



2024 National Urban Agriculture Conference

SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

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Executive Summary

Urban agriculture has a long history rooted in community resiliency and sovereignty. For centuries it has been an outlet for feeding communities while creating spaces for education, innovation, and personal growth. Urban agriculture plays a critical role in the health and vitality of urban food-based systems.

The USDA has made efforts to support urban agriculture initiatives, particularly as cities have become more densely populated. However, key components of urban production continue to experience huge barriers such as land access, zoning, and funding. These barriers are coupled with a lack of policy knowledge and lobbying efforts around these issues. Creating better support for urban agriculture is an investment in sustainable economics, climate resiliency/ protection, community development, recreation, rehabilitation, and so much more.

The 2018 farm bill increased USDA support for urban agriculture in several ways including building the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production, establishing a federal urban agriculture advisory committee, and the creation of competitive community-based grants. The USDA National Urban Agriculture Pilot was created to be an investment for urban producers within our cities, creating urban service centers and dispersing community-based grant funds in key urban areas. The National Urban Agriculture Initiative (NUag)'s

role is to provide support, training, and evaluation for the national pilot project.

The National Urban Agriculture Conference held August 4–6, 2024, in Detroit, MI, was an opportunity to strengthen the USDA's involvement in urban agriculture and provide an opportunity for local, regional, and national collaboration and coalition building. The main priority of the conference was connecting urban producers and community-based organizations with USDA programming and knowledge. With almost 700 attendees, the need for this type of event was evident. Participants felt excited and inspired to be a part of the growing USDA efforts to create programming that directly addresses urban challenges.

The conference served as a space to bridge the understanding and communication gap between those on the ground and those maneuvering policy and programming. Participants learned and discussed a myriad of urban agriculture topics and activities contributing to the overall positive response to the strategic balance of programming and networking offered.

This report highlights the key components of the conference and the value of connections made among USDA, urban producers, non-profits, and others to further our goal of bridging the gap for urban agriculture.



Project Overview

Virginia State University and T.I.M.E., Inc. in partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension and Virginia Tech University, serve in the lead support and education role for the USDA National Urban Agriculture Pilot Initiative. Our priority is to “bridge the gap” that has historically impacted the relationship between USDA and urban producers and community-based organizations. While addressing the needs of small farmers NUag Initiative aims to increase resiliency by offering training, networking, resource connection, and relationship building.

Our main goals for the project are to:

- >> Increase producer knowledge and provide resources for understanding, applying, and successfully utilizing USDA programs;
- >> Increase stakeholder engagement to strengthen the relationships between USDA and urban operations combating historical mistrust by providing opportunities for program feedback and meaningful conversation;
- >> Develop curriculum to equip USDA with knowledge and skills, particularly in addressing the unique challenges facing urban producers;
- >> Provide USDA with insightful recommendations, feedback, and project evaluations to help guide further urban programming.



“Urban food production has only begun to meet its full potential!”



Conference Overview

The National Urban Agriculture Conference held August 4 - 6, 2024, in Detroit, MI, served as a national opportunity to celebrate the advancement, investment, and dedication to urban agriculture. The conference created a space for producers and the community to learn about USDA programs, processes, and procedures. It also fostered informal and intentional networking spaces that encouraged participants to share their experiences, knowledge, and resources about urban ag opportunities around the nation.

The conference started with pre-conference farm tours including Drew Farm, Georgia Street Community Collective, Beaverland Farms, and D-Town Farms. Afterward, hundreds of people gathered at Oakland Avenue Urban Farm, managed by Jerry Ann Hebron, a member of the USDA Urban Ag Federal Advisory board. At the reception, attendees ate local food, visited local craft vendors, and listened to local music.

After being fully immersed in Detroit’s urban agriculture, the formal portion of the conference began with an empowering land acknowledgment, a welcome address from the project team, USDA national leaders, and a special keynote from the Honorable Senator Debbie Stabenow. Senator Stabenow provided powerful history on urban agriculture programs, a brief review of the current urban ag landscape, and necessary guidance on how to get involved to make a change for urban agriculture.

CONFERENCE VOICES

“This was a very good conference. All had positive feedback. Based on participants’ positive interactions with other urban ag growers and the USDA representatives under one roof, this needs to be an annual event.”

CONFERENCE VOICES

“Really enjoyed the pre-conference farm tours. This was absolutely fabulous. The social on Sunday night was amazing and I wish every conference had something like this. It was really noticeable how the conference worked with the local region to maximize engagement.”

The conference continued with breakout sessions, panels, discussions, and presentations on a variety of urban agriculture topics, resources, and programs. A limited number of these sessions were offered virtually with an interactive chat option. Urban ag pioneers and community heroes Will Allen and Malik Yakini both gave powerful keynote speeches that further elevated the frequency of empowerment. Attendees were given Will Allen’s book, *The Good Food Revolution: Growing Healthy Food, People, and Communities*. The book is a powerful story of Allen’s experience growing up in a sharecropping community, his journey to playing professional basketball, then eventually becoming one of the most well-known urban producers, despite the discrimination he faced.

Members of the National Urban Agriculture Conference Steering and Planning Committee

The National Urban Agriculture Conference steering and planning committee includes a diverse group of stakeholders from across the nation who represent the urban ag landscapes in different regions. These individuals are accomplished experts in their field and include USDA state and federal employees, USDA cooperative agreement holders, farmers, and outreach specialists. The committee spent 8 months guiding the scheduling and logistics of the event ensuring the success of this first-time conference.

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Evaluation Summary

This conference evaluation summary was prepared by the team at Virginia Tech’s Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation who’s national role is to implement, collect, and evaluate surveys from NUag events and activities.

The National Urban Agriculture Conference was attended by close to had almost 700 people from across the nation who participated in-person or and virtually.

This evaluation summary highlights participant outcomes and experiences, including what attendees appreciated most, key takeaways, and recommendations for the USDA. It also covers demographic insights and includes specific questions for USDA staff and Urban Cooperators. The survey was administered online through QuestionPro the week after the conference, providing valuable feedback to help shape future NUag events, initiatives, and policy recommendations.

STATEMENT	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	OVERALL
The information shared during the NUag Conference was relevant and helpful to me.	3.57%	1.79%	4.17%	35.71%	54.76%	100.00%
My understanding about what USDA FSA is doing to support urban agriculture has increased.	2.98%	4.76%	18.45%	38.10%	35.71%	100.00%
I have a better sense of the role the National Urban Agriculture (NUag) Initiative Team (VSU, TIME, Cornell, and VT) is playing to support the Project.	2.38%	7.14%	15.48%	41.07%	33.93%	100.00%
I was able to make new urban agriculture connections.	2.98%	0.60%	1.19%	25.00%	70.24%	100.00%
As a result of the conference, I know of USDA resources available to support urban producers.	2.38%	2.98%	21.43%	33.33%	39.88%	100.00%
I felt the program was well organized.	2.38%	2.38%	5.36%	36.31%	53.57%	100.00%
I was satisfied with the food served.	4.17%	3.57%	16.07%	30.95%	45.24%	100.00%
The NUag Conference location was satisfactory.	2.38%	2.98%	7.14%	24.40%	63.10%	100.00%

Outcomes and Experience

The NUag Conference received broadly positive feedback from attendees, reflecting its success in several key areas.

The high rate of agreement indicates that presenters and sessions were well-structured, informative, and in touch with the current state of urban agriculture. The effectiveness of this conference lies not only in its ability to present useful information but also in how that information was perceived by a broad spectrum of participants, including urban farmers, USDA officials, and various stakeholders. From a strategic perspective, the high satisfaction rates offer a strong endorsement for future conferences.

These results also suggest that the conference format, speakers, and topics were well chosen, and that a similar approach could be adopted in subsequent events. The low percentage of negative and neutral responses provides an opportunity for refinement.

Appreciations

What part of the NUag Conference did you appreciate most?

>> The value of networking and community building:

Many attendees appreciated the opportunity to connect with other urban agriculture professionals, farmers, and stakeholders. This sentiment was reflected in multiple responses, highlighting that both formal and informal networking opportunities were key to the conference's success of the conference.

CONFERENCE VOICES

“The many networking opportunities offered throughout the program were very helpful. The break between sessions was appreciated and it gave ample time to connect with other cooperators and USDA personnel.”

>> Farm tours: The tours offered participants a firsthand look at successful urban farming operations, allowing them to see practical applications of the concepts discussed during the conference. The tours provided an interactive learning experience, and respondents noted that seeing urban farming in action reinforced the theoretical knowledge gained.

>> Breakout sessions and panel discussions: Attendees reported that the topics were relevant and useful, with emphasis on land access, community-building strategies, and sustainable agriculture practices. Keynote speakers like Malik Yakini received

CONFERENCE VOICES

“I do not have a negative word to say. It truly was terrifically organized, very useful and a lot of fun. I don't know how to pick one thing. Maybe the farm tours, because not only did we see the farms, but there was enough time scheduled in to talk to one another.”

To ensure greater satisfaction in future events, the steering committee might consider conducting pre-conference surveys to gauge attendees' specific interests, challenges, and expectations. This would allow for the customization of certain sessions to address niche topics or concerns that may have been overlooked in the current format.

high praise for their insightful contributions, which resonated with many attendees due to their relevance and depth.

The appreciation for these specific elements underscores the importance of a balanced conference structure that combines educational sessions with practical, hands-on experiences. The ability to meet and collaborate with other professionals was especially significant for many participants. These connections are not only beneficial for knowledge-sharing but also for fostering partnerships that may continue long after the conference concludes.

While the responses were overwhelmingly positive, some attendees mentioned that they would have appreciated even more structured networking opportunities. Given the desire for more time to connect with peers, future iterations of the conference will ensure adding additional networking sessions and/or increasing the time allotted for networking. . Another suggestion was to create thematic networking groups that allow participants with shared interests (e.g., policy development, urban farming techniques) to meet and exchange ideas more intentionally.

CONFERENCE VOICES

“Hearing all the experiences of the farmers and officials. Personal experiences are usually the most valuable things to take away from conferences.”

Biggest Take Away

What was your biggest take away from participating in the NUAg Conference?

>> Importance of community and networking:

Attendees emphasized the value of building connections with other urban farmers, USDA representatives, and stakeholders. This sentiment highlights a recurring theme that urban agriculture is not just about farming techniques but also about creating a supportive ecosystem where knowledge, resources, and solutions can be shared.

CONFERENCE VOICES

“The importance of connecting with growers in my own community on a personal level and inspired that there is a thriving movement that I can be involved with.”

>> **Growing Roles of Federal Programs:** Attendees recognize the benefit and growth of USDA programs and the role they can play in supporting urban farmers. Participants were encouraged to see the USDA’s commitment to urban agriculture, though some expressed that there are still institutional barriers, such as land access and funding challenges, that need to be addressed. This illustrates the need for continued advocacy and policy development to ensure that urban agriculture can thrive in various contexts.

CONFERENCE VOICES

“Although some urban operations are unlike more traditional models that we routinely encounter, each is separate and distinct regardless of size or scope. There is a “spot at the table” for all producers within the USDA and together we must unite to break down barriers limiting access to USDA programs.”

>> Challenges faced by urban farmers are unique:

Attendees noted that while there are commonalities between urban and rural farming, the urban context presents distinct obstacles, such as limited space, regulatory barriers, and infrastructural needs. The conference helped highlight these issues and brought attention to the fact that urban farmers need programs and support that are tailored to their specific needs.

>> **Shared stories and success models:** Hearing directly from urban farmers who have overcome significant challenges to build successful operations was both motivational and instructive for attendees. This highlights the value of peer learning and the importance of providing platforms for urban farmers to share their experiences and strategies.

USDA FSA Recommendations

What is one thing you would recommend to USDA Farm Service Agency leadership for creating programs that better support urban producers?

>> **USDA (FSA) to simplify its processes and increase accessibility for urban producers:** Many respondents emphasized the need for the USDA to reduce bureaucratic barriers that make it difficult for small-scale urban farmers to access resources. A common suggestion was to streamline the application process for grants and loans, as many urban farmers lack the administrative capacity to navigate complex paperwork.

CONFERENCE VOICES

“For the first time, it was great. USDA came to listen and learn, hopefully, next time they will come with answers to the many questions and concerns that were shared.”

>> **Grants not loans:** Many urban farmers operate on small margins and cannot take on additional debt, making grants a more viable form of support. Some respondents also suggested that the USDA should develop new funding programs specifically tailored to urban agriculture rather than try to adapt rural programs to an urban context. This could include grants for infrastructure development, land acquisition, and technical assistance.

>> **Better outreach and education:** Attendees recommended that USDA leadership invest more in community engagement, particularly holding local meetings and information sessions where urban producers can learn about available programs and resources. Respondents noted that these engagements could help build stronger relationships with urban farming communities, including historically underserved populations, to foster trust and ensure that USDA programs are effectively meeting their needs.

CONFERENCE VOICES

“Farm Service Agency employees from the urban ag pilot cities would appreciate a session just for us, to share what recommendations we are working on, best practices, workarounds, etc. for working with city growers.”

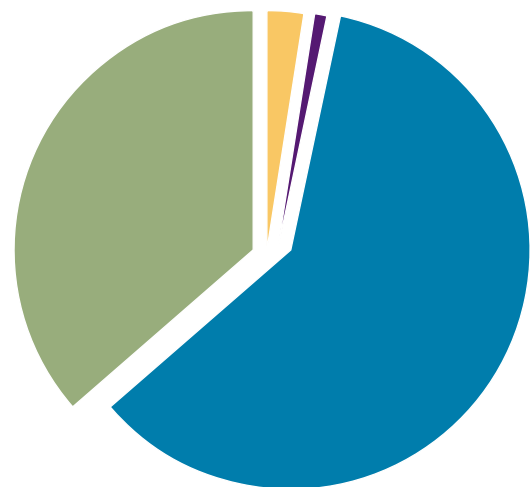
>> USDA flexibility: Attendees recommended USDA be more flexible in terms of eligibility requirements. For example, many urban farmers operate on leased land or in community gardens, which may not meet traditional land ownership or production criteria for federal programs. Creating policies that accommodate these alternative models of urban farming would make USDA support more inclusive and relevant to the needs of urban producers.

Demographics

GENDER

This gender distribution highlights the presence and engagement of women in urban agriculture, reflecting the growing role of women in this field. The strong representation of women could also suggest that urban agriculture, as a movement, provides an accessible entry point for women, particularly in the context of community-based food systems and local food production. Women have historically played key roles in grassroots agricultural movements and food justice initiatives, which may contribute to the higher female attendance at the conference. The gender data can be an important factor in helping organizers create more tailored resources and support systems that address specific challenges faced by women in this sector.

While the small percentage of non-binary participants indicates a need to consider greater inclusivity and representation, the overall distribution shows a strong, balanced engagement from both male and female participants in urban agriculture.



GENDER



AGE RANGE

The age distribution of participants at the NUag Conference is skewed toward middle-aged individuals, with 43.15% of respondents falling in the 40 to 59 age range. This distribution suggests that the majority of participants have likely had several years of experience in agriculture or related fields, which could explain the strong interest in discussions about policy, infrastructure, and resource management. The high proportion of middle-aged and older attendees also indicates a strong presence of established professionals in the sector who are likely involved in decision-making roles or lead urban agriculture initiatives.

At the same time, the smaller representation of younger participants can be viewed as an opportunity for growth. Urban agriculture often appeals to younger generations interested in sustainability, food justice, and innovative farming techniques. Increasing engagement with younger participants in future conferences may require targeted outreach and programming that speaks to their interests and challenges, such as entry into agriculture, access to capital, and education on new agricultural technologies.

Additionally, the range of participant ages highlights the importance of creating spaces for intergenerational learning and mentorship. Conferences like NUag could benefit from integrating mentorship programs that connect younger participants with more experienced professionals, fostering knowledge exchange and building networks that support the next generation of urban farmers. Generally, the age range data points to the



AGE RANGE



need for the conference to balance its programming between addressing the immediate needs of more established farmers and fostering the growth and participation of younger, emerging urban farmers.

RACE

Respondents to the survey represented a diverse array of roles and identities within the urban agriculture sector.

The strong representation of Black or African American participants aligns with the focus of urban agriculture on addressing food insecurity and systemic inequalities, particularly in underserved communities. Many urban agriculture initiatives have roots in food justice movements, which aim to empower communities of color by increasing access to healthy food, reclaiming land, and fostering economic development.

The data also points to a huge opportunity for increasing the involvement of other underrepresented groups who are minimally represented. Expanding outreach efforts to include these communities could further diversify the voices and perspectives involved in urban agriculture, enriching the conversations and strategies developed at future conferences.

AUDIENCE SERVED

The respondents to this question indicated a wide range of audiences their organizations work with, reflecting the diverse landscape of urban agriculture. **Beginning farmers or ranchers** were a primary audience, with **14.75%** of attendees working with them. This emphasizes the increasing number of new entrants into the agricultural sector, which aligns with the growing interest in urban agriculture among individuals seeking to establish farms or gardens.

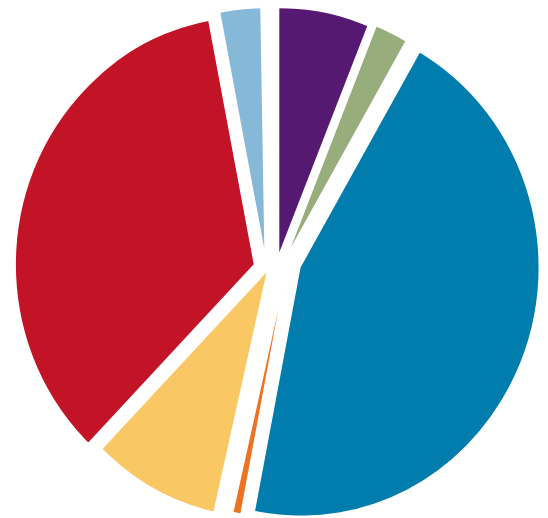
Another significant audience was **female farmers or ranchers**, with **12.14%** of participants indicating that their work involves this group. This corresponds with the gender distribution of the conference, where over 60% of attendees identified as female. This finding highlights the central role women play in the urban agriculture sector, often as leaders and decision-makers.

Organizations also work closely with **socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers**, accounting for **12.39%** of the audience. This group includes individuals from historically underserved racial and ethnic groups, such as African Americans, American Indians, and Hispanics. The prominence of this audience reflects the socio-political dimension of urban agriculture, where food justice and equity are often central themes.

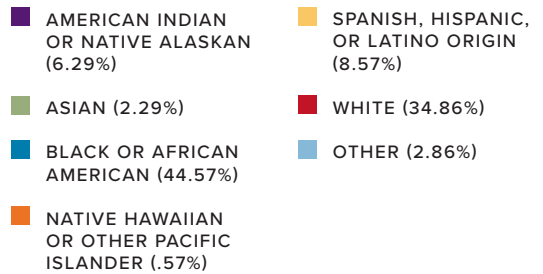
Limited resource farmers or ranchers made up **11.15%** of the audience. This segment points to the economic challenges many urban farmers face, further emphasizing the need for support structures, such as subsidies or grants, to sustain small-scale operations in urban areas.

Other notable groups included **organic or sustainable growers** at **11.03%**, demonstrating the emphasis on environmentally friendly practices within urban agriculture. Meanwhile, **veteran farmers** (7.43%) and **disabled farmers** (7.31%) reflect the inclusivity of the urban agriculture movement, where individuals from various backgrounds are supported in their agricultural endeavors.

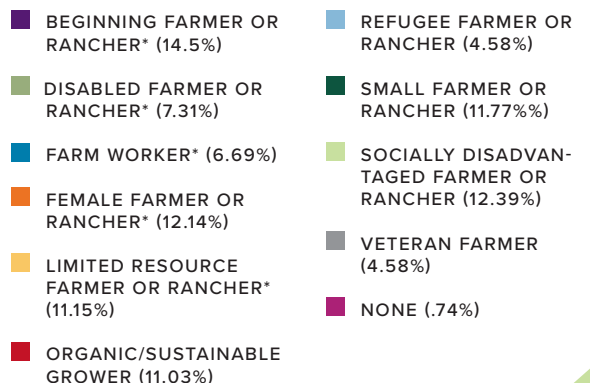
Additionally, **farm workers**, those who contribute labor without holding an ownership or operator status constituted **6.69%** of the audience. **Refugee**



RACE



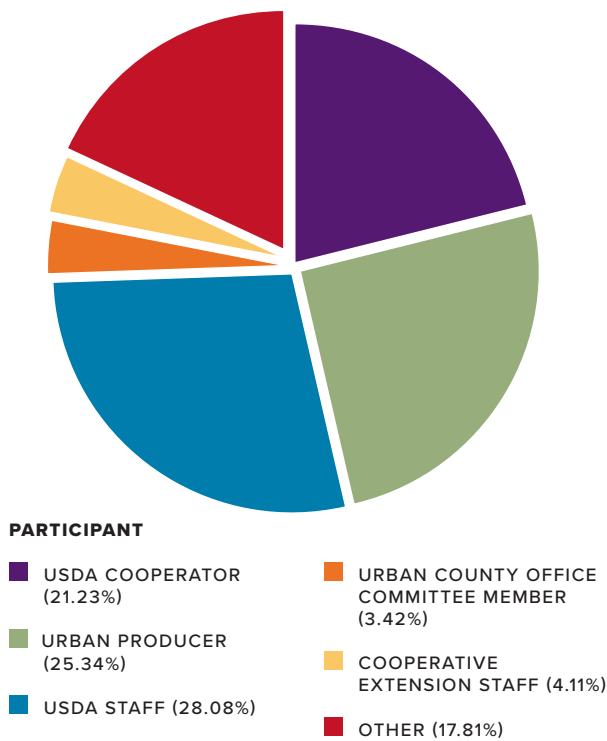
AUDIENCE



* USDA definition

CONFERENCE VOICES

“The need for national unification and networking that is inclusive. The urban ag “movers and shakers” continue to focus on very localized issues. Time to branch out and have a broader vision. To garner support at the federal level (including most importantly Congress) urban producers need to organize and develop a national coalition focused on food production and marketing in urban/suburban environments.”



CONFERENCE VOICES

“The scope of urban agriculture goes far beyond just producing food, and many stakeholders in the segment are focused on the food system as a whole.”

farmers made up 4.58%, highlighting the role of urban agriculture in providing livelihoods to displaced populations.

Finally, only **0.74%** of respondents indicated that they do not work with any of the defined groups, emphasizing that most participants at the conference were deeply engaged with one or more specific audiences. This wide range of groups reflects the complex social fabric of urban agriculture, where farming is not just about food production, but also about community building, social justice, and economic resilience.

PARTICIPANT TYPE

Attendees were asked to select a category that best described their role or affiliation, resulting in a snapshot of the various stakeholders involved in urban agriculture.

The largest category of attendees was **USDA staff**, who accounted for **28.08%** of respondents. This underscores the federal government’s involvement in supporting and investing in urban agriculture through policies and programs. USDA employees at the conference played a key role in disseminating information about federal resources and facilitating discussions about how these can be applied to urban settings.

Urban producers were the next largest group, making up **25.34%** of attendees. These are individuals who farm or garden in urban or suburban areas. Their presence at the conference is significant, as it reflects the growing trend of agriculture being incorporated into cityscapes. Urban producers likely attended the event to learn about best practices, network with peers, and gain insights into the resources available to them through government or community initiatives. **Urban cooperators** represented **21.23%** of respondents. These cooperators, often key partners in urban agriculture projects, play a key role in organizing and leading initiatives aimed at improving food security and community resilience in urban areas.

Other groups included **urban county office committee members** (3.42%), **cooperative extension staff** (4.11%), and a significant **17.81%** of attendees who identified as “Other.” The committee members, elected urban producers who represent their peers, and cooperative extension staff, who provide educational resources and technical support, are vital to the urban agriculture ecosystem. The “Other” category likely included a mix of non-profit leaders, educators, researchers, and local government officials, all of whom contribute to the diverse landscape of urban farming initiatives.

This distribution of roles highlights the collaborative nature of urban agriculture, where government agencies, local producers, community-based organizations, and educational institutions must work together to address the challenges and opportunities of farming in urban settings.

COOPERATOR FEEDBACK

USDA Community-based Cooperators were given a chance to share ways that USDA and the NUag Initiative team can best support their advancement in this work.

>> Platform for information sharing: Participants recommended using a platform such as Mighty Networks (mn.co), which would allow cooperators to share updates, resources, and experiences in a collaborative space. This type of online community could facilitate ongoing discussions and knowledge exchange between conferences, fostering a sense of continuity and support among participants.

>> Ongoing discussions: Webinars could focus on emerging issues in urban agriculture, ensuring that cooperators stay up to date with the latest trends, challenges, and opportunities in the field. Additionally, a chat room or forum was suggested as a way to allow cooperators to engage in real-time conversations and problem-solving discussions.

>> Financial support: Cooperators asked for more scholarships and educational technology assistance, reflecting the financial constraints many urban farmers face. Offering scholarships for conferences, training, or equipment would reduce barriers to participation, particularly for socially disadvantaged or low-resource farmers.

>> Updates and communication: More regular and timely communications about new programs and opportunities within USDA's urban agriculture initiatives. One participant specifically asked for more consistent email updates and notifications about upcoming programs, deadlines, and funding opportunities. This highlights the need for better communication channels between USDA and urban farmers, ensuring that information is accessible and timely.

COOPERATOR TOPICS OF INTEREST

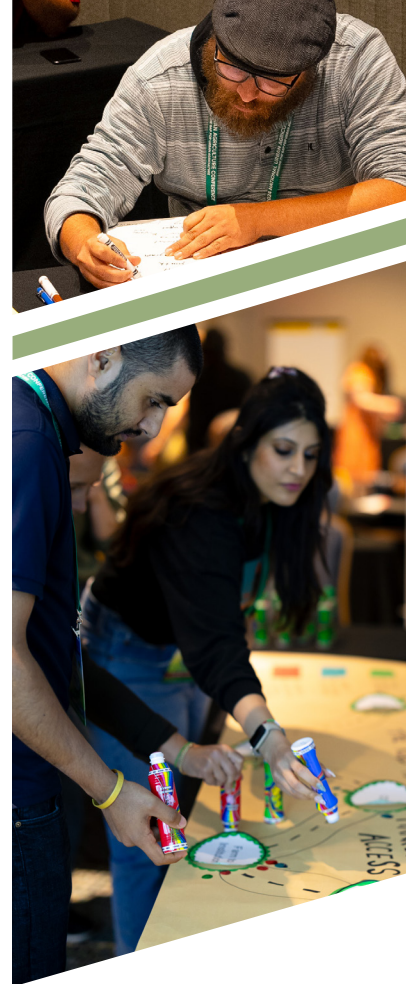
USDA Community-based Cooperators were given a chance to share what they wanted to cover within the NUag Initiative learning exchanges held for sharing resources and having meaningful conversations.

- >> practical and actionable knowledge
- >> access to grant funding
- >> community connections and grassroots fundraising
- >> water conservation methods
- >> soil health and soil mixture options
- >> diversified farming practices, such as integrating edible fruit trees into urban environments and setting up fish farms (aquaculture)
- >> utilizing small spaces
- >> policy and economics
- >> farm record keeping
- >> economics of technology adoption

USDA TOPICS OF INTEREST

USDA staff was asked to submit feedback on topics they would like to learn about as they navigate how to service urban producers.

- >> technical challenges associated with urban farming
- >> managing soil contamination
- >> soil remediation techniques
- >> innovative agricultural practices, methods such as rooftop gardens, green walls, aquaponics, and farming in converted shipping containers
- >> integration of technology and traditional knowledge system i.e.: precision agriculture tools and renewable energy solutions like solar-powered irrigation systems
- >> changing policy within specific states to better support urban agriculture ie: navigating local ordinances and understanding how zoning laws can impact urban farming initiatives
- >> equity in costs for land and water resources, especially in comparison to rural farmers given that urban producers often face higher operational costs, learning how to level the playing field is a significant concern



Special Session Highlights

Cornell Urban Ag Curriculum and Stakeholder Engagement

Cornell's session provided valuable insights into curriculum development aimed at urban agriculture. The goal of the curriculum is to equip USDA with knowledge and skills, particularly in navigating urban-specific challenges.

Given that this session focused on a new educational initiative, it is notable that almost half of the conference participants opted to engage with it. This indicates a strong interest in formal training and educational resources for urban agriculture, which is increasingly seen as a vital component of sustainable urban development. USDA appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback and recognize the responsiveness of the curriculum's developers. One participant noted, "I think what was most valuable is learning how receptive and responsive Kyle is to feedback." This acknowledges the importance of stakeholder engagement in shaping the curriculum to meet the specific needs of urban producers. The session's interactive elements were also highly valued, particularly the brainstorming components. Participants enjoyed the opportunity to engage in discussions with peers and learn from other states' projects and successes in urban agriculture.

Several attendees appreciated the content of the curriculum, with one stating, "The session on stakeholder engagement made me think about outreach from a different and valuable perspective." This acknowledges urban agriculture's broader practices that go beyond farming, emphasizing community involvement and strategic partnerships as key elements of success.

The session provided clarity on the educational content and delivery methods, which are key for prospective participants in understanding how the training will be implemented.

During the Cornell stakeholder engagement session at the conference, USDA attendees gave real-time feedback on USDA stakeholder engagement and how FSA and Cornell's curriculum can improve engagement with urban producers. This information will directly inform the current and ongoing design of workshops and curriculum for the NUAg Initiative.

For this session, attendees created a stakeholder map, listing the stakeholders they engage with in their work. These stakeholders ranged from business professionals

and government agencies to non-profits and state-level organizations. However, not everyone reported working with urban growers. This exercise underscores the need to define stakeholders, their purpose, and engagement strategies as part of the curriculum, and for participants to spend time workshopping their stakeholder maps.

The activity then explored how USDA employees are currently participating in stakeholder engagement, how they would like to in the future, what the barriers are, and what things could be helpful. Their responses reflected a wide range of engagement including direct outreach, workshops, listening sessions, and agency events. Several major opportunities emerged. 1) The need for FSA agents to articulate the FSA value proposition to urban producers; 2) The need for FSA agents to understand the scope of outreach allowed in their role; 3) The need for FSA agents to engage producers with the empathy, respect, and patience required to build long-term relationships with those producers and communities who are reluctant to collaborate with the USDA. Concerns about tangible barriers, such as a lack of funds to secure accessible meeting locations and payment for producer time/ food/ childcare, were also raised.

Fire Side Chat Sessions

Fireside chat sessions were valuable and appreciated according to participant feedback. Each session was led by facilitators with expertise in the topic. Facilitators engaged the group in interactive, informal conversations. Summaries and feedback collected at the end of these sessions provided additional insight into key barriers and challenges for urban agriculture producers.

GRASSROOTS RESOURCES AND COALITION BUILDING

Karen Washington, renowned Urban activist and farmer at Rise & Root Farm along with Patrice Brown, Detroit Urban Agriculture Director coordinated an interactive session where they separated the room into regions and had attendees share information on resources and common needs in their area. They brainstormed a wide range of accessible resources that are currently available or could be shared including hands-on technical assistance, youth programs, programming grant funds, partnerships, tool banks, and political connections within local

and regional government. These suggest that urban stakeholders are interested in utilizing all of the tools, resources, and funding available. Not surprisingly, common needs also emerged. Land, large equipment acquisition, fertilizer inputs, business management, labor, and national collaboration were identified as the most common needs, while emphasizing that there are larger significant hurdles that are hard to obtain without grant and grassroots funding. However, these are the same barriers most producers are facing.

LAND PRESERVATION AND ACQUISITION

Ash Richards, Director of Urban Agriculture of Philadelphia Parks and Recreation, and Savannah Robbins, Assistant Director of Planning and Analysis at the Detroit Land Bank Authority led a conversation with an intentional focus on strategies around national land preservation and acquisition. The group brainstormed several key objectives around land strategies and explored the intricate dynamics of land ownership in the current food system. These discussions included the desire for strategies related to advocacy for adverse possession, education on local zoning laws, cooperative land ownership, incubator sites, property easements, storytelling, and more. The session participants acknowledged the weightiness and density of the topics and how time is largely a barrier to creating strategies that fully address these complex challenges.

URBAN MARKET ACCESS

Joe Lesausky, Food Access Director at Michigan Farmers Market Association, and Madelina DiLisi of the Great Lakes Midwest Regional Food Business Center coordinated an energizing and interactive session on urban market access. Attendees discussed different types of markets and the successes and challenges for urban producers in those areas. Common themes around market access success included available community support, grant funding to subsidize income, networking, value-added products, healthy “fads” that influence buyer behavior, collective farming, and farm stands. Suggesting that accessing markets while prioritizing community education and engagement has pro and cons when it comes to production. Common challenges were crop planning, prices, self-sacrifice, storage, volume requirements, commercial kitchen space, and lack of successful frameworks. Emphasizing the issues that small and urban farmers face together making their operation scalable and profitable.

Conclusion

Amid climate change and technological advancement, urban and innovative agriculture emerges as communities look for ways to reliably access healthy, local foods. Community green spaces also offer safe spaces for education and programming in urban areas. We trust this conference and the feedback we have shared will help provide a framework for USDA to further invest in this growing industry. Evaluations from attendees of the National Urban Agriculture Conference emphasize the importance of tailoring spaces and programming for urban producers and stakeholders. It is noted that the conference would benefit from improvement in areas such as diversity, policy-focused conversations, and logistics. We will work to mitigate these concerns and ensure that we have an even more successful conference in the coming years.



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THE NUAG INITIATIVE IS MADE POSSIBLE BY GRANTS FROM USDA FARM SERVICE AGENCY: #FSA23CPT0012863, #FSA23CPT0013042.

NOVEMBER 2024