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Immigrant and Minority Farmers Inspire Soil Health Collaboration

Project Title: Soil Health and Nutrient Management Training for Immigrant and Minority Farming Communities

Coordinator: Julie Grossman
Location: Saint Paul, Minnesota

SARE Grants: \$74,760
Duration: 2015-2018

To read the full project reports, go to www.sare.org/projects and search for project number ENC15-145.

When Julie Grossman was an undergraduate, she had no idea that a single economic development course was going to change the trajectory of her life's work. In that course, and during her international PhD research in Latin American, she learned how biology, and specifically agroecology, could be used to help grow food in regions of the world challenged by food production and access. While she still works internationally, much of Grossman's current work is based in the Department of Horticultural Science at the University of Minnesota (U of MN) where she explores plant-soil-microbe relationships in organic systems in order to enhance soil fertility, with the ultimate goal of developing sustainable food production systems. Grossman works with immigrant and minority farmers, who she says represent a growing population of food producers in Minnesota and elsewhere in the upper Midwest. A number of these farmers had indicated a need for more information about soil health and nutrient management, including Rodrigo Cala, of Cala Farm in Turtle Lake, Wisconsin.

"I have been an organic vegetable farmer for 13 years, and have worked with the Grossman lab on various research projects," said Cala. "Organic agriculture is an integrated and complete system; the soil is a critical and fundamental part of that system."

Grossman knew that extending advanced soil science concepts would allow both beginning and seasoned farmers to enhance soil quality as well as productivity of their organic systems.

"Many immigrant and minority populations in our region are farming in urban or peri urban settings, which often means contending with poor soils that are compacted, low in nutrients, or lacking sufficient organic matter," said Grossman. "We had heard from farmers that accessing farming information in general, and specifically that related to soil health improvement practices, was challenging."



Vivian Wauters (right) is part of a team in Minnesota that created soil health workshops to train educators that support immigrant and minority growers. Here, she's speaking with organic grower, Chairesia Chatham (left) about no-till and cover crops. Photo by Julie Grossman.

While Grossman had a good amount of soil health information to share with producers, partnering with organizations that served immigrant and minority farmers seemed like the best way to get the information to the producers who needed it. Enter The Good Acre, a farmer-led, non-profit food hub with robust grower support services. The Good Acre had established relationships with the First Nations Development Institute, the Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA), the Shared Ground Food Co-op, the Minnesota Food Association's Farmer Education Program, and other farmers. In 2015, they put their heads together and applied for a \$74,760 NCR-SARE Professional Development Program grant to develop hands-on courses and online resources to teach soil and nutrient management to diverse audiences.

They put together a series of workshops that reached more

NORTH CENTRAL SARE

than 70 producers and 30 NRCS, Extension, and non-profit researchers and educators. They also developed a 30-page soil health and cover cropping handbook (see image) to be used as a train-the-trainer resource for educators, mentors, and community leaders working with immigrant and minority growers, along with a companion slide set.

“For me, the guide helped me understand which soil improving approaches might be best for my system,” reported Cala. “Cover crops are an excellent way to return organic matter to the soil and the guide provided different management approaches and options, as well as other resources to learn more.”

Grossman said the partnerships led to increased collaboration between the U of MN, The Good Acre, immigrant farming organizations, and indigenous farming groups with follow-up grants and collaborative projects, including a new 2019 NCR-SARE Research and Education grant that will collaborate with some of the farmers to provide data on summer cover crop management systems.

“What really stood out to me was how important relationships are between individuals at the University and the farmers,” said Grossman. “It is much less the information that is transferred from one to the other, but the way in which it is transferred and from whom. This project allowed us to deepen our relationships with the farmers and establish trust. The carry-over of this project has been extremely positive as we continue to work with these farmers to strengthen their farms and access to markets.”

For more information on Grossman’s NCR-SARE Professional Development grant project, visit the SARE project reporting website at <https://projects.sare.org/search-projects/> and search for project number ENC15-145, or contact the NCR-SARE office.

SOIL HEALTH &
NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT
FOR IMMIGRANT FARMERS
2-DAY TRAIN-THE-TRAINER WORKSHOP



With support from SARE, a team from Minnesota developed a train-the-trainer resource for educators, mentors, and community leaders working with immigrant and minority growers on issues around soil health. Find it online for free at www.northcentralsare.org/Educational-Resources/SARE-Project-Products/Soil-Health-and-Nutrient-Management-for-Minority-Farmers



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