insights that will help other communities replicate the successful farmer-to-farmer mentoring project in central Maryland



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The Chesapeake Bay Funders Network (CBFN) is a funding collaborative of private nonprofit foundations helping communities to initiate and sustain the necessary changes to promote and protect the health of the Chesapeake Bay. CBFN allows grantmakers to network, exchange information, and pool resources to advance shared interests in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

The CBFN Agricultural Initiative—Strong Communities, Healthy Waters—strengthens the economic sustainability of farms while promoting conservation practices that improve the health of the Bay. Grantmakers in the Agricultural Initiative have pioneered an innovative approach to identify and support strategic projects in key farming communities. Each project includes strong evaluation and communication components, providing a transferable model that can be applied to other locations.

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Forging New Traditions

A Farmer-to-Farmer Network

When academic and agency personnel aim to help farmers with conservation practices, they often strive to provide two big-ticket items: technical advice and financial support. But the experience of the Maryland Grazers' Network—created to expand the use of rotational grazing—suggests that success might equally depend on regular conversations among farmers. Farmers in the network overwhelmingly ranked tradition, peer pressure, and lack of confidence as the top barriers to adopting rotational grazing; cash flow issues and a lack of technical resources fell at the bottom.

The Maryland Grazers' Network provides a model of farmer-to-farmer interactions that can help a neglected conservation practice take root. This network was specifically aimed at promoting grazing systems. Grazing systems feed livestock with well-managed pasture grass instead of corn and other grains, which require the use of fertilizers, pesticides, and equipment fuel. Well-run grazing systems consistently improve farm profits in part because grass-fed beef and dairy draw higher prices, but also because the costs for feed, labor, veterinary services, and equipment are lower. And while grazing systems benefit farmers, they also prevent pollution in local streams and the Chesapeake Bay—pastures containing legumes require less tilling and fertilizing, and they prevent the dense concentration of animals and manure in feedlots. This in turn reduces the amount of nutrients and soil that runs into local waterways.

A small core of Maryland farmers and agency personnel believed that more farmers would adopt grazing systems if they could learn about the practice from people they trust: other farmers. A project team that included the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, and University of Maryland Extension proposed a network that would pair experienced grazing farmers with those who were new to the practice. Staff would support them with technical resources, marketing assistance, and financial analyses for individual farms.

The network evolved over a three-year period. Over time, the team increasingly observed that the real challenge lay not with the techniques of grazing, but with the people-driven, long-term task of cultural change. The network's reach remained small as it introduced new concepts and helped farmers with the slow but steady changes that build a new tradition. They adapted the network to strengthen relationships between the mentoring pairs and create a group identity. They learned that success carries different meanings. And although the network did not grow as quickly as anticipated, it spurred an important exchange of ideas and camaraderie that increased and improved grazing practices among its members.

This is the second pilot project supported by the Chesapeake Bay Funders Network that demonstrates the importance of farmer-to-farmer mentoring in promoting practices that challenge established farm systems. The development of the Maryland Grazers' Network—and lessons learned along the way—are detailed on the following pages.



Navigating Change through the Maryland Grazers' Network



The Challenge of Change

Rotational grazing is a livestock management practice that can cut feed costs, increase farm profits, and reduce nutrient pollution in local waterways. Instead of growing or purchasing feed, farmers let livestock graze on pasture grass, moving to new pastures once grass is grazed below a certain height and returning when the grass is tall enough to be grazed again.

Managed grazing systems are still uncommon in Maryland. They require a marked shift from farm practices that support confined animal agriculture and govern decisions and financial investments on many farms in the Chesapeake region. In today's economy, a new approach with uncertain outcomes often isn't worth the risk.

A small group of farmers in Washington and Frederick Counties was nevertheless passionate about grass-fed animals and grazing. And the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and University of Maryland Extension believed that more farmers would join them if they had an effective, convenient way to learn from sources they trust. First and foremost, farmers trust other farmers.

At the same time, the Chesapeake Bay Funders Network, with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, was searching for projects that would increase conservation practices for manure management while providing market-based incentives for the producers. The network collaborated with the project team, which included the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, University of Maryland Extension, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, and two farmers. Together, they proposed a three-year pilot project for a mentoring system in which experienced grazing

farmers would help farmers who were new to the practice.

The network eventually included participants from Washington, Frederick, Carroll, Harford, and Baltimore, and Prince Georges Counties. The Future Harvest Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture (CASA), along with Extension and Conservation District staff in Washington, Frederick, and Carroll Counties, became partners as the network took shape. The project team not only coordinated the network but provided financial analyses, marketing assistance for grass-fed products, expertise on pasture management, and resources for fencing and other practices that prevent cattle from entering streams.

Making the Match

A referral team recruited farmer mentors and matched them with partners. The referral team included the project team as well as soil conservation personnel, county extension agents, and other grass-based farmers. The team sought mentors with grazing experience, good people skills, and an interest in helping others.

Mentors received travel support and stipends to help cover their time. The stipend amounts were based on the advice of participating farmers. Payments included \$500 at the start of the year and another \$500 to \$750 at the end of the year, based on activity level.

Partner farmers were recruited through many sources, such as local agencies, other farmers, and churches. At first, the most successful recruitment was through personal invitation by a project partner. Over time, interested farmers began contacting the network to ask for support.

Surprise and Adjustment

The project team believed their biggest tasks were to “make the match” and collect resources for mentors. They expected that functional relationships, with regular communication, would easily follow. They also believed that farmers would have goals for their land, with measurable results.

However, most of the seven original mentoring partnerships developed slowly. Mentors hesitated to contact their partners because they did not want to appear pushy. Partners, on the other hand, wondered if they were considered poor managers because they were encouraged to contact a mentor. They were also afraid of imposing on the mentors’ time.

The project team decided to strengthen the mentoring relationships before recruiting more farmers. A liaison from the project team was assigned to each pair. The liaison arranged the first meeting and helped with the initial exchange of information. The liaison then checked in on the pair’s communications and encouraged the use of resource experts. Three to four members of the project team served as liaisons during the three-year period.

A Community of Grazing

Group events such as farm tours, planning sessions, and an annual winter meeting helped farmers to exchange ideas and build community. Marketing and business management advice was often included at the events. This helped farmers approach a grazing system with a sense of cash flow and some economic confidence.

The network also created a highly successful grazing calendar, illustrated with photos from their farms. They included monthly



checklists for grazing management, which allowed farmers to learn from each other as they discussed the tips to be listed at various times of the year. The calendar is now a popular tool for the greater community and a source of network pride. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation has showcased the calendar as one of its top twenty-five “knowledge products.”

In all, 67 farmers and 31 mentoring pairs have participated in the network, making improvements that protect water quality and increased profits. Some farmer partners have become mentors, and the group as a whole is eager to explore more cutting-edge practices for grazing.

A bison farmer in the Maryland Grazers’ Network describes the use of warm-season grasses in his grazing system.

Success Stories from the Grazers’ Network

- Resulted in 650 acres of cropland converted to pasture, 21 conservation plans for network farms, 70 acres of riparian buffers, 13 stream-crossings, 18 alternative watering systems, and five miles of streambank fencing.
- Developed 11 financial projections and 13 marketing plans for grass-fed animal products from network farms.
- Helped create a cost-share category for farmers who participate in a mentoring program and developed nutrient crediting for grazing systems.
- Produced an economic analysis demonstrating the financial benefits of grazing: 13 dairy farms using rotational grazing averaged \$132 more per cow than 19 dairy farms with confined herds.

Important Project Steps



1 Assemble a project team with grounded experience in grazing and farmer communications. Recruit members with expertise in grazing, conservation practices, farm economics, marketing, and communications. Designate a coordinator. The Maryland Grazers' team held biweekly conference calls and met in-person approximately four times each year.

2 Create a work plan that outlines the development of the network, special activities, and realistic goals for the mentoring pairs. If farmers are not members of the project team, seek farmer input.

3 Secure multi-year funding, because developing a solid farmer-to-farmer network requires sustained effort.

4 Develop a system for recruiting mentors and partner farmers. This network created a referral team across various agencies and community groups. A member of the project team interviewed the potential partner to determine the best mentor and appropriate resources.

5 Recruit a small group of respected and interested farmers as mentors. Seek mentors with strong people skills, who genuinely respect those they teach and desire to see them succeed. Include compensation for travel, planning, and mentoring time. Ask mentors for advice on planning and operating the network, as well as the frequency and duration of the mentoring relationships.

6 Develop support materials. Include information sheets that outline roles and expectations for mentors, farmer partners, and third-party liaisons; a farm inventory to help mentoring pairs assess farm resources and goals; and monthly checklists for mentors, including important topics to cover

with partners, group meeting dates, and reminders for regular communications with the project team.

7 Identify support resources. Ensure experts are available to answer questions about economics and marketing, as well as soil limitations, forage species, genetics, animal behavior, and farm facilities. Prepare to track costs and sales to ensure that new or improved practices, systems, and marketing benefit the farm financially. Include a summary of resources and contact information in the mentor information packet.

8 Recruit partner farmers and match them with mentors. Clearly express that this is an opportunity to learn from experienced grazers, not a criticism of their operation. This must be done subtly by emphasizing that the network is a large group of farmers who are all still learning. It offers an organized program of resources including experienced grass-based farmers and access to free or low-cost programs in soil conservation, business management, marketing, and whole farm planning.

9 Assign a third-party liaison to each mentoring pair. The liaison should arrange the first contact and nurture the relationship over time. Ideally, partnerships should begin in late fall, allowing the relationship to develop over the winter before the busy spring season on the farms. However, follow through on farmer interest as it arises and adjust the timing as needed.

10 Look into policies that impact grazing practices. For example, the Grazers' Network helped create a cost-share category for farmers who participate in a mentoring program. The network also provided information for more accurate recognition of nutrient reductions derived from a grazing system.

11 Support relationships with events and activities. Hold gatherings with food several times a year, such as farm tours, planning sessions with mentors, and an annual meeting. This network held three to four mentor meetings and two to three field days each year.

12 Include strategic communications projects, such as a newsletter and/or grazing calendar.

13 Ask farmers for feedback on field days and at the annual meeting: How can we improve? How can we support our mentors? What do partners need?

Partnership Roles

It is important to have partners assembled for early input on the entire project and to collaborate on a work plan. For the Maryland Grazers Network, the roles of the partner organizations were as follows:

- **Chesapeake Bay Foundation:** Project coordination, grants management, field outreach, and technical support.
- **University of Maryland Extension:** Economic, marketing, forage, and livestock expertise.
- **USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service:** Project coordination, outreach to Conservation Districts, and working with government agencies to make changes in cost-share programs.
- **Future Harvest CASA:** Outreach to farmers through its annual conference and web site, marketing pasture-based farm products (beef, lamb, cheese, chickens, pork, bison, etc.) through the Amazing Grazing Producer Directory.
- **Extension and Conservation District staff in Washington, Frederick, and Carroll Counties:** Outreach, grazing and conservation expertise.



Fall grazing of forage Brassicas supplements other slower growing pastures at that time of year.

Foundations of Success

Context A promising number of dairy and/or beef farmers within a reasonable distance from one another, some of whom who have experience and/or interest in rotational grazing; personnel from agencies or nonprofit organizations who can support the development of the network and provide technical resources.

- Staffing**
- At least one key leader to call meetings, set agendas, organize activities, understand the budget, and keep progress on track.
 - Institutional/agency support for nurturing farmer relationships and handling administrative tasks, such as producing the newsletter and other outreach materials.
 - Technical resources, such as those from the Maryland Cooperative Extension and Natural Resources Conservation Service.

- Partnerships & Process**
- Involvement of some farmers and all partners at the earliest planning stage.
 - Regular, in-person team meetings for the duration of the project.
 - A written work plan that the team creates, revisits, and revises as necessary.
 - Partnerships with existing organizations through pasture walks, grower meetings, and civic or church organizations.

Funding Multi-year funding is critical to forming a solid foundation for the network.



Farmers on a Maryland Grazers' Network field walk learn to adjust a no-till drill for seeding pastures.

Planning Notes

Funding and Budget

The Maryland Grazers Network was funded by \$400,000 over three years, including grants and agency staff support.

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Personnel	\$34,900	\$42,500	\$40,000
Consultants	\$4,700	\$12,300	\$10,500
Mentoring Stipends	\$15,000	\$9,000	\$16,500
Materials/Supplies	\$19,500	\$48,000	\$39,000
Meetings/Travel	\$10,000	\$10,700	\$11,000
Marketing/Farm Plans	\$23,900	\$7,400	\$11,000
Publications/Printing	\$5,000	\$8,100	\$30,000
Evaluation/Documentation	\$6,000	\$5,000	\$5,000
	\$119,000	\$143,000	\$163,000

- Personnel included 25 percent of one person's time to organize meetings and activities, as well as support for a marketing specialist to assist farmers
- Outreach funding was increased during the second and third years in order to provide two part-time field people
- Actual mentoring stipends cost \$500 per pair per year, which was half of the anticipated amount
- Most of the materials/supplies funding helped individuals who did not accept government funding to install stream fencing, stream crossings, and watering systems. Materials/supplies funding also allowed the network to print its annual grazing calendar and a consumer directory to pasture-raised products in year three.



The economics of grazing have improved the bottom line for dairy, sheep, and beef farmers.

Lessons, Insights, and Timesavers



1 Shape the network to fit the farm community—don't be limited by county or watershed boundaries. Also, open the network to any interested farmers, not just the mentoring pairs. Many want to learn from the network without participating in the formal mentoring process.

2 Nurture group identity but let farmers take the lead. Farmers in the Maryland Grazers' Network wanted a name for the group and chose it themselves. Recognize that some farmers dislike the term "mentor" because it suggests a hierarchy where one isn't wanted.

3 Create regular and intentional communication between the project team, mentoring pairs, and technical experts. This is critical to incremental progress. Matching mentors with same-commodity partners and hoping for progress results in sporadic meetings and a lack of focus. Regular communications, checklists, and purposeful field days will inject momentum and resources into the network.

4 The use of stipends was more important to farmer partners than to the mentors who received them. Partners were more comfortable calling on their mentors for advice and farm visits because they knew the mentors received some compensation for their time. However, mentors weren't motivated by the stipend; they were motivated by helping others and developing their own knowledge along the way.

5 Keep paperwork to a minimum. The team originally designed a simple "application form" to be completed at the initial visit, but farmers interpreted this to mean that they may or may not be accepted into the program. The form was renamed a "contact information sheet" and the liaison helped to complete it. The network wanted to create farm inventories and conservation plan maps, but obtaining this information is difficult and requires dedicated follow-up by the liaisons.

6 Consider including information on cutting-edge tools and practices. Farmers in the Maryland Grazers' Network took an enthusiastic lead in this process. Support personnel are responding to their questions and interests, and the network is now viewed as a progressive source of up-to-date grazing ideas for farmers.

7 Be flexible with definitions of success. Economic pressures make it very important to evaluate each farmer's individual situation to determine which grazing and management concepts they want and/or need. For some, meeting basic fencing and watering needs is a major improvement; for others, the goal is to gain experience with grass-fed animals. Data that documents environmental and economic changes is important, but may take several years to develop.

8 Both the project team and mentors should present concepts in different formats. Some people are visual learners, others like to read and study, some learn through stories, and others learn by doing. Help mentors recognize the reasons that partners hesitate to ask for clarification. Many ideas will be conveyed through a combination of time, observation of other farms, research, and casual conversation—but the liaison, mentor, and partner all have a role to play in the process.



Questions?

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