

# USDA Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities: Minnesota Working Group

On July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2024, MN Farmers Union, EDGE Dairy, MN Milk and The Nature Conservancy convened an information-packed workshop bringing together stakeholders from project grant partners. This was the third workshop convened with the overarching objective of understanding how grant funds from USDA's Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities (PCSC) will be deployed within Minnesota, and for coordination across grant partners to ensure these programs support farmers and our natural resources.

The half-day workshop began with presenters providing updates on ten of the Minnesota-based projects. Attendees were then invited to join breakout groups where small groups discussed **market development, USDA data and reporting, and farmer recruitment and outreach.**

## Background information regarding the organization of these workshops

Minnesota is listed on 30 of the USDA's PCSC, a grant program that supports the development of climate-smart commodities, monitoring and verification processes, and partnerships with emphasis on historically underserved farmers and ranchers.

Grants range in size from \$5m to \$90m. The grant period is five years, though projects may choose to complete their work in less time. Coordination among project stakeholders is critical for the success of Climate-Smart Commodities grant programs and ensuring benefits to farmers across the state. Agenda items included discussion of projects, approaches and scope, geographies, and other details. This event aimed to convene project stakeholders around concerns, areas of future discussions, shared learning opportunities, and resource building.

## Overview of July 17<sup>th</sup> Meeting

Representatives from select projects provided updates, sharing successes and ongoing challenges. Topics included farmer recruitment goals and strategies, difficulties of data management and reporting, and plans for establishing market relationships.

There was also an update about the Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) [Conservation Connector](#) which is an upcoming project that will allow producers, landowners, and trusted advisors to find programs and service providers who can help plan, implement, and verify voluntary conservation and climate-smart ag practices. The Connector is planned to be launched in the coming months and will help producers and technical assistance providers navigate the many options in their area.

## Takeaways from Breakout Groups

### **Market Development:**

The main discussion point in the market development breakout group was regarding how to keep projects going once USDA funding is complete. Building a market that demands a premium for climate-smart commodities is a real challenge, and there are concerns that building out a market

and supply chain for CSC could take longer than the 5-year timeframe of the grants. Some attendees suggested using RCPP programs and 45Z tax credits to continue the work after the CSC money ends.

Attendees discussed whether implementing climate-smart labeling could build a brand that markets recognize and reward with higher prices. If so, would the USDA act as a certifier? Further discussion included what criteria would be, and how to ensure that labeling provides flexibility while avoiding greenwashing.

### **USDA Data and Reporting:**

Attendees discussed the best ways to streamline data reporting and reduce pain points. The time requirements for data reporting are especially challenging for large, multistate projects with multiple partners. Participants have a wide range of approaches, with some using tools built into Excel (e.g., vlookups) and others looking to third-party vendors for solutions to data collection and management (e.g., Google forms and Piestar).

COMET Planner is required for all projects, but attendees have some concerns about the use of this tool. As a place-based tool, COMET Planner can be missing data for certain practices in certain geographies. Some participants have supplemented COMET Planner with using other models and tools, but these tend to need more data and have additional challenges.

Attendees expressed concerns about protecting the credibility of the PCSC program and the importance of thorough, well-documented data collection. There was some uncertainty around what level of GHG reporting will satisfy USDA for each project.

### **Farmer Recruitment and Outreach:**

Attendees stressed the importance of farmer-farmer interactions and tapping into existing networks. A farmer is another farmer's best teacher and can also provide "social permission" for trying new practices. Sharing testimonials can help to teach through examples. Local groups in particular can be helpful, as farmers may feel more comfortable sharing information. Financial data sharing has become somewhat more open in recent years (e.g., how much they can save on inputs), but producers overall remain skeptical about data sharing and data collection.

Farmers have multiple PCSC options and may find determining their best program option a challenge. Members have found it effective to emphasize the return on investment (ROI) of projects, shifting from a yield focus to a profitability focus. Marketing programs through multiple avenues and making it as easy as possible to join have also helped. Attendees expressed that postcards with a QR code to sign up, Facebook ads, and farm visits tended to be most successful.

## **Next Steps**

The Minnesota Working Group will continue to convene as the projects progress with in-person and virtual learning opportunities. Thank you to all those who participated in this working group. More information about this working group can be found on MFU's [Climate and Working Lands website](#). For all questions and comments, including to join the **MN PCSC Working Group List-Serv**, please contact Ariel Kagan, Climate and Working Lands Program Director, at [ariel@mfu.org](mailto:ariel@mfu.org).