A Model: Strengthening the Small-Scale Fiber Industry in WNY

United States
Judy Einach

Organization type: nonprofit/ngo/citizen sector
Budget: $100,000 - $250,000
Website: http://www.nysawg.org

- Economic development
- Income generation
- Rural development
- Marketing
- Sustainable development
- Rural
- Sustainable agriculture

Elevator Pitch

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

WNY small-scale fiber producers lack access to training and insight to sustain their operations and build a viable fiber industry. NYSAWG is organizing the industry and educating producers, who are generally at-risk, to increase their profitability and sustain their sheep, goat, alpaca and llama farms.

About Project

Problem: What problem is this project trying to address?

Describe the primary problem(s) that your innovation is addressing. (150 words or fewer) Small-scale fiber producers across NY State create lovely, high quality products yet NY is not known for fiber products. There is no coherent NY State fiber industry marketing to NY consumers or to consumers worldwide. Consumers want blended fibers but there is a lack of cooperation across producers of different fiber animal breeds.
Consumers want fiber products made from the fiber of local animals but few fiber producers understand marketing. There is a need for animal husbandry education, for improved business development training. No one knows the potential in WNY’s or NY State’s to provide fiber products, to purchase local fiber products or to sell outside the region. Recently the bottom dropped out of the camelid breeding market, a good thing many think, so producers are looking for alternatives, including increasing interest in processing fiber that was once considered waste.

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About You

Organization:
New York Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (NYSAWG)

First Name
Judy

Last Name
Einach

Website URL
http://www.farmtraveleronline.com

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Section 2: Your Organization

Organization Name
New York Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (NYSAWG)

Organization Phone
716 316 5839

Organization Address
19 Penfield Street Buffalo, NY 14213

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Your idea

Country and state your work focuses on
, NY

Website URL
http://www.farmtraveleronline.com

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Innovation

What makes your idea unique?

Little recognition has been given to WNY’s small-scale fiber producers, who are more numerous than most people know. They raise sheep, goats, llama and alpaca. The disorganized industry bears some responsibility for lack of recognition. The fact that camelids (alpaca, llama) were just recently recognized as farm animals by USDA was also a contributing factor. Farmers who raise sheep and goats for fiber are respected by other farmers, but those who raise alpaca and llama for fiber are tainted by others who breed these animals purely for profit. NYSAWG recognizes alpaca, llama, sheep and goat farmers as deserving of attention and seems to be on the cutting edge, recognizing the potential in and of a developed and organized fiber industry. Short term NYSAWG focuses on assisting fiber producers in Western NY (WNY). Long term NYSAWG would like to share an organizational model with fiber producers in other regions of the State. While NYSAWG focuses on the farmers who raise the animals, NYSAWG reaches out to others who process fiber into products, and has done some work with regional retailers who have helped identify problems in the industry. NY fiber producers, as well as USA fiber producers, do not have the resources to market their products compared to marketing budgets for fiber from other countries. The cashmere industry (goats, typically raised in other countries with their fiber processed in another country) spends billions yearly on marketing compared to a budget of tens of millions to market US alpaca products.

Do you have a patent for this idea?

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Impact

What impact have you had?

NYSAWG’s involvement in the WNY fiber industry has served a motivating factor. Producers (farmers) are so appreciative that NYSAWG embraces their industry, offers field days, attends producer group events, and promotes WNY fiber. Field days are very well attended, often exceeding the upper limit set for registrations. Producers assist with outreach and have helped build NYSAWG’s contact list. NYSAWG’s field days bring together producers groups that generally do not intermingle, thus breaking down barriers that prevent groups from working together to build the industry. Producers have given NYSAWG a list of subjects about which producers believe they need to know more, for example animal reproduction and marketing. Producers have worked with NYSAWG writing letters of support or commitment to accompany grant applications and have asked that NYSAWG not abandon them because NYSAWG’s support has had such an impact on their belief in themselves and in their industry. NYSAWG’s commitment to partnering with other organizations and institutions to offer programming has impacted our partners by allowing them to expand the programming they offer and community outreach they are expected to do.

Actions
NYSAWG seeks funding to support more educational field days and work sessions. NYSAWG works in partnership with other organizations, institutions and businesses with expertise to lead field days (diseases, fecal sampling, reproduction, pasture management, fiber processing). Staff attends meetings and events sponsored by fiber producer groups. NYSAWG has started to work with producer groups to gather information about the state of the industry in WNY to assess potential and develop next steps. Lack of funding would be our only barrier to success. Producers are motivated and participate in programming by attending events and contributing ideas. Experts are available.

**Results**

Producers of different animals breeds will understand common barriers to success and work together to overcome these obstacles for the benefit of the WNY fiber industry as a whole as well as for their individual success. Examples include pooling fiber to decrease cost of processing, to create and sell products, and on marketing initiatives. Success in WNY will result in other regions within the State working with NYSAWG and adopting the model. NY State will become known for excellent fiber products from small-scale fiber producers.

**What will it take for your project to be successful over the next three years? Please address each year separately, if possible.**

Please describe each year separately, if possible. (300 words or fewer)

Year 1 – identify common barriers to success, demonstration project to show the value of cooperation, additional field days.

Year 2 – Producers of different animal breeds will meet together and develop a strategy to overcome barriers limiting success, a demonstration project to show that by cooperating, producers of different breeds all win. Further field days to educate producers about caring for their animals, harvesting high quality fiber, and business development.

Year 3 – WNY producers rely less on support from NYSAWG, take responsibility for further developing the western NY fiber small-scale fiber industry and NYSWG reaches out to another region within the State to replicate success.

**What would prevent your project from being a success?**

NYSAWG’s biggest barrier to success would be lack of funding to support future programming, including staff time. Other resources, expertise, are there and our fiber producers are hungry for help. Many of the agricultural support organizations, like Cooperative Extension, have limited funds but tremendous expertise. As long as NYSAWG has the funding NYSAWG can partner with experts and deliver high quality programming. NYSAWG has been fortunate to receive USDA Risk Management Agency funding for the past two years which has allowed us to support fiber producers in the ways we have. NYSAWG understands that USDA will likely not support NYSAWG forever, so it is imperative that NYSAWG builds relationships with other funders who agree our work to strengthen the small-scale fiber industry in NY State is a worthwhile investment.

**How many people will your project serve annually?**

101

1000

**What is the average monthly household income in your target community, in US Dollars?**

$1000 - 4000

**Does your project seek to have an impact on public policy?**

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**Sustainability**

**What stage is your project in?**

Operating for less than a year

**In what country?**

, NY

**Is your initiative connected to an established organization?**

Yes

**If yes, provide organization name.**

New York Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (NYSAWG)

**How long has this organization been operating?**

More than 5 years

**Does your organization have a Board of Directors or an Advisory Board?**

Yes

**Does your organization have any non-monetary partnerships with NGOs?**

No

**Does your organization have any non-monetary partnerships with businesses?**

No

**Does your organization have any non-monetary partnerships with government?**

No

**Please tell us more about how these partnerships are critical to the success of your innovation.**

Alfred State College, Center for Organic and Sustainable Agriculture provides space and expertise for animal husbandry field days. The Fiber Factory, a mini-mill, provides tours of the mill during which producers learn about commercial processing of fiber. Alpaca Breeders of Western New York is the lead producer group working with NYSAWG on data collection, education and marketing. USDA Risk Management has been the principle funder of NYSAWG’s work to date with WNY fiber producers.

**What are the three most important actions needed to grow your initiative or organization?**

NYSAWG seeks to continue to bring producers of sheep, goats, alpaca and llama together during field days to make them more comfortable with
each other, to educate them about their animals and the industry, and to bridge the tricky subject of cooperation. NYSAWG seeks to gather data needed to understand industry potential by working with producer groups who will also help analyze data and chart next steps to grow the industry. NYSAWG seeks to attract the financial and expert resources needed to sustain this initiative.

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**The Story**

**What was the defining moment that led you to this innovation?**

As a proponent of buy local and as a knitter I discovered how difficult it is to purchase yarn and other products made from local fiber, fiber from animals raised in Western NY (WNY), the region in which I live. As the executive director of NYSAWG I have been working with local farmers, food producers, helping them reduce risk in an effort to sustain small farms in NY State. I reached out to the only person I knew who raised animals for fiber for leads to purchase local fiber products. The leads she gave me revealed a Pandora’s Box of problems. I met with her and it was just good luck that she is very knowledgeable about the fiber industry locally and nationally. During this meeting I recognized the potential in WNY’s small-scale fiber industry and its state of disorganization. By the end of my meeting with her I committed NYSAWG’s resources to pulling everything out of Pandora’s Box and working with WNY fiber producers to identify and resolve problems. Since that meeting in the spring of 2009 NYSAWG has sponsored field days, met with fiber producer groups, used our marketing tools to promote the industry, committed funds and applied for additional funding to continue to support WNY’s fiber industry.

**Tell us about the social innovator behind this idea.**

Judith Einach has been NYSAWG’s executive director since the fall of 2008. For 3 years prior to assuming the day-to-day leadership of NYSAWG she served on NYSAWG’s Board of Directors. She has decades of experience in program development and management, and in for-profit and non-profit administration. She serves on several Boards including the Board of her local farmers’ market. She is experienced in micro-enterprise development with a special focus on assisting new entrepreneurs in the food sector. She is an invited guest speaker at meetings and conferences and has written on agricultural issues, especially on the intersection of food and energy policy. Other NYSAWG initiatives which she manages include the development of a producer cooperative fruit and vegetable cannery in Schoharie County, an urban farming initiative in Buffalo, and a symposium on pollinators and pesticides (July 22, 2010) which is attracting worldwide interest. She holds an EdM from the Harvard Graduate School of Education where she focused her studies on community problem solving and decision-making. She currently lives in Buffalo, NY but will be moving to the more rural town of Westfield, NY in June, 2010. NYSAWG will move to Westfield with her.

**How did you first hear about Changemakers?**

Web Search (e.g., Google or Yahoo)

If through another, please provide the name of the organization or company

50 words or fewer

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