



Building a Local Young Farmers' Coalition

A guide to start thinking about how and why to organize...

Connect with the National Young Farmers' Coalition!

The National Young Farmers' Coalition is creating a national voice for young farmers and serving as a hub of young farmer organizing. As young farmer coalitions spring up across the country, NYFC is here to support, promote, and connect these groups. From organizing crop mobs to Farm Bill listening sessions, our affiliate coalitions are tackling barriers young farmers face and creating tight-knit support networks. We're bringing these organizers together to share resources and best practices. And though our coalitions are geographically diverse, NYFC is helping to unite young farmers in advocating for more supportive policies on the national level.

Why create a coalition?

Advocacy: Elected officials need to hear from young farmers about what they need to succeed. By working together, farmers are able to make sure their needs are met, whether it be subsidized loans, grant programs, land access, or environmental regulations. While every individual can make a phone call to the governor's office, a unified group of the region's young farmers can have a substantial impact!

Education: With the framework of a coalition, young farmers can organize educational events and trainings to improve skills to make farming easier and more productive. Trainings on such issues as finances, marketing, and technical skills are difficult to organize

for oneself, but a group of people who have interest in a certain subject can bring in an expert for an event. Young farmers can also teach each other by organizing skill-shares and related events.

Community: In the long run, farming needs to be sustainable for the farmer. By interacting through a young farmers coalition, we can get to know our fellow farmers, socialize, and have fun!

Marketing: The future of American agriculture depends on the success of young farmers. Working together, young farmers can advertise their goods, encourage the development of agricultural markets for certain products, and raise community awareness of the importance of local food.

Business: Banding together, young farmers can develop business relationships that couldn't exist for individual farms. This could take the shape of cooperative purchasing, negotiated prices, etc. The sky is the limit! Young farmers can also organize to help each other in day-to-day activities: some young farmer coalitions, for example, organize "crop mobs" to help each other on labor-intensive projects.

What would a coalition look like?

A coalition could take any form, depending on what you and your fellow organizers want to see! From a mere listserve of like-minded people to an organization that meets regularly and operates a number of projects and coordinates conferences and events, a coalition can serve the needs and desires of its participants.

How to get there!

There isn't any foolproof way to go about organizing a local young farmers' coalition. One method is to simply organize an introductory meeting, trying to pull as many interested people together to discuss the possibility and move on it:

Step 1) The best place to start is usually with an introductory meeting to discuss the possibility of the group. Spread the word through online message boards, listserves, flyers at agricultural events, talking to fellow farmers at markets, etc. If you already know other farmers who would be interested, then you don't have to do this work alone! You need to leave plenty of time for getting the message out, so plan a date far enough in the future, then work hard to recruit and advertise. NYFC has supporter lists and will help you get the

word out.

Choose a good meeting spot that is (ideally) centrally located for participants and easy to find. A community center, grange hall, or your own farm or house could work fine.

Come up with a good agenda for your first meeting. Start out with introductions, then go into what benefits could come from creating a young farmers coalition. Using “go-arounds,” make sure that everyone has a chance to add to that conversation. Only once your group's motivation is established can you move on to creating something tangible.

Step 2) Figure out what your next steps need to be as a group. Most likely, you will want to continue publicizing the group and growing. You can also start to organize toward whatever specific goals you have as a group. It may be starting a political advocacy campaign, say around the 2013 US Farm Bill, or working as a group to push for more farmers' markets, or planning educational or social events.

Step 3) Make sure by the close of the meeting you have planned for another meeting. Don't let the energy you've built fizzle by not making sure people follow through. Plan another meeting, and try hard to reach out to more people in the mean time.

There are alternative methods if the “calling a meeting” approach seems like it won't work. Find out about an event in your region that will probably draw the young farmer crowd – it could be an organic farming conference, a cooperative extension training, a Greenhorns movie screening, etc – and ask for a couple minutes at the mike to address the idea and call out for those interested. Meet up afterward and begin organizing. If the idea of starting with the creation of a coalition seems too nebulous, instead choose a specific project that you all as a group can work toward – a young farmers' conference or mixer, for example. By working together on a concrete short-term goal, you can galvanize the group's sense of direction.

Finally, remember that a coalition is something the builds slowly over time – don't be discouraged if things don't blossom immediately!

Next Steps

Once you have a core group formed, you can begin to iron out some technical issues and big-picture questions.

Mission statement: The Washington Young Farmers Coalition, for example, says that as a



newly formed group, they found that writing out a mission statement was exceptionally useful – it helped them to set a clear direction that they all could agree on.

Expansion: Continue to expand and spread the word in as many ways as possible. People are going to be most drawn to an organization that seems useful to them – whether that be in the form of advocacy, training, mutual aid, or socializing – so figure out what it is that young farmers in your area need and want and try to fill that niche.

Visibility: Use every opportunity you can to build your group's visibility. You could build a website (even if on a free-hosting site like blogspot.com or wikispaces.com) and update it regularly to attract newcomers. Whether or not you have a website, create an account on Facebook! A lot of outreach can be done by Facebook, so don't pass up the opportunity. Use the media whenever possible – announce events and get reporters out to conferences and special events. Send letters to the editor of local papers in response to changes in government agricultural policy. Work with other organizations that will help spread the word about meetings.

Finances: Depending on the size and nature of the group, you can choose whether or not you want to manage a treasury. Many groups have had no issue with operating without any sort of regular income – when funding is required for a specific project, the coalition can organize a fundraiser, and when a speaker or other special event need funds, you can sell tickets to raise the money.

Networking: There might be many other interesting agriculture-related organizations in your region, so make sure to make connections with them and work together whenever possible. A lot of people involved in those groups might also be interested in a young farmers' coalition, so it's an easy way to build membership. Whether it's local garden clubs, 4-H's, cooperative extension offices, or land conservation groups, you probably have a lot in common and a relationship would benefit both groups. Co-sponsor events or projects, advertise for their events and ask them to advertise for yours, or offer to share resources (office space, labor, whatever you have to give!).

Many of those organizations would also be happy to have a young farmer representative sit on their board or on a steering committee. This is a great way to get word out about the coalition, gain great experience with the operations of a non-profit, raise issues important to the group, and cooperate on things like conference organizing and grant-writing.

More Information

For more inspiration, check out some young farmers' coalitions that are well established:

Michigan Young Farmers Coalition: www.michiganyoungfarmercoalition.org/

Washington Young Farmers Coalition: www.washingtonyoungfarmers.org

New Connecticut Farmer Alliance: www.newctfarmers.com

Hudson Valley Young Farmers Coalition (NY): <http://www.youngfarmers.org/hudsonvalley/>

Contact us at NYFC with any questions: Wes@youngfarmers.org