

**NCR SARE Research and Education Pre-Proposal--2015**

## **Contract Grazing: Improving resilience of the livestock sector and the land in the North Central Region**

**Start date: October 1, 2015**

**End date: September 30, 2018**

**Project Duration: 3 years**

**Project Coordinator:**

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**Institution name: Southwest Badger Resource Conservation and Development Council**

**Institution Official Information: Cara Carper, Executive Director**

**Type of project: Education.**

**Systems Category: Integrated Crop and Livestock**

**Commodity Category: Other: Ruminant Livestock**

**Participating Institutions and Organizations:**

Nadia Alber, University of Wisconsin School for Beginning Dairy and Livestock Farmers

Greg Nowicki, WI Grass-fed Beef Coop

Tom Quinn, WI Farmers Union

Luke Wilson, Iowa Forage and Grasslands Council (Iowa subcontract)

Brian Peterson, Southern Iowa Forage and Livestock Committee

Meghan Filbert, Practical Farmers of Iowa

Joe Sellers, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

Terry VanDerPol, Land Stewardship Project (MN subcontract)

Kent Solberg, Sustainable Farming Association

Jane Jewett, Green Lands Blue Waters

Jim Paulson, University of Minnesota Extension

Dean Thomas, Fillmore County (MN) Soil and Water Conservation District

**Project Abstract (250 words): currently 246**

Contract Grazing (or custom grazing) is a practice that de-couples land ownership, livestock ownership, and pasture management. It is a flexible business model that spreads financial risk over multiple entities, providing benefits not only to partners, but to the environment and local economy.

An estimated 60% of arable land in Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin is controlled by non-farming landowners, for whom managed grazing may be an attractive alternative to renting for annual rowcrop production. Managed grazing is an economical means of raising ruminant livestock. As grain prices fall and demand for dairy and

livestock products remains strong, many acres of sensitive land could be reseeded to soil-conserving grasslands. Well-managed grazing can also increase productivity of expiring CRP and other underutilized grasslands, while providing grassland bird habitat and income for both landowner and livestock producer.

This project will educate livestock producers and landowners on the potential of the contract grazing (CG) business model to improve economic and environmental performance of their operations and provide land access for beginning farmers. We will focus on building skills in understanding lease agreements, negotiating rental rates, evaluating land suitability, and assessing financial and land management goals for both producers and landowners.

Project activities include a regional CG conference and local workshops designed to meet the unique educational needs of livestock producers and landowners in each state. Outcomes include increased awareness and utilization of CG among livestock farmers and landowners and increased acres of well-managed, sustainable grasslands in Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota.

**Project Description (75 words): currently 75**

This project will foster establishment of contract grazing as a model for livestock production in Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Contract grazing can increase forage production acres available for producers, help beginning farmers get established, allow non-farming landowners to meet income and conservation goals, and increase acres of well-managed grassland habitat. Project partners will carry out a multi-state conference, in-state workshops, and build a regional producer/landowner/educator network to build skills in developing successful contract grazing relationships.

**Project Outcomes (100 words): currently 97**

The livestock industry will gain resilience through increased access to land for forage production. Livestock producers will use CG to improve economic performance by expanding herd size, extending the grazing season, or establishing forage reserves. Beginning farmers will gain access to land through CG and will gain skills in managing livestock businesses through networking with experienced livestock producers. Non-farming landowners, a largely unknown and underserved audience that controls an estimated 40 million acres of arable land in the region, will use CG to maintain well-managed, income-generating grassland habitat. Many acres will be reseeded to soil-conserving perennial pastures.

**Method/Approach (200 words): currently 200**

This project builds a new contract grazing emphasis into existing successful programs for livestock producers, beginning farmers, and non-farming landowners in Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Contract grazing is used in Iowa, but is uncommon in the other states. We will create a regional network for sharing information among producers, non-farming landowners and educators; gaining skills in CG; and increasing access to forage acres. Partners will develop an online toolbox, identifying and modifying existing resources and developing new materials, creating a 'one-stop shop' for resources needed for successful CG partnerships.

1) A regional conference will bring together livestock producers, landowners, livestock managers, beginning farmers, and educators who are doing or interested in CG. The conference will provide a forum to gather experienced contract graziers and those interested in starting, to form a network for sharing information and resources.

2) In-state workshops. Partner organizations will conduct local workshops and other educational activities tailored to the unique needs of each state's livestock producers and landowners. Non-profits and agencies will partner with Land Grant Universities and Extension to develop programs.

3) Partners will work with existing beginning farmer training programs in their states to provide CG education and land access opportunities for beginning farmers.

**Relevance (200 words): currently 199**

As grain prices fall, demand for livestock products remains strong, and expiring CRP contracts return many acres to production, we have an opportunity to preserve or re-establish perennial forages through CG partnerships. Adoption of CG can increase acreage of well-managed pasture in the region, contributing to protecting water quality and soil health, and providing high quality grassland habitat.

Contract grazing can provide opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships among livestock producers, beginning farmers, and non-farming landowners. Cooperative Development Services estimates there are 200,000 parcels under lease in the Upper Mississippi basin, representing more than 40 million acres. Many of these landowners are unaware of alternatives to renting for cash grain production, and may be interested in soil conserving perennial forages or supporting a beginning farmer. We will help connect these landowners to resources and partners to meet their income and land management goals.

For the region's 81,000 livestock producers, access to additional grazing acres can reduce production risk and provide opportunities for herd expansion. As the average farmer age nears 60, CG can be a means of bringing on the next generation. Producers, beginning farmers, and non-farming landowners will gain skills in assessing potential partnerships and making sound leasing decisions.

**Impact (200 words): currently 195**

This project demonstrates CG as a business model that provides benefits to livestock producers, beginning farmers, and non-farming landowners. The current economic climate creates an opportunity to increase utilization of low-cost pasture, supporting economically and environmentally sound growth of the livestock sector, providing land access for beginning farmers, and contributing to making the region a major supplier of sustainably produced livestock.

There are few educational programs for non-farming landowners. Outreach to this audience will generate valuable information on these landowners' goals and needs, provide them alternatives to renting for annual crop production, give them tools to negotiate contracts beneficial to their goals, and help them connect with likeminded producers, leading to increased acreage of well-managed grassland habitat in the region.

Backgrounding beef cattle, finishing for grass-fed beef, cow-calf, raising replacement dairy heifers, sheep or goats are examples of enterprises that are suited to contract grazing. Beginning and experienced livestock producers will learn how to identify, evaluate, and negotiate access to rental land for grazing or hay production. By addressing the barriers of land access and availability of skilled labor, contract grazing can increase the resiliency of individual livestock operations and the industry as a whole.

**Suitability of Method (200 words): currently 200**

SARE projects have focused on managed grazing or land access for beginning farmers, but we found no projects bringing together livestock producers, beginning farmers, and landowners within a CG framework.

The initial regional conference will provide a forum for individuals interested in CG but who are isolated from one another due to geography or other factors. It will create a critical mass of people to foster networking among the three states and raise the profile of CG within the agricultural community.

In-state workshops will draw on expertise identified at the conference and will provide local peer-to-peer learning opportunities, using local people to identify and deliver the CG information most relevant to their geographical context.

Adaptation or development of lease templates, fact sheets, and other educational materials and creation of an online CG library will allow access to information needed to support successful execution of grazing contracts.

Our diverse partners, including farmers, universities, beginning farmer programs, non-profits, and conservation agencies, will incorporate this focused project into a solid base of experience and high quality programming. We will work closely with beginning farmer programs in each state to increase awareness of the CG business model and connect students with experienced livestock producers.

### Estimated Budget

	Total SARE Funds
<b>Personnel</b>	
1. WI Salaries	\$56,381
2. WI Fringe benefits	\$10,741
SUBTOTAL	\$67,121
<b>Non-Personnel</b>	
3. Supplies and Materials	
4. Travel (WI and regional conference)	\$3024
5. Publications, websites	\$10,000
6. Computers, Equipment	
7. Other direct costs	
a. Farmer honoraria, scholarships, speaker travel (WI and regional)	\$13,600
b. Conference and WI workshop costs (meeting rooms, A-V rental, etc.)	\$3500
c. Subcontract for IA	\$42,000
d. Subcontract for MN	\$42,000
TOTAL DIRECT COSTS	\$181,245
INDIRECT COSTS (10% of total)	\$18,125
<b>Total Request from NRC-SARE</b>	<b>\$199,370</b>

### Budget Description (500 words) currently 481

We have assembled a diverse team of experts from the three states, including experienced contract graziers plus staff from land grant universities, agricultural non-profits, and natural resources agencies. The funds requested will go to a non-profit in each state to serve as fiscal administrator of instate project activities.

Southwest Badger will serve as regional coordinator. The line items in this budget are totals for regional expenses (conference and farmer stipends) and for Wisconsin instate activities. Subcontracts for Iowa and

Minnesota are listed. Subcontracts will allow each state to develop and carry out instate workshops and educational activities suited to their local clientele.

**Personnel (\$67,121)**

As an education project coordinated by non-profits, our biggest expense is staff time. Salary funds will support one Southwest Badger staff at 33% for coordinating the project team and carrying out the regional conference and WI workshops.

**Travel (\$3024)**

Travel funds include mileage for three team members from WI to travel to instate workshops, the regional conference, and project team meetings. We plan one regional team meeting per year, plus two in-state team meetings per year. While the majority of project coordination will be conducted via email and conference calls, periodic face-to-face meetings will enhance our effectiveness.

**Publications, websites (\$10,000)**

A key long-term contribution will be a CG website, where new and existing materials (lease templates, fact sheets, cost-share information) will be made available. We have included \$8000 for web development and maintenance for two years. An additional \$2000 will be used for printing and/or purchasing publications for the conference and workshops.

**Farmer honoraria, scholarships, and travel (\$13,600)**

This includes honoraria and travel costs for three farmer presenters for the regional conference as well as two speakers per state for instate workshops. These funds will allow us to not only utilize local contract graziers but also foster connections among states. For example, speakers such as Bill Sproul, an experienced contract grazer managing several thousand acres in southern Kansas could contribute significantly to our learning. We have also included \$200 per farmer for up to 12 farmers who host field days or mentor beginning farmers and \$4000 for farmer scholarships to attend the regional conference.

**Conference and Wisconsin workshop costs (\$3500)**

These funds will cover meeting rooms, A-V rental, and other expenses associated with educational events.

**Subcontracts for Iowa and Minnesota (\$42,000 for each)**

We have set aside subcontracts for each state to develop and carry out their instate workshops and contribute to conducting the regional conference and networking. These funds will go to the Iowa Forage and Grassland Council in Iowa and the Land Stewardship Project in Minnesota. These non-profits will coordinate activities with land grant universities, Extension, and natural resource agencies in their state (see team list below). Detailed budgets will be provided if we are invited to submit a full proposal. Their expenses will likely be in similar categories to those listed above for Wisconsin.

**Team Members (250 words): currently 250**

**Wisconsin:**

Ron Schoepp: custom dairy heifer grazer, Lodi, WI

Laura Paine, Southwest Badger RC&D: grazing educator, grass-fed beef producer

Greg Nowicki, WI Grass-fed Beef Coop : beef producer and president, 100-member marketing coop

Nadia Alber and Dick Cates, WI School for Beginning Dairy and Livestock Farmers: beginning farmer education

Tom Quinn, Executive Director, WI Farmers Union: outreach to farmers, policy issues

**Iowa:**

Sam Mendenhall, custom beef operator, Garden Grove, Iowa. Participant in ISU Custom Grazing survey  
Joe Sellers, ISU Extension: beef specialist, cow-calf producer, conducted 2007 custom grazing survey  
Additional Iowa State University Extension and Outreach staff: Denise Schwab and Patrick Wall, Iowa Beef Center Beef Specialists; David Baker, Farm Transition Specialist, Beginning Farmer Center; Colin Johnson, Coordinator, Beginning and Young Livestock Producer Network  
Meghan Filbert, Practical Farmers of Iowa: livestock educator  
Brian Peterson, retired State Grasslands Conservationist, President Southern Iowa Forage and Livestock Committee, Board Member Iowa Forage and Grassland Council  
Luke Wilson, Iowa Forage and Grasslands Council (Iowa Subcontract)

**Minnesota:**

Douglas Piltingsrud, custom cow-calf grazer, Eyota, MN  
Terry VanDerPol, Land Stewardship Project: sustainable farming educator, beef producer (Minnesota subcontract)  
Caroline Van Schaik, Land Stewardship Project: sustainable farming educator, sheep producer, currently conducting RMA funded contract grazing survey  
Jane Jewett, Green Lands Blue Waters: website management, grazing educator, diversified livestock producer  
Jim Paulson, University of Minnesota Extension: sustainability in cattle production  
Diomy Zamora, University of Minnesota: agroforestry/silvopasture specialist  
Kent Solberg, Sustainable Farming Association: livestock educator, beef producer  
Dean Thomas, Fillmore County (MN) Soil and Water Conservation District: conservation grazing

**Farmer/Rancher involvement and compensation (100 words): currently 77 words.**

Farmer planning team members, presenters, and field day hosts will be provided with stipends. Stipends will also be provided to producers serving as mentors to beginning farmers. Our budget includes farmer scholarships to attend the conference as well as travel funds to bring in farmer presenters. Our partners include farmer organizations: Practical Farmers of Iowa, the WI Grassfed Beef Coop, WI Farmers Union, and the Sustainable Farming Association. A majority of our team members are farmers themselves.

**Statement regarding resubmitted ideas (100 words): currently 100 words.**

A version of this proposal was submitted in 2013.

Sustainability of the project. This proposal focuses on developing CG educational materials that will be permanently integrated into existing well-established programs allowing for long-term training opportunities and resource availability on CG.

Can CG capture environmental benefits? With declining grain prices, this project can drive transition of sensitive land back into perennial cover through well-managed, profitable grazing.

Can CG work? Producers who are making it work are on our team. Producers and landowners will gain skills in evaluating the roles of distance, trucking, cattle chores, etc. in establishing a viable rental partnership.