

Producer-led Group Roadmap: Finding Success in Farmer-Led Watershed Organizations





INTRODUCTION

Farmer-led conservation groups have been growing in popularity as a way for farmers to expand conservation practices and document their progress in water quality and soil health. These groups allow farmers to engage with each other, local experts and their communities as they work toward their goals. Producer-led and farmer-led groups will be used interchangeably throughout this document. This roadmap is intended for groups that are either funded through the Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant (PLWPG) program at the [Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection \(DATCP\)](#) or for those that are functioning without the state funding.

These organizations foster innovation and shared learning among members to bring about continuous measurable improvements in areas such as water quality and soil health by exploring on-farm conservation practices.

This roadmap is the result of a collaboration between DATCP, [Farmers for Sustainable Food](#) and [The Nature Conservancy \(TNC\)](#). Each of these organizations provides support for farmer-led conservation initiatives around the state of Wisconsin.

DATCP awards grants to producer-led groups that focus on ways to prevent and reduce runoff from farm fields and farmsteads through the PLWPG program. The goal is to improve Wisconsin's soil and water quality by encouraging producer-led

conservation decision making and solutions. Applications are accepted once annually, and full details on the program are available [here](#).

Farmers for Sustainable Food is a collaborative, industry-supported effort to promote and support farmer-led solutions to today's environmental challenges, taking into account business viability and community engagement. The group was established in 2016 and driven primarily by the [Dairy Business Association](#), [Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative](#) and TNC. FSF supports farmer-led watershed groups through various services, serving as an incubator and support system.

Founded in 1951, The Nature Conservancy is a global conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, TNC creates innovative, on-the-ground solutions to the world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. In Wisconsin, part of this mission involves working with farmers and the agriculture industry to support implementation of best management practices on farms. TNC provides direct funding and in-kind support to several producer-led groups around the state.

This roadmap is intended to serve as a guide and idea generator for farmers and others interested in farmer-led conservation projects. All groups may do things a little differently. The intent is to provide best practices to help any organization be successful.

For information, the online appendix can be found [here](#).

SUGGESTED DEVELOPMENT FOR FARMER-LED CONSERVATION GROUPS

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The roadmap provides detail on the following steps that have been critical to the success of existing producer-led groups:

1. Identify your watershed's specific resource concerns and develop a baseline. Identify potential changes or improvements your group would like to make in your watershed to address those resource concerns.
2. Consult farmer leaders from other established farmer-led organizations to get their perspective of their experience being involved with a producer-led group and what they've found to be benefits and challenges.
3. Organize a leadership structure within your producer-led group.
4. Develop a vision, goals and work/watershed plan, including timeline, for your project.
5. Execute your plan through education, outreach, and conservation practices and strategies.
6. Track and reward progress, participation and success.



SECTION 1

Establish purpose/goals of the group

It is important for all involved to agree on the basic goals and objectives of the group.

Questions to ask and considerations include:

- Why is the group forming?
- What are the specific resource concerns in your region or watershed?
- What would you like to accomplish? What changes or improvements could your group make in your watershed to address your specific resource concerns?
- Are there interested parties from a variety of commodities and local agricultural businesses? (Dairy, beef, hogs, poultry, row crops, etc.)
- Are farmers interested in taking on leadership roles and committed to the long-term success of the group? Is there enough interest for the group to stay viable?
- How will you evaluate your progress? How will you create a baseline from which to measure?
- What kind of water quality data is available for your watershed? Can this help you create a baseline?
- Who or what organizations will you collaborate with? What are your expectations from these partnerships?

Establishing roles and responsibilities of involved individuals and organizations is key to success.

- What are duties and expectations of board members?
 - Who will lead communications, finances, event planning/execution, grant writing, membership recruitment, database maintenance, upkeep of website, etc.?
- (See [Section 4](#) for more information.)

“

Our goals include creating a forum to gather and learn from each other based on sound science.”

Todd Doornink,
Western Wisconsin Conservation Council





SECTION 2

Establish organizational structure (legal aspects of the group)

To receive certain grants, take advantage of certain tax statuses, and limit personal liability of the founders, it is recommended to legally formalize the group. There are many considerations while creating the internal rules for the group with articles and bylaws that determine the rights of members and activities of the group.

There are two basic types of group structures:

- Informal group with leader or co-leaders (should still assign responsibilities)
- Formal group with a Board of Directors

If the group would like to formalize their structure, it is advisable to work with your collaborator (see [Section 4](#) for definition of a collaborator) and/or an attorney to draft bylaws and articles of incorporation, and to follow all state and federal rules to form as a non-profit. There are various steps and documents to be filed, and it is important to have professional advice in this area.

Review this resource from [DATCP](#) for more guidance on choosing your legal structure.



“

I can see, down the road, a lot of collaboration going on with other watershed groups, and that's where we're going to get the real value.

The power comes from working together because we learn from each other.”

Jim Winn, Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance





SECTION 3

Establish membership requirements/qualifications, recruit cross-section of members

It is important to note that DATCP PLWPG funding is based on watersheds. [Wisconsin Statute 93.59](#) is the law that sets the requirements for the grant program; an applicant must be a group of at least five farmers who farm in one watershed. However, there is not a defined watershed size, indicated by Hydrologic Unit Code (HUC) number in the rule, and DATCP has maintained flexibility in the size of the watershed groups within the program.

There are examples of groups that have defined more than one HUC 12 watershed as their project area of focus within their grant applications. Additionally, farmers who farm outside of a watershed are still eligible to be group members at the discretion of the group.

Establishing and documenting basic membership requirements will help ensure members are committed to the goals and objectives set forth by the organization.

Groups can choose to not have official membership, but this can pose challenges for tracking progress over time and determining which members are engaged in the project.

Considerations:

Farmer members

- Recruit diverse membership: size, type of farm
- Membership dues: dues structure, renewals, what constitutes a member in good standing
- Dedication to continuous improvement: verification, member surveys, participation
- Data tracking requirements: agreement to submit necessary farm information to measure group progress

Corporate/agribusiness/other members

- If you have a Board of Directors structure for leadership, will these members be voting members or in a supporting role? (This is dictated by the organization's bylaws)
- Membership dues: corporate membership vs. sponsorship (members vote, sponsors do not)

Cost-share program

- If a cost-share program will be offered, consider making a requirement to receive dollars contingent on turning in yearly survey and having dues paid (if applicable)
- Tie in a tracking component to the cost-share offered so that resulting progress can be documented from practices implemented



“ The Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant program provides the framework necessary to establish locally driven conservation initiatives while also demonstrating the economic viability of conservation practices on farms.”

Lacey Cochart, Director of Land & Water Bureau, DATCP





SECTION 4

Secure collaborators / coordinators

Collaborator

Groups funded by the DATCP PLWPG program must have a collaborator and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on file to receive funding.

A collaborator is an organization that has an understanding of the issues facing your region and that can provide support in any area the group needs. This could include administrative, organizational, fiscal, technical or research assistance. Examples of possible collaborators could include a staff person from your local county land and water department, a University of Wisconsin Extension educator or a non-profit organization focused on conservation.

View more information about collaborators and recommendations from DATCP [here](#).

Considerations for groups:

- Determine what the needs of the group are and what resources a collaborator could provide to help you meet those needs.
- These needs can be outlined in an MOU
 - It is required to have an MOU with your collaborator. DATCP provides guidance on creating an [MOU here](#).

Coordinator

A coordinator is someone who can help with behind-the-scenes tasks (volunteer or staff) - keeping membership lists, asking for renewals, tracking expenditures and receipts, etc.

There may be overlap between the collaborator and the coordinator, but there are many tasks associated with running an organization, and it is important to be clear about who is responsible for what from the beginning.



Considerations for collaborators and coordinators:

Support staff can be crucial. Collaborators can aid farmer leadership in steering the group toward long-term goals and supporting them in achieving these goals.

- Keep in mind the goals of the farmers versus what your goals as a collaborator may be.
- Leader identity and development; collaborators can help with delegation in giving clear and manageable roles to the farmer membership.
- Encourage multiple leaders to share the load of the responsibilities and tasks.

SECTION 5

Establish funding streams

When establishing any new organization, it is vital to identify funding sources.

Consider applying for grants:

- [DATCP Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant \(PLWPG\)](#)
- [Other grant opportunities](#)

If you plan on applying for grants, it is recommended to seek grant-writing training, work with someone who has written a grant or find grant-writing resources through someone like your local UW-Extension agent, county conservationist or the [Michael Fields Agricultural Institute](#).

Also explore existing local adaptive management efforts if they are available. Check the adaptive management and water quality trading project locations map on the [Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource's website](#).

For grant funding, it is typically required to provide a report on activities including documentation (receipts, etc.). You must also consider where matching funds will come from. For the PLWPG program, a 1:1 match is required, meaning you must provide match equal to the grant funds requested.

Membership dues are another potential revenue source for farmer-led groups.

Also, consider approaching local businesses for sponsorship of events or projects beyond membership dues.

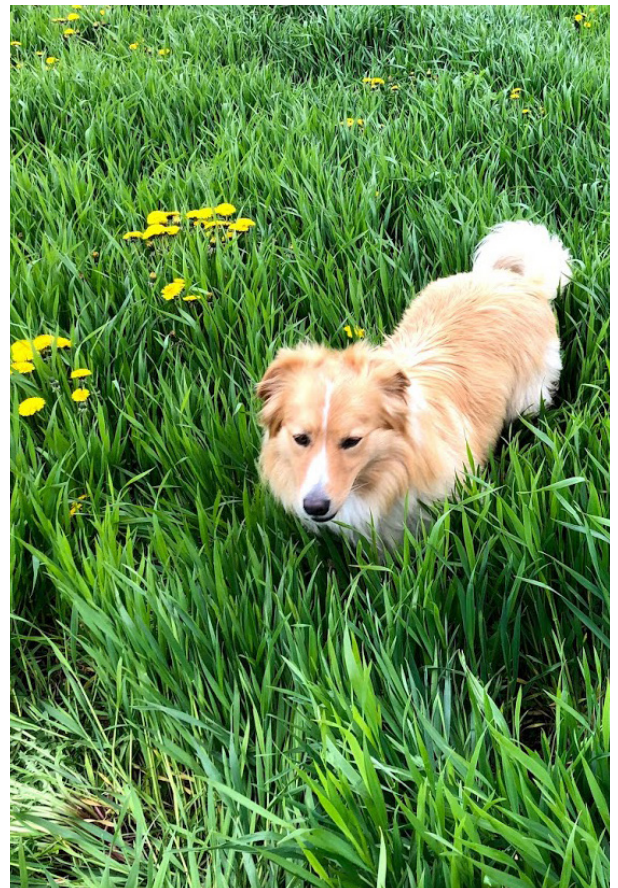
Reach out to established farmer-led groups to get ideas and examples of how they structure their membership and sponsorship programs. Use these as a model to decide what is the best fit for your organization.

“

I see a committed group of agricultural people that are learning every year since 2016.
I see our confidence building.

I see that our willingness to try new things is increasing, so all that's very encouraging.”

Don Niles, Peninsula Pride Farms



“ The field days show our members and others new techniques they can try and the willingness of farms to improve.”

Todd Doornink, Western Wisconsin Conservation Council





SECTION 6

Determine schedules and methods for tracking practices and outcomes (programs/tools/surveys etc.)

Data is essential for measuring progress over time. This information can be shared with stakeholders and funders to help secure future funding support.

Consider the specific resource concerns your group is hoping to address. These can help guide you on what potential projects/data could be collected.

Examples of information that could be collected include total number of farmer members, total acres and livestock numbers represented by the group, acres of various conservation practices implemented by members, phosphorus reduction estimates, any data collected through research partnerships and even anecdotal lessons learned by members when implementing new practices.

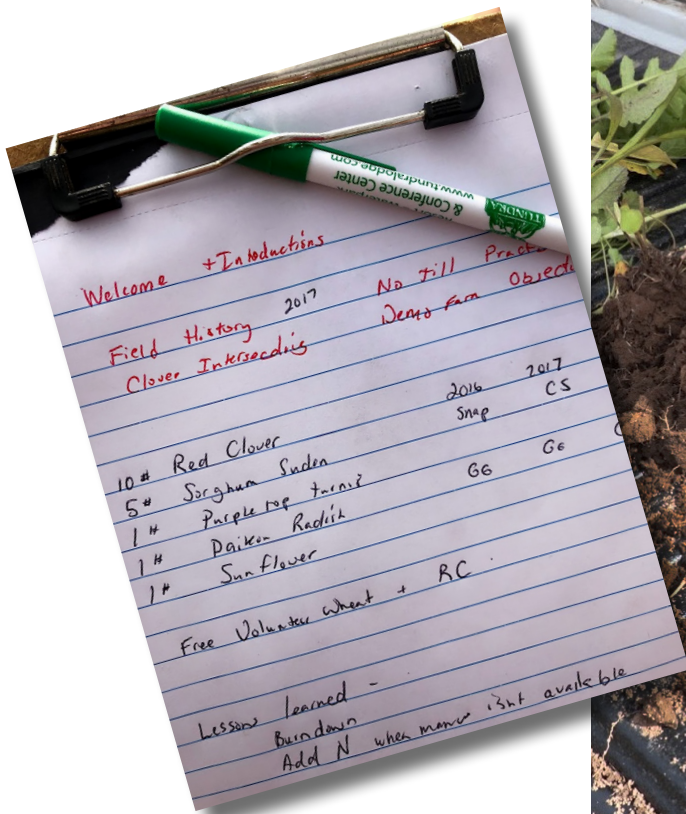
If you receive funding through the Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grants program, your group's efforts will be included in DATCP's program tracking project. DATCP partnered with the University of Wisconsin Nutrient Pest Management program and University of Wisconsin Soils Department to create a tracking system that utilizes SnapPlus nutrient management software. This tracking effort looks at the practices installed by the producer-led groups as well as their watershed's most common rotations, soils and soil phosphorus levels to estimate approximate phosphorus runoff and soil loss reductions.

Consult with your collaborator and other experts in your region for guidance on what data is most relevant to your group and goals.

Considerations:

- Recruit academic assistance or experts for support
- Determine project manager/lead: agronomists, county conservation staff, UW-Extension are some examples
- Select program for data collection/management in consultation with collaborator and project lead. Examples include nutrient management software like SnapPlus, Return-on-Investment (ROI) mapping, the Field to Market Fieldprint Calculator
- Establish database location and data manager
- Establish timelines for data collection
- Establish clear data handling protocol
- Obtain training for data analysis, if needed







SECTION 7

Establish continuous improvement priorities and learning opportunities

Consider what your goals are and set priorities for continuous improvement. Determine who your primary audience is and what actions you want them to take to help achieve your desired outcomes.

Determine what types of projects your group would like to focus on, such as:

- On-farm research
- Water quality monitoring
- Nutrient trading projects with a municipality
- Engaging the next farming generation in your efforts
- Better engaging agribusinesses in your work

Groups should also consider offering learning opportunities for members, prospective members and the broader community such as:

- Field days
 - View tips from DATCP on planning a field day [here](#)
 - Contact your local UW-Extension agent for support
- Cost-share program questions for consideration
 - What is your budget? Will you have cash in hand when it's time to distribute checks?
 - What practices are your members most interested in? What programs would be most helpful to them? What practices would be most effective in your watershed?
 - Would you like to offer a set fee per practice or cover a percentage of a producer's total cost for the practice?
 - What will you do if your funding requests exceed funding available?
 - Will there be any stipulations for participating in the program, such as requiring membership, completion of a survey, or any other information you'd like to request from participants?
 - Who will collect and track applications, receipts, and other program documentation?
 - ◆ View examples on the [DATCP PLWPG website](#).
- Annual conference/meeting
- Scholarship
- Community conversations

Explore the opportunity of collaborating with other farmer-led efforts in your area and co-hosting events. Regional Demonstration Farm Networks are also excellent resources for information and collaboration on events like field days. For more information, contact the DATCP program manager.



SECTION 8

Establish internal and external communication plan, brand and communication channels

Beyond members and prospective members, it is important to identify other audiences your group needs to communicate with. This can include your local community, government, suppliers/service providers and more.

Some basic steps to set up communication from your group:

- Purchase website domain(s) relevant to the organization name and establish website
- Engage with local media as needed
 - Determine one or two key spokespersons for your group who will lead talking to media. Consider media training for these individuals.
- Create social media channels (Facebook page, Twitter, Instagram)
- Consider email platform – Constant Contact, Vertical Response, MailChimp
- Consider texting service
- Consider print communications
 - Postcards/flyers to promote events
 - Print newsletter – is it necessary? How often would you send it?
 - Templates for event promotion, other ideas are available on the [DATCP PLWPG website](#).





SECTION 9

Compile annual report/summary of work

It is best practice to keep track of what the group has done over the year in one place. Consider who can best help document what is accomplished throughout the year to make it easier to compile when it comes to grant reporting or sharing with other stakeholders. Support for tracking could come from your collaborator, board members and other key stakeholders. DATCP requires an annual report for recipients in the PLWPG program. [View the report here.](#)

Examples of metrics to track throughout the year:

- Number of:
 - members
 - meetings and field days held
 - partnerships
 - people in attendance at meetings and events
 - news articles or features
- Cost-share program dollars awarded
- Acres enrolled in cost-share program
- Acres with conservation practices implemented (gather this through a yearly survey or other method)

See [Section 6](#) for more details on considerations for tracking practices and outcomes.

An example of an annual member survey is included in the online appendix, which can be found [here](#).

Information on acres of practices from each member's completed survey can be aggregated to provide a summary of total acres of each practice for the group as a whole. This information can be shared with group members, funders and other stakeholders via press release, newsletter, annual report or any other means that suit the group.

With help from collaborators, partners or DATCP, survey information can be used, alongside models, to help estimate the group's possible impact on phosphorus reduction, soil loss and other environmental indicators.

Additionally, consider hosting an annual meeting/conference. They are a way for groups to share what was accomplished throughout the year with members, stakeholders and the broader community. The agenda can include speakers on topics of interest to the group, a recap from the farmer group on what was achieved and plans for the next year.

If the group has formal bylaws, there are likely annual meeting requirements. It is important to follow all bylaw requirements set by the group. The annual meeting can be held before or after the public conference for ease.

There are many resources available beyond this roadmap. For more resources from DATCP, please visit the [DATCP PLWPG](#) website.

Another great resource is the [Environmental Defense Fund Farmer Network Design Manual](#).



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