

Is Your Farm Ready for a Grant?

By Jim Ochterski, Extension Educator

Thousands of dollars are handed out to New York farm operators every year in the form of public and private grants. This money is used for many farm projects: compensating time, paying for farmland protection, labeling, market studies, processing equipment, buildings, barn restoration, and more. Recently, several Schuyler County farm operators have received grants to help pay for various farm projects. More farms will get grant money next year as well.

Are the farms who get grant money lucky? No. Do they have the right connections? No.

How come you're not getting any of that money? It may be because your farm operation is not ready for a grant. You can get ready by asking and answering the right questions:

Are grants really just free money? Yes, grants are free money for specific purposes. The purpose of the grant is usually controlled by the grant giver, not the grant receiver. For example, grants are available from NESARE* for developing and attempting innovative sustainable agriculture practices, like having cattle graze standing corn when pastures dry out in the summer.

Nothing is for free, so what is the catch? There are several "catches" with grants. First, the farm usually has to leverage

existing time or resources with a grant (this is called the farm's "match"). Many grants require a 50-50 split between the farm contribution and the grant money. Second, grants are usually directed toward an attempt at something new or special, like a new customer, or transitioning to organic production for the first time. Routine farm expenses like hay purchases or bramble shoots will not be funded by a grant. The third catch is that grants take a lot of time to prepare. Farm operators should expect to invest many hours writing, researching, and calculating to assemble a good grant application.

Will a grant pay for me to start a farm? Not likely! If the new farm was truly unique and promised to demonstrate a highly innovative approach to agriculture and environmental protection, it might have a chance. Otherwise, new farms are started through personal investment and loans.

What would increase my chances of getting a grant? A written farm business plan is becoming more and more important. If your farm does not have a business plan and you want a big grant, work on your business plan. Organizations who hand out grants need to be able to trust that the money will be used for the right purposes. A business plan answers the

questions these organizations ask. Your farm business plan proves you have thought things through.

Let people know you are seeking grants for particular projects so if an opportunity comes along, they can let you know. It is very difficult and frustrating to find an appropriate grant opportunity by surfing the Web. Farm-related grants are often funded through the USDA's various agencies and the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets. These public institutions publish grant information in print and on the Internet. You can join the notification mailing lists to receive information about grants directly from the source.

Grants have short seasons and are not necessarily available when you want them. Usually you have to wait for the right opportunity to emerge. Cornell Cooperative Extension maintains a list of grants available to farmers in our region. Call Jim Ochterski at 535-7161 and ask for the list.

The next big opportunity will be in agritourism. They will be for farms who will invite visitors of all ages to experience farm life. State Senator Hoffman is expanding the Central NY Agri-Tourism and Education Project to include Schuyler County.

*NESARE: Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education