



Farmer-to-Farmer Education Act of 2023

Lead Sponsors:

Senators Ben Ray Luján (D-NM) and Jerry Moran (R-KS)

Background:

Conservation practices benefit both individual farmers through reduced input costs and increased resilience to extreme weather, as well as society, through improved water and air quality, carbon sequestration, and more. In fact, American Farmland Trust (AFT) case studies reveal an average return of \$3 for every \$1 invested into soil health practices. And yet, these practices remain underutilized. For example, as of the 2017 USDA Census of Agriculture, cover crops—a key conservation practice—were only planted on 6% of cropland acres.

Farmers face numerous barriers in adopting conservation practices, especially during the transition period, including cost, risk, lack of access to the right equipment, and insecure land tenure. Limited support or a lack of technical assistance is another major barrier to practice adoption. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) technical support can help overcome these barriers but can have significant wait times, and the informational resources available online or through consultants and service providers are often too general, are only available in English, and do not reflect the unique circumstances of an individual farm or farmer. In a 2022 National Young Farmers Coalition (Young Farmers) survey of over 10,000 young farmers across the country 15% cited “farming skills” as their top challenge.

Farmer-to-farmer education provides a way to overcome many adoption barriers by having someone with firsthand experience share both the benefits and challenges of practice adoption, addressing the perceived risks to yield, labor costs, and product quality that can prevent farmers from trying a new practice. Farmer-to-farmer learning happens formally, like at demonstration plots, soil health field days, and trainings, as well as informally, like at social gatherings, coffeeshops, and along fence lines.

This kind of education is a crucial part of an all-hands-on-deck approach to providing reliable technical assistance that results in the successful long-term adoption of conservation practices. A recent AFT New England survey found that more than 50% of farmer-respondents were getting their technical assistance and education directly from farmers they know (compared with 20% from NRCS), and over a third identified a consultation with an experienced farmer as one of the most helpful forms of technical assistance. Such technical assistance can also help reach farmers already interested in implementing conservation practices who do not have access to traditional training networks.

Farmer-to-farmer networking provides a culturally tailored, and therefore highly successful, complement to traditional technical assistance. For example, research findings have identified [peer learning groups](#) as effective in enabling and inspiring women to implement conservation activities on their land (Carter et al. 2017; Carter 2019; Eells and Soulis 2013; Petrzalka et al. 2020; Wells 1998). Similarly, farmers of color often report a lack of trust and disinterest in engaging with government technical assistance due to gaps in cultural understanding, language barriers, bias, and historical experience (Washington State Department of Agriculture, 2022). However, they report comfort in receiving that support from a known and trusted person.

Farmer-to-farmer networks are also highly adaptable and can quickly be pivoted to meet multiple needs, such as land access and emergency response. Successful farmer-to-farmer learning can also increase interest in NRCS conservation programs¹ and help bring more people with practical, on-the-ground experience into the Technical Service Provider program.

However, regular, coordinated farmer-to-farmer education exists in very few communities and can be hard for many farmers to find and tap into. Current funding and opportunities are not enough to realize the full potential of this transformational strategy. **Building on existing farmer-to-farmer education is a necessary and cost-effective way to increase long-term conservation practice adoption.**

Legislative Summary:

The bipartisan Farmer-to-Farmer Education Act adds farmer-to-farmer conservation education into the existing Conservation Technical Assistance statute, Section 1242. This would augment existing **farmer-led education networks and build capacity for new ones—particularly for historically marginalized communities—through the use of cooperative agreements and existing funding.**

Specifically, the Farmer-to-Farmer Education Act will:

- Enable NRCS to enter into cooperative agreements with community-based organizations, Tribes, States, Municipalities, and existing farmer networks that are able to identify and build on established and burgeoning farmer-to-farmer networks, and/or create new ones;
- Support each cooperative agreement holder as they plan and conduct events, connect farmers with mentors or group learning opportunities, and build network capacity within their defined area while compensating farmers for participation;
- Increase access to technical assistance for historically underserved farmers and farmers who have a primary language other than English;
- Allow for subawards to pay farmer-mentors, build partnerships, and host events to increase farmer networking.

More questions? Refer to our [FAQ](#), or reach out to:

Lotanna Obodozie,
Climate Campaign Director
Young Farmers
lotanna@youngfarmers.org

Samantha Levy
Conservation and Climate Policy Manager,
American Farmland Trust
slevy@farmland.org