

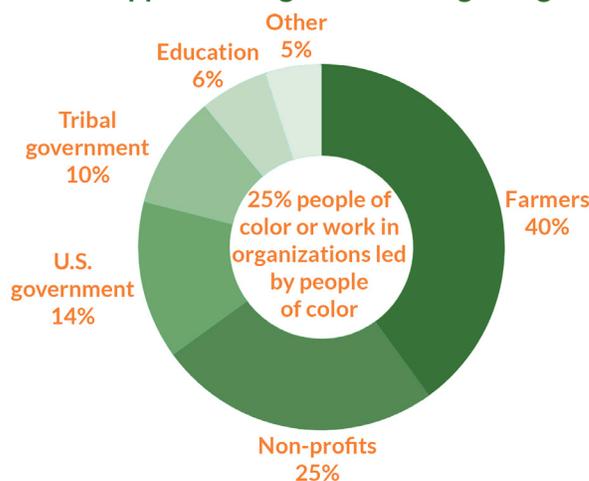
# Just Transitions to Managed Livestock Grazing in the Midwestern U.S.: Summary of Recommendations for Extension Professionals

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This brief provides an overview of recommendations from 128 Midwest grazing and agricultural community members on how extension professionals 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.

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.



The purpose of this document is to share community member experiences. 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.

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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 beginning farmers, immigrant farmers, and farmers of color
- Support marketing, lending, government programs, business and succession planning
- Shift conversations from productivity to profitability
- 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*

Extension could play a bigger role in building, coordinating, and publicizing farmer-to-farmer education networks and supporting peer-to-peer mentoring programs (that pay farmer-mentors for their time). Some interviewees shared stories of farmers refusing to mentor farmers of color, making it difficult for them to gain the technical skills, connections, and resources. Building networks of farmers of color and farmers willing to mentor them would be a valuable asset.

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

*“When I got started with grazing we had a fully staffed UW Extension office...that was an amazing resource...Starting out today, with no ag agent in our county and no sheep specialist in the state is a major, major hurdle for people getting started at this point.” – Jane Hansen, sheep grazier, WI*

While interviewees talked about how Extension classes and technical support were helpful, they emphasized the need for more technical, veterinary, breeding, and genetics resources tailored to pastured goats, sheep, chickens, pigs, and bison. Small animals require less land and infrastructure, lowering barriers to entry for beginning farmers, and produce culturally important foods for many communities of color.

### Improve technical support for beginning farmers, immigrant farmers, and farmers of color

Interviewees expressed frustration that Extension’s focus on the needs of beginning farmers is often limited, and that many offices have few relationships with farmers of color. Laura-Anne Minkoff Zern, a professor of Food Studies at Syracuse University who has worked extensively with Latinx immigrant farmers shared:

*“What I found with immigrant farmers is they didn’t know [USDA and Extension] existed, they were undocumented and afraid to work with anyone from the government, they tried but nobody spoke Spanish, or [they were mistaken for a] farm worker.”*

Many interviewees emphasized the need to address historic discrimination and earn the trust of communities of color. Moreover, immigrant farmers emphasized the importance of having Technical Service Providers who speak their language, and some shared that lack of clear guidance has made

them hesitant to use government programs, sell certain products, or apply for loans. A diversified grazer 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.”* And, a diversified grazer and Mexican immigrant to Minnesota shared, *“In Mexico, I used to make cheese... I wanted to make cheese (again). We bought a goat [but] I did not try to sell [the cheese] because I was afraid that [regulators] were going to say that it wasn’t done right.”*

***“Extension has very little focus on beginner farmers... We see our average age of our farmer getting older and older, fewer and fewer farmers exist... When we first saw that happening, we should have been moving and shaking. We’re late, very late.”***

**Vicki Morrone**

Organic Farming Specialist, Michigan State University  
Center for Regional Food Systems

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**

While it is difficult for any farmer to gain business expertise in these areas, beginning farmers or those whose first language is not English face additional barriers. On the other side of the equation, many retiring farmers struggle to figure out how to pass on their farm. Expanding Extension programming around business planning, marketing, lending, accessing government programs, and succession planning could help fill this need.

## **Shift the focus from productivity to profitability**

Many people discussed the powerful influence universities have in reinforcing norms that emphasize production over farm profitability. Discussing economic benefits of farming practices like managed grazing rather than focusing on production would support farm viability and economic success.

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

The above actions suggest how Extension can tailor its education and technical support activities to support managed graziers in ways that emphasize diversity and equity. However, interviewees also emphasized that efforts to support sustainable agriculture and “socially disadvantaged” producers tend to focus on education and technical support to the detriment of other issues that inhibit the adoption of sustainable practices and equity within the food system: farm viability, labor justice, access to land and capital (particularly for beginning farmers and farmers of color).

Extension can play a role in supporting the vital work of both farm owners and workers by helping to connect them with resources on healthcare, housing, and retirement. It could also expand its programming to support all farmers, including farmworkers, in addition to farm owners. Farmworkers are a highly exploited population within the food system, and Extension could also partner with existing organizations that seek to educate farmworkers about their rights and help build pathways to farm ownership. [Voces de la Frontera](#) supports farmworker education and advocacy in Wisconsin.

With an aging population of farm owners and skyrocketing farmland costs, access to land and capital is a serious issue for the future of farming. Extension could support land access initiatives in a variety of ways including assessing needs around land access, providing capacity for succession planning, connecting beginning farmers with farmland for sale, and expanding education that helps beginning farmers and farmers of color access capital. University of Wisconsin Extension is currently engaging in a [Farmland Protection and Access Initiative](#) that seeks to better understand the land access needs of farmers of color.

There is also a need to build transparency and trust between rural neighbors, farmers, urban farmers, and consumers. Extension could support this effort by facilitating conversations about the current food system and what the future could look like.

A more detailed set of recommended actions that address these deeper-seated issues can be found in the full report: [grasslandag.org/justtransitions](http://grasslandag.org/justtransitions)

*“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