



What to Expect from Conservation Leadership Training for Farmers

Author: Jenny Seifert, UW-Madison Division of Extension

Among conservation professionals, there is growing excitement around the potential of farmer-led conservation efforts to move the needle on conservation practice adoption. This is, in part, because research has shown farmers are particularly moved by what their peers say and do (Prokopy et al., 2019; Ranjan et al., 2019), and social networks are consistent indicators of conservation practice adoption (Prokopy et al., 2019).

But, as many conservation professionals and already-engaged farmers can attest to, it's not easy to find farmers who are willing to engage their peers, join farmer-led groups, or step into leadership roles. Continuous recruitment of willing farmers is essential to the long-term sustainability of these efforts. Amid this call to increase farmer involvement, what outcomes can outreach professionals expect of leadership development efforts?

What does farmer leadership look like?

There are many ways farmers can lead in conservation. A report by Benning and others (2019) identifies three primary forms of farmer leadership in conservation:

- **Peer-to-peer leadership** can range from serving as a mentor and hosting a field day to merely being willing to have a conversation with a neighbor.
- **Consultation leadership** entails serving as an advisor to a group or project.
- **Decision-making leadership** is more formal leadership, where the individual determines strategies and resource distribution, such as serving as group president.

However, there are challenges with any of these forms of leadership that can undermine the long-term sustainability of farmer-led efforts.

Farmer-led efforts are inherently volunteer-led efforts — farmers are typically not paid to host field days, talk to their neighbor, or serve as group president. Active farmer leaders are often tapped frequently to represent their groups and/or share their experiences and expertise, which entails time spent away from their full-time jobs as farmers.

As a result, burnout among these volunteer farmer leaders is real. For example, according to findings from an unpublished evaluation, Wisconsin conservation professionals who support the state's producer-led watershed groups have expressed that sustaining commitment from farmer leaders is a growing challenge for these groups. Recruiting new farmers with the time and willingness to take the baton and relieve their exhausted peers is equally challenging.

Moreover, some farmers may have limited leadership experience or skills, which can contribute to their hesitancy to step up and risk their success as leaders.

Skill Building for Conservation Leadership

One approach to address these challenges is providing training in leadership skills to help farmers feel more motivated, confident, and capable as potential leaders. A research-based effort led by extension specialists at University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension developed, piloted, and evaluated such a training, called [Skills for Building Farmer Networks for Conservation](#).

The goal of the training was to prepare farmers to become more involved in farmer-led conservation efforts, focusing on their capacities in peer leadership, as the most accessible form of farmer leadership. The curriculum was based on a set of core competencies, or key skills and knowledge, farmers need to be effective peer leaders (Seifert et al., in press). These competencies were identified through focus groups and interviews, combined with a literature review. The competencies covered in the training included watershed literacy, communication skills, storytelling, listening, and relationship building. The pilot run of the training took place in three sites within the Mississippi River Basin — in Wisconsin, Indiana, and Arkansas — in collaboration with local partners. The evaluation included a survey disseminated to all training participants and one-on-one interviews with a smaller sample of participants.

Results of a Conservation Leadership Training for Farmers

If a farmer completes a training in leadership skills, what outcomes can conservation professionals expect? Will it lead to more farmers willing to be “leaders” in their watersheds or communities? Our evaluation results provide some insight that can help establish pragmatic expectations.

Increased Confidence in Leadership Skills

Results of the pilot run show farmers who participated in the training gained confidence in most of the skills they learned and/or practiced, particularly communication skills such as storytelling, as demonstrated in the following graph (Figure 1).

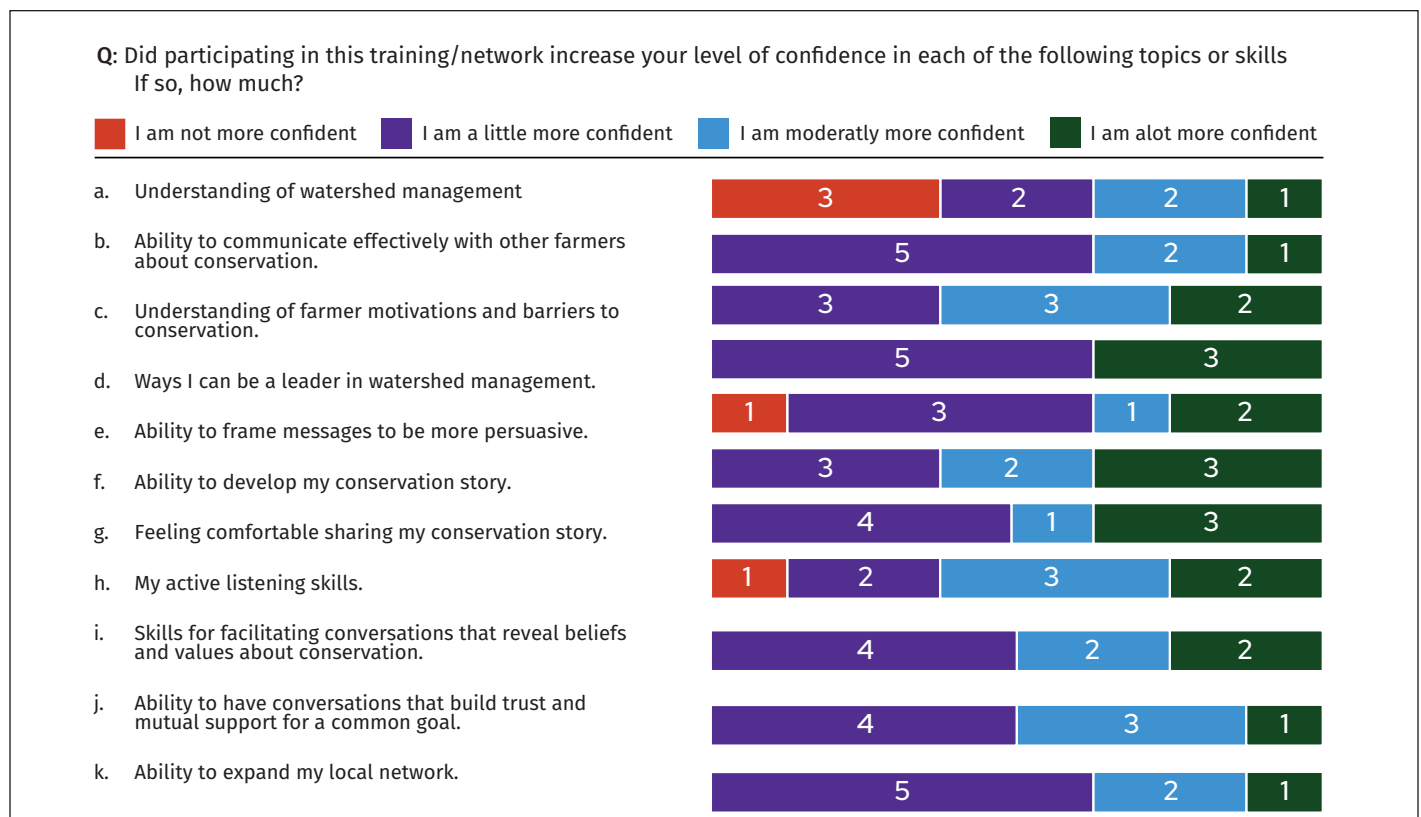


Figure 1. Participant increase in confidence as a result of the training.

All responding participants said they are to some degree likely to use the skills and knowledge they gained from the training in their interactions with other farmers, with 37.5 percent indicating somewhat likely, 25 percent indicating likely, and 37.5 percent indicating very likely (as seen in figure 2).

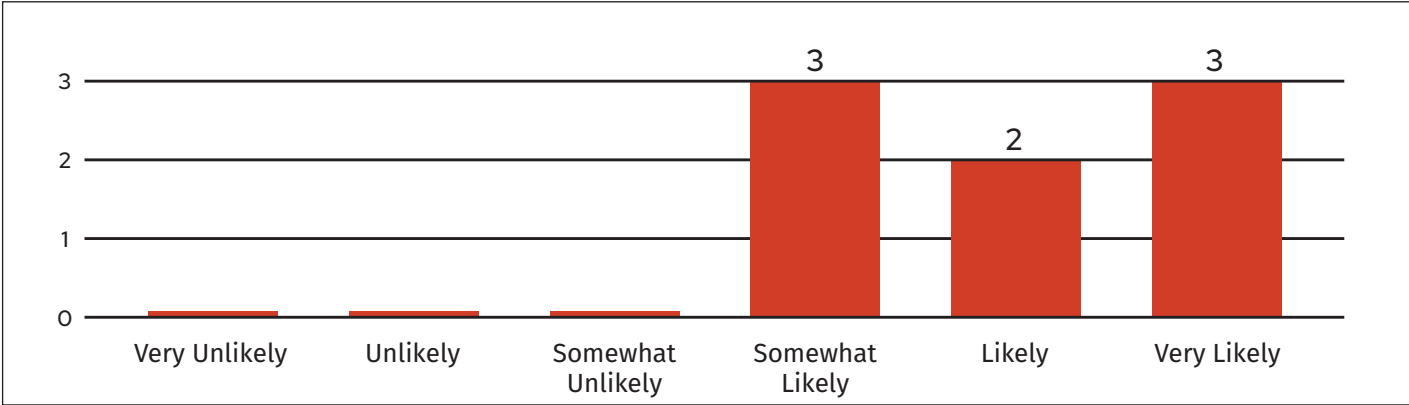


Figure 2: Participant-reported likelihood that they will use skills and knowledge they learned from the training in their interactions with other farmers.

Willingness to Lead

Participants expressed a slight increase in willingness to either participate in or lead a farmer-led conservation group, as shown in the figures below.

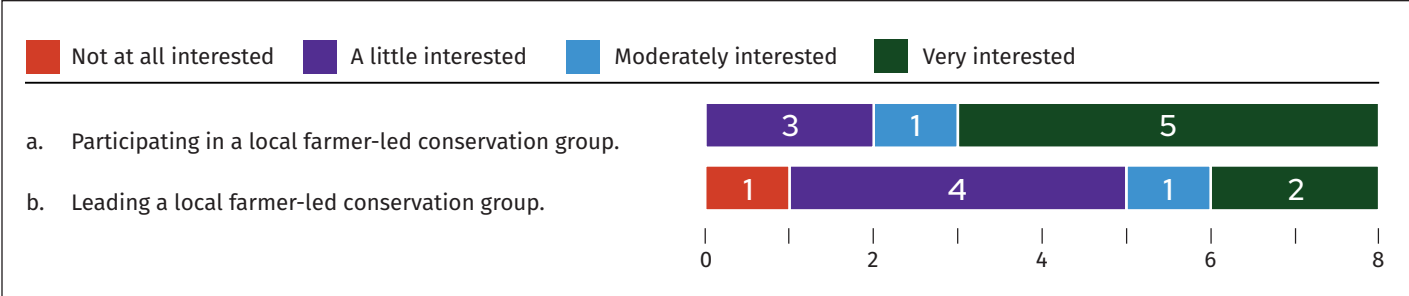


Figure 3: Participant willingness to lead BEFORE the training.

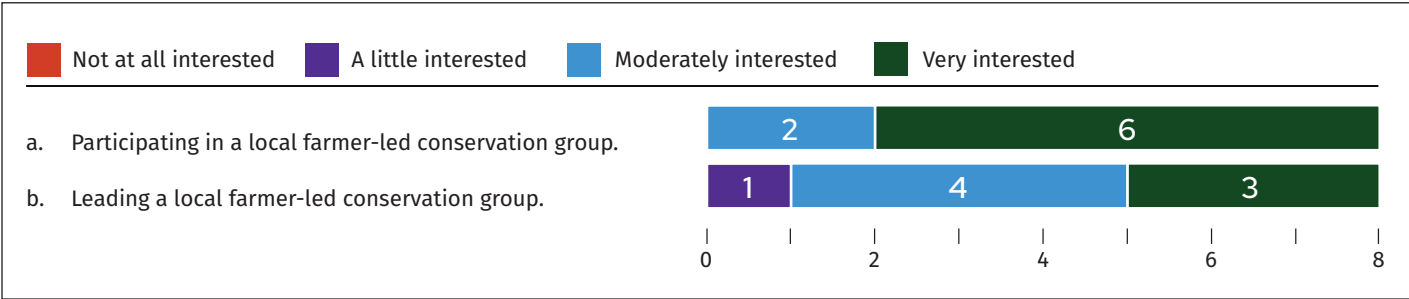


Figure 4: Participant willingness to lead AFTER the training.

And several of the responding participants indicated they plan to take on a leadership-related activity (e.g., encouraging or mentoring other farmers or hosting a field day) sometime in the year following the training (see figure 5).

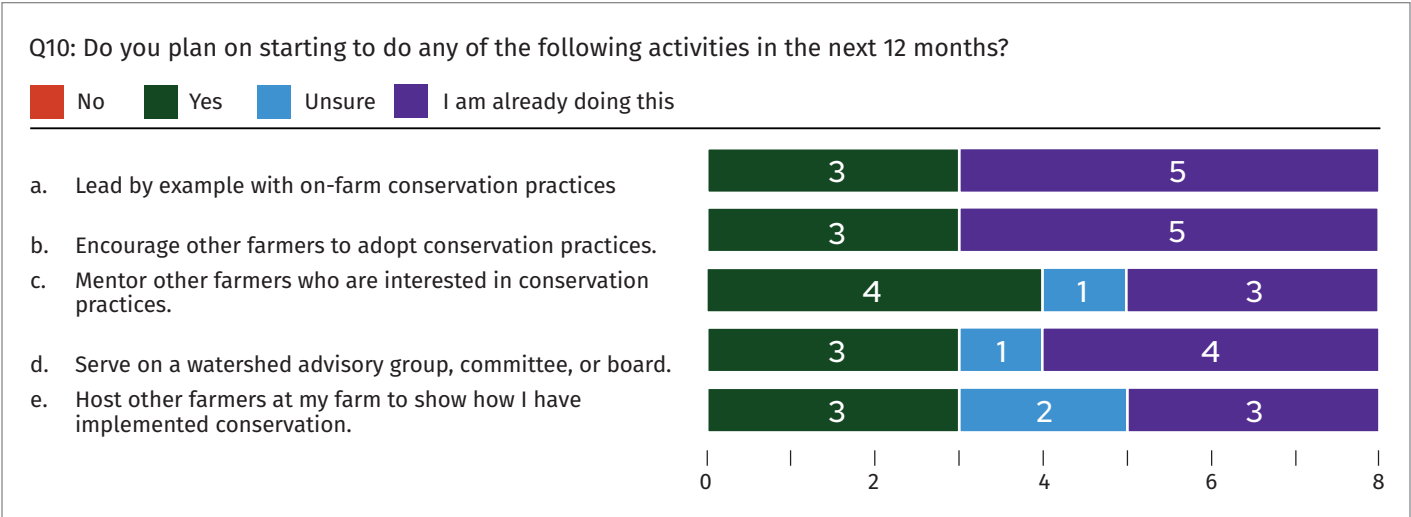


Figure 5: Participant intent to take on a leadership-related activity following the training.

Notably, in the follow-up interviews, participants expressed increased readiness and/or willingness to speak with their peers about conservation as a result of the training. For example, one farmer attributed the training to motivating him to host a field day. Others spoke about the training as encouragement to speak with their peers more deliberately about conservation, as exemplified by the following quotes:

"I mean it, while I enjoy conversation that may lead into [conservation], prior to this training, it wouldn't have been in my mind to do a more leading conversation."

"As a town chair, when I speak to a farmer or landowner about fixing an issue about which they are concerned, for example, dealing with a culvert or drainage, I would now incorporate things they could do on their farm to alleviate the issue and limit its impact on the public infrastructure."

This willingness to lead comes with an important caveat: Farmers may hesitate to call themselves “leaders.” At least among the farmers who participated in either the focus groups and interviews that preceded this training or those who participated in the training, there was a general reverence of humility as a leadership quality and/or a discomfort with the perceived role of a leader.

"There's a couple of characteristics that I've observed in...people that I think are doing a great job of leadership. One is modesty."

"I suspect that people who are truly effective at long-term engagement and leadership have a level of humility."

"For myself, the incentive of 'leadership' isn't particularly there. Teachers get paid for their job. My job is farming."

While this hesitancy may be an initial barrier to farmer recruitment, emphasizing the low-profile ways to serve as conservation leaders could help ease the discomfort. For example, leadership could mean merely being willing to talk with their neighbor about a conservation practice or mentoring another farmer.

Takeaways for Conservation Professionals

1. Leadership skills training is a promising starting point in the long game of expanding farmer-led conservation.

This project gives evidence that leadership training can increase a farmer's willingness to act in ways attributed to peer-to-peer leadership, such as talking with a fellow farmer about conservation when they otherwise may not have. But not all farmers who participate in a leadership skills training will be willing to take on more involved forms of leadership as a result. Developing an individual farmer's leadership potential may require continued experience and encouragement beyond a single training opportunity. Ultimately, building farmer leadership and networks will require time, resources, and persistence.

2. Talk about leadership without talking about leadership.

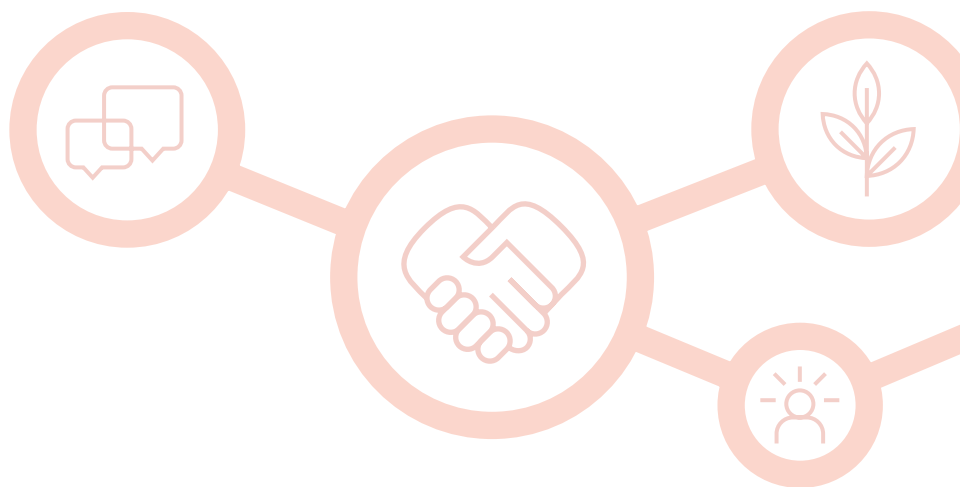
Given the observed hesitation among farmers to embrace a leader identity, conservation professionals may need to be mindful about how they frame efforts to build leadership skills among farmers. For example, centering the training on skills they may be interested in gaining anyway (e.g., communication and relationship-building) rather than on the pursuit of leadership may be one way to circumvent the hesitancy.

3. Expanding farmer leadership in conservation requires investing in people and relationships.

Ultimately, farmer leadership development to expand farmer-led conservation efforts requires requires not just investments from the people involved (i.e., the farmers as participants and conservation professionals as facilitators) but also investments in those same people. Research shows relationships between farmers and conservation professionals are critical for conservation practice adoption (Morris et al., 2021). Allocating more time and resources to support both farmers and conservation professionals — and the relationships between them — will be an important mechanism for helping conservation agriculture become more mainstream. Training opportunities are one way to invest in both farmer leadership and relationship building between farmers and conservation professionals.

References

- Benning, J., J. Bonnell, M. Daniels, A. Gumbert, & R. Power. (2019). Fostering and facilitating farmer leadership in watershed management projects. North Central Region Water Network. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin–Madison. <https://northcentralwater.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/317/2019/07/MARBreport-7-2019.pdf>
- Morris, C., J. G. Arbuckle, C. DeLong, & C. Lindahl. (2021). Conservation Practitioner Poll 2021 summary report. Ankeny, IA: Soil and Water Conservation Society. <https://www.swcs.org/resources/publications/2021-conservation-practitioner-poll>
- Prokopy, L. S., K. Floress, J. G. Arbuckle, S. P. Church, F. R. Eanes, Y. Gao, B. M. Gramig, P. Ranjan, & A. S. Singh. (2019). Adoption of agricultural conservation practices in the United States: Evidence from 35 years of quantitative literature. *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation*, 74(5), 520–534. <https://doi.org/10.2489/jswc.74.5.520>
- Ranjan, P., S. P. Church, K. Floress, & L. S. Prokopy. (2019). Synthesizing conservation motivations and barriers: What have we learned from qualitative studies of farmers' behaviors in the United States? *Society and Natural Resources*, 32(11), 1171–1199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2019.1648710>
- Seifert, J.M., Bonnell, J.E., Power, R., Mase, A.M., & Nardi, A. (in press). Core Competencies and Attributes of Farmer Leaders in Watershed-Scale Conservation Efforts. *Journal of Extension*.



This work was completed under Assistance Agreement No. 01D00921 awarded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension. It has not been formally reviewed by EPA. The views expressed in this document are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Agency. EPA does not endorse any products or commercial services mentioned in this publication.

The University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming in compliance with state and federal law. You may request an interpreter, materials in an alternative language or format, or other services to make this document more accessible by contacting disabilityaccess@extension.wisc.edu. There is no added cost to you for these services.

