

Emerging Farmers' Working Group

Local Food Purchasing Assistance Special Meeting, April 12, 12:00 – 1:30pm

Opening

- Call to order: Lillian Otieno
- Emerging Farmer Working Group (EFWG): Mark Gutierrez, Janssen Hang, Murugi Mutiga-Waititu, Hindolo Pokawa, Emily Reno, Erika Resendiz Alonso, Shelly Woods, Michael Birchard (EFWG facilitator).
- MDA Staff: Mike Zastoupil, Kate Seybold, Alex Cortes, Valerie Gamble, Lillian Otieno, Lebo Moore.

Welcome, housekeeping, introductions

Lillian welcomed everyone to third meeting of the Emerging Farmers Working Group (EFWG) regarding the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Program. She shared appreciation for those present and indicated that we will be open to comments from the public at the end.

During introductions, working group members were asked if they had had a chance to read the application. If so, do you have any thoughts to share? If not, what do you most want to know about regarding the application? A clarification was provided that “Request for Information” is the package that was shared in an email to members and posted on the website. It includes a link to the draft application and the form for feedback. Here are responses:

- Here to listen in, good to see how discussion has progressed. Happy to read MDA listening to what the community suggests, its different than how they do things. It's a moment of growth and we are learning to do things in a new way. I know there were discussions on the advisory group and who can participate. When you go to the community setting, even when all are benefiting from decisions, there is a way that can work still. Excited about this process and learning together.
- No specific questions currently
- I want to learn about the process and see how we can help each other, and I really care about food. No questions and I haven't read the doc yet.
- I did read the application. I'm excited about the three broad outcomes that the application is trying to support. No questions now, but I have one to ask as part of our conversation
- I read through the RFI and I don't have any questions.
- (In chat) Reading app now and I appreciate the reference to the IAP2 framework
- I think things are looking fantastic. I appreciate the work on bringing this initiative forward.
- I did review the RFI and don't have any questions right now.

Staff shared appreciation for everyone here today and for all the input and feedback that's gone into the draft application. Shared a hope that the draft reflects what the group has discussed and if not, hope we can continue to improve it so that it does.

Overview of LFPA proposal

Val walked through the current timeline proposed. The timeline has been brought up various times but continues to evolve and become more detailed. Current draft timeline:

- Summer 2022: continued planning
- Fall 2022: Funding start Sept. 15th allows us to continue planning
- RFP Period: Oct/Nov

- Application reviews: Dec/Jan
- Contracts established: Feb
- Procurement and distribution: March-Sept

Val also walked through a list of key pieces that the draft does not yet answer and indicates will need to be addressed during public engagement this summer of 2022. These include:

- Development of an application procedure designed to be accessible for the public
- Outreach efforts to support statewide engagement
- The merits of factors such as one versus two-year grant cycles and price list
- Applicant eligibility and criteria for evaluation applications
- Awardee experience (e.g., cohort could help foster relationships with idea of building long-term resiliency and connections)
- Overall program evaluation

There were no questions / feedback on this overview.

Review of draft objectives

Val shared that the draft contains objectives, deliverables, and outcomes/indicators. Not enough time to go through all of them today but the objectives felt like a middle ground big versus small picture-wise to explore during this time and discuss how they are sitting with this group. The objectives inform the actual work listed in the outcomes. The parameters of the first three objectives were provided by the USDA and the fourth is what we came up with at the state level.

Draft objective #1 – purchase related

Proposal: Invest at least \$1.4 million into food purchased from local farmers over the course of two years AND spend at least 51% of those dollars on purchases from socially disadvantaged farmers.

Val explained the reasoning behind this objective. Overall grant is 2.76 million. USDA indicated that at least 51% must be spent on food purchased from local farms. We are trying to establish a minimum with hopes of being higher than that. Leaves room for other expenses, transportation, storage, rentals (not purchases), admin by orgs that are contracted and MDA staff.

Member reactions and questions

Two members raised questions about the 51% proposed for purchases from socially disadvantaged farmers – how that % was determined, whether it also included the funding allocated to Tribal Nations, and whether it could be raised.

- These numbers are unique to the pool of funding MDA has access to, not the funding Tribal Nations have access to.
- We were trying to set a minimum, not saying we will only hit 51%. Some of the challenges we'd been considering would be the ability to have socially disadvantaged farmers be aware of this program and make the connections between entities who will apply. What is the ease of making these connections?

As I was reading more of the areas, we want to do public engagement in, I noticed language barriers, etc. If you are a socially disadvantaged farmer there will be challenges accessing this funding. But that is the whole point of the grant, to realize these challenges and try to do better. Is the 51% recognizing these challenges and trying to figure out how best this grant can be managed through evaluation and criteria, etc.?

- We haven't established criteria on who qualifies and how. There must be a structure for that, but we haven't developed what those qualifiers or requirements will be but that will be part of public engagement in summer 2022. It's about doing things differently and making sure those gaps that exist can be worked around.

Is the 51% for the whole program or for individual contracts?

- That's as a goal of the whole program.

I think that's an important thing to notate. There will be some that can achieve over that 51% and others that will be struggling that will have to work a bit harder. I imagine there will be a wide mix. As a goal of the whole

program seems like a good starting point. Has anyone even done math to know how we achieve that based on production?

I would set a stretch goal of 60%. What are the repercussions of not meeting our goal? We may surprise ourselves and reach 89%.

- As far as repercussions, we will likely need to document why we didn't reach a goal in a certain time frame.

I understand where we are getting base numbers. If the working group is a unique part of MDA and it isn't being done across the country, we are a bit more equipped to up that number because we have a framework of people representing those farms.

Staff then asked whether the 60% that had been proposed by a member seemed more reasonable or is it still too low.

Additional follow up comments questions from members - where would the 49% be spent?

- Would go to farmers that wouldn't meet definition of socially disadvantaged, but still meet definition of local.

More reason to raise to 60% and leave 40% to other farmers. I think 60% would be something that will work for people of this group.

The group was asked if it wanted to move forward and say this is a number that should be adjusted. Is 60% ok?

- Preference in chat to raise to 70% to show level of commitment committed to allocate funding to socially disadvantaged.
- Majority support for 70%.

Draft objective #2 - related to distribution and where food is going

Proposal: 1) Prioritize procurement of food that can be distributed within the community that it is produced. 2) Through outreach and public engagement, provide community members the opportunity to determine pathways and parameters for procurement and distribution that can meet the unique needs of farmers and underserved members of the community.

Member reactions and questions

I think something related to employment could be worth including here. I think earlier we had seen an opportunity that would be about how some of these dollars are creating employment opportunities for people across the state? Not sure if this is something to include as part of evaluation criteria. Maybe this is assumed, but it would be cool if that was part of the scoring criteria. There has been concern from the corporate space that it's not really investing in community.

- May not be able to fit into this objective but can continue conversation on how to hold that idea and put it into application criteria.

Potentially in evaluation process ensuring that their contracts represented from each region across the state.

A suggestion would be to divide the state into regions which would lower transportation costs. If goal is to keep it local, if you had a set region, no one would be travelling too far either way. If you try to go statewide, that's a huge network. If in smaller chunks it might be more doable to achieve.

- That has come up in public discussions. What we are hoping is that community could be defined broadly. Someone could put in an app for the SE region of the state. But in a different part of the state someone else could define community as a town. Pros and cons for this framework but trying to give communities the chance to define what they need and provide as much flexibility during the app process as much as possible and allow for flexibility of scale.

Draft objective #3 – related to sharing lessons learned, improve outcomes and adoption of best practices

Proposal: Organizations contracted for community projects provide contracts to socially disadvantaged farmers participating in the program to demonstrate their reliable product delivery and financial management and improve their chances of receiving business loans and/or accessing new markets.

Members indicated support for the objective and did not have suggested changes.

Other feedback raised

From the chat: the line on page 5 referencing BIPOC feels out of alignment with the definition of “emerging farmer” that MDA has defined – ex. Folks with disabilities, women, veterans? Limits the possibilities for farmers in my opinion.

- We added this language because of dynamics that have played out in society. Through a very small mini grant in produce safety, that has given us some limited experience with grant making, we have seen disparities in how funding is distributed. Within that grant, based on feedback that we had gotten from our advisory group, we had built that grant to prioritize emerging farmers. In this second year of doing it, what we see in the funding distributed is that without calling out BIPOC farmers, we have a list of awardees that are primarily not identified as BIPOC but are women, farmers with disabilities, veterans, etc. – BIPOC farmers have been left behind. Are going into this work wanting to make sure that the emerging farmers umbrella – which is broad - does intentionally carry forward all those populations.

I hear your point. Has what you are describing affected other groups of farmers, or have we noticeably seen the disparity affecting mostly the BIPOC community?

- It is very limited experience and only specific to the Produce Safety grant, but we did have a lot of submissions and the disparity mainly was reflective in BIPOC representation. Not to say there is no BIPOC representation but it's not moving the needle forward in the name of equity and distributing the resources where they are needed.

Maybe we can look at the wording of this part to not lose the intention but adjust.

I do agree with the BIPOC statement as it is centering equity and justice as a priority which it should be.

Maybe it relates to 70% we talked about earlier and that number could have a sub %. I see you are still honoring emerging farmers but also recognizing historical injustices that has particularly happened to BIPOC communities. I feel like you are hitting both in a supportive and good way.

In all ways we must center race and I agree with how you have it written.

Alex indicated that with the emerging farmers language and use being new at the MDA, that use of the term, and the ways in which it supports the various populations it encompasses would continue to be an area that we will want to be paying attention to.

Draft objective #4

Proposed objective has two parts that are more MN specific. Directly related to the grant and how we want this process to play out. It's also more focused on the needs of the state outside of this specific grant and what can we do to help the agency improve processes.

No specific discussion on this objective.

Objectives wrap-up

Val thanked members for the conversation and discussion. We have a lot to look at and hoping to get more through the Request for Information. With that we want to encourage everyone to continue looking at the application and please use the form set up that's linked on the Request for Information to send more feedback. We will be looking at all of that and finalize the draft by next Friday April 22nd.

Public engagement, next steps for EFWG

Staff shared that they have heard about some of the comments that have been shared around burnout and the effort required of working group members to participate in this process. Staff have also heard the need for community engagement and making sure MDA is not making decisions. Feedback will make this a better product; the flip side is the amount of time and investment, and we don't have the structures yet that support collaborative decision making. We are walking in between those spaces. We see it and want to continue walking that way, but what is reasonable to ask of the EFWG? How does the EFWG want to be involved moving forward? We have moved away from the advisory group model because that limits participation in the application process. So, we will be doing a second request for information with the community applications so that everyone knows and has a chance to apply but will need continued input and review on that.

Feedback

Members shared how they are feeling about their individual levels of capacity.

- I'm very passionate and excited about this. It's a turning point for Emerging farmers in our state. I think committees need to be formed to take this on. We have the draft and have a good foundation. If we have those areas that are highlighted – we need to develop those committees. I want to volunteer myself in certain capacities once we have those areas laid out to see how we can support the working team to see how when we get it, how this can support emerging and disadvantaged farmers in MN
- Because we are on the inside, it's very meaningful to us. We are happy to spend the time that is needed, but I have competing priorities and I'd like to commit and stay on but not always able to attend all the time. Being able to drop in and provide input when I'm able helps. Having that option is good.
- Agreed, it's always a big ask and it's important and what you are doing to take input from people who are impacted it's important. Even though we can't always make all the meetings it is important.
- Really appreciate the outreach and the opportunity to give input. I agree with what people have said and being a part of this is an opportunity and is unique. I might not always be participating but when I can, I will do what is possible. Food is important and supporting emerging and small farmers is important too. Thank you.

Staff indicated that this feedback is helpful, and we can take from comments to follow-up with EFWG on. Appreciate suggestions and ideas on a range of committees but also hearing people's capacity. Noted that several people had dropped off for other meetings already. We may not have enough capacity to form committees but perhaps can use the format of hosting optional meetings like we have. And if there are people that want to help us structure those meetings perhaps that could be a way to allow for more engagement for those that want it.

Open for Public Comment

No public comments.

Adjourn

Meeting adjourned at 1:30p.m.

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