

# PUTTING RESEARCH ON THE FARM: THE SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE RESEARCH & EDUCATION PROGRAM

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Combining on-farm research and sustainable agriculture principles, the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education program (S-SARE) has provided grants directly to farmers as part of its Producer Grant Program. In addition to the Producer Grant Program, S-SARE requires that its research and education grant recipients provide means and methods for farmer involvement and end-user outreach. This presentation will provide an overview of the S-SARE on-farm research program.

## THE SARE PROGRAM

SARE is a national competitive grant's program with regional leadership and decision making structures. The program has offices in four regions of the U.S., recognizing the differences and diversity of U.S. agriculture. Authorized by the 1985 Farm Bill, SARE was first funded in 1988. In the first ten years, SARE funded 1,200 projects, spending \$80.6 million. For each year approximately \$11 million is divided among the four regions. The Southern SARE region comprises the 13 states as well as Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. SARE provides funding for research, demonstrations, education, and extension projects carried out by scientists, producers, educators and private sector representatives.

SARE's mission is to increase knowledge about – and help farmers and ranchers adopt – more sustainable practices that are profitable, environmentally sound and beneficial to local communities and society in general. Sustainable agriculture, as defined by Title XVI, Subtitle A Sec. 1603, consists of integrated systems of plant and animal production practices having site-specific applications that satisfy human food and fiber needs, enhances environmental quality and the natural resource base, make the most of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources, integrates natural biological cycles and control, sustains economic viability of farm operations, and enhances the quality of life for farmers, ranchers, and society.

Southern SARE has evolved a set of principles that guides the research process. First, S-SARE is participatory: farmers are involved in all facets of S-SARE, as advisors, evaluators, and cooperators. Farmers help to design and conduct on-farm research. S-SARE is

inclusive, from decision making to the conduct of research. The goal is to broaden the scope of agricultural research. S-SARE also addresses the needs of limited resource farmers and farmers with small holdings who are often overlooked in traditional agricultural research programs. S-SARE encourages a multi disciplinary-team approach to research, recognizing that agricultural sustainability requires a true multi- and inter-disciplinary approach. Consequently, S-SARE has developed a systems research method which is problem focused and accounts for the dynamic nature of agriculture.

In essence, S-SARE recognizes that agriculture is socially, economically and ecologically diverse with a large number and variety of stakeholders. The grants program, therefore, seeks to incorporate diverse scientific disciplines, difference types of institutions and organizations, farm households, and farm workers/managers/firm/consumers and communities. The goal is to encourage a diverse array of projects which provide critical information and insight on sustainability to multiple stakeholders who have a direct investment in project outcomes. The program seeks to build institutional and collaborative capacity so that problem solving becomes more flexible, participatory, inclusive and applicable.

One of the unique features of the S-SARE approach to sustainable agriculture research is the inclusion of farm-household members and farm workers in the research process. Rather than constructing research designs and farming recommendations in isolation from producers, agricultural researchers should consider that the research process and the production process are parts of one system. How and why farm-household members and other farm-level workers farm in particular ways are important to discern if university and government researchers wish to offer effective alternatives. In addition, the insight of people involved in the day-to-day work and management of the farm and farm household is essential for understanding the interaction between parts of production systems.

## S-SARE GRANT CATEGORIES

S-SARE has four funding programs: Research & Education grants, Professional Development grants,

graduate student awards, and Producer Grants.

A Producer Grant is a research, marketing or education project in the area of sustainable agriculture. Projects must be developed, coordinated and conducted by farmers and/or ranchers or a producer organization. Producer organizations should be comprised primarily of farmers/ranchers and must have majority farmer representation on their governing board. Producers or producer organizations complete a proposal describing their project and explaining how it will help other producers understand and adopt sustainable agriculture practices.

Producer Grant-funded projects generally involve research, marketing or education, although all kinds of innovative projects have received producer grants. Producer Grant marketing and education projects are generally designed to provide producers or producer organizations with information to implement sustainable agriculture practices. Other activities eligible for funding

from the Producer Grant program include farm demonstrations, farmer workshops, farmer surveys and farmer-to-farmer networking activities that promote sustainable agriculture. Projects should be innovative, generate results that are useful beyond one year and generate results that many farmers can adopt. S-SARE has set aside \$150,000 each year for Producer Grants. Grants have a cap of \$10,000 for each project.

In addition to Producer Grants, the S-SARE's main granting effort is the Research & Education program. Approximately, \$1.3 million is distributed yearly. For each R&E projects, S-SARE encourages substantial farmer and end-user involvement in all phases of the project.

Since the Producer Grant program began in 1994, 105 projects have been funded. Since 1988, S-SARE has also funded 120 R&E grants. For more information on the S-SARE program, see our web site at: [www.griffin.peachnet.edu/sare](http://www.griffin.peachnet.edu/sare).