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Introduction and Goals

Navigating conservation practices and programs can be confusing and intimidating, especially for farmers who do not yet have a relationship with sponsoring agencies. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) identifies four groups of farmers as “Historically Underserved (HU)” —Beginning; Socially Disadvantaged; Veterans; and Limited Resource. To ensure inclusivity and equitable access to services, the USDA provides special provisions, including specific incentives, waivers, priorities, set asides, etc. to HU farmers. Despite earmarked services and provisions, HU farmers’ involvement with Federal agencies and enrollment in Federal conservation programs is lower than desired. **“Cultivating Conservation” is an educational effort to increase knowledge of conservation practices and programs, particularly among HU farmers. The program strives to improve the environmental and economic performance of working agricultural lands and build capacity of local partners to develop and implement effective projects.**

Participants of “Cultivating Conservation” should gain an:

- Increased knowledge of conservation practices and how conservation fits within farm planning
- Increased understanding of conservation programs and the program sponsoring agencies
- Increased understanding of conservation contractual agreements and program expectations
- Increased comfort level to engage and visit conservation partners such as Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)

Methods

- Partners University of Maryland Extension, University of Maryland Agriculture Law Education Initiative, University of Delaware Cooperative Extension, Maryland and Delaware NRCS, and Soil Conservation District field offices developed and taught programs
- Curriculum included introducing conservation practices, programs and agencies, how to fit conservation into whole farm planning, and conservation contracts and regulation
- Participants had various hands-on opportunities such as touring their local conservation service center, meeting their local conservation professionals, and/or touring farms to view conservation practices
- Workshop participants completed pre-class, end-of-class, and follow-up surveys which assessed demographics, interests, goals, knowledge gained, and actions taken as a result of the programming

“This presentation is great to help explain the process and where to begin. The process is overwhelming and to know the agencies a little better and how they work together and how you have to have a plan and how to make one... Thank you. The encouragement alone I gained from today's conversation was help I needed.”



Attendees

- Workshop participants were 67% female & 33% male; 5% Asian, 19% black or African American, 67% white, & 9% two or more races
- Participants’ interests varied (Fig 1), and 26% hoped to start farming in the near future, 13% were farming <1 year, 10% <5 years, 6% for 6-10 years, and 45% >10 years

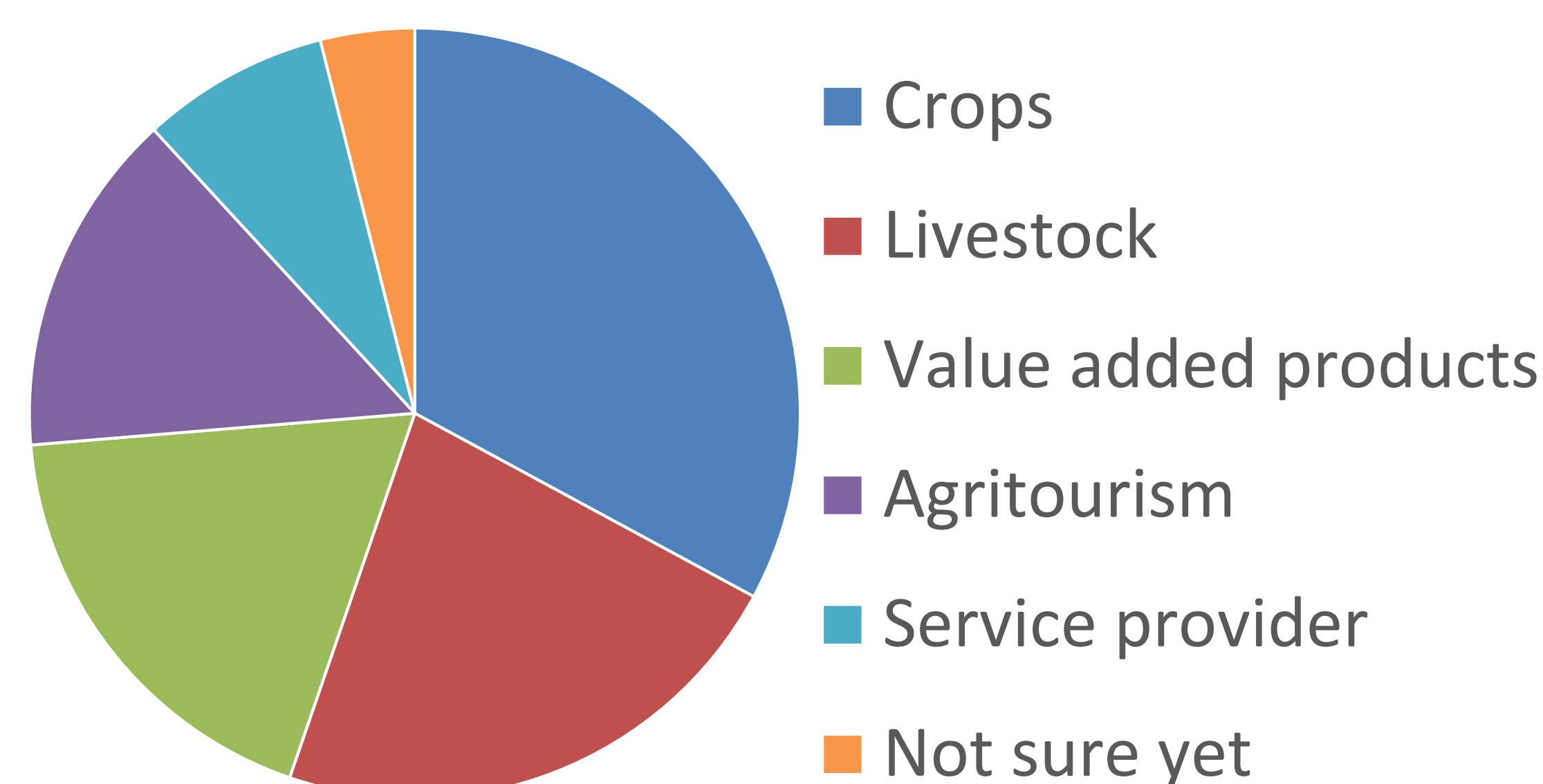


Figure 1. Agricultural entities participants were currently involved with or interested in (N = 76)

Results

- Programming reached 65 participants at in-person workshops, 34 participants at virtual workshops, and 239 participants at events that included an abbreviated presentation of the curriculum
- 98% of workshop participants said the program was good or excellent
- Participants reported gaining a significant increase in knowledge following the program in: using USDA Web Soil Survey tool (37% gain; $p = 0.015$), what federal, state and local agencies to contact (28% gain; $p = 0.006$), contractual obligations and expectations (40% gain, $p = 0.023$), and the role of conservation in a farm production plan (27% gain, $p = 0.012$)
- All participants who completed the follow-up survey, distributed 1-2 years following completion of the class, took some action following the workshop: 88% reviewed literature about various programs available, 81% reviewed Web Soil Survey for their property, 53% contacted their county NRCS office, 69% implemented a conservation practice, 38% visited a USDA service center or participated in tours, and 64% began or created a conservation farm plan



<https://go.umd.edu/cultivatingconservation>