

# Innovative Small Farm Education 2004-2005 Final Project Report Form

**Title of project:**    “New Farmer Mentoring”

**Project leader(s) and contact information:**

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**Partner organizations (on *this* project):**

New York Pasture Association, Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative, GrazeNY,  
Growing New Farmers Initiative, Central New York RC&D

**Background situation:**

Despite unfortunate downward trends in most areas of agriculture, Oneida County has experienced a steady stream of entrepreneurs interested in starting their own farming operations. They have found Oneida County to be an ideal location for them to realize their dream of owning their own agricultural business for a variety of reasons. Firstly, many of these potential “new farmers” have very limited agriculture experience and knowledge and are looking at starting out on a very small scale, either as a part-time interest or as a way to simply utilize their land and home resources. Secondly, Oneida County’s existing farm sizes, topography, and markets are ideal for smaller sized agricultural production, which makes it very feasible for new farmers to get a foothold in the industry. As former dairy farms are put up for sale, it offers an excellent opportunity for them to be purchased by individuals wishing to develop their own small-scale agricultural business. Thirdly, Oneida County is home to two urban centers (cities of Utica and Rome) and a rather significant ethnic population. This ethnic population offers a huge marketing opportunity particularly for livestock producers, which is currently not being met. Along those same lines, with recent attention being paid to health issues and food safety, people want to know more about where their food comes from. Farmers Markets and direct farm sales are seeing a surge in sales and interest as people feel more secure about the quality and safety of their food if they are purchasing it directly from farmers. This trend is likely to increase and intensify, leaving the door wide open for new farmers looking for a truly unmet market opportunity.

The problem arises in the fact that lack of experience and knowledge of agriculture as mentioned above often leads to failure for many of these agricultural businesses, or at least a lack of true fulfillment of their dream. For those with a true desire to turn their hobby into an actual farming business, they may never get there despite all of the hard work in the world or their best intentions. When starting any type of new business, you are bound to make mistakes or run into roadblocks, but agricultural businesses seem to offer many more challenges simply because of the intricacies and the other “uncontrollables” involved in agriculture.

**Expected outcomes of project:**

The expected outcome of the “New Farmer Mentoring Program” was that this one-on-one mentoring relationship would help ensure the success of these new farms. The “new

farmers” would have the opportunity to visit their mentor’s farm to experience how the farm operates as well as specific tasks required by that particular type of operation. Then as the new farmer’s operation grows and develops, the mentor will be available to answer questions and provide guidance as needed. The mentor would also visit the participants’ farm to provide general assistance or suggestions or possibly assist with some of these same tasks to eliminate some of the road blocks and speed bumps that may occur on the first time through them.

In addition, each new farm would develop a detailed work plan which would chart the goals and achievement plan for their new agricultural business.

A final outcome will be publication of a “New Farmer Mentoring Project Guide”, which will assist other farmers, agencies or groups in establishing similar mentoring programs. The guide will describe our project and will identify successes that were achieved as well as obstacles that were encountered in the project. It will identify keys to success for a farmer mentoring program and will outline the framework to guide the development of future mentoring programs.

### **Project activities:\***

The “New Farmer Mentoring Project” involved new and “exploring” farmers teaming up with experienced producers involved in the same type of agricultural enterprise as what they were considering. To do this, we utilized an application process (see Appendix) whereby interested participants were able to tell us a bit about their background, interests and resources. From this information, we selected five participants whose objectives seemed to match what our resources could provide.

An initial meeting was held on March 30, 2005 at which time participants met their mentors and were introduced to the project in terms of timeline and what they could expect to gain from their involvement. Based on the interests of the participants, we had one primary farm mentor who worked with 4 of the participants and then the 5<sup>th</sup> participant was teamed up with another mentor. We also utilized a “technical advisor” who met with one participant to discuss specific aspects of the enterprise they were considering.

At this initial meeting, each participant set a date at which they would go visit their mentor’s farm. From there, each participant and their mentor determined future interaction based upon the needs and situation of each individual participant. For example, one participant visited their mentor’s farm several times over the summer to assist with poultry processing to gain experience before processing their own chickens on their own farm in the fall. (*This participant indicated that this experience was invaluable!*) Another participant was further along in the development of their farm business. In their case, after their initial visit to their mentor’s farm, the majority of future interactions with their mentor was via phone to ask questions or get guidance in decisions they were making in their operation.

Also at this initial meeting in March, a presentation was offered on Holistic Management. A speaker on the subject provided information and discussion around the concept of utilizing a holistic approach to starting and managing a new farm business. All participants received copies of the publications “Making Your Small Scale Farm Profitable” and “Whole Farm Planning”.

On September 15, 2005 a meeting was held to touch base with all participants and mentors to see how the season went and where they are at in their planning process. Participants shared their status and progress through the season, including their own interaction with their mentor. They also shared how they felt their involvement in the Mentoring Project influenced their progress or the development of their farm business. At the conclusion of this meeting, each participant talked directly with their mentor to plan any future interaction. Most

exchanged contact information and planned to communicate on an as-needed basis. A couple planned additional visits to each other's farms.

Finally, a case study (see Appendix) was developed which evaluated the feasibility and effectiveness of this New Farmer Mentoring Project. The case study outlines the process and procedures that were undertaken in this case and discusses positives and negatives of this type of endeavor. It also highlights the impact of these types of relationships as gleaned from the participants themselves.

### **Farmer participation:**

*How many farmers were involved in the project overall?*

3 farmer Mentors

5 new farmers

*Briefly describe how farmers were involved in initiating, planning, doing and evaluating the project.*

The lead farmer mentor (Keith Morgan-Davie) was involved in this project from beginning to end. He actually initiated the idea and helped develop the project plan. He was the mentor for 4 of the 5 participants in the project and also recruited the other 2 mentors. He was also involved with evaluation of the project, including the development of the case report.

### **Other participants:**

Phil Metzger, Central New York RC&D – Presentation on Holistic Management

### **Outreach & media:**

A news release (see Appendix) was developed and distributed to over 75 media outlets in and around Oneida County. In addition, it was distributed to other organizations/associations that cater to new, beginning, or small farms such as the Regional Farm & Food Project, Growing New Farmers, etc.

The project was also advertised in the "Livestock Extension" newsletter which is distributed to approximately 150 livestock producers throughout Oneida and surrounding counties.

### **Farmer evaluation:**

Please see Appendix "Participant's Evaluation of New Farmer Mentoring Project" and Case Study Report.

### **Farmer impacts:**

Based on participant's feedback and comments it is clear that the New Farmer Mentoring Project was instrumental in helping them make some of the decisions that have had to be made in the development of their farming plans. For example, at the beginning of the project one participant thought that he wanted to get involved in some type of sheep farming operation, but had no idea about the different breeds of sheep, let alone which breed would be most suitable for what he wanted to do. By the end of the project, through interaction with his

mentor and the resource networks that were established, he had not only decided upon a breed, but had already identified a buyer that he was going to purchase a starting flock from.

Another participant ended up changing their marketing plan for their grass-fed beef based upon feedback and discussions with their mentor. They were going from marketing a small number of cattle through direct, on-farm marketing, to selling their meat through farmer's markets and restaurants. They also had to re-evaluate their pricing structure and needed to look at expanding their herd in order to meet demand for their products.

### **Your evaluation:**

I feel that the New Farmer Mentoring Project was a complete success based upon the evaluations and impacts from the participants themselves. It is clear that we achieved our goal of assisting these agricultural entrepreneurs in gaining experience and developing networks that will be critical to ensuring the success of their new farm business.

The identification and availability of mentors is key to the success of this type of project. It not only determines the satisfaction and impact on participants, but also determines the number of new farmers that can participate in the program.

I also think that a key element to this project, as should be to any discussion with new farm business' or entrepreneurs, is an emphasis on planning and goal setting. At the first meeting in the spring, we encouraged the participants to think about their farm "dream" or plan and gave them the opportunity to put it on paper. Then in our discussion about Holistic Management, we continued to come back to the concept of planning and the idea of thinking about all aspects of every decision that will be made. We may not go so far as to actually have them write a business plan, but certainly encourage them to consider and put some thought into all of the aspects of a thorough business plan.

One drawback to this type of project is that the relatively short time-frame that we had to work with makes it difficult to truly see the impact and long term effects of the relationships and networks that the project established. Obviously the development of a farm business is a very long term process. The true impacts of a mentoring project may be more clear over a two or three year period, as it may take this long for decisions to be made and carried out.

### **Follow-up activities, spin-off effects:**

As mentioned, each participant and their mentor, together determined any future interaction or relationship based upon each individual situation and need. I fully expect several groups to continue to visit each others' farms and meet on a regular basis, while others may just visit via phone as needed.

### **Supporting materials, Appendix**

- New Farmer Mentoring Project Case Study
- Participant Application
- Newsrelease
- Participant List
- Participants Evaluation of New Farmer Mentoring Project
- Project Resource List

# **APPENDIX**

A CASE STUDY IN NEW FARMER MENTORING

Context/Background

Despite unfortunate downward trends in most areas of agriculture, Oneida County has experienced a steady stream of entrepreneurs interested in starting their own farming operations. They have found Oneida County to be an ideal location for them to realize their dream of owning their own agricultural business for a variety of reasons. Firstly, many of these “new farmers” have very limited agriculture experience and knowledge and are looking at starting out on a very small scale, either as a part-time interest or as a way to simply utilize their land and home resources. Secondly, Oneida County’s existing farm sizes, topography, and markets are ideal for smaller sized agricultural production, which makes it very feasible for new farmers to get a foothold in the industry. As former dairy farms are put up for sale, it offers an excellent opportunity for them to be purchased by individuals wishing to develop their own small-scale agricultural business. Thirdly, Oneida County is home to two urban centers and a rather significant ethnic population. This ethnic population offers a huge marketing opportunity particularly for livestock producers, which is currently not being met. Along those same lines, with recent attention being paid to health issues and food safety, people want to know more about where their food comes from. Farmer’s Markets and direct farm sales are seeing a surge in sales and interest as people feel more secure about the quality and safety of their food if they are purchasing it directly from farmers. This trend is likely to increase and intensify, leaving the door wide open for new farmers looking for a truly unmet market opportunity.

Oneida County, New York is not the only place that is experiencing this surge in interest in new farm start-ups. It is being seen throughout the Northeast and across the county. The “Growing New Farmers” program is a network of over 200 agencies and groups dedicated to supporting and encouraging the Northeast’s new farmers. Their data and research suggests that:

- Most Northeast new farmers are young, although some are older, “mid-life career changers” and even retirees.
- More and more new farmers are coming from non-farm backgrounds—they did not grow up on farms. Some are from farming families; they may be the next generation on an established farm, or may move onto a different farm.
- In the Northeast, new farmers are ethnically and culturally diverse.
- New farmers are interested in a very wide range of farming enterprises, crops, production and marketing strategies.
- Many new farmers will start out farming part-time, and some will continue part-time for a variety of reasons.
- New farmers come from urban, suburban or rural backgrounds. Those in the Northeast are drawn to the region because of its markets, support for alternative agriculture and diversity of farming opportunities.

The problem arises in the fact that lack of experience and knowledge of agriculture as mentioned above often leads to failure for many of these agricultural businesses, or at least a lack of true fulfillment of their dream. For those with a true desire to turn their hobby into an actual farming business, they may never get there despite all of their hard work or their best intentions. When starting any type of new business, you are bound to make mistakes or run into roadblocks. But agricultural businesses seem to offer many more challenges simply because of the intricacies and the other “uncontrollables” involved.

According to the “Growing New Farmers” program, new farmers face four major barriers to success:

- (1) Access to training, education, and technical assistance
- (2) Access to land
- (3) Access to capital and credit

#### (4) Access to markets

### What/How

Cornell's Small Farms Grants Program was initiated in 2000 to help support programs and efforts targeted toward New York's small farm community. This grants program recognizes that farmers themselves have tremendously valuable information and experience to offer other farmers. Therefore, grants are awarded for projects that facilitate the sharing of knowledge among farmers through farmer-to-farmer relationships and interactions.

In 2004, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County received funding through the grant program to develop a New Farmer Mentoring Program. The purpose of the mentoring program was to help the county's new agricultural entrepreneurs avoid many of the mistakes that often lead to failure of agricultural businesses. It would allow them the opportunity to learn from other experienced farmers and, most importantly, receive guidance in developing and managing their businesses from experienced producers that have already been "in their shoes" at one time or another.

To initiate the project, a lead farmer-mentor was identified to serve as the primary mentor and resource person. This person had extensive experience and knowledge in a variety of livestock marketing and production areas. In addition, other mentors were identified to serve as resource people on an as-needed basis or to be mentors for new farmers in the areas of small dairy farming, beef finishing, or farm produce production.

### Project/Timeline

January 2005 – Newsreleases, flyers, articles and other notices were distributed throughout Oneida County and the region to solicit new and prospective farmers interested in working with a mentor. A short application was sent to each prospect. A total of 11 applications were requested and 8 were returned for consideration in the program.

February 2005 – A group of 5 "new farmers" were selected for participation in the program. Factors such as their stage in the development of their farm plan, their commitment to the program, and whether mentor-resources were available to assist them were considered in the selection process.

March 2005 – An initial group meeting was conducted to introduce participants to their mentors and to provide an overview of the project. A presentation and discussion on "Holistic Management" clarified to the participants the concept that farming involves and affects all aspects of one's life. Resources and reference materials were distributed to each participant. They also spent time discussing their plans and ideas with their mentors so that they could chart their course of action over the next several months.

Spring 2005 – Each participant visited their mentor's farm. They had the opportunity to see and experience how the mentor's farm operates and get an idea of what is required if they choose to pursue a similar type of operation, or ideas of things they may want to consider in their own operations.

Summer 2005 – Mentor made at least one visit to each participant's farm. They offered general ideas, suggestions, comments, or assisted with a particular task for the first time. Additional communication between mentors and participants was carried out via phone and/or email on an as-needed basis.

September 2005 – Status update meeting with all participants was held to see how each participant had progressed in their plans, their successes and disappointments, and to determine what their next steps were. Participants shared their status and progress through the season, including their

own interaction with their mentor. They also shared how they felt their involvement in the Mentoring Project influenced their progress or the development of their farm business. At the conclusion of this meeting, each participant talked directly with their mentor to plan any future interaction. Most exchanged contact information and would communicate on an as-needed basis. A couple planned additional visits to each other's farms.

## Outcomes

The following are participant's comments and evaluations of the project:

- Good information was provided to me at a time when I needed it most in starting my new farm.
- "The mentor project was invaluable in giving me experience with raising pastured poultry. Being able to work with and talk to (my mentor) was great. The program definitely gave me the confidence to move forward with a small farm operation."
- The New Farmer Mentoring Project "gave us the much needed support to get us rolling. We thought we were fighting the world with what we wanted to do."

Based on participant's feedback and comments it is clear that the New Farmer Mentoring Project was instrumental in motivating and assisting these individuals, who made considerable...and some *great*...strides in moving their farm dreams forward. Some participants gained experience by working hand-in-hand with their mentor and were able to discuss ideas and issues with them to assist in decision-making on their own farm. For example, at the beginning of the project one participant thought that he wanted to get involved in some type of sheep farming operation, but had no idea about the different breeds of sheep, let alone which breed would be most suitable for what he wanted to do. By the end of the project, through interaction with his mentor and the resource networks that were established, he had not only decided upon a breed, but had already identified a buyer that he was going to purchase a starting flock from.

This increase in confidence and connectedness to the communities they operate in was common among the participants. For example, another participant ended up changing their marketing plan for their grass-fed beef based upon feedback and discussions with their mentor. They were going from marketing a small number of cattle through direct, on-farm marketing, to selling their meat through farmer's markets and restaurants. They also had to re-evaluate their pricing structure and were looking at expanding their herd in order to meet demand for their products.

Participants indicated that besides the hands-on experience they gained, probably one of the most valuable things they got out of the program was the network of resources available to them. Besides their mentor, who will probably continue to be their primary resource, they each began to compile a list of other resources (people, print, associations/organizations, etc.) that they can call upon to meet various needs or assist them in various ways as they move forward.

## Lessons Learned

- Confirmation of the need for direct contact between established farmers and new and beginning farmers to assist, connect, avoid mistakes, and smooth that first plunge.
- The success of the program depends upon the identification and availability of mentors. The mentors not only determine the satisfaction and impact on participants, but also determine the number of new farmers that can participate in the program.
- Obviously the development of a farm business is a very long term process. The true impacts of a mentoring project may be more clear over a two or three year period, as it may take this long for decisions to be made and carried out.

## Next Steps

At the conclusion of the 9/15 meeting, participants and mentors met to determine their future interaction and relationships. Most exchanged contact information and will communicate on an as-needed basis in preparation for next year's season. A couple planned additional visits to each other's farms.

Continued follow-up is planned through mailing to participants at 6 months post-project (about March 2006) and then 1-year post-project (September 2006). Participants will be asked to explain where they are in their farm development process and reflect upon how their involvement in the New Farmer Mentoring Project influenced their plans along the way.

On a broader scale, this small project illustrated the need for this type of mentor-mentoree relationship over a broader geographical area, perhaps state-wide. Because of the need for on-farm visits, mentors and mentorees must be within reasonable driving distance from each other. If not, that hand-in-hand experience, that proved so valuable in this project, is much more difficult, if not impossible.

## Resources Used in This Project

- Making Your Small Farm Profitable by Ron Macher; Storey Publishing.
- Whole Farm Planning by Elizabeth Henderson and Karl North; Northeast Organic Farming Association
- Exploring Your Small Farm Dream by the New England Small Farm Institute
- Small Scale Livestock Farming by Carol Ekarius; Storey Publishing

## Appendix

New & Small Farm Resource List from "Exploring Your Small Farm Dream" workbook

Participant Application

Participant's Evaluations of New Farmer Mentoring Project

## **Participant Evaluation for New Farmer Mentoring Project** **September 2005**

1. Was your involvement in the New Farmer Mentoring Project a positive experience for you?

Yes: 5                      No: 0

2. Did the New Farmer Mentoring Project help you in any way in achieving or making progress toward your goal of starting your own farm business?

Yes: 5                      No: 0

**Please Comment:**

- Gave tips and pointers on how to do stuff. Information marketing of meat products at farmers markets.
- The mentor project was invaluable in giving me experience with raising pastured poultry. Being able to work with and talk to Keith was great. The program definitely gave me the confidence to move forward with a small farm operation.
- Connections and advice.
- Sound advice on pasture.
- Yes, it gave us the much needed support to get us rolling. We thought we were fighting the world for what we wanted to do.

3. Was the New Farmer Mentoring Project worth your investment (time and \$\$\$) in it?

Yes: 5                      No: 0

- However, I did not use the book that was distributed.

4. Did you expect something different out of the project that you didn't receive?

Yes: 1                      No: 4

**Please Comment:**

- Keith was a big help about talking about different things and ways to do it.
- Not really as I was most interested in getting hands-on experience and I received enough to raise and process my first batch of broilers.
- Because of my time frame the biggest part of the program, the hands-on, will be in the future.
- However, I thought maybe we would meet more as a group.

5. What changes would you suggest to improve the New Farmer Mentoring Project in the future?

- None. It was good information at a time when I needed to start my hog project.
- None are really needed. The program will work as good as the person and the time they invest in it. Keith was available whenever I needed to talk to him or visit his farm.
- To be able to move forward faster would be a benefit. That is totally my responsibility not a flaw in the program.
- Have available to people more business/financial resources for getting money from banks and/or business summaries.
- More group meetings and possibly doing farm tours of other farms in the same field.



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Do you currently own any livestock or produce that would be part of your farming operation? Yes No

If yes, please describe the livestock or produce that you are currently raising. Please include type, numbers, etc.

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Do you currently own any other resources (vehicles, facilities, inputs, etc.) that would be utilized in your farm operation? Yes No

If yes, please describe the resource and how it will be used in the farm. \_\_\_\_\_

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If you answered "no" to any of the questions above, how do you plan to acquire the resources (farm/facilities, land, livestock, produce, other inputs, etc.) that you will need in your farm operation?

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Will other family members or friends be involved in your farm operation? Yes No

If yes, please describe their involvement and commitment to the farm operation.  
If no, please describe who will contribute the labor on the farm (all by you, hired labor, etc.)

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Can you commit to the time commitment required for this New Farmer Mentoring Project (1-2 group meetings in Spring; regular meetings with your mentor throughout spring, summer and fall; 1-2 group meetings in Fall; follow-up meetings and conversations as needed; etc)?                      Yes                      No

Please explain why you feel you should be chosen as one of only 6 “new farmers” to be involved in this project. Please include evidence of your commitment to developing your farm operation and how you will see your plan to fruition. (Please use space provided)

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Is there anything else that you feel is important for us to know about you or your plans that will help us in evaluating you for this project?

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Thank you!

Please return your completed application to Heather Sweeney at the following address by February 15, 2005.

Return to:  
Heather Sweeney  
Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County  
121 Second Street  
Oriskany, NY 13424

## NEWSRELEASE

December 6, 2004

Contact: Heather Sweeney, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County

### Looking for “New” Farmers For Mentoring Program

Oneida County and Central New York have been experiencing a steady stream of entrepreneurs interested in starting their own farming operation. Unfortunately, when starting any type of new business, mistakes are bound to be made and roadblocks are certain to be encountered. Agricultural businesses, however, seem to offer many more challenges simply because of the intricacies and the other “uncontrollables” involved, all of which often result in the failure or lack of fulfillment of a farming dream. Fortunately, though, a mentoring relationship with an experienced farmer and some thoughtful planning and guidance can greatly improve the chances that a new farming business will succeed.

The “**New Farmer Mentoring Program**” will provide entrepreneurs serious about starting their own farming operation with the opportunity to learn from other experienced farmers and receive critical guidance in developing and managing their businesses.

Keith Morgan-Davie will serve as the lead farmer mentor. Keith has extensive knowledge and experience in variety of livestock marketing and production areas, including sheep dairying, meat and poultry production, as well as direct marketing and value-added production. Other mentors are standing by to offer their experience and expertise in areas such as small dairy farming, beef finishing, and farm produce production.

If you are a “new” farmer, don’t miss this opportunity to help ensure the success of your business. Participants in the program will be assigned a mentor who will work one-on-one with them to meet their individual farming goals. They will also develop a detailed work plan, which will chart their goals and serve as the basis for their business plan.

An application process will be used to select up to 6 “new” farmers to participate in the program. Selected participants will gather in March 2005 to meet their mentor(s), discuss the details of the program, and receive and review workbooks and resources that will be utilized throughout the process. By the fall of 2005, the new farmers and their mentors will have met several times on each other’s farms and worked closely to develop their long-term plan.

Each selected participant will be expected to pay a fee of \$100, plus purchase necessary publications and resources (approximately \$100). Applications for the “New Farmer Mentoring Program” will be **available January 1, 2005** and must be returned by February 15, 2005 in order to be considered.

***For more information or an application, please call Heather Sweeney at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County at (315)736-3394, extension 104.***

\*Partial funding provided by Cornell’s Small Farms Program.

## New Farmer Mentoring Project - Participants

<u>Name</u>	<u>Address</u>	<u>Phone</u>
(1) <i>Geoffrey Horan</i>	5132 Military Rd., Poland, NY 13431	(315) 826-7060
(2) <i>Miranda McHale</i>	9091 Ellis Rd., Holland Patent, NY 13354	(315) 865-8458
(3) <i>Vinny Faraone</i>	2133 Bonney Rd., Hamilton, NY 13346	<a href="mailto:vfaraone@verizon.net">vfaraone@verizon.net</a>
(4) <i>Sharon Hinson</i>	PO Box 872, Trumansburg, NY 14886	(607)387-9581
(5) <i>Jay Williamson</i>	6124 Willson Rd., Vernon Center, NY 13477	(315) 829-4302

## Resources Used in This Project

- Making Your Small Farm Profitable by Ron Macher; Storey Publishing.
- Whole Farm Planning by Elizabeth Henderson and Karl North; Northeast Organic Farming Association
- Exploring Your Small Farm Dream by the New England Small Farm Institute
- Small Scale Livestock Farming by Carol Ekarius; Storey Publishing