Specialty Crop Block Grant Program

Winter 2012 Outreach

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Developing Measurable Outcomes

Why Identify and Measure Project Performance?

Performance measurement improves public accountability and policy decision-making and, if done frequently, can improve project management and effectiveness. By focusing on project outcomes, the State Agency and its project partners define success early, execute projects more likely to generate a significant impact to the specialty crop industry, and more easily measure and demonstrate results.

As funding is reauthorized for the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP), the need to report on the results of the Program to Congressional staff and the specialty crop industry is also renewed. There are several driving forces behind the need to measure the performance of projects:

- The value of the Program in "enhancing the competitiveness of specialty crops" must be supported by the results of the funded projects.
- The project benefits to the specialty crop industry must be shown to outweigh the Federal costs.
- The U.S. Office of Management and Budget has signaled a strong emphasis on performance management. "Rigorous, independent program evaluations can be a key resource in determining whether government programs are achieving their intended outcomes as well as possible and at the lowest possible cost. Evaluations can help policymakers and agency managers strengthen the design and operation of programs. Ultimately, evaluations can help the Administration determine how to spend taxpayer dollars effectively and efficiently – investing more in what works and less in what does not." [1]

[1]http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/assets/memoranda_2010/m10-01.pdf

How to Measure (and Improve) Project Performance

While the demand to measure the value of projects is great, the obstacles to doing so are perceived equally as daunting. Success of a program relies on focusing on quality outcomes and using metrics that matter.

Focusing on Outcomes

The value of any project cannot be measured without defining success. It requires a focus on outcomes. Outcomes are the events, occurrences, or changes in conditions, behavior, or attitudes that indicate progress toward a project's goals. Outcomes are specific, measurable, and meaningful.

Outcomes are not activity-based, such as "conduct five training workshops" or "install a salad bar in 20 schools" or "develop a new pest testing protocol". These

Outcomes are:

⇒ *Changes* in behavior or condition that reflect a positive impact to the specialty crop industry. Note: outcomes generally begin with a verb like increase, expand or improve

⇒ *Specific and measurable:* tracking data to monitor outcomes is practical and timely

⇒ *Meaningful:* achieving an outcome indicates fulfillment of purpose and program toward longer-term impact

Outcomes are not:

* Activities or processes (hosting an event is an activity, increasing awareness is an outcome)
* Immeasurable long-term change

Grant Opportunity: Enhancing the Competitiveness of Specialty Crops."

Please inform your potential grant applicants about the upcoming free and interactive webinar.

Date: December 15, 2011

Time: 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. EST

Find out about the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program and how you can apply for grant funds to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops.

Visit http://bit.ly/v21Rfi to register before the Dec. 9, 2011 deadline.

Contribution - Oriented Metric	Compliance - Oriented Metric Focused on Activities
♦ % change in knowledge	# of trainings
♦ % increase in fruit and vegetable consumption	# of salad bars installed

are outputs and do not reflect results achieved and will not demonstrate the value of the project; rather they are activities or products of work that support outcomes. Outputs are things that the project's personnel have done, not changes that favorably effect outside beneficiaries.

In order to develop outcomes, program personnel should ask what results are expected from each output. Outcomes should be something that the project wants either to maximize, such as evidence of "increased learning by workshop participants" or minimize, such as "reduce pest damage to fruit." Some outcomes are financial. For example, by installing salad bars in schools, a likely appropriate outcome is increasing the dollar amount of fruit and vegetable purchases. These intended results of the project generally are expressed as goals within your project outcome.

Metrics that Matter

To ensure you measure what matters: 1) transition from measuring compliance only to also measuring value; 2) measure contribution, not attribution; and 3) use metrics focusing on business and development outcomes, the value of the project, and effective implementation.

Compliance vs. Value

Measurement is often an act of compliance – counting up the work plan activities completed and monitoring how funds are spent. While ensuring that adequate progress is made on the project and funds are accounted for and expended responsibly is an important aspect of performance reporting, to demonstrate impact and value of a project requires another type of measurement. In short, awardees have a responsibility to track funds and activities; but they also have a responsibility to communicate value through outcome measurement.

An output-oriented measurement system asks, "Did it happen?" It tracks activities and dollars. Data is collected for transparency and rarely revisited. Outcome-oriented measurement attempts to prove theories of change, asking, "Did it work?" and "How well is it working?" It is a value-oriented approach that captures outcomes and progress toward long-term and systemic change and uses data to improve results and demonstrate value delivered.

Many organizations may aspire to demonstrate an explicit cause and effect relationship between their projects and broad social change to the specialty crop industry. In doing so, they are faced with two challenges. First, to scientifically validate that a project will produce a long-term impact requires studies that are costly and more time-intensive than is practical for most projects. Second, most projects are complex and multi-variant in nature; attributing large scale or systematic change to a specific project is rarely possible.

The solution to this dilemma is neither to accept the cost of investing in attribution studies nor to sacrifice measurement all together. Instead, project partners can practically measure their contribution to long-term impact by measuring their progress against intermediate outcomes. Intermediate outcomes occur before, and are expected to help lead to, long-term outcomes. For example, a project aiming to reduce childhood obesity is not likely to have the time and resources to statistically prove the relationship between the project and a decline in this serious health issue. It can, however, measure the number of children who have increased access to healthy fruits and vegetable or an increase in dollars being spent on fruit and vegetable purchases. Similarly, a project that aims to train 500 specialty crop farmers in Good Agricultural Practices and Good Handling Practices cannot credibly correlate its project to decreasing food safety outbreaks. What it can measure as a result of the training is an increase in food safety knowledge of the trained farmers and resulting growth in access to new markets by measuring their increase in distribution outlets and/or sales.

Identifying Performance Measures, Benchmarks and Targets

Once you have decided on the goal of your project's performance-based outcome, you need to identify a measure, benchmark, and target. A performance measure is a particular value or characteristic used to measure an outcome. Performance measures are used to observe progress and to measure actual results compared to expected results. They are usually expressed in quantifiable terms and should be objective and measurable (numeric values, percentages, scores, indices). Quantitative indicators are preferred in most cases, although in certain circumstances qualitative indicators are more appropriate.

Performance measures should focus on metrics that:

- Represent results in terms of their contribution to project goals, not just those that track activities or inputs;
- Demonstrate incremental value in terms of effectiveness (increased relevance or quality), scale (increase in reach), efficiency (reduction in time and/or cost), or sustainability (increase in longevity of impact); and
- Progress toward the project's intended purpose.

Next, determine the baseline for each measure and set target goals for future performance.

Example of Outcome Measure

Goal - Increase the number of low income people in X County who have access to fruits and vegetables

Performance Measure- Number of people who actively participate in the community garden program

Benchmark- In 2011, 100 people participated in the community garden program from May through September

Target – In 2012, increase participation by 50% to 200 people during the same period.

Data Collection Plan – Promotion for the program will start in January. Each month from January through April, enrollment records will be reviewed to ensure that participation is increasing. If this is not the case, changes to the program promotion plan will be made at the beginning of the month.

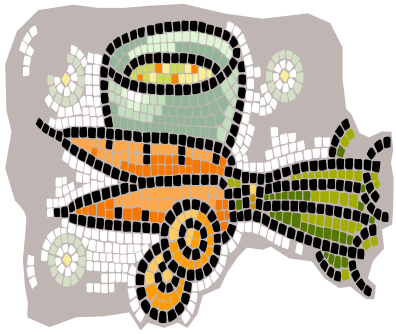
Benchmarks or baselines are usually determined by researching past circumstances in the area you are trying to measure. As an alternative, you may use benchmarks established by third parties accepted as the standard-setters in your industry. If data does not exist, describe the lack of data. It may be appropriate in the first year to set vaguer targets, such as "improvement" where any increase represents outcome achievement, and set more concrete targets in subsequent years when benchmark data is available.

Once you have determined your baseline, set targets for the quantity of change expected. Targets may be framed in terms of:

- Absolute level of achievement (ex: increase access of 10,000 students to fruits and vegetables);
- Change in level of achievement (ex: increase the access of 10,000 students to fruits and vegetable, 5,000 more than last year); or
- Change in relation to the scale of the problem (ex: increase access of 10,000 students to fruits and vegetable, approximately 30% of the students in the city's school district.)

Lastly, develop your data collection plan.

Define who your data sources are and how the data will be collected. If the project involves a survey, provide some information about the nature of the questions that will be asked, the methodology to be used and the population to be surveyed. If a draft questionnaire is available, you may want to include a copy with the application. Outline how data gathered will be used to correct deficiencies and improve performance, both as it gathered and analyzed and in subsequent project periods. This data collection plan should be integrated into your work plan and budget.



WINTER 2012 OUTREACH

1400 Independence Ave. SW, Rm. 2077
Washington, DC 20250-0235

Phone: 202-690-4942
Fax: 202-720-0016
E-mail: trista.etzig@usda.gov

WWW.AMS.USDA.GOV/SCBGP

Multi-State Projects

State agencies are strongly encouraged to partner with one another to meet the growing need for solutions to problems that cross state boundaries such as, but not limited to: addressing good agricultural practices, research on crop productivity or quality, enhancing access to federal nutrition programs, pest and disease management, or commodity-specific projects addressing common issues in multi-state regions.

A project is considered multi-state when one organization receives Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP) funding from more than one state to execute the same or multiple components of the same project. The project must be identified as a multi-state project through the inclusion of a multi-state section in the State Plan project profile (see Appendix C: State Plan Format and Appendix D: Application Checklist for more information). In addition, all States reviewing the proposal must be aware that the project is multi-state so they can collectively decide to fund it.

A high-quality multi-State project proposal demonstrates the following:

- The objectives are clearly focused.
- Each participant/state agency listed has direct involvement in the accomplishment of the stated objectives.
- The project involves multiple states.
- The project proposal has been peer-reviewed in all participating states.
- The proposed project is oriented toward accomplishment of specific outcomes and impacts and based on the priorities developed from stakeholder input.
- The proposal describes how the states are going to collaborate effectively within the project.
- Each state participating in the project submits the project in their state plan indicating which state is taking the coordinating role and including the percent of the budget covered by each State.

Because application forms, deadlines and processes vary from state to state, it is vital that state agencies work closely with one another and with the applicant to ensure that all information is obtained in a timely manner and in the required format. Multi-state projects require concerted coordination, especially during the application and review process. One state should lead the submission, review, award and monitoring processes of the project.

Recommended Review Process for Multi-State Projects

Multi-state projects present an opportunity to address complex issues both efficiently and comprehensively within the specialty crop industry. Situations that require a multi-state effort tend to be beyond the scope or reach of a single State department of agriculture. Therefore, it may not be feasible to align specialty crop goals, priorities, review criteria, etc. to ensure the selection of multi-state projects within each State department of agriculture's competitive review process. As a result, it may be sensible for the States to consider the use of a non-competitive review process specifically for multi-state project proposals in order to encourage their development and submission.

This non-competitive peer review process, although not part of a state's competitive review, ensures that the proposed project is of the highest quality, is multi-state, meets stakeholder needs, and is consistent with each State's goals.

Multi-State Collaboration

To facilitate conversation and coordination amongst states, SCBGP will establish a Google group where states can discuss multi-state project ideas, share application guidance, best practices, lessons learned and more. More information will be forthcoming in an email to state contacts.