

Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program: Progress Report on 2015 Awards

The Land Stewardship Project
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Background

The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) is a competitive grant program that provides organizations and educational institutions resources for training the next generation of agricultural producers. BFRDP was authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill but not fully realized until the 2008 Farm Bill when it was provided \$75 million in mandatory funding for fiscal years 2009-2012. After a break in funding in 2013, BFRDP was re-authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill and provided \$20 million in funding per fiscal year for 2014-2018.

USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) is responsible for administering BFRDP and will continue to manage the program. The Office of Advocacy and Outreach, which has a Small and Beginning Farmers and Ranchers program area, also coordinates between overall USDA beginning farmer initiatives and BFRDP.

Progress Report

This progress report provides an analysis of BFRDP's administrative and programmatic strengths and weaknesses based on feedback from FY 2015 grant recipients. In addition, it evaluates trends over the past six grant cycles and reviews changes made to the program following the 2014 Farm Bill. The progress report also includes a summary and new recommendations based on historical trends and data from FY 2015.

The progress report will not address the issue of merit or value of granted projects. Though beyond the scope of this report, evaluation of merit and the individual and collective effectiveness of awarded projects is something stakeholders and agency personnel should aim to assess.

We are hopeful this, and previous progress reports, along with NIFA's own program reviews^{1,2} will provide helpful insights on the merits of the program and needed improvements. BFRDP is the only federal competitive grant program exclusively dedicated to training beginning farmers and ranchers. With program demand the past six cycles far exceeding available resources, understanding the program's true value as well as how to better administer and target available funds is of great importance to the next generation of American agriculture.

¹ Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program 2010 Outcomes Report. Available on NIFA's website at https://nifa.usda.gov/sites/default/files/resources/Beginning%20Farmer%202010%20Outcomes_0.pdf

² Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program 2011 Outcomes Report. Available on NIFA's website at https://nifa.usda.gov/sites/default/files/resources/Beginning%20Farmer%202011%20Outcomes_0.pdf

Key Findings

Since 2009, demand for BFRDP has far exceeded available funding. In the last two grant cycles, the number of applications increased significantly—resulting in a much lower success rate for applicants. In 2015, only 15% of applicants were awarded grants.

Of these successful applicants, the majority of grants were awarded to projects led by community-based organizations (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Projects led by CBOs and NGOs also secured the majority of the funding—61 percent, and projects led by academic institutions were awarded 39 percent of the funding. After 2014, a year in which the majority of funding went to projects led by academic institutions, this distribution of funds represents a return to the historical trend of awarding more than half of the funding to CBO/NGO led projects.

A large portion of the available funding continues to serve socially disadvantaged and veteran farmers, well above the statutorily required 5 percent set-asides for each group. In 2015, respondents reported directing 43 percent of overall funding to serving socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers and 10 percent to military veteran farmers.

The regional distribution of grants was fairly balanced again in 2015, with projects in the West receiving somewhat fewer awards and funding compared with projects in the other three regions.

Methodology

Following the announcement of FY 2014 BFRDP grant awardees in October 2015, representatives from the Land Stewardship Project and the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition conducted the research for this progress report. Data was collected from two sources: project briefs posted on NIFA's website and phone interviews with principal investigators or representatives from the FY 2015 BFRDP grantees. Phone interviews were conducted with 31 of the 34 grantees. World Farmers Inc., Mississippi Delta Council for Farm Worker Opportunities Inc., and Hawthorne Valley Association did not respond to multiple interview requests. The methodology of data collection is consistent and similar in scope with the reviews published for FY 2009³, FY 2010⁴, FY 2011⁵, FY 2012⁶, and 2014⁷.

³ *Analysis and Recommendations for the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program*, The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

⁴ *Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program: 2010 Progress Report and Recommendations*, The Land Stewardship Project, February 2011.

⁵ *Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program: 2011 Progress Report*, The Land Stewardship Project, December 2011

⁶ *Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program: 2012 Progress Report*, The Land Stewardship Project, December 2012

⁷ *Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program: 2014 Progress Report*, The Land Stewardship Project, May 2014

Quantitative Analysis of 2015 BFRDP Awards

Out of the total 221 applications for funding that were submitted in FY 2015, 34 projects were awarded grants. This means that fewer than one out of every five proposals were funded, or 15 percent of total applications. (See Table I)

Table I: BFRDP Funding and Demand

Year	Grant Recipients	Applicants	Funding Awarded	Success Rate
2009	29	194	\$17,185,504	15%
2010	40	117	\$18,140,803	34%
2011	36	108	\$18,154,513	33%
2012	40	109	\$17,886,643	37%
2014	39	157	\$18,930,733	25%
2015	34	221	\$17,757,174	15%
Total	218	906	\$108,055,370	24%

Demand for funding has increased over the past few cycles. The number of applications increased by more than 50 percent from 2012 to 2014, and then again by more than 70 percent from 2014 to 2015. More than twice as many applications were submitted in 2015 as were submitted in 2012.

For a complete list of 2015 grants see Appendix 1.

Of the 34 projects that were funded in 2015 (see Table II):

- 22 (65 percent) were led by community-based organizations (CBO) or non-governmental organizations (NGO);
- 12 (35 percent) were led by universities/colleges or other academic institutions.

Of the \$17,757,174 in awarded grants (see Table III):

- \$10,761,758 (61 percent) supported projects led by CBOs/NGOs;
- \$6,995,416 (39 percent) supported projects led by universities/colleges or other academic institutions.

The mean CBO/NGO grant is \$489,171 compared with the mean university grant \$582,951.

Table II: Historical Distribution of Grants by Lead Institution Type

Institution Type	FY 2009	FY 2010	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2014	FY 2015
CBOs/NGOs	38%	63%	61%	65%	62%	65%
Academic Institutions	59%	37%	36%	35%	38%	35%
Trade Associations	-	-	2%	-	-	-
Federal Agencies	3%	-	-	-	-	-

See Appendix 2 for historical pie charts

Table III: Historical Distribution of Grant Funding by Lead Institution Type

Institution Type	FY 2009	FY 2010	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2014	FY 2015
CBOs/NGOs	34%	50%	54%	54%	44%	61%
Academic Institutions	57%	50%	42%	46%	56%	39%
Trade Associations	-	-	4%	-	-	-
Federal Agencies	9%	-	-	-	-	-

See Appendix 3 for historical pie charts

Further review of the university/college or other academic institutions category found that 9 of the 12 grantees are 1862 land grant institutions, two are 1890 land grant institution and one is a public university which does not have land grant status. Of the eight partnerships reported that included universities/academic institutions, six are partnerships with 1862 land grant institutions, and two partner with both 1862 and 1890 institutions.

The majority of the 34 grant recipients received standard grants, which follows similar trends to prior years. In total, two grantees received educational enhancement grants, three received development grants and 29 received standard grants.

The three development grants are led by CBO/NGOs. Of the two educational enhancement (EET), one was led by a CBO/NGO and one by a university.

Table IV: Grant Distribution by Grant Type

Institution Type	Development	Standard	EET
CBOs/NGOs	3	18	1
Academic Institutions	-	11	1

For FY 2015, the majority of projects will receive grant funding for three years. Specifically, of the 34 total grants, 26 are three years in duration, two are four years in duration, two are two years in duration, and four are one year in duration.

Seven of the 29 standard grants are renewals of projects funded in previous years. An additional five grant recipients reported previous awards, but said their current grant is not a renewal. Two recipients of 2014 development grants were awarded 2015 standard grants.

Seven renewal grants in 2015 is a small decrease from a total of eleven renewals in 2014 and nine in 2012. In each of 2014 and 2012, the majority of renewals were standard grants which received an additional 1-3 years of funding and one development grant from the previous cycle was awarded a standard grant.

In terms of grant size distribution, 21 of the grant projects and 80 percent of total funding (\$14,253,321) was awarded to grants \$500,000 and larger. While this is down slightly from the 83 percent of overall funding dedicated to awards \$500,000 and larger in 2014, it's still higher than in the 2012 cycle in which 74 percent of funds went to projects in the top percentile (\$500,000-\$750,000).

Of the 21 grants awarded in the top percentile, 8 were awarded to grants led by academic institutions and 13 were awarded to grants led by CBO/NGOs. Of the eight grants awarded in the middle percentile (\$200,000-\$500,000), three were awarded to grants led by an academic institutions and five were awarded to grants led by CBO/NGOs. In the bottom percentile (up to \$200,000), one award was given to a grant led by an academic institution and four were given to grants led by CBO/NGOs.

The difference between the size of the average award given to projects led by universities compared with the size of the average award given to projects led by CBO/NGOs is the lowest in the history of the program. Though the average award to a project led by an academic institution/university is still nearly \$100,000 greater than the average award to a project led by an CBO/NGO, that disparity is down significantly from 2014 when the average grant to a project led by an academic institution was more than \$350,000 greater than the average grant to a project led by a CBO/NGO.

Table V: 2015 Grant Amount Distribution by Range

Dollar range	# of Grants	Total Funding	% of Funding	CBO/NGO compared to Univ/Academic
Up to \$100,000	-	-	-	-
\$100-\$200,000	5	\$587,379	3.3%	4 to 1
\$200-\$300,000	3	\$695,590	3.9%	3 to 0
\$300-\$400,000	1	\$310,419	1.7%	1 to 0
\$400-\$500,000	4	\$1,910,465	10.8%	1 to 3
\$500-\$600,000	2	\$1,044,393	5.9%	1 to 1
\$600-\$700,000	8	\$5,378,221	30.3%	5 to 3
\$700-\$750,000	11	\$7,830,707	44.1%	7 to 4
Total	34	\$17,757,174	100%	34

NIFA evaluates applications on a scale, and determines which are eligible for funding and which are not. In 2015, 139 applications, 63 percent of all applications submitted, were rated highly enough to be “fundable.” Only 34 of those 139 fundable applications were awarded grants.

Since 2012, the success rate of applications meritorious enough to be considered “fundable” has been trending downward. In 2012 approximately half of the applications deemed fundable were awarded grants, down to less than a quarter of successful “fundable” applications in 2015 (see Table II).

Similarly, NIFA’s evaluation of 2015 applications notes that 69 percent of the total funding requested was fundable. Of those requested \$83,626,906 deemed fundable, \$17,757,174, or 21 percent of fundable dollars requested were actually awarded.

Table VI: Historical Success Rates of Fundable Applications

Year	Overall # grants requested	# requests fundable	% requests fundable	# grants awarded	Success rate of fundable requests
2012	109	74	68%	40	54%
2014	157	109	69%	39	36%
2015	221	139	63%	34	24%
Total	487	322	66%	113	35%

Table VII: Historical Funding Requested Compared with Funding Awarded

Year	Overall \$ requested	Requested \$ fundable	% requested \$ fundable	Funding awarded	% of fundable funding awarded
2012	\$62,649,814	\$43,535,058	69%	\$17,886,643	41%
2014	\$92,669,403	\$67,578,541	73%	\$18,930,733	28%
2015	\$125,555,284	\$83,626,906	67%	\$17,757,174	21%
Total	\$280,874,501	194,740,505	69%	\$54,574,550	28%

Partnerships and Collaboration:

Partnerships⁸ and collaborations⁹ are important elements of BFRDP, and have been since the creation of the program. These related, but different aspects of the program are specifically defined in the FY 2015 RFA. The additional guidance below was also provided in the RFA for determining priority in grant making as it relates to partnerships and collaborations.

⁸ “Partnership” means a relationship involving close cooperation between parties having specified and joint rights and responsibilities in the management of the project. 2015 BFRDP RFA Part VIII – OTHER INFORMATION

⁹ “Collaborator” means a person or an organization that cooperates with the applicant in the conduct of the project but is not immediately connected to the management of the project. 2015 BFRDP RFA Part VIII – OTHER INFORMATION

Partnerships and Collaborations: Priority will be given to partnerships and collaborations that are led by or include NGOs, CBOs or SAEOs with expertise in new agricultural producer training and outreach. Only applications with a minimum of 25 percent (25 percent) of the Federal budget allocated to these partner organizations (i.e., NGOs, CBOs and SAEOs) will be given this priority. In addition, these partner organizations must have been involved and played an important role in the project design and development. Projects must also employ an equitable and appropriate decision-making and oversight process that includes all partners to be given this priority.

In interviews, grantees were asked a series of questions regarding the partnerships associated with their projects. Questions included: 1) number of partners, 2) names of partners, 3) degree to which partners are participating in the project (low, medium, and high), and 4) percentage of funding each partner will receive while participating in the project.

While these questions were asked of each grant recipient, varied responses and the unique nature of each awarded project makes analysis of the role of partners difficult to quantify and assess. Below is the best characterization of the information gathered.

In review and interviews with 31 grant recipients, we found that approximately three fourths of the projects (24) for which data is available included partnerships with one or more CBO/NGO or university partners. Partners represented a wide range of types of organizations. Table VIII shows partnerships by type.

This is significant increase from 2014, in which only half the projects included partnerships. Though 2014 shows an increase in partnerships from the historically low levels in 2014, respondents in 2015 reported a lower number of partnerships compared with historical norms. In FY 2012, 34 of 39 respondents reported at least one partnership; and 32 of 35 respondents reported partnerships in 2011.

Table VIII: Partnership by Type

Primary Grantee	Partners	Engagement of Partners
Univ/College	CBO/NGO	6
Univ/College	CBO/NGO and Univ/Coll	3
Univ/College	Univ/Coll	1
Univ/College	none	2
CBO/NGO	CBO/NGO	10
CBO/NGO	CBO/NGO and Univ/Coll	2
CBO/NGO	Univ/Coll	2
CBO/NGO	none	5
Total		31

When academic institutions or universities were the primary grantee, they were most likely to partner with CBO/NGOs. Six partnered with only CBO/NGOs, three partnered with other universities and CBO/NGOs, and one partnered only with other universities/academic institutions.

The most common type of partnership arrangement in projects led by CBO/NGOs was with other CBO/NGOs. Two partnered with universities/academic institutions but not CBO/NGOs. Two partnered with both universities and CBO/NGOs.

Of the two universities reporting no partnerships, both reported CBO/NGO collaborators. Though two universities without any partnerships is down from 2014 in which four universities had no partners, it is still a relatively high number of grants awarded to universities with no partnerships in the context of historical trends. In 2011 and 2012 all universities awarded grants reported at least one partnership.

Five CBO/NGOs reported no partnerships, down by half from 2014 in which 10 CBO/NGO led projects without partners were awarded grants. All five report multiple collaborators.

Degree of Engagement with Partners

Of the 24 respondents that spoke to the degree of participation of their partners, 20 rated the participation of their partners as high. Three respondents rated their partnership involvement as medium and one as low (See Table IX).

Table IX: Degree of Partner Participation

Degree of Participation	Grantee responses
High	20
Medium	3
Low	1
Total	24

Twenty respondents identified their partners as sub-grantees. 13 of those estimated that their partners in total received at least 25 percent of the grant, while 7 estimated that their partners received less than 25 percent. Our estimation is that in FY 2015, approximately 21 percent of the total funds were disbursed to sub-grantees, which is consistent with previous years (See Table X).

Table X: Resource Distribution to Sub-Grantees

% to sub-grantees	1 to 24%	25 to 49%	50 to 74%	75 to 100%	Total sub-grantee
Number of grants	7	8	4	1	20

The role of collaborators was even more difficult to assess and ranged so significantly that we were unable to make any coherent conclusions from the data. Under the “Qualitative Aspects” section of this report, we do provide some additional feedback regarding partnerships and collaborations that grant recipients articulated during interviews.

Socially Disadvantaged and Limited Resource Farmers

The authorizing language for BFRDP in the 2014 Farm Bill stipulates that at least five percent of funds must be designated for projects benefiting limited resource and socially disadvantaged beginning farmers (SDA), as well as farm workers desiring to become farmers or ranchers.¹⁰ Though this is a major reduction in the historic statutory set-aside of 25 percent authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill, the last two grant cycles have shown that a projects directed to socially disadvantaged farmers are still securing over 25 percent of the funding and well over the 5 percent mandatory set-aside.

Interviews quantified how many grants assisted these targeted populations and the degree of focus these projects had with socially disadvantaged and limited resource producers.

Of the 31 awards for which we have data, 21 of the projects targeted outreach efforts to socially disadvantaged and limited resource producers. The majority (13 of 21) focused at least 75 percent of efforts on those constituencies.

More than 65 percent of grantees surveyed targeted a portion of their outreach and programming to SDA farmers, committing a total of \$7,664,129, or 43 percent of BFRDP funds for 2015. Funding directed to serving socially disadvantaged farmers is trending downward over the last few cycles—43 percent of overall funding directed to SDA farmers in 2015 is down from 46 percent in 2014 and 58 percent in 2012.

Table XI: Number of Grants and Resources that Support SDA Groups

	1 to 24%	25 to 49%	50 to 74%	75 to 99%	100%	Total
Number of grants	3	2	3	7	6	21
Total Resources	\$324,339	\$258,719	\$552,476	\$3,501,147	\$3,027,448	\$7,664,129

Respondents were asked three questions about their work with SDA farmers: 1) what percent of your outreach, programming, or other project activities is targeted to a socially disadvantaged group?; 2) which specific groups does your project target or reach?; and 3) has your organization worked with this community before?

¹⁰ Agricultural Act of 2014, Public Law 113-79, Section 7409

Responses that varied in specificity make data about programming serving SDA farmers somewhat difficult to compare project-to-project. Many projects served more than one socially disadvantaged community, or indicated they served multiple socially disadvantaged groups within one community. For instance, projects targeted to a particular community of color often report special outreach to women and military veterans within the community, or note that their programming also works with other socially disadvantaged farmers within their service area.

Seven projects indicated they targeted programming to African Americans, six to women, six to Native Peoples (Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, tribal communities), five to immigrants and refugees, five to Latinos, three to low-resource farmers, three to Asian Americans, and two to people who were formerly incarcerated.

Of the 14 CBO/NGOs that targeted programming to SDA farmers, three groups targeted 20-50 percent of programming to SDA farmers and 11 targeted more than 50 percent of programming to SDA farmers. Three CBO/NGOs targeted 100 percent of their programming to SDA farmers.

Seven universities targeted programming to SDA farmers. Of those, one targeted 1-20 percent of programming to SDA farmers, one targeted 20-50 percent of programming to SDA farmers, and five targeted more than 50 percent of programming to SDA farmers. Three universities targeted 100 percent of their programming to SDA farmers.

Responses to the open-ended question “Has your organization worked with this community before? If so, how?” varied. Most CBO/NGOs were based in the community they sought to serve, and had organizational leadership from the community—both staff and board members. A few noted that their programs were designed by members of an SDA community, and that committees and advisory councils made up of members of the community were responsible for shaping the program. Many noted that their organizations were a long-time presence in their communities.

Universities, on the other hand, most commonly noted past projects or work with the community as well as partnerships and collaborations with CBOs with longstanding relationships in the communities. A couple of universities also have staff members from the SDA communities to which they’re directing programming. A few universities and CBO/NGOs mentioned that some of their work targeting SDA farmers and ranchers overlaps with their programming targeting veteran farmers and ranchers.

Military Veteran Farmers

The 2014 Farm Bill created a new set-aside for farmers and ranchers who are veterans of the U.S. military. Statute stipulates that five percent of funds be set aside for projects that address the needs of military veteran farmers.¹¹

Interviews with grant recipients revealed that 14 projects specifically target a portion of their work to farmer veterans. Two projects dedicate 100 percent of their outreach and programming to veteran farmers. Overall, \$1,718,592 and 10 percent of funds in FY 2015 are being utilized to

¹¹ Agricultural Act of 2014, Public Law 113-79, Section 7409

support farmer veterans. 2015 is the second year of the veteran set-aside, and shows a slight reduction of overall funding dedicated to military veteran farmers down from 12 percent in 2014.

Table XII: Number of Grants and Resources that Support Military Veteran Farmers

	1-24%	25 to 49%	50 to 74%	75 to 99%	100%	Total
Number of grants	11	1	0	0	2	14
Total Resources	\$782,725	\$123,367	-	-	\$812,500	\$1,718,592

As with organizations that work with SDA farmers, organizations that indicated they work with military veteran farmers were asked these questions: 1) what percent of your outreach, programming, or other project activities is targeted to veterans? and 2) has your organization worked with this community before?

Nine CBO/NGOs and five universities/academic institutions indicated they work with farmer veterans. Of those, seven CBO/NGOs target 2-25 percent of their programming to farmer veterans and two target 100 percent to farmer veterans. All five universities target 10-25 percent of their programming to farmer veterans.

As with projects that target programming to SDA farmers, projects serving veteran farmers had varying degrees of experience working with military veterans. Most CBO/NGOs and universities are partnering or collaborating with veterans organizations. Both types of institutions also cited past work with military veteran farmers, though many noted that their experience working with veterans was limited. One CBO/NGO had veterans on staff, and two noted that military veterans were on their boards or in other positions of leadership within the organization. One university said it had no experience or connections with military veterans.

Reflections on the Application Process

Grant recipients were asked to provide input on the application process itself, including the level of difficulty compared to other grant application processes they’ve experienced (See Table XIII).

Table XIII: Level of Difficulty Compared to Other Grants

Level of Difficulty	Grantee responses
More	16
Same	14
Less	1
Total	31

Grantee estimates of the time spent writing the application ranged from 30 hours to 1,400 hours. Three grantees estimated they spent 30-50 hours on the application. Nine reported spending 50-100 hours putting together their applications. Nine said they spent between 100 and 200 hours on the application process. Nine grantees reported spending more than 200 hours on their application.

The amount of time spent developing and submitting the grant varied widely, but in 2015 we estimate an average of 185 hours per grant. That represents an increase from an estimated 162 hours per application in 2014. On average, over the five cycles we've tracked (2010-2015), it takes a successful grantee 167 hours to write and submit an application.

Regional Distribution

The regional balance and distribution of grants in FY 2015 is summarized in Table XIV below. The highest concentration of funds were awarded to projects in the Northeast, which secured 31 percent of overall funding. The region with the highest number of grants is North Central, where 11 grantees or 32 percent of overall grantees are based. The region with the lowest concentration of grants was the West, which represents 15 percent of overall grants and 13 percent of overall funding.

The regional distribution of the 2015 grants is comparable with past distribution. Three regions are fairly well balanced (the South, Northeast and North Central) all secured between 28 and 31 percent of the funding. Fewer awards and less funding went to projects based in the West this cycle. Compared with 2014, the West tied the Midwest for the most grants and highest percent of overall funding, and projects in that region secured 28 percent of grants and 28 percent of funding.

Importantly, regional distribution does not necessarily reflect service area. This analysis of regional distribution is based on the location of the lead-organization. Four organizations indicate their service area is national, and eight projects serve more than one state.

Table XIV: FY 2011 Regional Distribution of Grants and Resources

Region	Number of grants	Funding allocation	% of grants	% of funding
South	9	\$5,035,355	26.5%	28%
Northeast	9	\$5,418,993	26.5%	31%
West	5	\$2,278,559	15%	13%
North Central	11	\$5,024,267	32%	28%
Total	34	\$17,757,174	100%	100%

Service Area

Grantees were asked to define the service area of their projects. While there is substantial variation, service areas generally broke down into six groups. Statewide is the most common service area by far.

Table XV: Geographic Service Area of Grants

Service Area	Number of Grants
Localized regions, including metropolitan areas, cities, or reservations	6
County or numerous counties	4
Statewide	12
Multiple States	8
National	4
Total	34

Qualitative Comments

Grantees were asked two open-ended questions. First, **“Is there anything you think is particularly strong about BFRDP?”**

As in past years, grantees were largely grateful that there is funding available to train, support and develop beginning farmers and ranchers. Fifteen grantees cited the basic existence of the program as strength. One grantee said, “It’s good to have this kind of program out there for farmers that are just starting out. Farming is not an intuitive occupation and to have a program that can focus on this group is very good.”

Grantees also lifted up BFRDP’s focus on community-based solutions. “It’s a strength that they’re looking for people outside of extension and the usual suspects that seemed to get this kind of money in the past, and asking non-profits to partner with extension and make these long term commitments,” said another respondent.

Grantees also noted good working relationships with NIFA staff. Twelve respondents discussed the value of productive relationships with NIFA staff. Grantees found NIFA staff responsive, helpful and easy to work with.

Eight grantees cited the duration of the award (up to 3 years for a standard grant) as a strength, stating that it gives enough time to do active learning and adjust programming to best meet the needs of beginning farmers and ranchers.

Both CBO/NGO and university grantees continue to value the program's emphasis on partnerships and collaborations. Seven respondents said they consider this one of the programs greatest strengths.

Many grantees also like the fact that the program dedicates some funding to serving socially disadvantaged and veteran farmers.

Grantees were also asked, **"What suggestions for improvements do you have?"**

The bulk of the suggestions for improvement were, as in past years, largely focused on the application process.

Eight grantees noted the time and effort required to submit an application, and considered the difficulty of applying to be one of the biggest challenges facing the program. One grantee noted, "We're a small organization, we put a lot into this application. Even last year we wouldn't have had the resources to do this. This type of grant—it's really attracting a certain size of organization. There's a barrier."

Many grantees said they had applied for BFRDP funding previously, and three of these added that they found they found interpreting reviewers comments on applications challenging, or found the comments "uneven." One grantee said, "Our application was similar to one we submitted two years ago. We took into consideration the critique we got on that application. But some of the comments seemed to have nothing to do with what we had written down—sometimes it seems like the reviewers don't even read these [applications]."

Six grantees mentioned the 25 percent cost share as a barrier to participation in the program, and/or a factor in limiting the scope or duration of their proposal.

Respondents also continue to note that, while they have good relationships with NIFA staff, they find the grant department very difficult to work with.

Summary

Demand for BFRDP far exceeds available funding.

Since the first year of the program, demand for BFRDP grants has always outstripped available funding. In the last few years, the trend accelerated and both the number of applications and the amount of funding requested increased substantially—more than doubling between 2012 and 2015. In 2015 only 15 percent of applications were awarded funding—meaning 85 percent of applicants supporting beginning farmers and ranchers had to seek funding elsewhere or cut back on their work.

In keeping with statutory intent, the majority of funding was awarded to projects lead by community-based organizations.

The historic norm in BFRDP is to award the majority of the grants and the majority of the funding to projects led by CBO/NGOs. The distribution of funding in 2014 deviated from that norm, and the majority of the funding went to projects led by universities. The 2015 cycle restored a balance

in which projects led by CBO/NGOs are awarded at least half the funding—and, in fact, 2015 shows the largest percentage of the funding (61 percent) going to projects led by CBO/NGOs to date.

High value grants were well distributed, but take up a large portion of overall funding

The grants valued at more than \$500,000 were well distributed between projects led by CBO/NGOs and projects led by universities. That said, these higher-value grants still accounted for 80 percent of the total funding.

Partnerships have increased from last cycle, but are still lower than the historical norm

Partnerships and collaborations are a core component of BFRDP, and the grantees reporting no partnerships has been fluctuating up and down in the past couple of years. However, for the second year in a row multiple projects led by universities reported no partnerships. That is unusual in the context of previous BFRDP trends, in which the trend had been that all university-led projects reported at least one partnership.

Projects serving socially disadvantaged farmers still make up a large percentage of the awards, but funding dedicated to these projects is trending down

Funding dedicated to serving socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers accounts for 43 percent of overall BFRDP dollars in 2015. That is well above the 5 percent set aside, and much greater even than the previous 25 percent set aside. That said, the percentage of funding directed to programming for SDA farmers and ranchers is trending down—it has decreased in each of the last two grant cycles, from 58 percent in 2012 and then 46 percent in 2014.

Grantees continue to find the application process challenging

Similar to previous years, grantees—especially CBO/NGOs—say they find applying for BFRDP grants time-consuming and difficult. Those who applied in previous cycles often say they appreciate NIFA’s efforts to make the application process more approachable, but still find it difficult and expensive to submit an application.

Recommendations

BFRDP is a critical tool in the nationwide movement to establish the next generation of American farmers. It has never been business as usual—its excellence as a program is the result of it being grounded in the experience, vision and skills of community leaders across the country. The following recommendations were developed to inform and assist USDA staff, congressional leaders and others who are invested in the continued success of BFRDP. These recommendations are based on the above analysis of the 2015 awards, and historical trends that have developed over the six funding cycles since the program first awarded grants in 2009. The purpose of the recommendations is to underline existing strengths in BFRDP, keep the program accountable to statutory intent, and lift up opportunities for improvement.

The recommendations are divided into two sections: first, recommendations for Congress for the continuation of and improvement of BFRDP through legislation. Second is a set of agency recommendations for NIFA for the regular management and implementation of the program.

Recommendations for Congress:

1. ***Increase funding for BFRDP by 50% in the next Farm Bill.*** Demand for BFRDP has been trending steadily upward, and reached a peak in 2015. Requests for funding far exceed available dollars, to the point that less than a quarter of projects NIFA considers “fundable” were awarded grants in 2015.

Over six funding cycles, BFRDP has served farmers in nearly every state. Across the nation, BFRDP has invested in programs that help beginning farmers take advantage of emerging opportunities in agriculture and build sustainable farm operations. More and more organizations are investing in innovative education and support systems for beginning farmers, and still more are working to grow and deepen the infrastructure they’ve begun to build. Keeping this infrastructure viable—and expanding it to effectively serve more beginning farmers—requires sustainable funding.

That meritorious applications have only a one in four chance of success is a significant problem for BFRDP. While the program does not, and shouldn’t, guarantee funding for all qualified applicants, the disparity between funding requested and funding available makes the expensive, and time consuming, investment in applying for a BFRDP grant increasingly risky.

Increasing overall funding for the program from \$100 million to \$150 million over 5 years, or \$20 million to \$30 million annually, would go a long way toward addressing the twofold increase in demand over the past five years.

Recommendations for program administration:

1. ***Continue to give priority to projects led by community-based organizations.***
 - ***Continue to award at least 65 percent of overall grants to projects led by CBO/NGOs.*** Since the second year of funding, BFRDP has consistently awarded 60-65 percent of grants to projects led by CBO/NGOs. That’s in keeping with the intent to give priority to projects led by CBOs/NGOs, and should continue.
 - ***Dedicate least 65 percent of overall funding to projects led CBO/NGOs.*** After directing the majority of the overall funding to projects led by academic institutions in FY 2014, it is heartening to see BFRDP award more than 60 percent of FY 2015 dollars to projects led by CBOs/NGOs.
2. ***Reduce the maximum award to \$500,000 over three years.*** With demand for BFRDP grants at a historic high, it makes sense to spread available funding over a greater number of projects. Not only does the money itself stretch farther, it’s also a more sustainable approach for the organizations requesting funding in a highly competitive pool. The failure to secure a high value renewal grant may result in cutbacks to successful ongoing programs, or institutions backing away from opportunities when a large and ambitious

project can't get off the ground. BFRDP can and should aim to build a viable, sustainable, and self-perpetuating infrastructure of support for beginning farmers across the country. Reducing the cap could help increase the sustainability of the beginning farmer and rancher training programs developed and initiated by grantees.

- 2. Continue to direct at least 25% of funding to serving socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.** Though funding dedicated to programs that are targeted toward socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers has trended down in the last few years, going from 58 percent of overall funding in 2012 to 46 percent in 2015, it's clear that BFRDP is still making a substantial investment in serving socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

BFRDP is particularly valuable in communities that have not been historically well served by existing agricultural education infrastructure. That BFRDP invests directly in community-based support for beginning farmers is especially important when it comes to projects that serve socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. Organizations based in the communities they serve know best what barriers farmers in their communities face, and can most effectively provide in-person, culturally appropriate and ongoing support that leads to the success of beginning farmers.

To qualify for the targeted set-asides, past Requests for Applications (RFA) have called for "evidence of the ability to serve the needs of the intended audience, e.g. a strong track record of having previously done so." The RFA would benefit from specifying the kind of "evidence" applicants should provide. For instance, that members of the community served are in leadership roles—e.g., represented on the board or staff of the organization, or in other decision-making positions for the projects that impact their communities.

- 3. Continue to offer support to first-time and less-experienced applicants.** This recommendation is carried over from previous reports. The application process continues to be time-consuming and challenging for many applicants, in particular for community-based organizations. Existing supports, like webinars, and technical assistance are appreciated. NIFA has done a good job of listening to and helping applicants work through the challenges—and ongoing support will continue to be critical for applicants, whether the support is given by the agency directly and/or by external organizations.
- 4. Establish a consistent process and expectations for supplementary information needed from grant recipients once they have been notified of grant awards.** This recommendation is a carry-over from 2011, 2012 and 2014. Grantees continue to note the difference between great working relationships with and support from NIFA staff and difficult, unclear communication from the Grants Administration office. Several grantees suggested training for the Grant staff to enable them to work better and communicate more clearly with non-academic recipients.
- 3. Continue to staff the peer review panels with at least two-thirds representatives of CBO/NGOs and farmers.** Panelists bring their own experience, and limitations, to the peer review process. Continuing the practice of staffing the panels with at least one-third

representatives of CBO/NGOs and one-third farmers is critical in a program that seeks to give priority to funding community-based initiatives.

The selection of strong panel managers, with on-the-ground experience is also crucial. And good training for panelists of all backgrounds is important, as they weigh the merits of projects that seek to serve farmers across the country with diverse backgrounds, skills, geographic settings, and production goals and methods.

Credits

This report was compiled and developed by the Land Stewardship Project. The Land Stewardship Project is membership organization based in Minnesota, that works to foster an ethic of stewardship for farmland, promote sustainable agriculture and develop healthy communities. Core program areas concentrate on policy and organizing efforts, supporting beginning farmers and strengthening community based food systems and economic development.

Additional review and support for was provided by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC). NSAC is an alliance of grassroots organizations that advocates for federal policy reform to advance the sustainability of agriculture, food systems, natural resources, and rural communities

Special thanks to Kelliann Blazek, former policy intern at National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition and Kayla Koether with the Land Stewardship Project.

Appendix 1

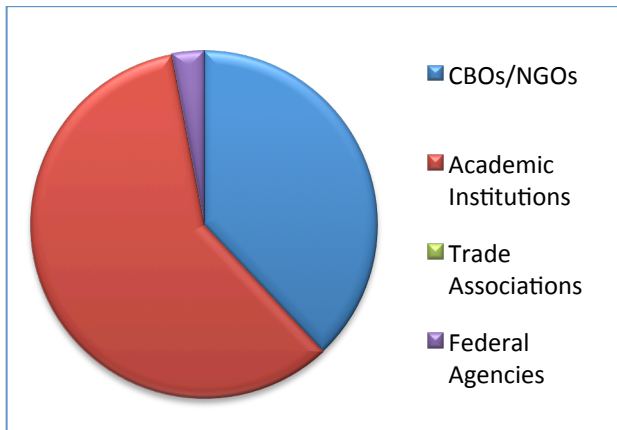
2015 BFRDP Grants

State	Institution	Project Title
WI	Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service	New Organic Stewards: Expanding Community, Resources and Financial Knowledge
NH	LAND FOR GOOD, INC	Access to Land for New England's Beginning Farmers: Phase 2
CA	Farmer Veteran Coalition	"Supportive, Small Scale, Basic Livestock, Financial Skills and Risk Management Training for Beginning Veteran Farmers Program"
WI	Easter Seals Wisconsin, Inc.	Securing Beginning Farmers Through Succession Planning Project
WV	Tri-State Local Foods, Inc. dba The Wild Ramp	Refresh Appalachia: Agricultural Entrepreneurship Development Program
NE	Legal Aid of Nebraska	Legal Aid of Nebraska's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Project
DC	Hmong National Development	Hmong Agricultural Sustainability Training and Education (HASTE)
CA	Planting Justice	Advancing Next Generation Urban Farmers: Experiential Education, Mentoring, and Employment
MI	The Greening of Detroit	FARMING DETROIT -- An education and training partnership between The Greening of Detroit and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network
MN	Hmong American Farmers Association	Beginning farmer training for socially disadvantaged Hmong and Latino immigrants.
NM	Center of Southwest Culture, Inc.	Cooperative Development Center of Northern New Mexico
SD	South Dakota State University	beefSD: Enhancing knowledge and success of beginning beef producers through mentorship and training
WI	University of Wisconsin System	Organic Grain Resources And Information Network (OGRAIN): Supporting beginning organic grain growers in the Upper Midwest
VA	Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University	Appalachian Beginning Forest Farmer Program: Growing Opportunities Beneath the Canopy
AL	Auburn University	A Collective Approach to Providing Resources, Technology and Assistance to Beginning Farmers
ID	Regents of the University of Idaho	Cultivating Success: A Comprehensive Beginning
VT	University of Vermont and State Agricultural College	21st Century Management: Enhancing Educational Programming for Beginning Women Farmers
AR	University of Arkansas	Generation Indigenous Food: Preparing Beginning Farmers and Ranchers for Success and Resiliency
KY	Kentucky State University	Farming for Cash: A Continuing Training Program for Veteran, Socially-disadvantaged, and Limited-resource Beginning Farmers

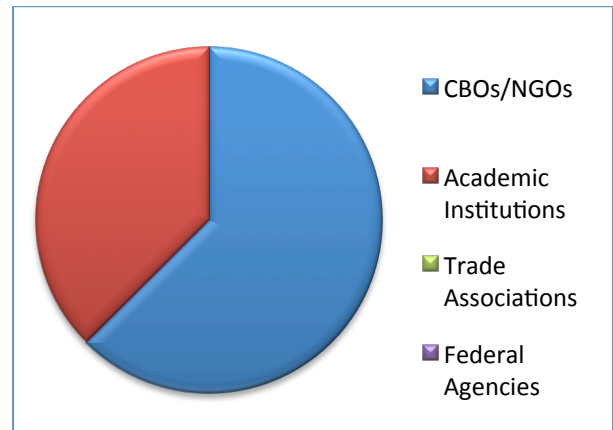
AL	Tuskegee University	Tuskegee University Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program
VA	Arcadia Food, Inc	Arcadia`s Veteran Farmer Program
DC	American Farmland Trust	FARMLAND FOR THE NEXT GENERATION: TRAINING THE TRAINERS TO HELP BEGINNERS SECURE LAND AND SUCCEED IN AGRICULTURE
WA	Organic Seed Alliance	Classroom and Field-based Training to Assist Beginning Farmers` Entry into Organic Seed Production
TX	The University of Texas - Pan American	South-West Texas StrikeForce Initiative for Beginning Farmers and Ranchers
WI	Southwest Badger Resource Conservation & Development Council	A Pathway to Livestock Farming: Providing Access to Land and A Guiding Hand
ND	Dakota Rural Action	South Dakota Beginning Farmer Training, Mentoring, Networking and Market Support Project
ME	Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association	A comprehensive new farmer training program for Maine
IL	Chicago Horticultural Society	Windy City Harvest: Training Beginner Farmers for Chicago`s Urban Agriculture Community
MS	Winston County Self Help Cooperative	Enhancing the Sustainability and Viability of Beginning Farmers and Ranchers through Training Exercises, Mentoring and Outreach Programs
IA	Iowa State University of Science and Technology	Roads to Successful Farm Succession
NJ	Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey	Ultra-Niche Crops for the Progressive, New Farmer
NY	Hawthorne Valley Association	Filling in the Gaps: Developing a Farmer Training Pipeline for Metropolitan NYC and Mid and Upper Hudson Valley Farmers with Special Emphasis
MA	World Farmers Inc	Farmer-to-Farmer Mentoring for Beginning, Immigrant, & Refugee Farmers in Crop Production & Marketing Using the Existing Thirty Year Old
MS	Mississippi Delta Council for Farm Workers Opportunities, Inc	Delta Farming Start

Appendix 2: Historical Distribution of Grants by Institution Type:

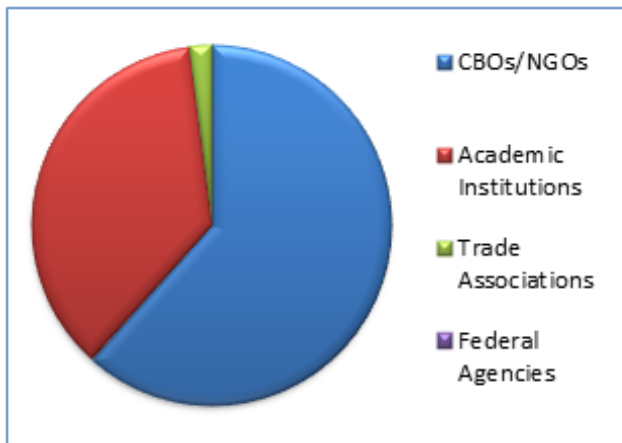
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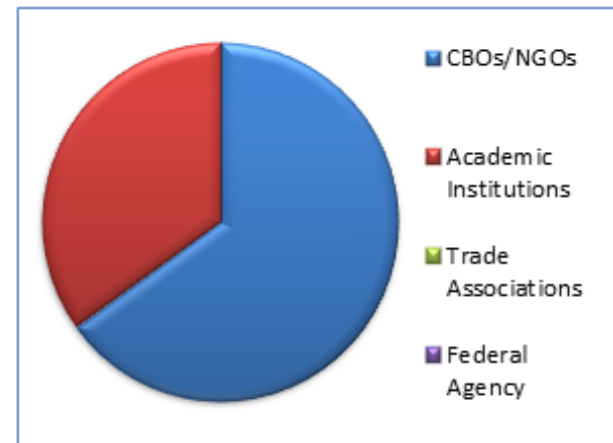
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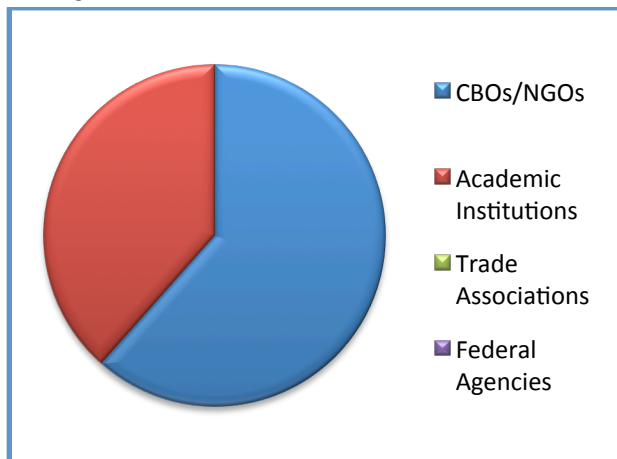
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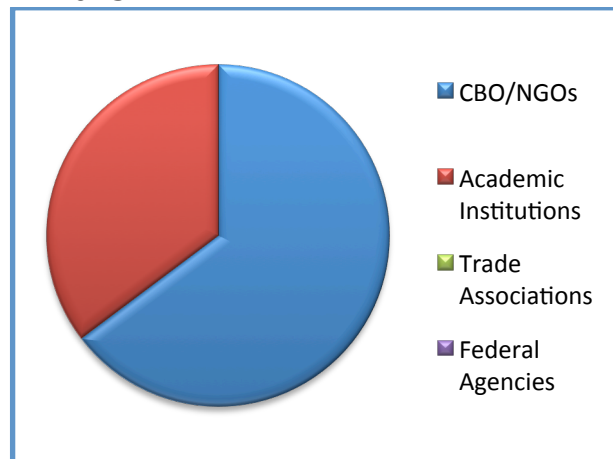
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FY 2014

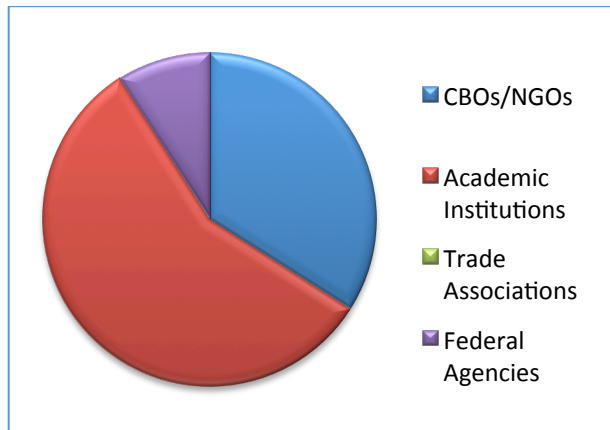


FY 2015

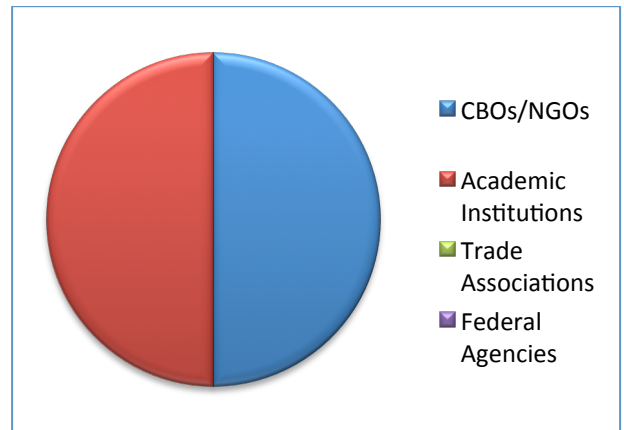


Appendix 3: Historical Distribution of Grant Funding by Institution Type

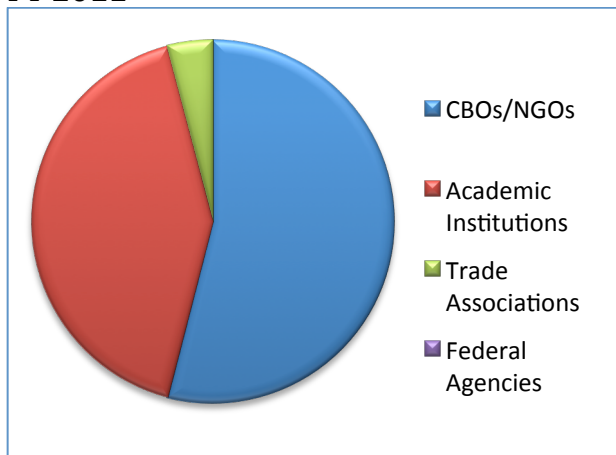
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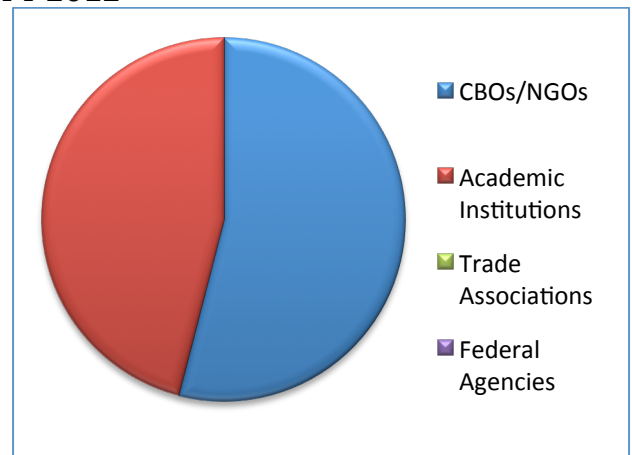
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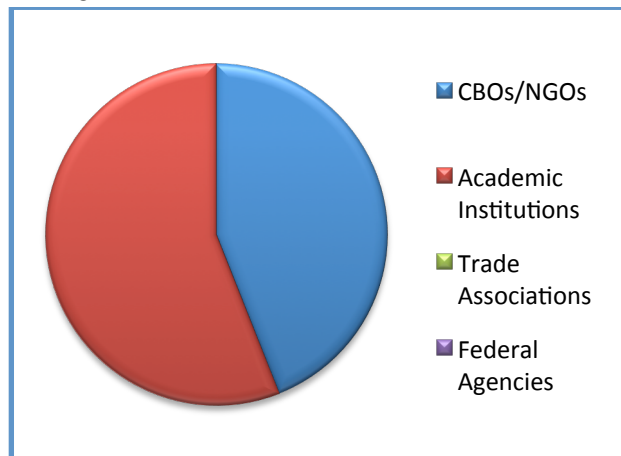
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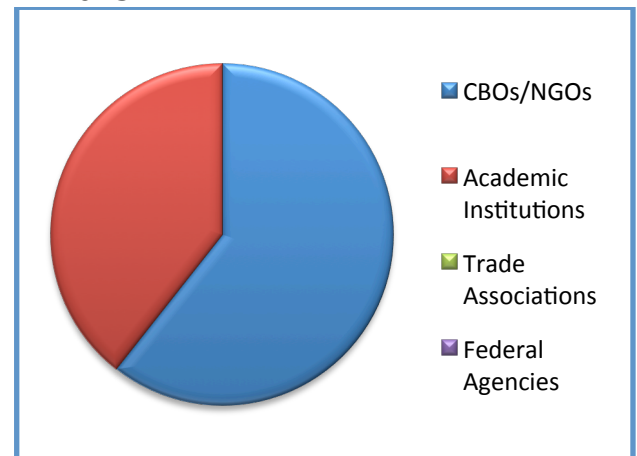
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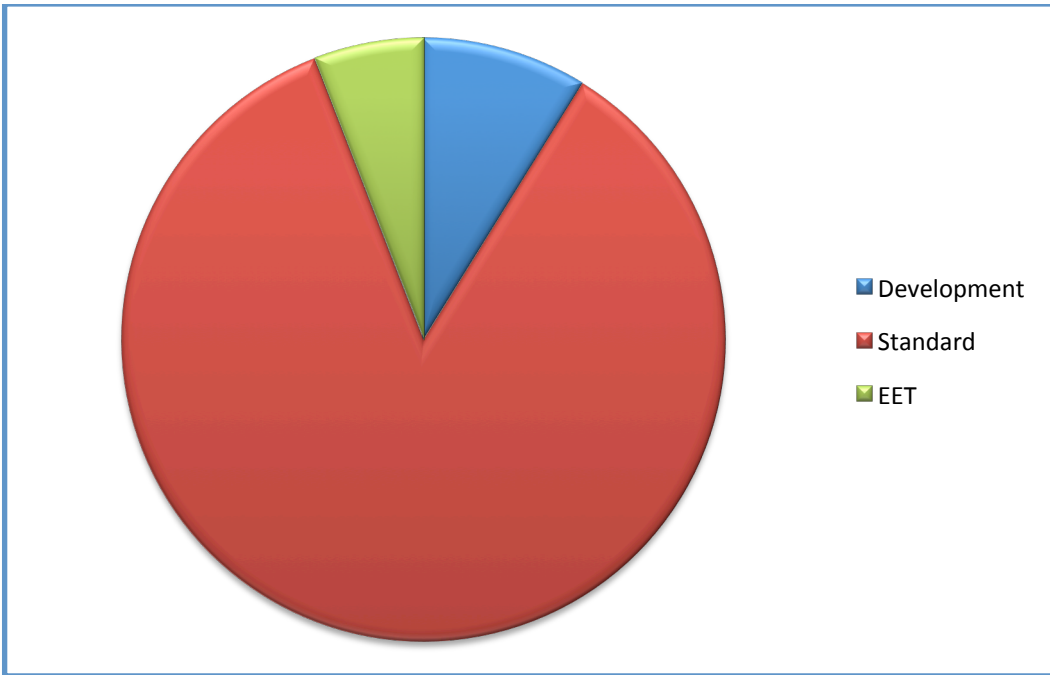
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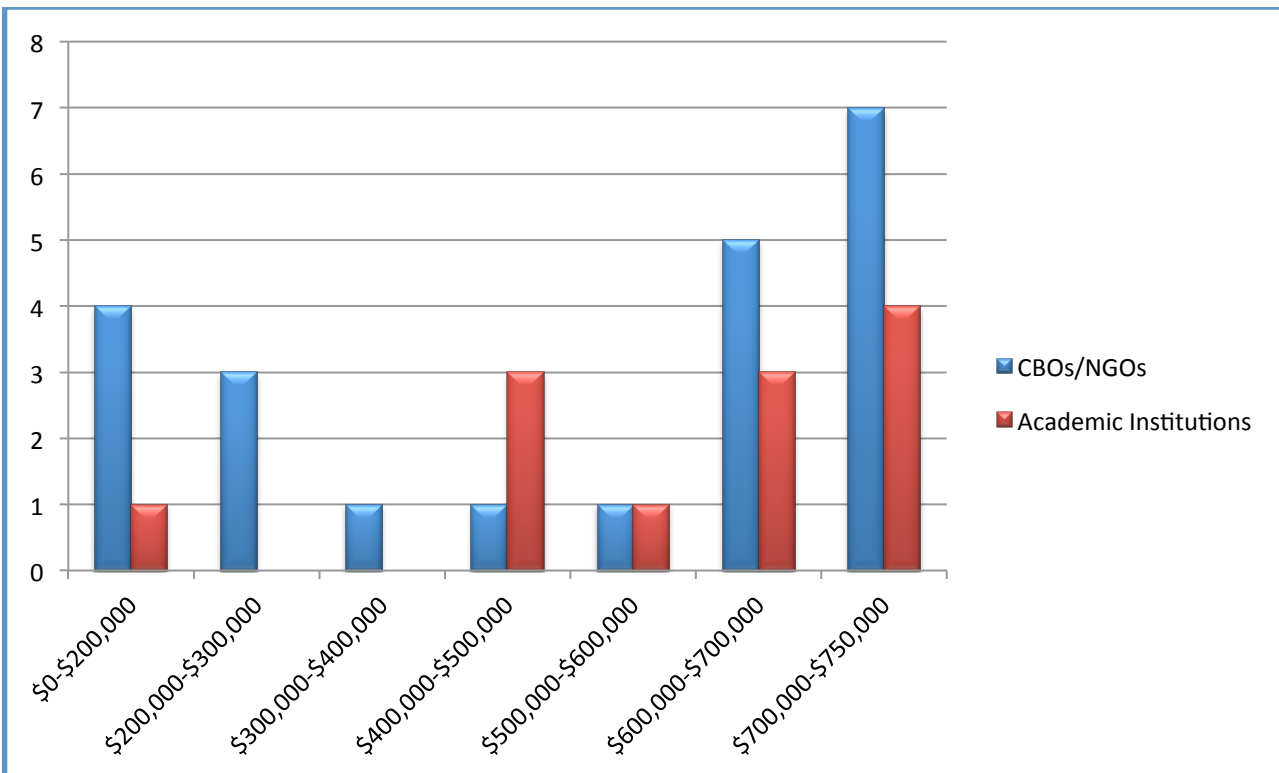
FY 2015



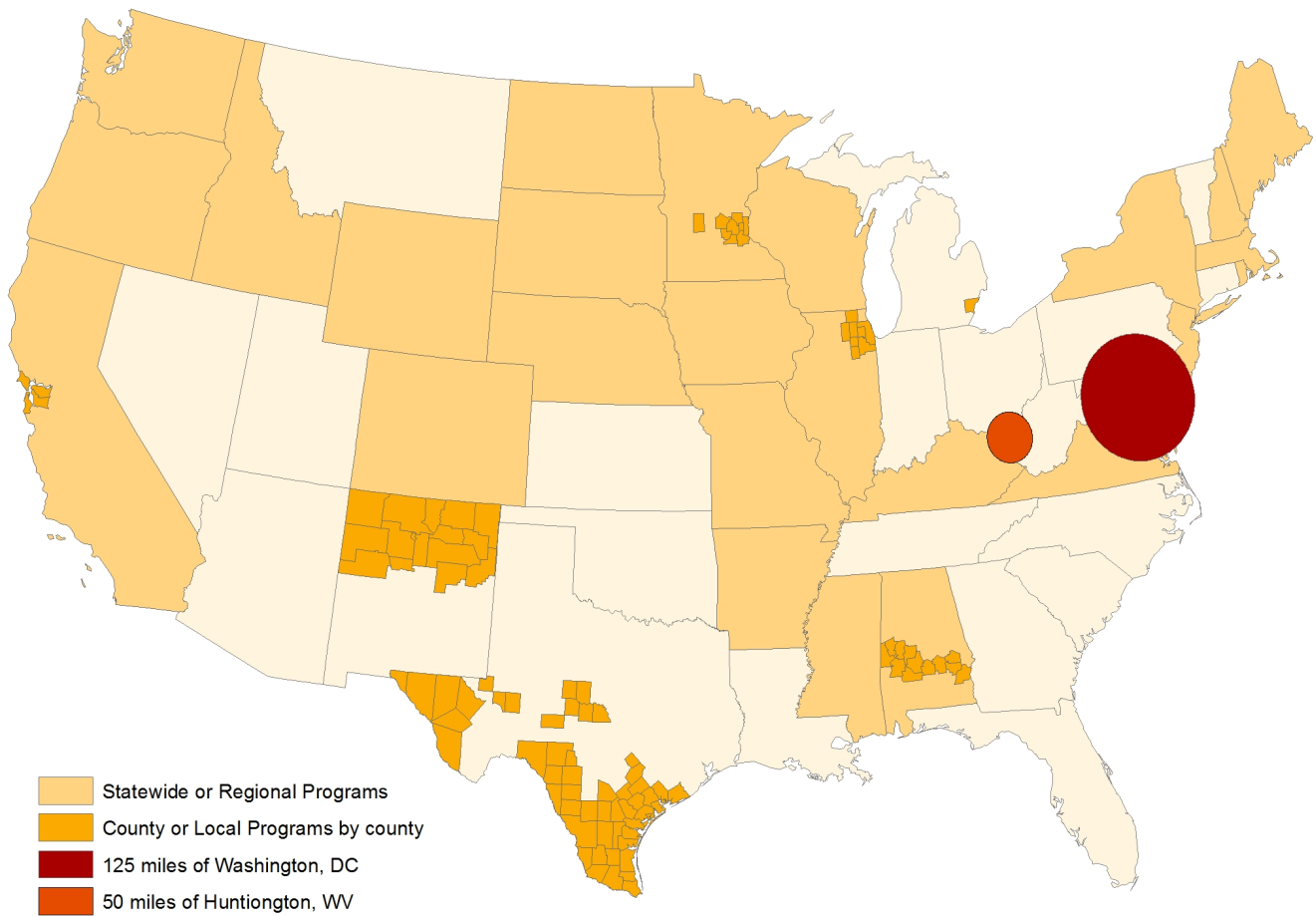
Appendix 4: Grant Distribution by Grant Type



Appendix 5: Grant Distribution by Grant Size and Institution Type

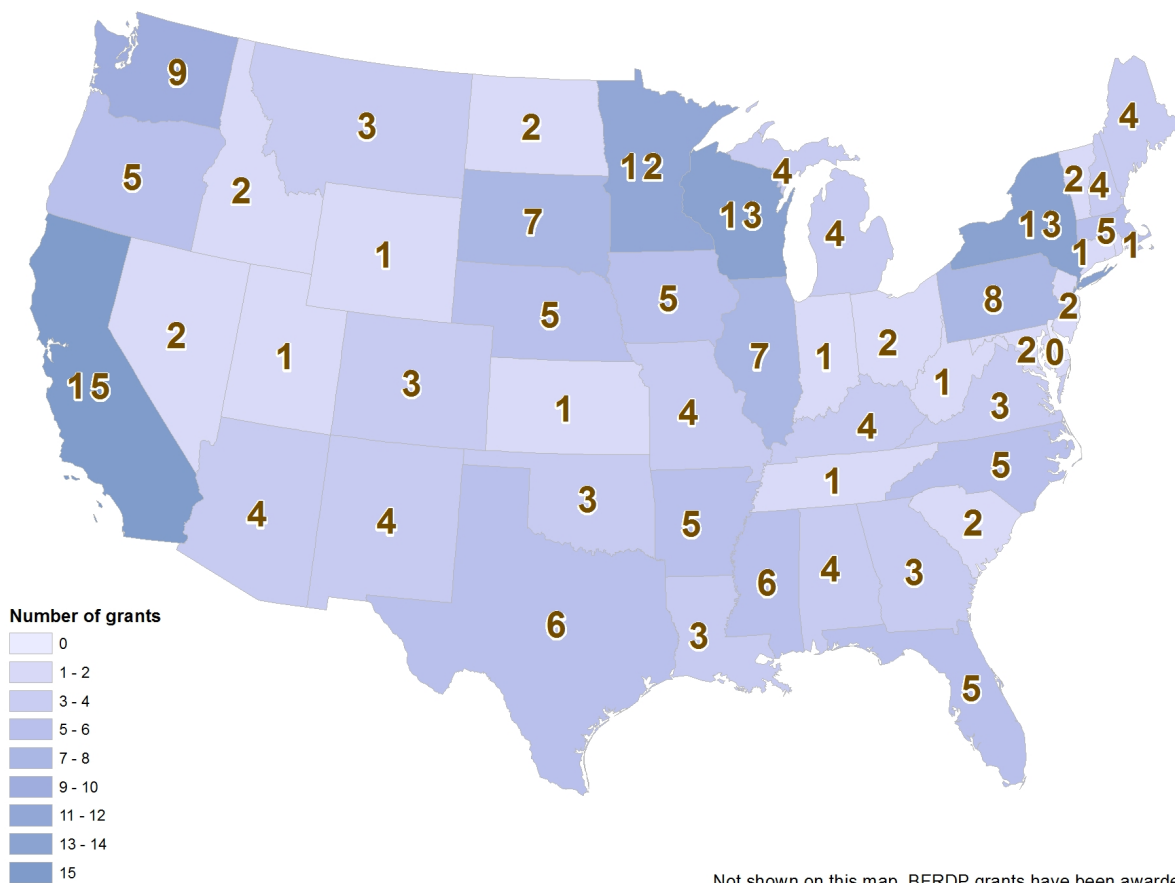


Appendix 6: Service Areas for FY 2015 Grantees



Not shown on this map, 4 grants with a national service area.

Appendix 7: Historical Distribution of Grants by State FY 2009-2015



Not shown on this map, BFRDP grants have been awarded in Virgin Islands (1 grant), Alaska (2), Hawaii (4), and the District of Columbia (3).