



Farm and Forest Growers Cooperative works to build supply of climate-adaptive tree seedlings

By Lisa Holm

Editor's note: This is the third article in a series highlighting the projects of Minnesota Farmers Union Foundation "Co-ops for Climate" grant recipients. Learn more at mfu.org/mfu-foundation-com-climate-working-lands/.

Farm and Forest Growers Cooperative, based in northeast Minnesota, is a part of the first cohort of "Co-ops for Climate" grant recipients awarded in the summer of 2023.

Farm and Forest Growers Cooperative (FFGC) is a network of small farms and nurseries growing climate-adaptive tree seedlings which are sold to reforestation agencies and individuals with the goal of creating resilient forest resources. Technical service projects include governance development, business planning and creating a development pathway.

The Northwoods are experiencing dramatic climate changes and many northern tree species are dying. The goal of FFGC is to assist the forests to convert to a species mix genetically adapted to a warmer climate region. The cooperative is working on a fast-moving and expanding project to build the farmer-based production supply chain of climate-adaptive tree seedlings for the health of the forest, which provides significant carbon sequestration. Additionally, the co-op aims to help farmers financially through providing an additional on-farm revenue stream.

David Abazs and Stefan Meyer are leading the cooperative development process. Abazs is executive director of the Northeast Regional Sustainable Development Partnership and co-owner of Round River Farm in Finland, and Meyer practices regenerative agroforestry on his 3 Oaks Forest Farm in Kettle River.



Farm and Forest Growers Cooperative is a network of small farms and nurseries growing climate-adaptive tree seedlings.



Kevin Edberg of Co-op Development Services (CDS) serves as the technical service consultant. This winter, the board held several meetings to discuss the cooperative's goals, strategies and objectives to guide development.

The cooperative has been focused on laying the groundwork for a business plan and encouraging members to participate in and take ownership of the process. To

improve member-grower's interaction and knowledge, FFGC and the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD) are hosting monthly Growers Support Network Q&A zoom calls. These are open sessions for all growers to drop in and ask questions regarding tree production, share successes, troubleshoot any issues and basically just touch base with other tree growers. It is also a venue for sharing updates on the Climate Smart Seedling Production Network (CSSPN) as the cooperative continues to grow.

Through education and engagement, the cooperative has not only seen an increase in membership (16 currently) but also there are many new interested growers. The co-op is early in development and does not want to overex-

tend. As Abazs explained, "membership can only grow with the demand of seed and the market. Right now, we are building a list of interested growers and will most likely expand through central and southern Minnesota to be in line with the Minnesota Million approach." The Minnesota Million approach is a goal to reforest 1 million acres in priority watersheds across Minnesota by 2045 to sequester 1.5 million metric tons of carbon dioxide annually. The cooperative intends to have capacity for more than 50 members by spring 2025.

Due to the influx of interested potential growers, FFGC is hosting a monthly Meet the Farm and Forest Growers Cooperative Zoom call, where all interested parties can hear a short presentation on climate smart tree production and the cooperative, then ask questions.

The co-op has the support of several experienced farmers that have been foundational to its development. Through free

technical training and a network of seasoned farmer-mentors, the co-op aims to serve as a “starting place” for people new to farming. One of the many benefits of tree seedling production is that it can be done in small spaces as new farmers transition and navigate the daunting task of starting a farming operation. The co-op envisions serving as a resource to help emerging farmers gain a solid financial footing.

The cooperative has key partners supporting its mission to increase the number of farmers growing tree seedlings, including The Nature Conservancy. FFGC has been working closely with UMD and UMN Northeast RSDP to gather and plant tree seeds genetically adapted to the warmer regions of southern and central Minnesota for planting in northern forests.

Q. Why a cooperative model?

A. Due to the nature of this project and our relationship with TNC, we knew it

was important for them to have one entity to work with. After looking at our options and considering our socially driven mission we landed on a cooperative. Many of us are of the collaborative mindset, and there were already models of ag producer co-ops out there that we could learn from and try to replicate those practices.

Q. What have been some challenges thus far?

A. Cooperating and getting farmers to come to a decision. Not everyone is completely cooperative minded, trying to get members to buy in and take ownership over the co-op. Understanding that a huge part of this co-op is that we are member-owners and have responsibility for all aspects of the business. We were constantly having those conversations about how to encourage member buy-in. Now we are getting people

approaching us, which is exciting. Hopefully, the challenge of buy-in will continue to slowly fade away as we grow. We are constantly trying to improve our process and share our knowledge openly. It’s important to not create a blanket process for farmers. What’s important is our end goal and production.

Q. What will success look like?

A. Successfully produce and deliver 10,000 tree seedlings. By next spring we want to hit 40,000 tree seedlings and double in years after that. Success will look like having a viable supply chain for tree seedlings. It is our intention that the cooperative will be able to work without grants once this system is built out - it will be able to run on its own merit.

Visit FFGC’s website at climatesmarttrees.com to learn more.

