



40 Acre Co-op aims to build opportunities for marginalized farmers

By Lisa Holm

Editor's note: This is the second article in a series highlighting the projects of Minnesota Farmers Union Foundation "Co-ops for Climate" grant recipients. Co-ops for Climate is a Minnesota Farmers Union Foundation grant program that funds farmer cooperatives in developing solutions for climate resilience. Learn more at mfu.org/mfu-foundation-com-climate-working-lands/.

40 Acre Cooperative, based in Sandstone, is a part of the first cohort of "Co-ops for Climate" grant recipients awarded in the summer of 2023.

40 Acre Cooperative aims to create access and opportunities for historically marginalized farmers in Minnesota and the surrounding region and build climate resilience through operational support for specialty crops, specifically hemp. 40 Acre is proud to be the first national Black farmer cooperative since the Reconstruction Era. Projects funded through the grant include a market assessment and specialty crop business planning guide.

This is the third year that 40 Acre has held grower-member meetings. Angela Dawson, founder and CEO of 40 Acre, said

it is important for hemp growers to be adaptable due to frequent changes in the governing laws. Dawson often provides one-on-one assistance to help ensure growers have the correct compliance and license materials. Dawson also highlighted the need farmers have expressed in meetings for assistance in accessing grants and developing business plans. 40 Acre is developing an Introduction to Business

Visit fortyacre.coop to learn more about the history and mission of 40 Acre Cooperative.

Planning guide for specialty crop growers.

The cooperative has held trainings where Dawson, alongside other growers and technical experts, teaches the basics of how to grow hemp using 40 Acre's hoop house model. Training goes through steps including site preparation, necessary supplies and proper hemp genetics. Through

this work, Dawson has seen the need for more foundational knowledge on cooperatives, which she incorporates into lessons.

There has been a significant increase of people interested in growing hemp, especially from Indigenous producers. In the spring, 40 Acre worked with Loretta Hansen, Education Developer for Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, to hold a training for Tribal members at the Hinckley Community Center and another online. Dawson said there is a need for emerging farmer resources that use more Indigenous language and methods, which she is working with Hansen to develop.

One resource that has been important to the cooperative is the Agricultural Utilization Research Institute's (AURI) research on value added products, including the Minnesota Hemp Value Chain Analysis, which informed 40 Acre's educational strategy. Dawson appreciates the work AURI has done to support the growing hemp industry in the upper Midwest and beyond. 40 Acre is dedicated to expanding its network of hemp growers across Minnesota through providing education, training and increased market power to growers.



Harold Robinson, center, talks with people at the Hinckley Community Center. At right, a hoop house at 40 Acre Co-op.

Q. Why a cooperative model?

Dawson: Cooperatives are important for smaller and regenerative farmers because there are so many issues we face that there really aren't many resources for yet. The co-op model is a great way to respond to those needs more efficiently. I'm excited about the new opportunities emerging to support this model, like MDA's cooperative development grants.

Q. What have been some challenges thus far?

Dawson: A lot of the challenges we've faced have been external things we can't control. Weather and regulations have made things more unpredictable, and we've had to pivot to adapt. In the

last two years, members have had issues with storms that cause delays in planting and all kinds of things like damage to infrastructure which is super expensive to repair. The tornados that came through last year were devastating and tore down all but one of our hoop houses - that took a lot of reworking. We fixed a lot of it now, but it was basically destroyed. The neighbors came together to help fix it.

There's also been a lot of fluctuation in pricing. Two years ago, the price was high but then for six months there was a rule that made hemp oil illegal so there were no sales. It's leveling out now, after this new cannabis law is enacted next year things will be steadier.

Q. What have been some successes thus far?

Dawson: I am super excited about how open and receptive ag leaders have been to small farmers and really taking hemp seriously as a commodity crop for Minnesota. I appreciate the receptiveness from policy makers and appreciate that it has been easy to work with the MDA and MFU.

Over the last couple of months there has been steady product demand, which has been encouraging. Education and marketing are important, but I want there to be strong financial incentives for people to participate [in growing hemp]. That happens when you have consistent demand.