

The Natural Farmer

What is SARE? - Summer 2002 Special Supplement on On-Farm Research

By Jack Kittredge

SARE is the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program of the United States Department of Agriculture. It is funded by US tax dollars and is designed to divert a small portion of the huge federal ag research effort into sustainable and organic agricultural research.

Administratively, SARE is divided into regions, and the relevant one for NOFA is the Northeast Region. Although it is run out of the University of Vermont, the region is composed of 12 northeastern states, south as far as Maryland and west as far as Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

SARE runs three main programs. The primary one, the Research and Education grant program, gives money to Cooperative Extension and other scientists for interdisciplinary projects. In the last year Northeast SARE awarded \$1,654,457 to 16 researchers to explore topics as diverse as alternative crop development, grazing, marketing, nutrient management, and training for farmers in machinery selection and maintenance. Grants ranged from \$32,680 to strengthen a local food development and distribution network to \$164,882 to see if gooseberries, currants, elderberries, and other native fruits are suitable for adding value.

The second program, the Professional Development grant program, allows extension educators and other agriculture professionals to take advantage of various learning opportunities to spread knowledge about sustainable concepts and practices. Northeast SARE this year awarded \$673,453 under this program to nine funded projects including training in national organic standards, community agriculture, marketing, and farmland conservation. Northeast SARE has funded 73 training projects since the professional development program was begun in 1994. The overall goal of the SARE Professional Development Program is to give Cooperative Extension, USDA-NRCS, and other agricultural professionals the training they need to serve growers and advance sustainable practices in the northeast region.

The final program, the Farmer/Grower grant program, is the one most NOFA growers might be interested in. It supports much of the work by farmers covered in this issue to test new crops, practices and systems through on-site experiments and share the results with other farmers. This year Northeast SARE has awarded \$262,402 in grants to farmers to explore innovative production techniques that are profitable, environmentally sound, and beneficial to communities. This year, grants ranged from \$763 to design an affordable silage wrapper in Maine to \$9,927 to explore the production of late-season and winter strawberries in Maryland. In all, fifty grants were made; the average award was about \$5,250.

Although farmer grants barely make up 10% of total SARE projects, in individual cases the money can be significant enough to make a farmer sit down and carry out a research project concerning some idea he or she has always wondered about. The stated goal of this program is “to develop, refine, and demonstrate new sustainable techniques and to explore innovative ideas developed by farmers across the region. Information gained from these farm-based projects may be used to redirect research priorities.”

To apply, you must be a farmer in the Northeast SARE region. You need not be farming full time, but your operation should have an established crop or animal product that you sell on a regular basis. Nonprofit farms may apply, but the primary activity of the farm must be to produce and sell food under the kinds of economic constraints that affect commercial growers. Many community-supported farms qualify, but farms where the primary mission is educational normally do not. The 2003 Farmer Grant Applications will be available in June 2002.

To learn more about this program or past Farmer/Grower projects, go to the Northeast SARE website at www.uvm.edu/~nesare/. The national project database allows you to sort by grant type, region, interest area, and a variety of other criteria. To request printed materials and general background about SARE, call (802) 656-0471, fax (802) 656-4656 or send e-mail to nesare@zoo.uvm.edu.

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The Northeast SARE has made a change in the grant application process for the 2003 funding cycle. This change does not affect the Farmer/Grower grant program, but does affect the Professional Development and the Research and Education grant programs.

For these latter programs, SARE will require a preproposal—a one-page description of performance targets and project design—for early review. Projects consistent with the SARE outcome statement will be identified. From these, SARE reviewers will select preproposals to proceed with a full application. Preproposals for 2003 grants must be postmarked on or before June 14, 2002. This new process allows applicants to have proposal concepts reviewed before developing a detailed application, and also gives reviewers an opportunity to focus on projects that most advance the SARE mission.