

# Just Transitions to Managed Livestock Grazing in the Midwestern U.S.: Summary of Recommendations for Agricultural Educators

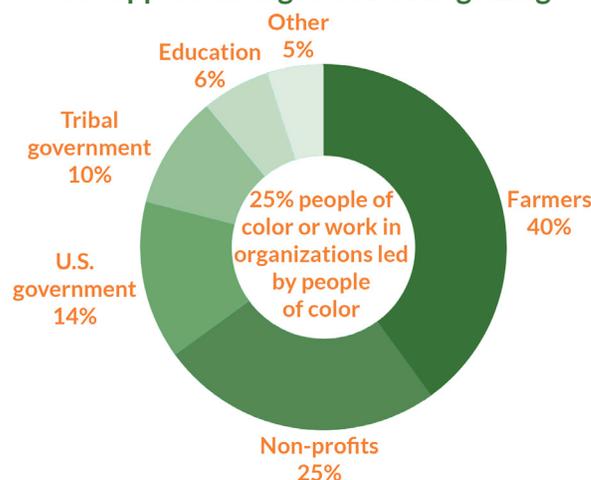
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This brief provides an overview of recommendations from 128 Midwest grazing and agricultural community members on how agricultural educators can support managed livestock grazing and build a more equitable food system.<sup>1</sup>

Managed grazing refers to the practice of rotating animals through pastures, allowing each pasture to rest after grazing. The movement gives forages time to regrow, contributing to pasture productivity, soil health, reduced nutrient loss, improved water quality, and increased biodiversity. In addition to being ecologically important, managed grazing can provide economic and lifestyle benefits to farmers and rural communities. Livestock grazing is also a culturally and ecologically important practice in the Midwest, including for many Native communities who are actively recovering the practice of grazing bison.

The purpose of this document is to share community member experiences with grazing related educational programs. Our intent is not to analyze these recommendations or propose exactly how to achieve them, but to amplify the voices of the community members we interviewed. A full report, which includes more detail on the background of this project and these recommendations can be found here: [grasslandag.org/justtransitions](https://grasslandag.org/justtransitions). The order of recommendations in this document follows the order of the report and is not ranked based on priority.

We interviewed 128 community members across the Upper Midwest in 2020 and 2021, primarily in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Iowa, and Michigan. We asked them about their vision for the future, and what is needed to support managed livestock grazing.



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<sup>1</sup> All participants quoted are listed with their position at the time of their interview.

## Needs at a glance:

- Build farmer-to-farmer education networks and peer-to-peer mentoring programs
- Increase technical support capacity for grazing animals other than cattle
- Improve technical support capacity for farmers of color
- Support marketing, lending, government programs, business and succession planning
- Invest in sustainable agriculture education at the high school and college level
- Use expertise in education to address issues beyond farming practices

### Build farmer-to-farmer education networks and peer-to-peer mentoring programs

*“Getting information from [a farmer] who actually lives it is so much better than an agency person” –Kirsten Jurcek, beef grazier, WI*

Many interviewees emphasized the value of supporting farmer-to-farmer education including peer-to-peer mentoring programs that pay farmer-mentors for their time. Some interviewees shared stories of white farmers refusing to mentor farmers of color, making it harder for farmers of color to gain technical skills, connections, and resources. Building networks of farmers of color and farmers willing to mentor them would be a valuable asset. [The IDEA Farm Network](#) and [Practical Farmers of Iowa’s Labor for Learning](#), mentoring programs, and [Beginning Farmer Summit](#) were cited as useful examples.

### Increase technical support capacity for grazing animals other than cattle

Interviewees emphasized the need for more education and technical support around pastured goats, sheep, chickens, pigs, and bison. This included technical support, veterinary support, and information on breeds and genetics. The lack of resources for animals other than cattle, including a shortage of qualified Technical Service Providers who can write grazing plans for these animals, can disadvantage certain farmers in accessing NRCS funding. Small animals can be raised with fewer resources and produce culturally important foods for many communities of color. As a result, technical support for animals other than cattle can be a way to advance racial and economic justice.

### Improve technical support capacity for farmers of color

Many groups that provide technical support have few relationships with farmers of color. Chris Borden, an NRCS Tribal Liaison in Wisconsin, explained how NRCS has worked with “generations of dairy farmers in Wisconsin. When you go into the field offices, you’ll see great grandpa’s casefile... and we just worked with the great, great grandson,” while for many farmers of color and beginning farmers, those types of relationships don’t currently exist. He emphasized that “there has to be that level of trust... and that exists more strongly in our traditional clientele than it does with new groups.”

Many immigrant farmers emphasized the importance of having Technical Service Providers who speak their language, and some shared that fear of misunderstanding application processes or regulations has made them hesitant to use government programs. A diversified grazier who immigrated from Laos to Iowa explained,

*“I would like to [access government programs] but the problem is English... if somebody helped to direct me to get in a program... I’d go for it, but I just don’t know how.”*

To build trust with communities of color and improve technical support, interviewees provided the following recommendations:

- Address racism and implicit bias amongst technical support providers
- Hire multiple people from communities of color and who speak languages other than English
- Build relationships with trusted organizations in communities of color and distribute resources through those groups (e.g. community centers, mutual aid associations, Tribal newspapers)
- When working with non-native English speakers: allow people to verbalize rather than write; use pictures and video; reduce jargon and define terms like “organic” that are not used in some languages
- Engage communities in program development (rather than consulting after program creation)
- When working with Native communities:
  - Develop cultural competency with Indigenous agriculture and learn about Tribal government, land, and legal structures
  - Understand Tribal priorities and how these affect program participation
  - Support Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils, like the [Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council](#), and hire people who can work with them to support Native producers
  - Build programs that place students from Tribal Colleges and Universities into TSP roles

### **Support marketing, lending, government programs, business and succession planning**

Farmers are expected to wear many hats, and it can be particularly difficult for sustainable farmers to piece together funding sources and access markets in what is currently a niche industry. Beginning farmers who lack experience and connections, particularly those whose first language is not English, face additional barriers. Many farmworkers interested in becoming farm owners have a wealth of experience farming but may not have had the opportunity to learn to manage a business or market their products.

On the other side of the equation, many retiring farmers struggle to figure out how to pass on their farm. Departments of Agriculture in three states, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, contract with technical support providers who can help farmers with business and succession planning. The Land Stewardship Project’s [Farm Transitions Program](#) and organizations like [Land for Good](#) and [Farm Commons](#) also support farm transition and succession planning.

### **Invest in sustainable agriculture education at the high school and college levels**

Some interviewees shared how experiences in grade school were fundamental to cultivating a love of farming, while others felt that they weren’t able to learn as much as they wanted about agriculture and stressed the need to provide more agricultural education at a younger age. Developing elementary and high school curricula about sustainable agriculture and food systems could help foster an interest in farming, particularly for students who don’t come from farming communities, and could help the next generation of eaters understand food production.

### **Use expertise in education to address issues beyond farming practices**

The actions suggested above indicate how agricultural educators can tailor education and technical support programs to address the needs of managed graziers and support justice and equity in the food system. However, interviewees also emphasized that the Midwest sustainable agriculture movement tends to focus on education and technical support to the detriment of deeper-seated issues around racism and racial inequity, farm viability, labor justice, farm and industry consolidation, agricultural subsidies, access

to land and capital, and social norms. Organizations could leverage their expertise in education and network-building to also address deeper-seated issues.

Many people emphasized the need to create more spaces for people to share and process their struggles within the food system, including historic and ongoing violence against communities of color and the struggle of rural poverty. There is also a need to build transparency and trust by bringing together rural neighbors, farmers, urban farmers, and consumers to discuss the current food system and envision a better future. Because the current system benefits so few people, there is an opportunity to build coalitions across political boundaries around shared struggles with farm and industry consolidation; the ability to make a living, access to healthcare or retirement; and the challenge of transitioning land to the next generation. Austin Frerick, Deputy Director of the Thurman Arnold Project, said that while his family is divided politically,

*“I think most Americans will agree the system just doesn’t work... That’s something we [family members] all agree on... People in that profession [agriculture and food] just don’t feel respected.”*

***“It’s really, really easy to talk about technical barriers, not enough fence - it’s too expensive. It’s not easy to start breaking down the actual looming barriers that have prevented so much of what we want to see... to figure out the action to take on these... very deep-rooted issues.”***

**Meghan Filbert**

Small Ruminant Grazier and former Livestock Program Manager, Practical Farmers of Iowa