

# The New Agrarian Program Evaluation Report

A formative evaluation report of the New  
Agrarian Program

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# Introduction

## Program Description and Justification

The New Agrarian Program (NAP) was initiated in 2009 as a way to help beginning agrarians learn the advanced skills necessary to pursue successful careers in regenerative agriculture. The program partners with skilled ranchers and farmers to create opportunities for comprehensive, full immersion experiential learning in authentic professional settings. NAP apprentices and interns are first-career professionals with sincere commitments to life at the intersection of conservation and agriculture. Mentors are dedicated land stewards who prioritize healthy soil, healthy food, and healthy communities. Their ranching and farming practices provide a high quality of life for people and animals, while actively regenerating soil, vegetation, and riparian areas, and protecting air and water quality. *(from Agrarian Apprenticeship: Growing the Next Generation of Ranchers and Farmers, p. 13)*

## Objectives

NAP exists to increase the number of professional training opportunities with highly skilled, established practitioners, land-based agricultural apprenticeships that can provide critical experiential education and mentorship that cannot be acquired through classroom study alone. NAP helps train the next generation of ecologically minded ranchers and farmers by partnering with established practitioners to offer agricultural apprenticeships for young people committed to lives in regenerative agriculture *(Agrarian Apprenticeship: Growing the Next Generation of Ranchers and Farmers, p. 9)*.

The formative evaluation was conducted using primary data gathered from NAP apprentices, second year NAP apprentices, current mentors, past mentors, and NAP alumni. A formative evaluation approach was chosen because it allowed for the exploration of the program, identification of the necessary areas for assessment, the piloting of the evaluation instruments, and development of baseline data. The immediate purpose of the evaluation was to discover how to better recruit applicants for the Agrarian Apprenticeship Program.

## Stakeholders

The primary stakeholders include the NAP administration, ranchers, farmers, current and future apprentices and mentors, and the Quivira Coalition.

## Challenges and Constraints

The main challenges and constraints facing NAP includes funding, the political environment, agricultural market uncertainties, environmental and agricultural priorities, weather patterns and climate change, and the age of mentors and succession.

## Logic Model

A logic model is a tool used by evaluators, and managers as a framework for assessing the effectiveness of a program (see Appendix A). The logic model for NAP was informed by interviews with Sarah Wentzel-Fisher, Executive Director of the Quivira Coalition, Jill Rice, and Julie Sullivan. The logic model creation process included developing evaluation questions, identifying relevant indicators, and establishing criteria and thresholds. Email and video conferencing communication with Sarah, Jill, and Julie provided feedback for revisions. The main assumption that underlies the logic model is that every year there will be applicants to the program and the program will continue to operate under the same mission and according to the same values.

## Data Collection

Data were collected using qualitative methods. Individual interviews were conducted with 12 NAP apprentices, 3 second year apprentices, 17 NAP alumni, 11 current mentors, and 2 past mentors. Interviews were conducted by telephone and in-person using a semi-structured interview protocol that allowed for relevant conversations not otherwise specific to the scripted questions. This flexibility allowed for the generation of richer data. Because the evaluator, Ms. Tyler Thorp, M.S., lives in Arizona, the interviews were conducted by members of the NAP team. An inherent limitation of relying on interview data is the potential bias and misinterpretation from the evaluators.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by the evaluator using the pre-established criteria and thresholds as the coding framework.

## Findings

### Short Term Results

Outcome # 1 - Increase regenerative ranching apprenticeships in the American West

The number of ranching apprenticeships, second year apprenticeships, mentors, applicants and apprentices, and organizations offering large landscape agrarian apprenticeships should all be increasing over time for the first outcome of the short-term goals to be achieved. These numbers provide a baseline from which to assess future growth and attrition.

Outcome # 2 - Increase points of entry into regenerative ranching/farming careers for agrarian beginners

The outputs for outcome #2 are alternate program formats developed (i.e. part-time, shorter duration) for internships and/or apprenticeships to reach currently under-represented groups in the NAP program. Of the current and past apprentices interviewed, 84% are continuing in agrarian careers. 17% of the current apprentices interviewed are engaged in leadership

activities such as the Soil Conservation District, Farmers Union or in roles such as consumer educators/advocates for regenerative agriculture. If this trend of beginners staying in regenerative agriculture after their apprenticeship continues to increase, the anticipated outcome is likely to be reached.

#### Outcome # 3 - Improve apprentice recruitment

How apprentices hear of NAP and decide to become an apprentice ranges from participant to participant. Common themes include a teacher/mentor/professor suggesting they apply, a parent or family member suggesting they apply, online job search sites, Google searches for an apprenticeship, or already being a member of the Quivira community. The Quivira conference was also mentioned by three apprentices as the reason for why they applied for the apprenticeship. Interestingly, the years of experience prior to applying to NAP is *not* a trustworthy predictor of application behavior.

#### Outcome #4 - Increased alumni training and support

All of the past apprentices who stayed working for additional seasons spoke of their experience positively. For example, apprentices felt “8 months is too short, the longer you stay somewhere, the more you can will learn” and “learning happens at a slower pace, you need more than 8 months”. Additionally, apprentices felt more connected to NAP staff and the Quivira community after staying for additional seasons. 82% of the NAP alumni interviewed have stayed in touch with their mentor after ending their apprenticeship. Similarly, 64% of the NAP alumni interviewed have stayed in touch with other apprentices. 52% of the NAP alumni interviewed have stayed in touch with Quivira staff. NAP and Quivira continues to play a role in the lives of 47% of the NAP alumni interviewed.

#### Outcome #5 - Increased mentor recruitment, training, and support

The tool NAP is currently utilizing to accomplish outcome #5 is a Mentor Guidebook that is made available online (conflict style, goal setting, feedback prompts, skill sheet check in prompts, etc). When asked what has been the most helpful support provided by NAP/Quivira, 61% of the mentors interviewed referenced the mentor orientation calls, 53% the NAP director contact, 23% networking with other mentors, and 46% assistance with apprenticeship problems. Those who answered “other”, listed NAP advertising and recruitment as well as in-person contact (rather than virtual/phone contact). For the mentor orientation phone calls, most of mentors found them helpful and participated in at least some of the calls. For those who didn’t or couldn’t make all of them, six reported it was because the time of day didn’t work for them. Two of the mentors interviewed claimed they didn’t participate in every call because of the timing in the production season, only one reported that they weren’t interested in the call, two reported that it wasn’t a high priority, and two reported that it was hard to use technology due to poor internet access.

Furthermore, when asked what support they would like that is not offered, 46% of the mentors interviewed requested in-person training/events, 15% requested teaching techniques and tips, 46% requested mentor to mentor discussions, 15% requested communication and/or conflict

skills, and 23% requested skill sheet implementation suggestions and online communication tool trainings. 38% requested a short HMI course to prepare for use with an apprentice. 81% of the mentors interviewed strongly agree that exposure to the Quivira Coalition, NAP and apprentices has supported them as a regenerative land manager.

#### Outcome #6 - Established 2nd year journey person curriculum

The output for outcome #6 is a 2<sup>nd</sup> year/journey person program included in the Agrarian Apprenticeship Handbook. The number of second year apprenticeships offered, and the number of journey persons who enter the workforce at a management or owner/operator level should increase in future years to ensure outcome #6 effective. All of the second-year apprentices that were interviewed are currently pursuing a career in agriculture.

#### Outcome #7 - Established graduate network for apprentices

The output for outcome #7 is the creation and maintenance of a database of past apprentices. All of the apprentice alumni agreed to have their information inputted into a database. Currently, 82% of the NAP alumni interviewed have stayed in touch with their mentor after ending their apprenticeship. 64% of the NAP alumni interviewed have stayed in touch with other apprentices. 52% of the NAP alumni interviewed have stayed in touch with Quivira staff. NAP or Quivira continues to play a role in 47% of the NAP alumni interviewed.

### Medium Term Results

#### Outcome #1 - Established support structure and mechanisms for the full agrarian career cycle

The outputs for outcome #1 are diverse intern and apprentice programs offered (e.g. time length, full/part time, shared between mentor sites). 70% of NAP alumni strongly agree that NAP gave them the tools and support to continue an agricultural career. The current NAP apprentices responded that NAP helped them to gain the following skills through their apprenticeship: business/entrepreneurship, fence building, butchering, farm operations and management, raising animals from birth to butcher, pasture management and planning, animal husbandry, machinery, communication, cheese making, patience, cattle management, plumbing, horsemanship, problem solving, organics, stockman ship, haying, and personnel management. Additionally, all of the second-year apprentices that were interviewed are continuing a career in agriculture.

#### Outcome #2 - Create a replicable model for place-based apprenticeship hubs with the capacity to support local apprenticeships connected in regional networks

The outputs for outcome #2 are offering regular cycles of short-term trainings that support agrarians at key points in the life cycle, developing a system to support and build awareness for these hubs and the broader New Agrarian network, and the established partnerships with other organizations (e.g. HMI, WLA, RMFU, and others). 5 of the current apprentices that were interviewed mentioned isolation as one of the main challenges they faced during their apprenticeship. 7 of the mentors interviewed suggested growing apprenticeship hubs into regional networks so it is more feasible for apprentices to engage with other apprentices near

them, as well as take to take advantage of the resources that are available with regional networks.

Outcome #3 - Have established points of entry into a career in agriculture with successful recruitment of new apprentices

The number of applicants each year should be kept track of and should be growing for outcome #3 to be successful. Of the apprentices, past and present, interviewed, 84% are continuing in agrarian careers.

Outcome #4 - Further the regenerative agriculture movement.

Of the NAP alumni who were interviewed, 76% are currently working in agriculture, 94% are using regenerative practices, 47% are in a land management or ownership position, and 41% are engaged in advocacy, policy, and/or education related to regenerative agriculture and land stewardship.

Outcome #5 - Graduates of program become mentors, managers and active leaders in regenerative agriculture

The output for outcome #5 will be the creation of a mentor network. Of the participants interviewed, 11% (2) of the NAP apprentice alumni are currently mentors, 47% (8) are in a land management or ownership position, and 41% (7) are engaged in advocacy, policy, and/or education related to regenerative agriculture and land stewardship.

### Ultimate Impacts

Outcome #1 - Develop a self-sustaining structure for overall agrarian life cycle training and support, with continual increases of points of entry

The output for outcome #1 is a novice-to-manager/owner training and support trajectory in place throughout the west. When current mentors were asked “what would a colleague or neighbor of yours want or need in order to consider becoming a NAP mentor”, the responses included that they have to want to teach because it is a large time commitment, financial support, motivation to teach their knowledge to the next generation, in-person mentor connections, good laborers so the apprentices don’t add to their workload, and one-on-one conversations with NAP staff. When NAP alumni responded to why they are not either pursuing regenerative agriculture, or in a management position, the most common responses were that land was too expensive to begin their own operation, or that they did not feel ready and wanted to build their skills more before branching out on their own.

Outcome #2 - Create the next generation of farmers and ranchers who use regenerative management of the land through agriculture

Currently, 1 NAP alumni is taking over an existing operation that is practicing regenerative agriculture. 94% of the graduates that were interviewed are using regenerative practices and 41% are engaged in advocacy, policy, and/or education related to regenerative agriculture and land stewardship. When past and current apprentices were asked what their biggest takeaways

were from the program, all of them mentioned regenerative agriculture hard skills and/or the importance of regenerative agriculture.

Outcome #3 - Normalize apprenticeships as a method of educating young agrarians on ranching and farming on large western landscapes.

When asked what their hopes are for the future of NAP, all of the participants mentioned growth with the majority also specifying that NAP keeps its high-quality program attributes while it is growing. All of the second-year apprentices also mentioned their favor for an additional apprenticeship year because one year is too short in their opinion. As the number of apprenticeship programs, mentors, and federal funding and recognition grows, outcome #3 will be achieved and apprenticeships will be normalized.

Outcome #4 - Shift support structures so that a career in ag is a viable profession/living: More young people feel that they can start and continue a career in regenerative agriculture.

When asked on a scale of 1(not likely)-5 (very likely) how likely they would have pursued an agricultural career path without NAP, the average score among all participants was 3.8. Many of the participants also mentioned that they might have pursued an agricultural career without NAP, but that it would have been much more difficult, and they may not have used regenerative agriculture practices when doing so. 82% of the NAP alumni interviewed have stayed in touch with their mentor after ending their apprenticeship. 64% of the NAP alumni interviewed have stayed in touch with other apprentices.

## Conclusions

### Opportunities and Recommendations

One opportunity for program development is to promote participation in leadership activities during the apprenticeship as a majority of the 41% of apprentices who were engaged in leadership activities during their apprenticeship continued to be engaged after the apprenticeship ended. An additional opportunity is to offer more in-person resources for each sub-population (i.e., mentors, apprentices, alumni). All of the participants recommended improving the HMI online course, with many suggesting making it an in-person course. Mentors also consistently suggested that they get a lot more out of the annual conference than the online conference calls due to it being in-person. The mentors also recommended increasing the number of regional event offerings. Additionally, current mentors suggested in-person contact with NAP staff would help recruit more mentors.

Another recommendation is to develop/gather resources for apprentices and mentors to help with interpersonal communication and isolation. In fact, this sense of isolation was by far the most commonly referenced challenge of confronted by the apprentices and mentors.

### Strengths

One program strength revealed through the evaluation is that the majority of NAP graduates (94%) are using regenerative practices after they exit the program. Additionally, 84% of current

and past apprentices are continuing in agrarian careers. Another strength is that all the second-year apprentices are pursuing a career in agriculture, using regenerative practices, and participate in advocacy. This means that the second-year apprenticeship program is extremely effective. Another strength is that many of the mentors believe that NAP is helpful and supportive when it comes to recruiting and interviewing apprentice applicants. Additionally, the large majority (70%) of NAP alumni strongly agree that NAP gave them the tools to continue in regenerative agriculture.

## Appendices

### The New Agrarian Program: Agrarian Apprenticeship Logic Model

