



Growing Opportunities Beneath the Canopy

Appalachian Beginning Forest Farmer Coalition

Organization Document and Decision Making Guide

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This document was adopted in 2014 during the establishment of ABFFC

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Background

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to guide the organizational and decision making structure and processes of the Appalachian Beginning Forest Farmer Coalition. This document is available for anyone to access on the appalachianforestfarmers.org website. The management and advisory board will review this document and revise as needed based on feedback from coalition members and other circumstances as they may arise. Coalition members are encouraged to share their feedback and recommendations pertaining to this document at any time.

Rationale

Sixty-five percent of Appalachia is forested. Farming of non-timber forest products is a potential income source for Appalachian forestland owners. There is a long history of wild harvested edible, medicinal, and decorative materials in Appalachia. Consumer knowledge of and demand for these products has grown in recent years and forest cultivation is growing as an economically viable option and alternative to wild harvest. Forest grown medicine and food has piqued the interest of new farmers who are looking for ways to either diversify current production or make better use of wooded land and keep forest ecosystems intact.

The Appalachian Beginning Forest Farmer Coalition (ABFFC) is a project dedicated to increasing opportunities for farmers and forestland owners in Appalachia and beyond who are interested in starting or expanding/diversifying a forest farming operation. Funded by NIFA under the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP), the ABFFC is the first of its kind within the BFRDP program to focus specifically on forest farming. The ABFFC promotes cultivation and conservation of native non-timber forest medicinal products and is building a network intent on expanding production through collective problem-solving and grassroots leadership.

The ABFFC helps prepare forest farmers to supply a forest grown verified and certified organic raw material to nutraceutical and herbal product industries. This is done by providing technical, administrative, and market sales training, and opportunities for farmer-farmer and farmer-industry representative networking. Also important is the grassroots networking and problem-solving associated with advancing a nascent but growing forest grown supply chain. The Coalition also improves access to farm resource inventory and plant habitat management support services by training extension and other agency personnel. Additionally, opportunities are provided to link them with forest farmers in their area in order to learn more about these enterprises through mentoring.

Common Vision

The ABFFC's vision is to support people in Appalachia who want to create viable livelihoods from forest farming enterprises or incorporate forest farming into existing enterprises. The long-term goal is to build

a lasting sense of financial and consumer-preference identity among Appalachian beginning forest farmers and shape financially productive arrangements.

Mission

This coalition assists beginning forest farmers in navigating the production, processing and marketing of forest farmed medicinal plants in the Appalachian Region. It supports regional partnership and network development and offers educational programming, publications, and videos for forest farmers and technical service providers. It also builds capacity by tapping into the leadership qualities and leadership assets among coalition members to refine production techniques in an evolving forest grown market.

Objectives

- Build an inclusive coalition of new and beginning forest farmers across Appalachia and beyond.
- Educate, train and support new and beginning forest farmers on production, marketing, and sales.
- Train extension and state agency personnel on forest farm inventory and medicinal plant habitat management for beginning forest farmers.

Beginning Forest Farmer Audience

Our coalition works with prospective, new, and experienced forest farmers in the Appalachian region. We also work with technical service providers to develop a greater capacity to support beginning forest farmers across the service region.

Approach

We have a participatory approach to coalition building, with input from multiple sectors, farmers, and technical service providers via multiple communication pathways. Leadership teams coordinate coalition training using an inclusive process. An advisory board guides the strategic work of the coalition. Members are not just an audience but part of the team. They are represented in multiple areas including on the advisory board and are solicited for feedback via direct contact at events, via the coalition list serve, and website surveys. Service providers are critical to the coalition and welcome to join. Communication among coalition members is direct, open, and consistent.

The Approach includes:

- A leadership team, coalition development committee, forest farmer education committee, and service provider education committee to monitor and evaluate impacts and progress;
- A coalition advisory board that will monitor and evaluate project success and abide by coalition member input through use of surveys, online forums, and face-to-face input;

- Indoor/outdoor education programs in multiple locations that cover the technical, administrative, and market sales aspects of price-premium production on a state-by-state basis including forest grown verification, organic production, and best handling and processing practices (e.g., Good Handling Practices, Good Agricultural Practices, Good Manufacturing Practices), in collaboration with each NGO project partner
- External partnership opportunities offered to organizations throughout the region to collaboratively organize training in diverse locations.
- Curriculum design for external partner events balances local resources with standardized, structural inputs and learning outcomes. It is the coalition's expectation that each partner program will vary based on local experts, sites, and partner and community needs, but will also meet general training guidelines and learning outcomes based on the nature of the program. Training themes will also vary based on whether the programming is introductory and primer-based, or focused on a specific forest-farming concept. Revenue for events will be shared.
- Series of training and networking sessions in multiple locations for extension agents and agency professionals covering medicinal plant identification, habitat, inventory procedures, and planning, cost-share, and best management practices and connect forest farmers and service provider participants through a service provider referral forum.
- Informational stakeholder meetings hosted in multiple locations where beginning medicinal plant forest farmers discuss the consumer market situation and forest grown preferences with industry, forest grown verification, and organic certification professionals;
- A bi-annual Appalachian Forest Farmer Chronicle is published that highlights the work and successes of beginning forest farmer coalition members and provides technical, administrative, and market sales tips. It also will include information on the seed distribution and equipment share forums;
- A mentorship program facilitates forest farmer learning and exchange;
- A Coalition Clearinghouse website is live and links to project partner websites and other web pages with useful information and networks. Participatory social media forums where coalition members can share dialogue, post about events and opportunities, and connect across industry sectors on topics related to forest farming are linked to the website, as is a "Farming in Appalachian Forests" resources page with an ever-growing body of synchronous (e.g., live webinars) and asynchronous (e.g., videos) curriculum;
- Annual reflective retreats and a two-day summative meeting are hosted to celebrate the coalition and evaluate project results and formalize next steps.

Organizational Structure

Coalition

The Appalachian Beginning Forest Farmer Coalition is a network of forest landowners, universities, and governmental and non-governmental organizations that share a common goal of improving agroforestry production opportunities and farming capabilities among forest farmers.

ABFFC Leadership Team

Virginia Tech houses the leadership team for the ABFFC, which is responsible for facilitating and managing the development of all programming, networking, and resources by project partners. The Leadership team is primarily responsible for the development, management, and evaluation of program activity. The Leadership team receives guidance and input from the advisory board to aid in the overall decision-making process for the Coalition. They will consult with the board and committees on major program decisions, management issues, and serve as organizational curators to monitor membership and outreach efforts. Day-to-day decisions are primarily made by the management team. Development of the compendium, flipped classroom training curriculum, mentorship program coordination, publication of the Appalachian Forest Farmer Chronicle, the summative retreat, evaluation and reporting, and day-to-day project management, administration, and marketing are direct responsibilities of the leadership team, comprised of the project director, project co-director, project assistant, and project media specialist who are listed by name below.

ABFFC Advisory Board

The ABFFC receives guidance, support, and direction from an advisory board composed of six to nine individuals from the coalition who draw upon their professional experience and connections as well as feedback from coalition members to advise the direction of the coalition. Responsibilities include:

- Provide input on and oversight of all ABFFC initiatives so they meet coalition objectives
- Ensure sustainability of the ABFFC
- Represent the coalition of stakeholders

Composition. The advisory board will be composed of at least two representatives from the following communities: forest farmers, technical service providers, and industry stakeholders. Three slots will remain available to fill with representatives from any of these and other communities. No more than one representative from a specific organization can serve at any one time.

Term. Advisory board members will serve a minimum 3-year term. Each member will be limited to 5 years, which they will then be required to take a 2-year rest period. The inaugural advisory board will end its term in August 2018, with at least 4 members remaining on the board for continuity.

Nominations. Six months prior to term ending, the advisory board will request nominations for available board slots from coalition members. The leadership team will compile a nomination list with information about the nominees to include a photo, their name, affiliation, background and reason they would like to serve. They will send this list out to the whole coalition for a vote. The advisory board will use the popular vote to inform their decision of the next board composition. The inaugural board will complete these tasks by September 2017.

How to Participate

Forest Farmer Members

- Attend workshops and trainings
- Reach out to new forest farmers in your community or those who may be interested to expand our network
- Reach out to local service providers to build your local forest farming support services
- Consider setting up a booth or sharing information about the ABFFC at events you attend
- Join the ABFFC Facebook Group
- Volunteer on a project to support the coalition (policy, etc.)

Technical Service Provider Members

- Attend TSP workshops and trainings with CEU credits
- Join trainings for forest farmers
- Join the ABFFC Facebook Group
- Share information about the coalition with interested clients to expand forest farmers involved
- Share information about the coalition with colleagues to expand TSP members involved
- Host a workshop or training in your service area
- Assist forest farmers in your service area

Decision Making

Decisions in the coalition are made across different levels in the organization to include the leadership team, advisory board, project partners, and forest farmer and technical service provider members. All levels except the farmer and service provider members use a consent-based decision making process. The farmer and service provider members will be included through majority votes.

Leadership Team

The leadership team has the authority to make operational (every day) decisions and time sensitive decisions on behalf of the Coalition using the consent-based decision making process. These include communications with the advisory board, project partners, and the full coalition and other tasks that fall

under the purview of day-to-day program tasks and communications. The leadership team also takes part in the decision-making with the advisory board for coalition policy issues (see below).

The Advisory Board

The advisory board has the authority and responsibility to make coalition policy decisions, those that define the organization and determine how it will develop and function now and in the future, with the management team using the consent-based decision making process. These include but are not limited to elections, funding opportunities, and programmatic, policy, and marketing directions and initiatives.

Project Partners

Project partners are required to hold key positions on one or more coalition committees that are instrumental to decision making regarding programming and development. Committees include the forest farming education committee, the service provider education committee, and the coalition development committee.

Forest Farmers & Technical Service Providers

The leadership team and advisory board will call for feedback and recommendations from forest farmer and technical service provider members on decisions they deem need full coalition input. These include advisory board elections and specific programmatic questions and will be collected via vote and open ended responses that will inform the decision making process of the advisory board and leadership team.

Consent-based Decision Making Process

Consent-based decision making, also known as dynamic governance, sociocracy, and circle forward, is a method where all individuals must consent to the proposal set forth. A decision is considered final when there are no “paramount objections”. *Consent = a strategy everyone can live with (i.e. no needs actively not met), within everyone’s range of tolerance, to which no one has a reasoned and paramount objection.*

Steps:

1. Consent to the issue(s) to be decided
2. Generate a proposal (what is our approach?) Often a draft is developed and circulated for comment and revision before the next meeting
3. Consent to the proposal
 - Present the proposal
 - Clarifying Questions “Do you understand the proposal?”
 - Quick reactions “What do you think of the proposal?”
 - tune the proposal based on quick reactions

4. Consent round- “Do you have any paramount objections to this proposal?”

- If there are NO objections, celebrate!
- If there ARE objections:
- Any objections are heard and discussed, repeat consent round if applicable. Circle back to step 1 or 3 as needed until resolved:

1. Discussion focuses on clarifying questions on the objections rather than a debate or rebuttal. The proposal sponsor(s) offers details rather than arguments. Facilitator keeps the focus on the proposal and not on the people involved. All input is valued and the proposal is altered to “integrate” the new information and resolve raised concerns until the objection is removed and another Consent round occurs.

2. Loop of updating the proposal and asking for objections continues until there are no unresolved objections. If after several rounds the group cannot agree to live with the proposal as stated, the proposal is tabled and a small group is designated to work on it and bring it back when the objections have been resolved.

Quick Decision Making Process

In the event of a time sensitive decision, the management team may use an “online proposal review process” to make a quick decision with the advisory board and project partners. This generally works as:

- The time sensitive proposal is shared electronically for members to read.
- Everyone replies via email within 7 days with a “yes or no” vote in support of the proposal.
- Support for the proposal is assumed if no email reply is offered.
- The quick decision is approved if there is a majority vote.

Conflict of Interest

No advisory board member, management team member, or persons compensated by or on behalf of the coalition will derive any personal profit or gain, directly or indirectly, by reason of his or her participation in decision-making. Anyone with a conflict of interest shall disclose in writing to the project team their personal interest that they may have in a pending matter over which they have discretionary decision-making authority and will refrain from participation in decisions regarding that matter. The management team maintains a record of such disclosures.

Amendments

The advisory board, based on recommendations and feedback from the coalition, will review this document and modify as needed. We see this as a ‘living document’ that can be modified as needed by the consent of the Coalition as described in this document.

Acknowledgements

<p><u>Coalition Partners</u></p> <p>Virginia Tech Appalachian Sustainable Development Rural Action United Plant Savers Blue Ridge Woodland Growers North Carolina State University Pennsylvania State University Southern Regional Extension Forestry National Agroforestry Center Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry US Forest Service's Southern Research Station</p>	<p><u>Inaugural Advisory Board (2016-2018)</u></p> <p>Dana Beegle, Stone Root Farm David Brown, Beginning Forest Farmer Chip Carroll, United Plant Savers Jim Chamberlain, USDA Forest Service Bill Chioffi, Gaia Herbs Ed Fletcher, Herbal Ingenuity Jim Hamilton, NC Extension Michael McGuffin, American Herbal Products Association Katie Trozzo, Blue Ridge Woodland Growers and Virginia Tech</p>	<p><u>Advisory Group Ad-hoc committee for Organizational & Decision-making Guidelines</u></p> <p>Katie Trozzo, Blue Ridge Woodland Growers and Virginia Tech Michael McGuffin, American Herbal Products Association Bill Chioffi, Gaia Herbs Holly Chittum, American Herbal Products Association and Virginia Tech John Munsell, Virginia Tech</p>	<p><u>Advisory Board</u></p> <p>Dana Beegle David Brown Chip Carroll Jim Chamberlain Bill Chioffi Edward Fletcher Jim Hamilton Michael McGuffin Katie Trozzo Bevin Clare</p>
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About Forest Farming

In case it is a new term, **forest farming** is an agroforestry practice that involves cultivating herbal, edible, decorative, and handicraft non-timber forest products under a forest canopy that is modified or maintained to provide shade levels and habitat that favor growth and enhance production. Forest farmers intentionally cultivate and rotate marketable **non-timber forest products** in the woodlands they own or have access to. They produce and sell raw material or **value added products** that are traceable, unadulterated, and sustainable. This can lead to market share and price-premiums because companies can trace and confidently sell verified NTFP-dependent products to discriminating consumers.

How does the ABFFC work?

Recent renewal funding from the United States Department of Agriculture - National Institute of Food and Agriculture ([USDA-NIFA](#)) has allowed ABFFC to greatly expand **membership** and exposure. By recruiting and training new Appalachian beginning forest farmers we continue its tradition of providing in-depth, multi day training and technical resources for forest farmers on NTFP propagation and management.

This website also houses a large agroforestry network as well as an ever growing list of resources that are freely available to anyone with an interest in forest farming. From publications and plant profiles to

videos and events, we hope to unite the forest farming community through Appalachia and beyond. In addition, over the next three years, ABFFC will help expand the [Forest Grown Verification](#) program through [United Plant Savers](#), increase forest farmer mentorship, and improve propagation and distribution of planting stock for forest farms.

Two new [initiatives](#) have been added in 2020, and are currently under development with the help of input and surveys from our members. [The American Forest Farming Council \(AFFC\)](#), and the [Point of Harvest Workforce Development Program \(POH\)](#) are two new ways we hope to expand our reach and have a positive impact on the forest farming community.

Project Goals & Objectives

The coalition hopes to establish an inclusive Appalachian Beginning Forest Farmer Coalition; educate, train, and support beginning forest farmers; and improve forest farm inventory and medicinal plant habitat management services for beginning forest farmers.

- Build a coalition of new and beginning forest farmers across Appalachia and beyond.
- Educate and train new and beginning forest farmers on production, marketing, and sales.
- Train extension and state agency personnel on resource assessment and habitat management.
- Technical assistance and training for forest farmers throughout Appalachia.
- Forest farming training for natural resource professionals at upcoming meetings and events

ABFFC Project Team

The ABFFC is funded by the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture and is supported in part by the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. Our partners range from Georgia to Pennsylvania.

<p>Non-governmental Organizations: Appalachian Sustainable Development The Yew Mountain Center Organic Growers School Rural Action United Plant Savers Catawba Sustainability Center</p>	<p>Universities: Virginia Tech University North Carolina State University Penn State University Warren Wilson College</p>	<p>Extension: Southern Regional Extension Forestry</p>	<p>Agency Partners: Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry US Forest Service's Southern Research Station</p>
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