Caitlin Marquis, MS
Jill K. Clark, PhD
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Raising the Production and Efficiency of Farms in Cuyahoga Valley National Park

Introduction
The Countryside Conservancy operates the Countryside Initiative program, which is an effort to preserve the rural landscape in Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP) by leasing park land to farmers who commit to using sustainable management practices and interacting positively with visitors. Based on small farms in their network expressing barriers to increasing production, the Countryside Conservancy aimed to reduce those barriers by generating feasibility data around mitigating cost of inputs and labor limitations. The Conservancy received a project grant from the Center for Farmland Policy Innovation at Ohio State University to address this goal. The Center’s mission is to enable communities to achieve farmland protection policy and food and agricultural economic development priorities by partnering on innovative projects and providing needed programming.

The Conservancy worked with the farmers in the Countryside Initiative program to determine the need, interest, and capacity of those farmers to work cooperatively and hire employees. This work occurred primarily through Farmer Networking events, classes, and workshops.

Farmer Networking Sessions
The Farmer Networking events, which occurred periodically between late 2011 and throughout 2012, were used as a forum to discuss and brainstorm cooperative opportunities and labor issues.

The sessions quickly revealed an urgent need for labor, leading to investigation of the feasibility of developing an internship program. Through researching state employment laws, the Conservancy determined that it was illegal by state law for private farmers to have unpaid interns. However, farmers expressed challenges in paying minimum wage and
Workers’ Compensation to potential interns, as the state mandates. In response, the Conservancy began looking into their potential role in sourcing interns for the farmers as a nonprofit organization. In initiating an internship program, the Conservancy determined that they would want to offer interns educational opportunities, hands-on learning through working on the farms, housing, and a stipend. The Conservancy began conversations with Cuyahoga Valley National Park to discuss housing possibilities for interns and was able to locate one building that could be used in the short term, while several other buildings could become available in the long term pending funding for utilities and furnishings. The Conservancy also hosted a brainstorming session with academic experts, farmers with successful intern programs, and the CVNP Resource Management Chief to determine the best structure for the internship program. While the meeting solidified the need for the internship program, consensus was not reached on an operational model for the program.

When the issue of forming cooperatives was approached, farmers were less engaged, in spite of formerly expressing the need/desire for such programs. This lack of engagement inhibited consensus among the farmers about what type of cooperatives would serve their needs. As such, the Conservancy decided to look internally at cooperative models, with two staff members attending a seminar hosted by Kent State University’s Cooperative Development Program. While the Conservancy remains interested in operating a cooperative for the farmers, the possibility of developing the cooperative is dependent on the Conservancy locating funds and staff for the project.

A major theme that emerged from the Farmer Networking Sessions was the fragility of small farms in maintaining successful operations. The Conservancy learned that farmers feel that having business resources and financial resources available to them is necessary for their success. Farmers also expressed challenges in determining whether or not to scale up their operations, as hiring an employee to bring production levels up and increase revenue represents a major financial risk for them.

**Classes and Workshops**

Based on challenges and limitations expressed by farmers in the Countryside Initiative program, the Conservancy hosted a series of classes and workshops to address and help mitigate those challenges. The topics covered by the Conservancy included:

- Adding Employees to Your Farm Business
- Networking Your Farm Business
- Record and Bookkeeping
- Quickbooks for Farmers
- Taxes for Farmers

The participants in these sessions were asked to turn in an evaluation sheet on the day of the session, and the evaluation results were discussed with staff and the Conservancy’s Executive Director for consideration of future improvements.
Immediate Results and Future Plans
The work of the Countryside Conservancy to increase production and efficiency of farms in Cuyahoga Valley National Park yielded both immediate results and plans for future work. The Conservancy determined that the classes, workshops, and networking events effectively provided immediate benefits to farmers by way of increasing their knowledge and deepening their understanding of key elements in running a small farm business. Due to the Conservancy’s efforts to investigate the feasibility of an internship program and a cooperative model, the Conservancy is now prepared to develop these programs pending appropriate funding. In fact, the Conservancy currently plans to pursue an internship program for the Countryside Initiative farmers beginning in 2014 with a pilot, and developing into a full program in 2016. The Conservancy continues to research the development of a cooperative enterprise for the farmers in Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

Find Out More
To learn more about how the Countryside Conservancy applied its Community-Based Agricultural Economic Development planning grant from the Center for Farmland Policy Innovation to raise the production efficiency of farms in Cuyahoga Valley National Park, contact:

Countryside Conservancy
2179 Everett Road
Peninsula, OH 44264
(330) 657-2542

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