

Vance Owens, National Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education

Kimberly Ratcliff: Thank you. [inaudible 03:42:50] for us. And we're going to move right along to our next speaker, which I think is virtual. There he is, Mr. Vance Owens, who is a national sustainable agricultural research and education, which stands for SARE, which most of us know as SARE, and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture. So I'm going to hand it off to you, Mr. Owens.

Vance Owens: Yeah, thank you so much. Can y'all hear me? Just make sure that first. Just give me a thumbs up. Okay, great. Well, thanks so much for inviting me. And I don't know how it all came about exactly, but I think from what Mr. Miller had told me, I think that he had a hand in this. And so, I appreciate whenever I get a chance to share about the SARE program, or sustainable ag research and education. I should point out first... And I know RJ that Josh stole our congressional... Or our stakeholder affairs person has been in touch with you. That SARE is just one of a number of programs at the National Institute of Food and Agriculture that would have benefit and does have benefit to farmers and ranchers of all kinds. And so, you may want to have somebody speak more broadly to those other programs as well.

SARE is one that has been around since... And I probably should first mention if you're not familiar with NIFA, or the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, that we are USDA's extramural funding agency. And so, the capacity funds that come through us that go to land grant institutions, the AFRI program or the Agricultural Food Research Initiative, that has probably the flagship grant program primarily for research. And then, obviously, very many others. And SARE's just one of those. You can go to the next slide please.

So I thought it'd be important, and I'll try to keep my comments relatively short. If you have any issues with anything that I say or feel that you've been neglected in any way, please you have copies of my slides. And you've probably seen this slide or something akin to it be before. You're welcome to reach out with using any of the numbers or emails that are listed on that slide. Next slide please.

And so, SARE is a regionally run program, meaning that there are four regions across the United States. Plus, and each of those region has what's called a host institution that runs the grant programs in that region. Well, I'll get into that in the next slide. There's also what's called a National Reporting Coordination and Communications office, or the NRCCO. And that group, I'm not going to talk about them a lot, but I

would encourage you, when I share some websites at the end, that if you have interest in knowing more about SARE, whether it's nationally or at the regional level, to go to those websites. And you'll see that there are a number of just really nice educational information that run the gamut of everything that you can imagine regarding farming and ranching at that website that's free to download. Everything on there is free. I'd point out the last night, on RFD TV, PBS did a special on some SARE farming, rent farmers and ranchers. I haven't been able to see it yet because it wasn't broadcast here in the Kansas City area, or at least on my TV, but it's going to be linked up to the NRCCO website soon. So anyway, we have these four regions. University of Minnesota runs north central, Vermont at Northeast, Georgia for Southern, and Montana State in the western region. Next slide please.

And the SARE model, as I like to call it, obviously it's a USDA NIFA program, but the funding, once Congress appropriates the funds for the SARE program, it is run through NIFA, and we provide that funding to host institutions using these annual five year cooperative agreements. And having those five year cooperative agreements allows those host institutions to run their own calls for proposals or their own grant programs in say year one. They can have one to three year projects that they're going to fund and then have a year to finish up those projects.

The thing that's interesting about SARE too is that each region has a legislative mandated administrative council, not an advisory committee or an advisory council, but an administrative council. And that council, I think what the beauty of it is is that while there are a host of different kinds of people or areas, professions that are on there, that it is required to have farmers and ranchers on the council. And typically, each of the regions, if they have somewhere around 15 to 20 administrative council members, typically you'll see that there'll be anywhere from four to six or seven that will be farmers and ranchers. And so, it's really grassroots driven because it's up to the administrative council to help determine some of the priorities that are going to be put into the calls that go out, as well as selecting the projects that are ultimately funded. So the host institutions, administer the grant programs. And then, the NRCCO runs what's called the grant management system and the reporting system, where you or anybody could go and see how these funds are used. Next slide please.

So SARE projects, we ask that people who apply to these programs, they may not address all three aspects of an sustainability in every project, but many projects do. But I would just point out that SARE really does want to address all three of these sustainability issues, whether it's economic,

environmental, or social. And on the social side, we typically, you'll see us refer to that as the quality of life for producers and their communities. Obviously, looking at stewardship of the land and water and then the profitability over the long term. And those projects run the gamut. Next slide please.

Funding has increased since SARE's start in 1989. And in, I say '22 up there, but I did include FY23, where it did go up to 50 million. SARE's authorized at 60. We've never gotten there yet, but that is what the President has in his budget this year. And so, we'll see what happens. Next slide, please.

And I should say that the funds that come in, there's a certain amount, about a million and half, that goes out to the NRCCO and then the rest are just divided equally among the four regions. I think what's really great about the SARE grant program, whatever type of program you're talking about, so this applies across all the grant programs and specifically to the Farmer Rancher grant program, is that it's open to any kind of farming, whether that's large or small, it's organic or it's conventional, whether we have row crops or small crops, whatever we have, whether we have livestock, fruit and vegetable, agroforestry. If you go to the National Agroforestry Center website that Mr. Barrett may have just been talking about, you'll see that they've listed the projects from SARE, that were funded by SARE, that specifically address agroforestry and aquaculture. We're looking at all things across the entire value chain from production all the way through marketing. It's not restricted to a specific discipline. You would find all kinds of disciplines that have been funded and all kinds of farmers who have been funded through the SER program. The eligible applicants is quite broad. It varies by the type of program that you're looking at in a region, but with farmers it's quite broad and diverse, but you just have to look at the call when you're talking to people that want to apply for one of these programs to see how the eligibility fits. Next slide please.

So, here are the grant types, and I'm not going to spend too much time on this in the interest of time. The larger ones are the research and extension ones that are about 300K give or take, and that varies by region. The specific farmer rancher under the smaller grants typically range anywhere from five to on the farmer rancher side. They're typically capped at about 30, \$30,000. And I'll show a slide about that in just a minute. There are other places that farmers and ranchers fit in. In fact, besides these direct grants that can go to farmers and ranchers, essentially, not in every single case, but in nearly every case, especially in the large research and extension projects, we require that farmers and

ranchers be involved as collaborators on those projects so that we make sure that, so we know as reviewers when reviewers review the proposals that come into this SER program so that they know that the real questions beyond the ground questions that farmers and ranchers have are being addressed in the research that's being funded. Next slide please.

So, I took these statements from the four regional Farmer Rancher calls for proposals, just so you could see the breadth of things that are trying to be addressed in these different regions. It all is about sustainable ag, obviously, but from one region it's to explore new, I'm going to read through these actually to explore new concepts in sustainable ag conducted through experiment surveys, prototypes, on Farm demonstrations, or other research and education techniques that address issues affecting farming with long-term sustainability in mind. Another region has in there is that it will explore sustainable solutions to problems through on-farm research demonstration and education projects. Another one, and I'll just reiterate that these are approved by the administrative council, is to enable farmers and ranchers to test a sustainable ag idea using a field trial on-farm demonstration, marketing initiative or other technique. And then finally the last one would have that it would advance on farm sustainability solutions by funding innovative producer driven research and outreach. And I think that you see there obviously that the overall goal is to enhance sustainable ag, but it's done at a grassroots level on the farm. Next slide please.

So, this is just a slide that you may just want for your reference and these could change while they do change. Obviously this just shows across the region some of the criteria or things that are associated with these various grant programs. You could, as an example, in the North central region where Mr. Miller served as a grant reviewer at this point, if an individual farmer wanted to apply the max on that, on that grant would be 15K. Whereas if there were two or more farmers, it could go up to 30K. The North central region is allocated approximately \$700,000 out of their annual budget to go towards these farmer rancher grants. Those projects can last up to almost two years. The RFA for that comes out typically in the summer or fall, and they will give farmers and ranchers about two to three months to apply for that to put their proposal forward. The other ones vary to some extent, but still quite similar. Next slide please.

I thought that one of the things, and I appreciated that the previous talk, I got to listen to the whole thing because I got confused on mountain standard time versus mountain daylight time. So I came on an hour early

and that was good though. That [inaudible 03:55:47] me the chance to listen to the whole thing. But some of the things that we're working specifically from a national level and within each region right now, especially to try to help promote ways in which we can help those who have not taken part in these grant programs as much as they could or should or have been felt left out or have been left out.

And one of those is on the technical assistance side of things. And that's something that over the last year we've really tried to push hard and that we're still doing, trying to figure out ways that we can provide assistance not just on how to get a grant proposal or a proposal written and into the region, but how to manage a grant and how to report with the requirements that are in place, how to manage the funds, how to help conduct outreach that they would do.

And obviously we're not allowed to write a grant for somebody, but there can be technical assistance upfront to help identify issues or possibly collaborators or things like that. We think we have a long way to go in providing technical assistance, especially to those who are underserved. We try to put things in the regional calls for proposals or requests for applications, whatever you call them, that would indicate that if there's serving an underserved population that or might minority farmers that there will be a benefit to that. One of the things, and I heard this in the previous talk as well, is that we have these panels that are brought together in each region to evaluate these proposals as they come in. The farmer rancher panel that Mr. Miller sat on, that's one of their tasks is, well it's their main task is to review all the proposals that come in or the ones that are assigned to them.

And we really feel like that one of the things that we can do and that we've been working on, I think the northeast region is a great success marker on this in trying to make the panel look a little more like what the region or the applicants look like and making sure that we have diversity on the panel that reflects that in order to have not just the diversity physically, but the diversity in thoughts and excuse me in ideas. And then there has been a lot of focused outreach by the host institution staff and by the AC members themselves. Being an administrative council member on in and for SER is quite a large undertaking and I just love the fact that there are so many that are willing to do that.

One example of this is again, in the north central region where over the last about three years, the regional coordinator who is Beth Nelson at the University of Minnesota and her staff have made I'd say fairly significant strides in developing the relationships that Mr. Miller was just talking

about. In particular with the many tribal colleges that are located in the North central region. In fact, 20 of the 34 are in the north central region and they've been doing things there to try to promote that and to build that relationship. Next slide please.

So, here's some of the key websites, and this is my last slide and then I'll pick some time, take some questions if you would like. You can access the regional websites from the main site that's up there www.ser.org and you'll find contact information that you can direct people for the grant coordinators for each of those within each region. And I would also encourage you if you're interested in knowing what kinds of things SER has funded, because there have been approximately 7,500 to 8,000 projects that have been funded through the SER program since its inception 35 years ago. And every one of those has some report or things like that on the SER project database. And you will see, I just did a search yesterday because of a congressional request that came down wanting to know what SER had done in the last several years in terms of indigenous food.

And so I went onto that website and did a search on indigenous food and found approximately 93 projects that at least had something related to indigenous food, to tribal culture or to [inaudible 04:00:28]. It was those three terms over the last five years. And so you'll see that as well as a host of other types of projects outlined on that website. And I think that's all I have. If you go to the next slide, I think it's just question, [inaudible 04:00:42], that's the end and hopefully there's some time, I know we were a bit behind. I tried to hurry a little bit, but if you have time for questions, I'm happy to try to answer them.

Speaker 31: You did a great job. And you have a few minutes quick questions. [inaudible 04:00:56]. You talked about Carolyn Jones, Mississippi Minority farmers and you talked about the administrative council. How would I find a person that is a member of the administrative council that represents Mississippi? Would I find any contact information or is that how it works?

Mr. Owens: Each of the regional websites will have a list of all of the administrative council members and that will include the farmers. I'm on the administrative council by legislation in each region and so you're welcome to contact me too, but you will find the list of all the regional administrative council members on each region's website.

Speaker 31: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Owens: And I should mention too that the regions try when, because there are term limits on these administrative councils and they try to do a regional search, broad search to locate new regional new AC members when the time is appropriate.

Speaker 31: Any other questions?

Speaker 32: I received one of those grants many years ago to operate a cashmere producing facility, raising cashmere, growing, [inaudible 04:02:15] growing goats, and it worked out very well. There's something that people need to know about because if they follow the suggestions, they stand a good chance of being successful.

Mr. Owens: I appreciate that comment. I couldn't tell who was speaking actually, but...

Speaker 32: [inaudible 04:02:42].

Mr. Owens: Okay. Thank you. And you know what I mean? And you can also see on one of those websites, and I can share this with you if you'd like, you can see the success rate for the Farmer Rancher grants and frankly, in most cases, for most it's usually it's not a hundred percent obviously, but it's usually around 40 to 50%, which from a grant making standpoint as an old researcher myself, that's good. I obviously we'd like to give even more, but there are just, yeah. Thank you for sharing that.

Speaker 31: Go for it.

Speaker 33: Carrie Jr, I just want to mention too, my organization, we received a SER grant, our first grant with the SER grant probably about 10 years ago. And we found that the [inaudible 04:03:30] was very helpful for us when we were able to get that. Also, people may also be aware, at least out our region, that they also give out \$500 stipend if someone wants to go to a sustainable agriculture related conference. You just have to make a request for that as well. But also, I was invited to be on administrative conference, but at the time I wasn't able to do it, but I did have one of our representatives and she serves already and she said it was a good opportunity, Laura. So we appreciate the program. I think SER's very good for first beginning Farmers.

Mr. Owens: Wonderful. Thank you. And I would say also that if you're aware of sustainable ag-related conferences, as you just mentioned, I mean most of the regions, I think all of them have a method by which you can submit a request if you're involved in those conferences for on occasion, some

sponsorships, not high level, but recognize the importance of having people there and the Western region, just as an example too, just started a practice about a year ago where they are really, they are encouraging their farmer ranch or grant recipients to go to these conferences. Well, they've always done this, but now they're providing them some extra funding if they will go because it helps to promote the SER program and get the word out of the good work that they're doing.

Speaker 32: Do you know the director at University of Georgia, Jeff Jordan?

Mr. Owens: Very well. Yep.

Speaker 32: Jill Osborn.

Mr. Owens: So, Jill Osborn was a predecessor of mine way back. She was the national program leader probably 15 or 20 years ago.

Speaker 32: That's correct. How was part of the program when they were running at a Georgia?

Mr. Owens: Well, and they have done an excellent job. I've only been with NEF. I was a faculty member at South Dakota State University for 25 years before I came to NEF about three years ago, and I was part of the North Central Administrative Council when I was a faculty member there. And that's how I came and also worked with SER and I loved the program and I think it has done a lot of benefit. If you look at, just as an example, and I hope I'm not born you to tears, but if you look at the incorporation of cover crops across the US, I would say that SER projects and the SER program has had a big hand in helping to get cover crops across this nation. I just think they really have.

Speaker 31: Yeah, we have one more question.

Speaker 33: Okay. Statement and question. I was just going to say, I also was going to comment on the database that you all have. It is interesting because anybody applies if you have an idea, but you are required to go through that database and that actually helps you shape your idea of what your grants, what your proposals going to be, and I think that's great. But I was going to ask you, is there going to be another annual meeting, a conference, I guess typically of the annual, not annual, there'll do a biannual every five year conference for sales recipients to attend.

Mr. Owens: So, what has been done is there's pretty much been about a 10 year not like that a 10 year anniversary, and if I had been, this is my fault, if I had

been thinking about this when I came on two years ago, I probably would've had a 35th anniversary conference this year. But there won't be one. It wasn't on my radar when I came on, but we will have one. I won't say, I don't know exactly when, but we will have one because I know they've been really well received and really well attended.

Speaker 31: Thank you very much Mr. Owens.

Mr. Owens: Thank you.