

option to purchase the land.

LEDC trains beginning farmers

LEDC has developed a beginner farming model for Latinos wishing to farm. Called “Farm Incubator Cooperatives,” the goal of the effort is to create a pathway for low-wage farmworkers to become farm owners.

The Agua Gorda Cooperative is the first LEDC client to make this transition. Five other Latino cooperatives have been organized in Minnesota and Wisconsin, which are following the Agua Gorda example.

LEDC’s loan program incorporates micro-farming loans which include working capital and equipment loans.

Access to land and farming skills are the biggest barriers for Latinos to enter into farming. LEDC’s assessment is that, in most cases, it is very difficult for Latino small farmers to become owners of land as individuals; but access to land as a cooperative is an option that the Agua Gorda Cooperative has shown is possible.

Learning From Each Other

UW Center roundtable encourages peer learning among co-op directors

By Courtney Berner
Cooperative Development Specialist
UW Center for Cooperatives

As the business world grows increasingly complex, an effective board is critical for a cooperative’s success. In August, the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives (UWCC) tested a new format for delivering information on “best practices” for board leadership. It involved an interactive roundtable that facilitated learning among the directors of a diverse range of cooperatives.

The event targeted directors from cooperatives of all sectors and sizes from across Wisconsin. Topics included the role of the board chair and other leadership positions, ways to facilitate effective meetings and developing strategies for good decision-making

“It was great to hear how cooperatives that are very different from ours met their challenges.”

processes. Other topics included ways to develop a more efficient board, how to conduct a CEO performance review and leadership succession planning.

The roundtable brought together cooperative board leaders from a range of sectors and industries, including agriculture, grocery, transportation, food processing, farm supply and energy. Participants included a number of well-established, successful worker-, producer- and consumer-owned cooperatives. These included Organic Valley, Adams-Columbia Electric Cooperative, Willy Street Grocery Cooperative, Landmark Services Cooperative and Union Cab Cooperative, among others.

Cross-sector learning

Even though many of the directors from these cooperatives boast years of experience serving on boards, they found value in exchanging ideas with directors from different co-op types and sectors.

“To me, the value of this event for our directors is gaining exposure and understanding from other cooperative directors that the challenges we face have been, and continue to be, faced by other cooperatives,” said a member of an agricultural marketing cooperative. “Our own particular size (global level



The Yahara River Grocery Cooperative (YRGC) implemented a new governance system in 2014. It was just one of the many co-ops that participated in idea-sharing roundtables sponsored by the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives. Photo courtesy YRGC

now) is pushing us into a new realm of challenges.”

While the primary goal of the roundtable was to encourage peer learning between cooperative leaders, it became apparent that the roundtable format also provided an excellent opportunity to deliver cost-effective education and support to newly launched cooperatives that have received technical assistance from UWCC. We hoped that mixing directors from start-ups with established co-ops would increase idea and skill sharing between the two groups and strengthen cross-sectoral connections within Wisconsin’s co-op community.

New co-ops well represented

In addition to established cooperatives, the event attracted a number of UWCC’s start-up and “co-op conversion” clients, including:

- Big Water Coffee Cooperative, which

UWCC helped convert to a worker cooperative in 2015;

- Yahara River Grocery Cooperative, which implemented a new policy governance system in 2014;
- Allied Community Cooperative, which is working to open a grocery store in an underserved neighborhood in Madison;
- Fifth Season Cooperative, a multi-stakeholder, local food cooperative launched in 2011;
- Hop Exchange, a marketing co-op for hop growers, and
- A Milwaukee-based start-up brewery cooperative in its early planning stages, among others.

As we had hoped, the relatively new co-op directors found value in hearing how more established cooperatives approach governance and board leadership issues.

“It was fascinating to hear from diverse sector perspectives,” a food co-op director said. “It was great to hear

how cooperatives that are very different from ours met their challenges.”

Members of fledgling cooperatives also found inspiration in their exchanges with established cooperatives. “I want to let you know that I have a renewed commitment because of the roundtable discussions,” a member of a new community owned co-op said. “I learned that a cooperative can grow and operate to become an effective element for its members.”

Based on feedback from roundtable participants, the UWCC plans to host two additional roundtables in the coming year. The roundtables will continue to include co-ops of all types, sizes and sectors. However, future gatherings will include breakout sessions for established and start-up cooperatives while still providing shared meals and networking time to encourage the two groups to share key learning and strengthen cross-sectoral relationships.

Changing the Game

Montana Poultry Growers Co-op seeks to take flight with new processing facility

By Laura Ginsburg

Program Manager for Cooperative Development, Lake County Community Development Corporation, Ronan, Mont.

The Montana Poultry Growers Cooperative, now in its ninth year of operation, is pursuing some game-changing actions — including construction of a new processing plant that will cater to small producers — which it believes will propel the state’s poultry production to new highs.

The statewide producers’ co-op was one of the first businesses to develop an inspected, mobile processing facility for

chickens. But the results have been mixed for the mobile unit.

This mobile processing unit traveled all across “Big Sky Country,” and was a huge benefit to some members. But the trailer itself did not fare well after the wear and tear of many thousands of miles traversed on our state’s many dirt roads.

The low volume of birds processed, combined with the long distances traveled and the fact that it did not meet most members’ needs, ultimately meant that the unit was not economically viable.

The co-op tried an alternate strategy

that involved placing several smaller processing units at locations across the state. But these units no longer could offer food-safety inspection, preventing sale of the birds to the public. So while this strategy has allowed farmers to continue to process birds for their own use, it has not created a viable option for those seeking to sell them.

Bulk feed purchasing

The co-op has explored other ways to make poultry production more profitable. One effort has involved having the cooperative make bulk feed purchases from a certified organic feed