

Advancing Edge-of-Field Conservation Adoption Through Mini-Grants

A Playbook



BEFORE

A farm field before and after a Good Idea Mini-Grant recipient team installed a grassed buffer along the edge.



AFTER

Farmers are natural innovators. They are constantly adapting to environmental and market challenges while facing increasingly tighter profit margins. A domain where farmer-led innovation is ever more critical is in protecting soil and water resources to sustain production systems and maintain national food security.

Edge-of-field conservation practices are solutions farmers can implement on their operations that have many benefits for their farms and communities – such as reducing erosion and nutrient runoff into local waterways, improving wildlife habitat, and making unprofitable land more productive.

However, edge-of-field practice adoption is typically incentivized through complex and limited government-supported financial incentives, which often include extensive technical requirements. While government financing is critical, the system's complexity and requirements can often leave farmers with limited flexibility and autonomy to foster innovation that integrates with their production system.

Two factors may be important for advancing edge-of-field practice adoption: flexible funding opportunities and relationships between farmers and farm advisors.

Good Idea Mini-Grants is a model for a low-cost, high-reward approach to foster farmer-led innovation at the local level through flexible funding and relationship building. The mini-grants provided pairs of farmers and farm advisors with modest financial support to implement a conservation solution that both meets a local conservation need and seamlessly fits into the farmer's agronomic system. The grants also enabled the farmers to share what they did and learned through video and podcast production to help encourage more farmers to adopt these practices.

This playbook describes the design and impacts of Good Idea Mini-Grants, so others can replicate the model to enable more farmer-led conservation innovation.



Good Idea Mini-Grants in a Nutshell

The Good Idea Mini-Grants program was small funding allocations (up to \$8,000) to support edge-of-field conservation practice adoption on working farms to protect soil and water resources while supporting profitable production systems. With few parameters beyond its focus on edge-of-field practices, the funding was flexible, ensuring the teams could think outside the box to solve on-farm problems without onerous paperwork.

But the mini-grants were more than just money. The design of the mini-grants incorporated relationship building, skills building, and digital farmer-to-farmer learning to enhance recipients' capacities to make positive changes for their farms and communities.

Relationship building: Only teams of farmers and farm advisors were eligible to receive mini-grants. The teams worked together to design and implement the practices, which enabled them to leverage the unique skill sets of both the farmer and the farm advisor. For example, the farm advisor could handle the grant application and reporting, while the farmer could focus on the practice installation.

Digital farmer-to-farmer learning: Given the evidence that farmers often look to other farmers to guide their decision-making, the mini-grant program was designed with farmer-to-farmer learning opportunities in mind from the outset. The teams were required to produce and publish a video or podcast that documented their implementation experience to help other farmers learn from what they did.

Skills building: An objective of the mini-grant program was also to build the capacity of the farmers and farm advisors as local leaders for conservation, so they could motivate other farmers in their communities to consider adopting conservation practices. A requirement of the grant was to complete a short, virtual training in relevant skills, such as storytelling and other communication skills.

Key Features of Mini-Grants

- Flexible funding with limited paperwork that allows the farmer to implement a practice that makes sense for their goals and operation.
- A team approach, where the farmer works in partnership with a conservation professional or farm advisor.
- Training in communication and other skills that builds the capacity of the farmer and farm advisors to support other local farmers.
- The production of a video or podcast by the recipient teams to share what they did, so other farmers can learn from them.

Is this format right for me?

A mini-grant program modeled after Good Idea Mini-Grants might be right for you if your goals include one or more of the following:

- Advance edge-of-field conservation practice adoption*
- Drive local, farmer-led innovation in conservation strategies
- Support relationship building between farmers and farm advisors
- Foster knowledge sharing between farmers locally and beyond
- Cultivate a culture of conservation among farmers

*Note: This model is not exclusive to edge-of-field practice adoption, though it lends itself well to it. It could be used to encourage innovation in in-field conservation practice adoption as well.

Outcomes You Might Expect

- **Strengthened collaboration between farm advisors and farmers:** Feedback from mini-grant participants showed that these relationships matter for both getting the grants and accomplishing the projects. Many of the farmer and farm advisor teams were already connected, and the mini-grant program provided them an opportunity to work more collaboratively and leverage their individual strengths to complete the project.
- **Increased implementation of innovative conservation practices:** Not only did the mini-grants successfully help farmers adopt an edge-of-field practice, but the farmers also reported that the flexibility of the funding allowed them to do more innovative practices that otherwise would not have been supported by traditional funding programs.
- **Enhanced confidence among recipients to share their conservation experiences:** Our results showed that the farmers gained confidence in sharing conservation information with other farmers, such as through multimedia content, and felt more motivated on their conservation journeys.

Ready to create and implement your own version of Good Idea Mini-Grants? Let's get started!

A Recipe for Success

Like any recipe, you can add your own flair and don't need to follow this one exactly.



Photo by Jenny Seifert.

A bioreactor installed by a Good Idea Mini-Grant recipient team.

Key Ingredients

- Clear requirements and goals related to conservation practice adoption or impacts.
- Secured funding for the grants.
- A funding limit for each mini-grant and a target number of grants to award.
- A target area for promoting the mini-grant program.
- An online application portal to accept applications.
- A training to prepare awardees for documenting their projects and sharing their experiences with other farmers. One existing training that is free to use and applicable to this context is "[Skills for Building Farmer Networks for Conservation](#)," which contains several modules you could choose from to meet your goals.
- An administrative support team that is responsive to the awardees.
- Opportunities for on-site visits by the administrative support team.
- Capacity to promote the awardees' digital media products across a variety of media channels.
- An evaluation plan to capture the successes and challenges the awardees experience to optimize the program's impact. This can include an exit interview with project teams to get standardized feedback and experience from all grantees.

Mini-Grants: The Play-by-Play

Here's what the mini-grant program looks like from the administrator's view:

Develop the application: Get your mini-grant program off to a strong start by developing a clear and concise request for applications and online application page. Include the mini-grant program's goals, application requirements, eligibility, deadlines, and contact information. The application page should capture only the most critical information.

Tip: Pay close attention to the annual cropping cycle in your region to ensure applications open during the offseason and provide at least 12 months for project implementation. It's most likely that edge-of-field practices will need to be implemented in the offseason. Providing up to 18 months for project implementation should leave teams with optimal time for planning, implementation, and documenting outcomes.

Promote the program: Ensure successful recruitment of applications by promoting the mini-grant program across the target geographic range. With an on-farm conservation focus, be sure to target local farmer organizations, commodity groups, Farm Bureau, land-grant university extension networks, soil and water conservation organizations, county boards of supervisors, and farm and tractor supply stores. Create a variety of promotional materials that you know will reach your target audience (e.g., emails, digital media, radio announcements, etc.)



Photo by Darren Yanke.

Farmer Darren Yanke, a Good Idea Mini-Grant recipient, seeds the prairie strip he installed with his grant funds.

Review awards: With great applications coming in, you'll want to fund them all! Take care to develop a review rubric and identify at least three reviewers. Having a rubric will increase the impact of the projects and create a clear process for reviewers.

Select awards and set up contracts: While the business side of conservation may not be the most fun, it's just as important to ensure that all awardees understand the terms and requirements of funding and fiscal reporting requirements. Ensure frequent and open communication between accounting teams to ensure that the projects run smoothly.

Host mini-grant kickoff training: The projects are ready to kick off — start with a bang! Host a virtual or in-person kickoff and training. The training should ensure the teams will be ready to share their experiences effectively and develop a video or podcast. This kickoff meeting helps to build relationships across the teams and allows the administrators to answer questions, provide immediate support, and start getting to know the project teams.

Check in and conduct site visits: Three to nine months into the projects, the teams should be rolling, and conservation practices are starting to go on the ground. This can be a great time for grant administrators to visit sites to see progress, get a better sense of each farm's unique context, and get feedback related to how implementation is going. Having a team member on the ground can also help with taking videos or pictures and co-developing meaningful solutions with teams if there are setbacks.

Communicate end-of-project reporting and schedule closeout interview: As the projects near completion, communicate proactively about any end-of-project reporting requirements and schedule a closeout interview to get feedback on what worked or didn't work to support farmer production systems and conservation goals. This type of communication is supportive, not bothersome. The goal is to help the teams cross the finish line strong.

Summarize and share mini-grant outcomes: Once the projects are complete, don't stop there. Develop a strategy to share all videos and podcasts developed by the farmer and farm advisor teams to maximize the reach and impact of the projects. Review all key metrics and closeout interview feedback to summarize the story — what were the successes and strengths of the mini-grant program, how was conservation adoption supported, and what could be done differently next time to remove barriers or anticipate challenges? Learning with farmers and farm advisors was a cornerstone of the Good Idea Mini-Grants program.



Photo by Jenny Seifert.



Ready to give it a try? Please get in touch.

You can ask us questions during planning or just let us know how it's going. You can contact any one or more of us:



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