



Leveraging Social Science to Improve Outreach and Protect Water Quality

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Farmer Adoption of Conservation Practices

- **Technical, economic AND social challenge**
 - Primarily voluntary and incentivized adoption
 - Farmers are influenced by a wide range of factors
 - Billions of \$ invested in supporting conservation adoption
 - Conservation professionals are a key factor

Social Factors in Adoption

- **Technical and outreach professionals**
- **Farmer and landowner peer networks**
- **Social norms and cultural influences**

Social Factors in Adoption

- Technical and outreach professionals

doi:10.2489/jswc.2021.00166

2021 *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation*

Conservation plans and soil and water conservation practice use: Evidence from Iowa

C. Morris and J.G. Arbuckle

These results suggest that it is not the plan itself, but rather the sustained interaction with natural resource professionals, that makes a difference in the use of conservation practices.

BUT There may be misalignment between common approaches and outcomes

A Central Challenge in Conservation Outreach

you're
preaching
to the choir

- Who comes to conservation events?
 - Conservation-oriented farmers
 - Long-time practice adopters
 - Conservation personnel

Traditional Information Deficit Model



- “If people only knew the facts...”
 - Beliefs & knowledge are not often the most important barrier
 - Change in beliefs may not lead to behavior change
- Outreach should address the most relevant motivations



Outreach Training Needs

TABLE 9

Educational and training background.

Subject	No Training at All (%)	Very Little Training (%)	Some Training (%)	A Lot of Training (%)
Soil science	3	13	52	32
Environmental science	4	17	46	33
Water resources management	5	21	49	25
Agronomy	8	18	43	31
Wildlife management	9	27	36	29
Agricultural engineering	15	22	36	27
Communications	9	29	50	13
Forestry	13	31	45	12
Animal ecology	16	36	31	17
Animal science/livestock management	13	40	38	9
Agricultural economics/economics	15	41	40	4
Urban conservation	29	39	25	6
Marketing/sales	31	40	25	5
Rural sociology/sociology	30	44	22	4
Psychology	36	40	22	3

Morris, C., J.G. Arbuckle, C. DeLong, and C. Lindahl. 2021. Conservation Practitioner Poll 2021 Summary Report. Ankeny, IA: Soil and Water Conservation Society.



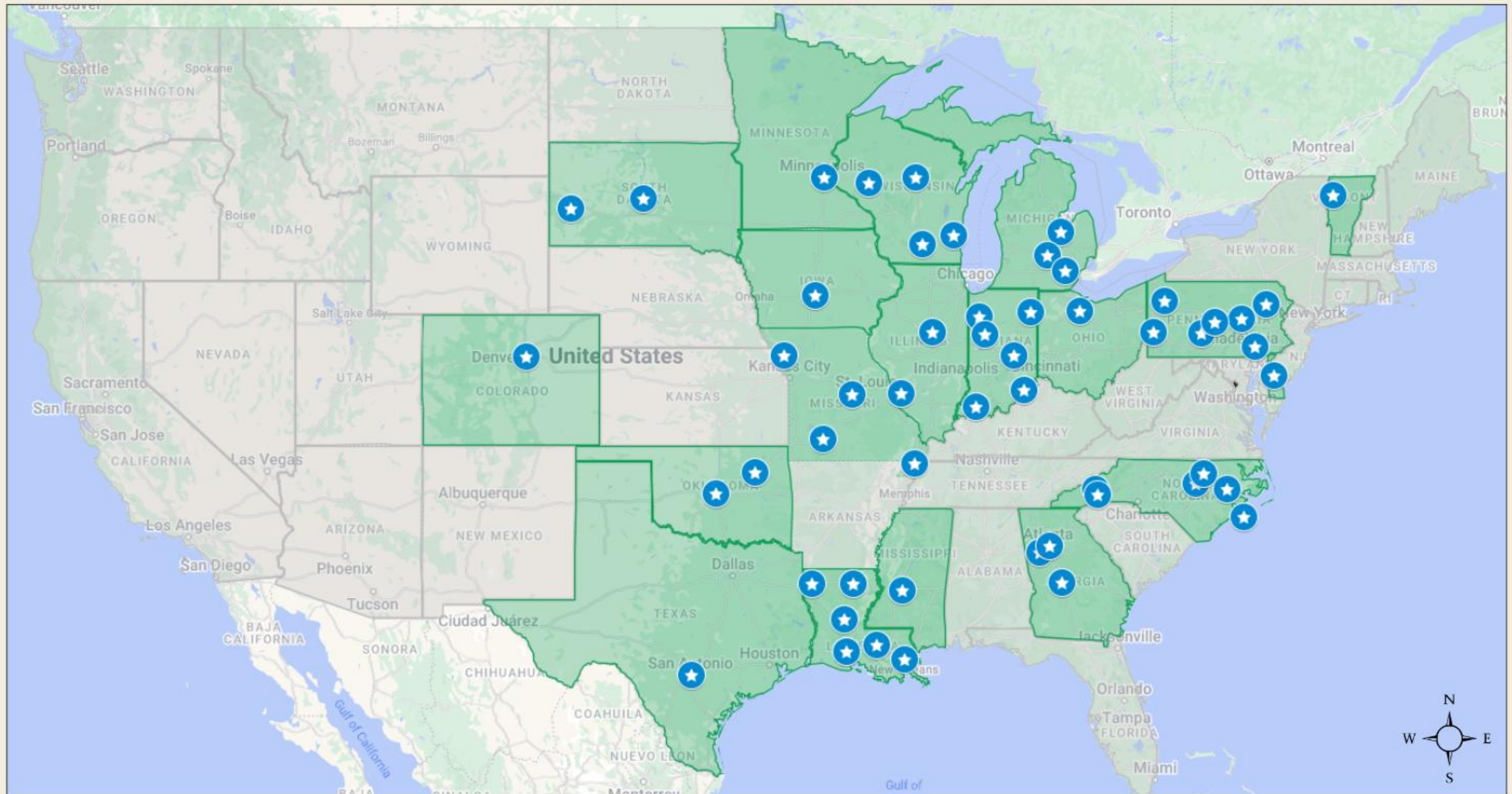
Grow More Program



- Professional development program for conservation professionals
- Grounded in social & behavioral science
- Over 100 trainings since 2019, more than 800 individuals

Grow More Training Locations

2019- August 2024





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Basics of Behavior Change

Don't forget the science!
Humans make decisions
based on external and
internal factors



Culture & Social Norms

Appealing to culture is key
to successful outreach and
the creation of social
norms.



Outreach Messaging

Successful outreach starts
with you! Now that you know
HOW people make decisions
its time to get to work



Framing Your Outreach

Don't be afraid to get
personal! Tailoring your
outreach to match your
audience is key.



Outreach Planning & Preparing Speakers

Here's where you get creative.
Creating successful events requires
thinking outside of the box.



Planning and Evaluation

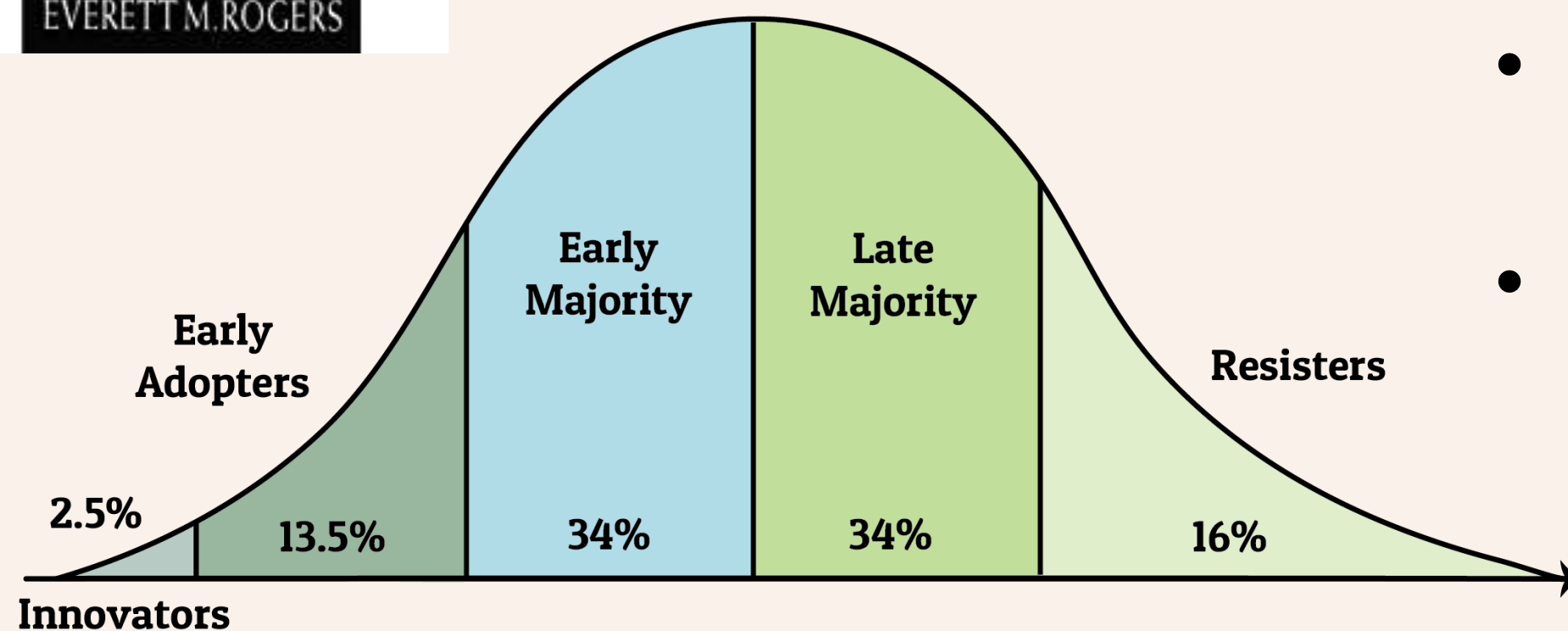
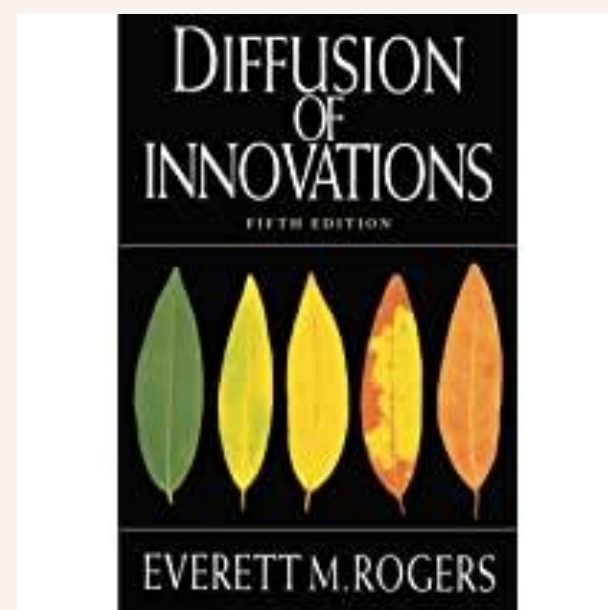
Put it all together! Using
the resources and tools
provided its time to plan
your event and measure its
success. Don't forget your
SMART goals and Impact.



Interested in More? Check out our outreach toolkit!



Diffusion of Innovations Theory



- Describes process of how new ideas become mainstream
- Highlights different mental models within a population
- Details aspects of innovation

Different Mental Models



Innovators & Early Adopters

- More open to new or challenging ideas, more comfortable with uncertainty
- See failure as part of progress
- Use longer timeframes to evaluate options
- More independent

Middle & Late Adopters

- Uncomfortable with new ideas that challenge existing thinking
- Take failure personally
- Use shorter time frames to assess success
- More concerned with what others are doing (neighbor effect)



Strategies to Overcome Barriers

1. Provide the right motivation
2. Speak your audience's language
3. Solve problems
4. Frame the conversation by putting change and risk in context
5. Make it safe for change
6. Provide clear steps for success

Messages that Resonate

1. Solving problems
2. Managing risk
3. Supply chain sustainability
4. Personal & industry reputation
5. Stewardship & religious values
6. Legacy values in farming
 1. Honoring the past
 2. Leaving it better for the future



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Meeting in the Middle Part II: Engaging the Next Wave of Cover Crop Adopters

A Descriptive Report of the Environment and Social Sustainability Lab



Farmer Peer Networks

Adoption of agricultural conservation practices in the United States: Evidence from 35 years of quantitative literature

L.S. Prokopy, K. Floress, J.G. Arbuckle, S.P. Church, F.R. Eanes, Y. Gao, B.M. Gramig, P. Ranjan, and A.S. Singh

Synthesizing Conservation Motivations and Barriers: What Have We Learned from Qualitative Studies of Farmers' Behaviors in the United States?

Pranay Ranjan, Sarah P. Church, Kristin Floress & Linda S. Prokopy

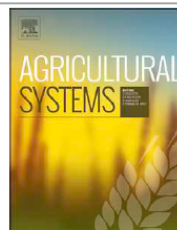


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journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/agsy



The role of farmers' social networks in the implementation of no-till farming practices

Kamilla Skaalsveen^{a,b,*}, Julie Ingram^a, Julie Urquhart^a



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It's Who You Know: Social Capital, Social Networks, and Watershed Groups

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CAN NETWORK THEORY-BASED TARGETING INCREASE TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION?

Lori Beaman

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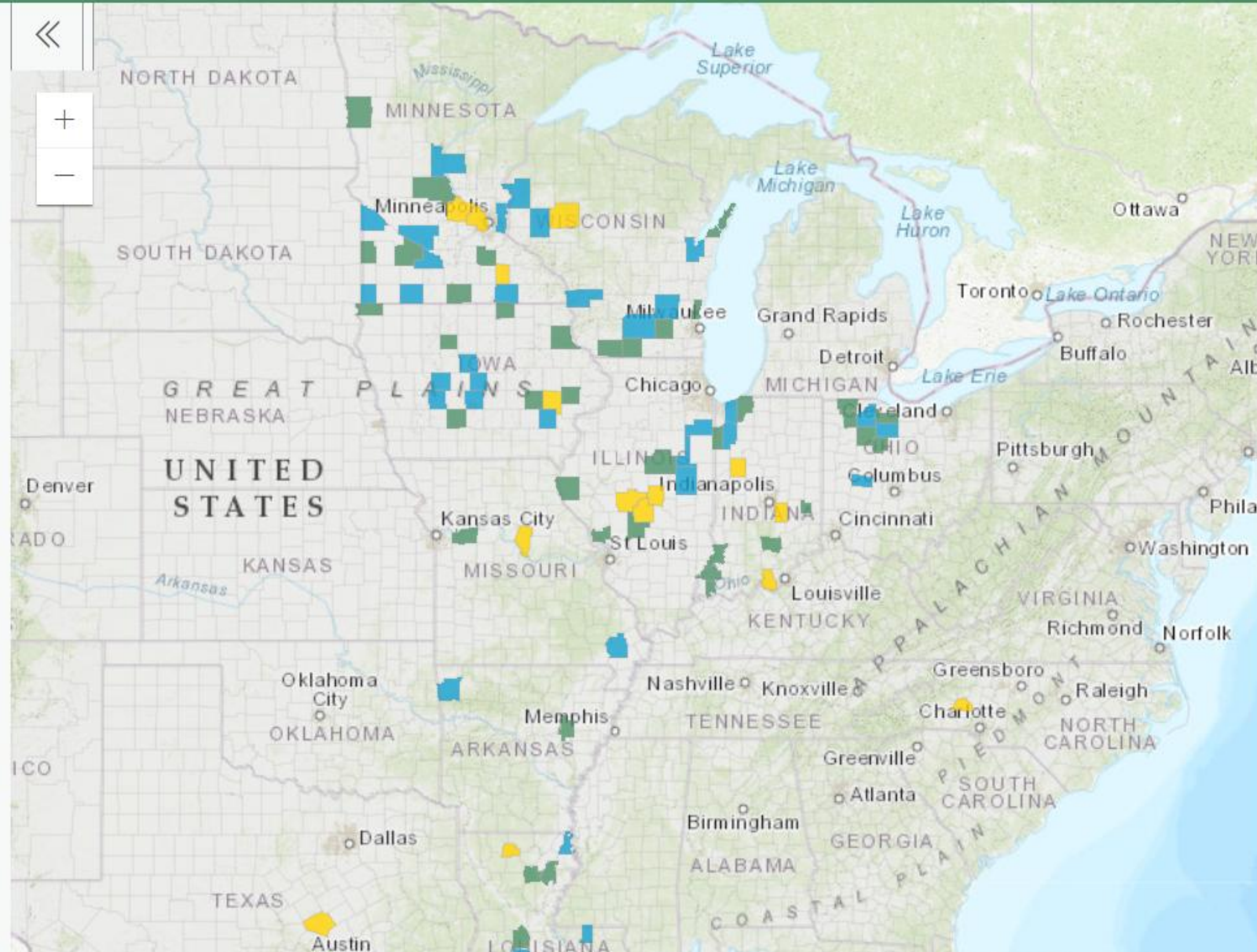
Delivering on the potential of formal farmer networks: Insights from Indiana

A. Pape and L.S. Prokopy

Legend

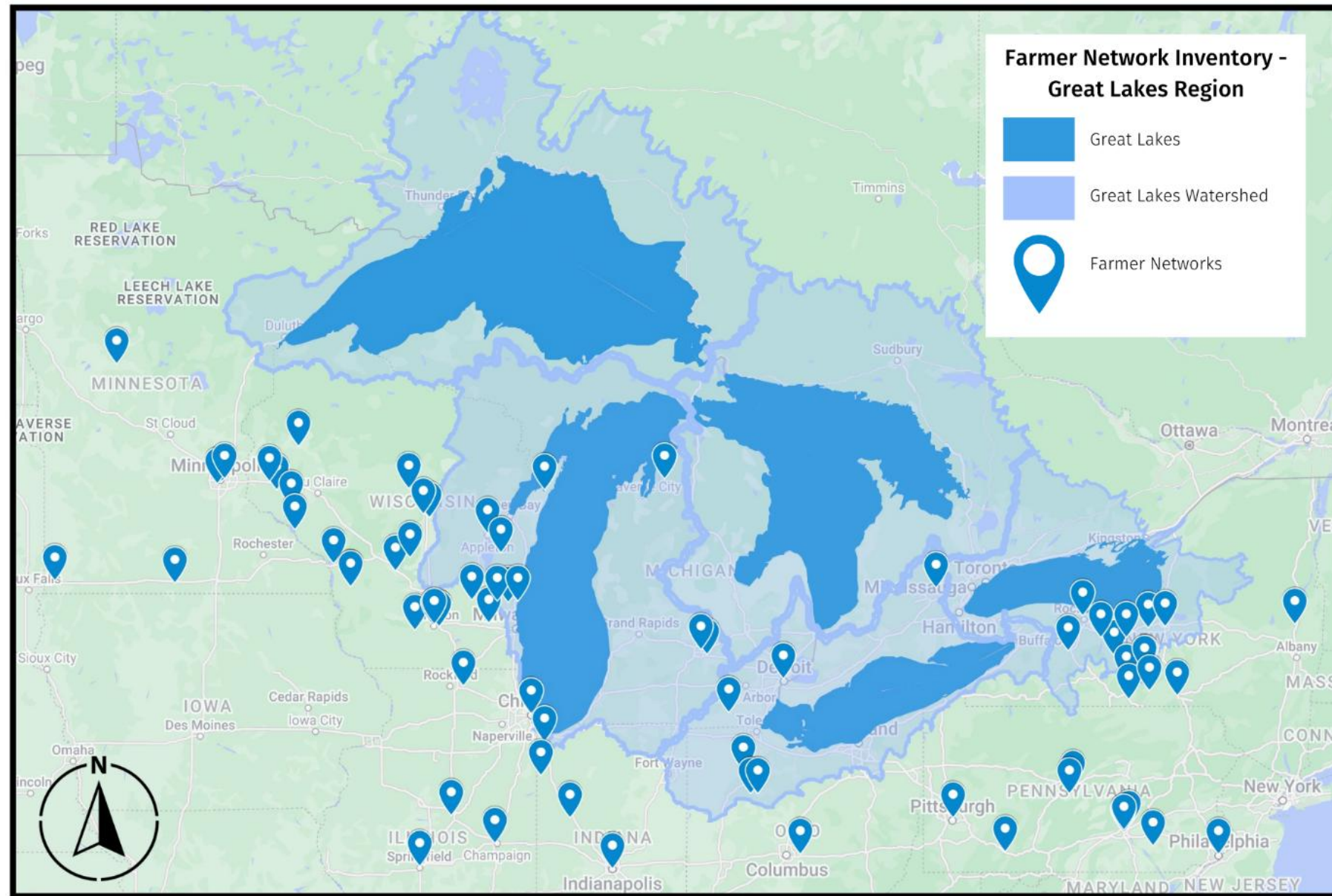
CCC Counties

-  Farmer Champion
-  Outreach Champion
-  Both
-  None



2021-2023 Conservation Champions

Great Lakes Farmer Networks



Locations of some farmer networks in GL states

- Survey of conservation organizations and farmer networks across 8 states
- 133 farmer-centered networks identified
- 70+ other network-supporting organizations



Farmer Centered Network Locations

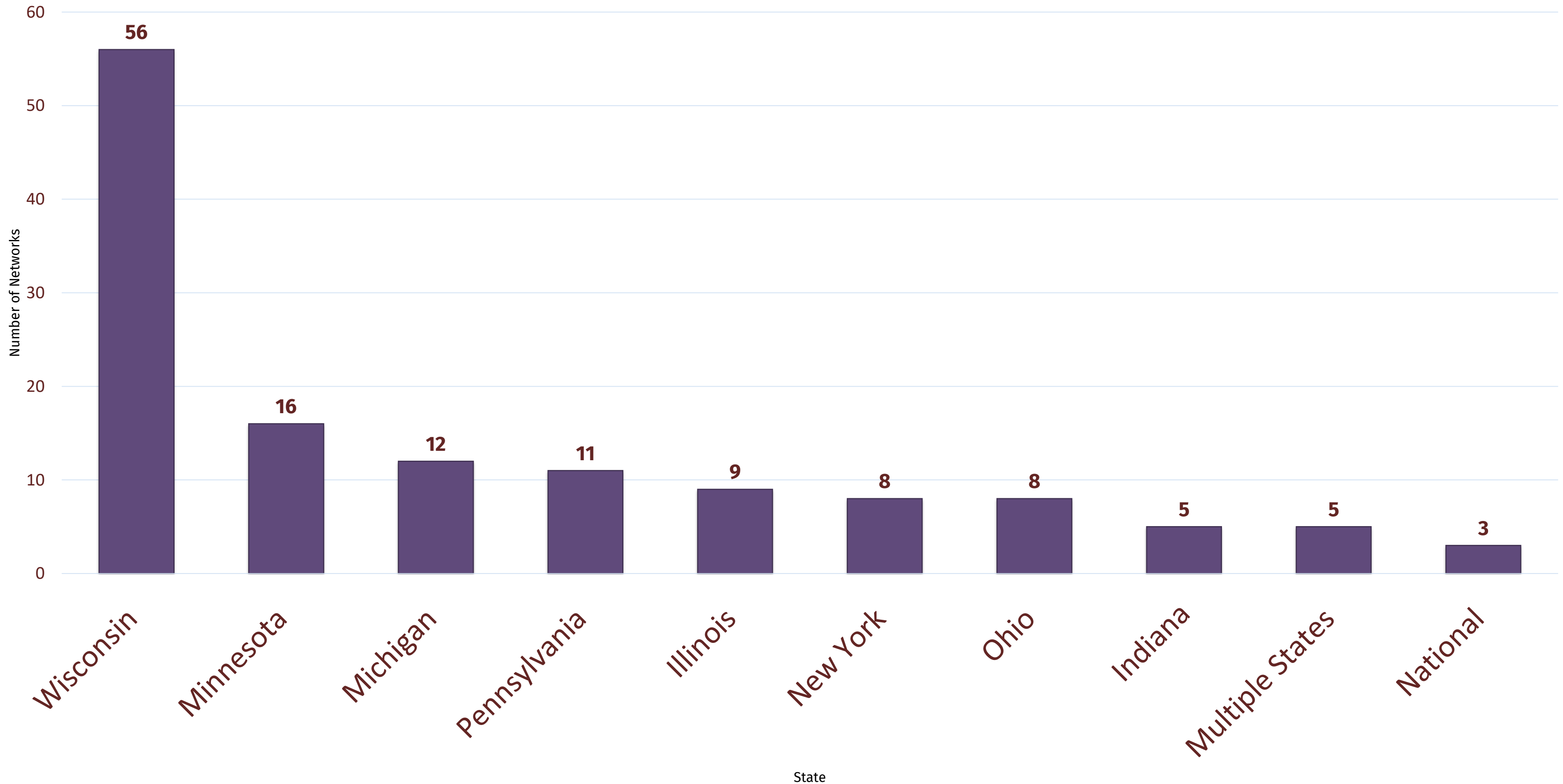


FIGURE 1: HOW IMPORTANT DO YOU THINK FARMER NETWORKS ARE FOR EXPANDING ADOPTION OF CONSERVATION PRACTICES?

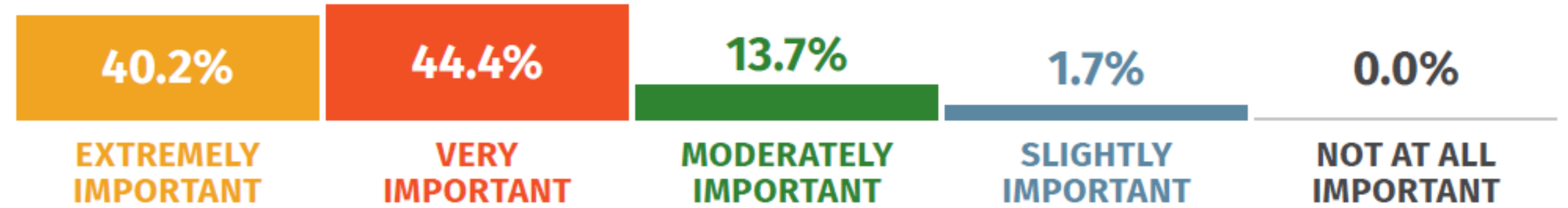


FIGURE 6: PRIMARY LEADERSHIP OF FARMER NETWORKS

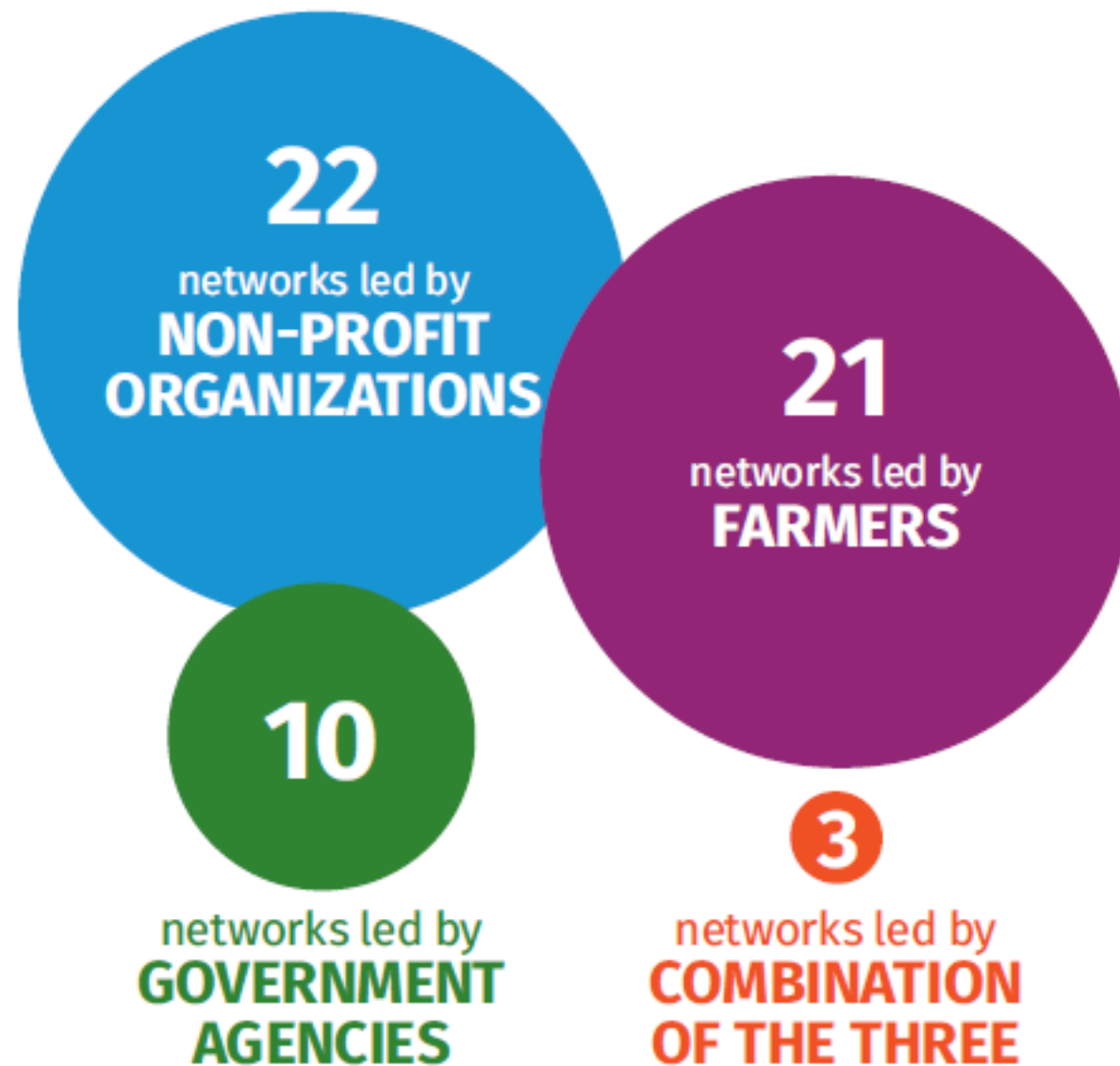


FIGURE 7: SOURCES OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT RECEIVED

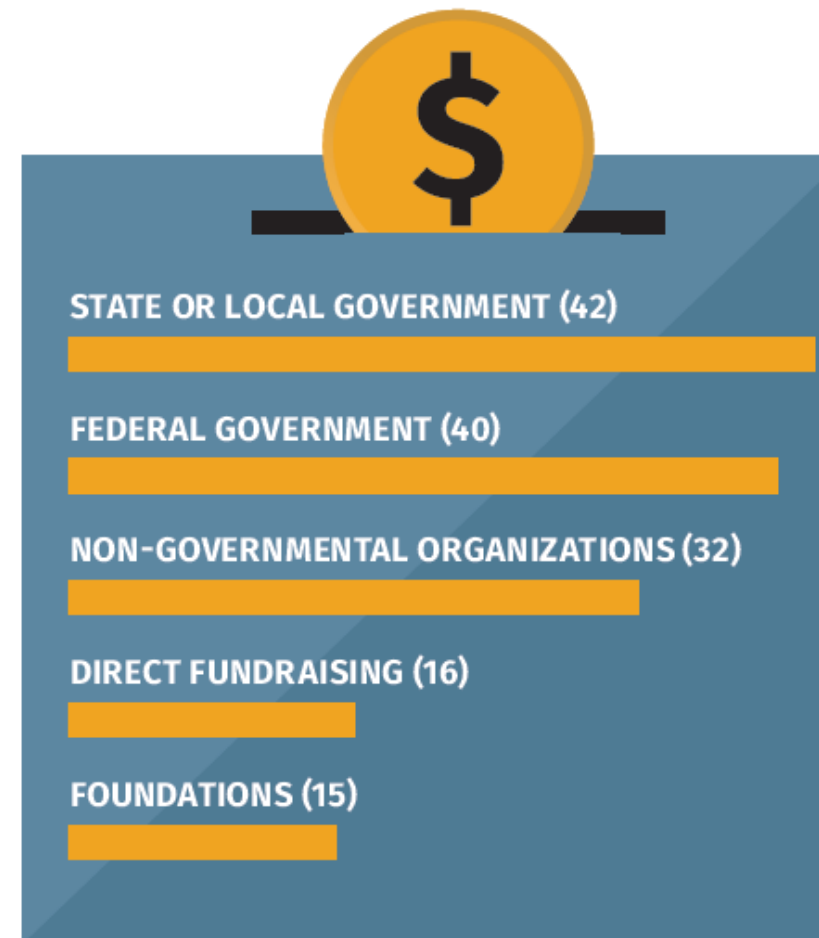


FIGURE 14: WHAT AREAS DO FARMER NETWORKS NEED THE MOST SUPPORT?



Local Outreach & TA Capacity



- Organization capacity important for achieving conservation outcomes
- **How** orgs are doing the work also matters
- Need to have better documentation of how local capacity translates to conservation outcomes

Michigan Conservation District Assessment

Project Overview

- Selected 6 districts based on outreach success
- Interviewed 28 individuals
 - District managers and staff
 - Board members
 - Conservation partners (NRCS, community partners)

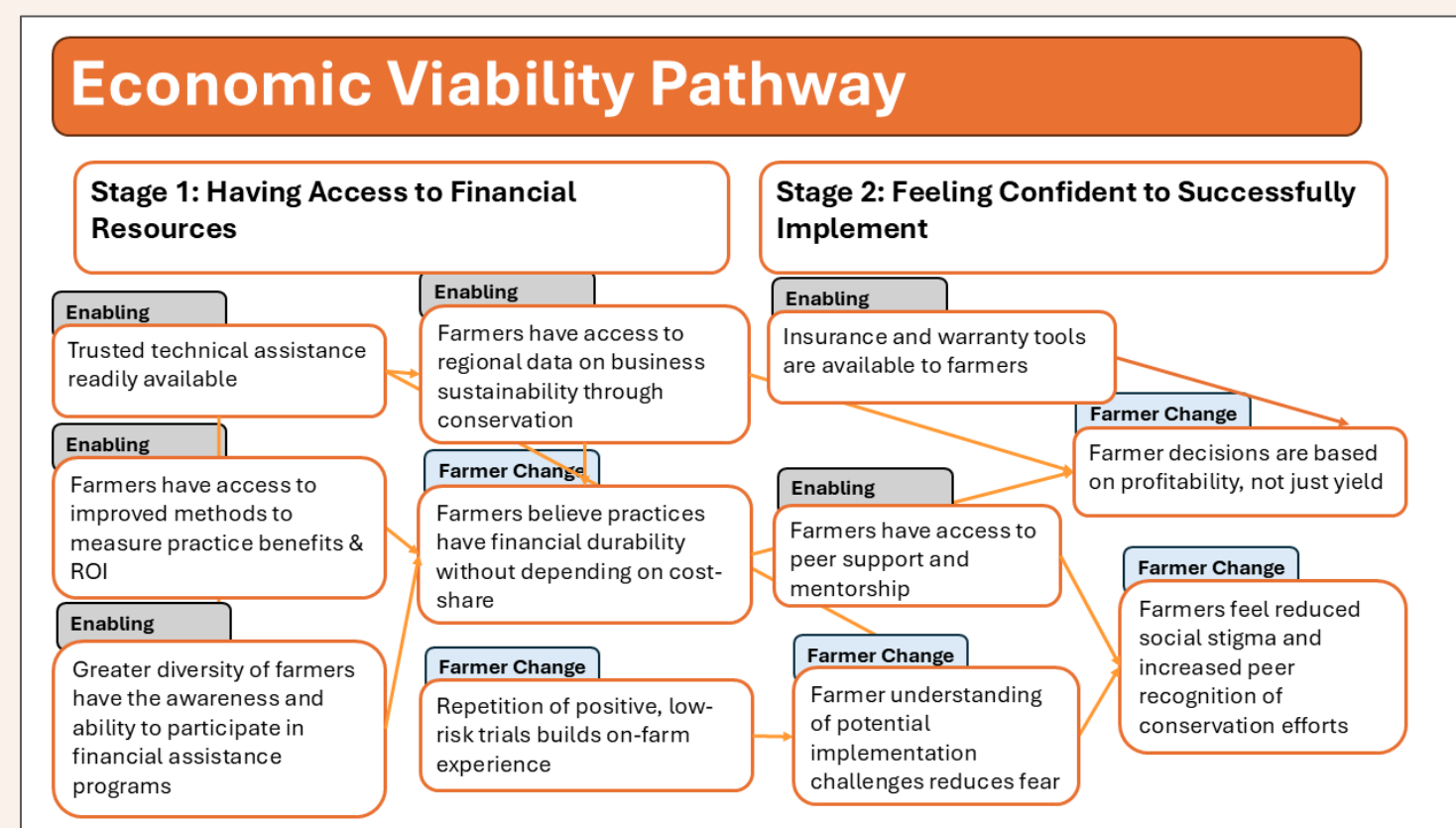


Major Shared Themes

1. Strong managers
2. Flexible staff roles
3. Financial stability (esp. external funding)
4. Strong partnership
5. Supportive board relationships
6. Community-based outreach approaches

Next Steps in Michigan

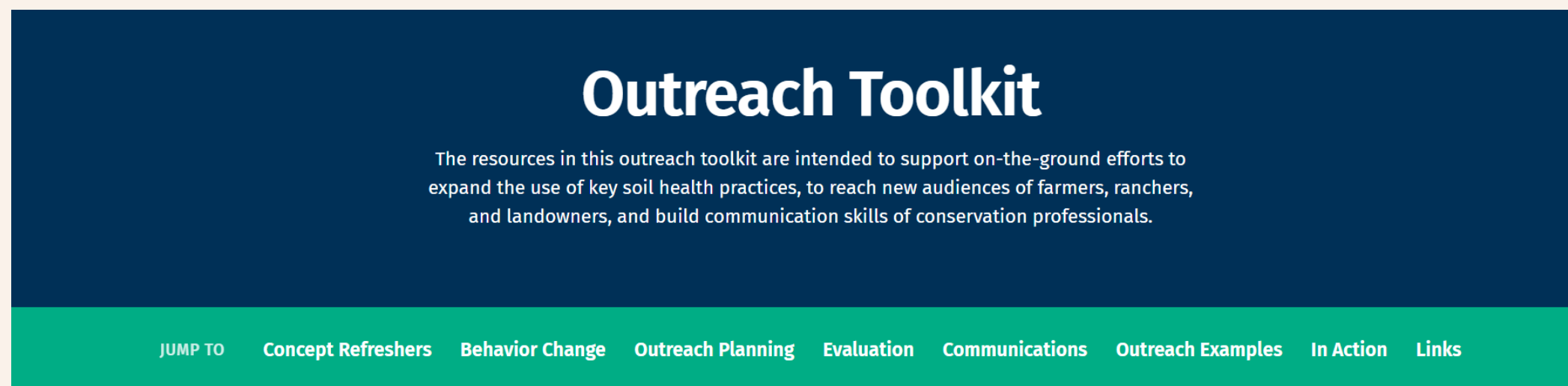
- Theory of change and strategic planning
- Outreach evaluation and tracking systems
- Professional development resources and outreach training



Upcoming Opportunities



- Outreach Toolkit: free online outreach resources and examples



- Newsletter and online trainings coming in 2026!





THANK YOU!

You can reach me at:

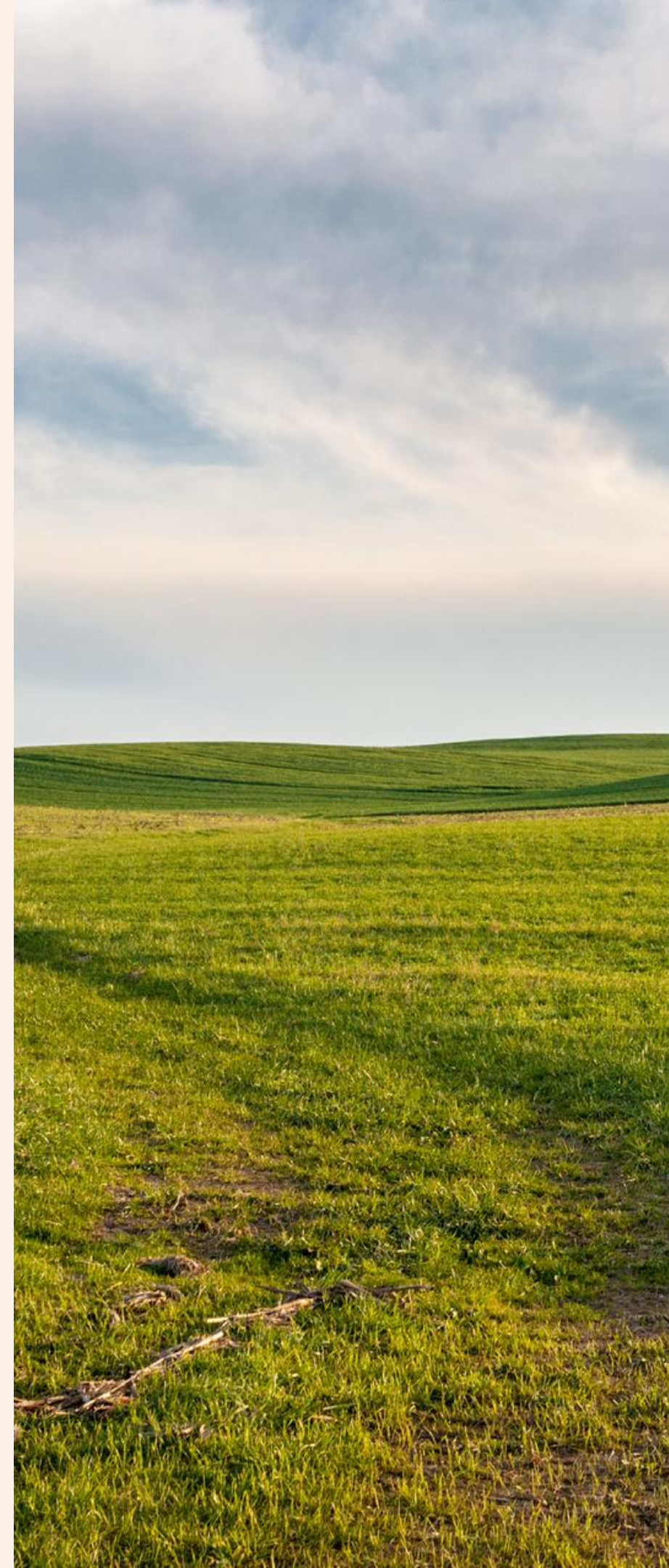
reimera@nwf.org

More Information:

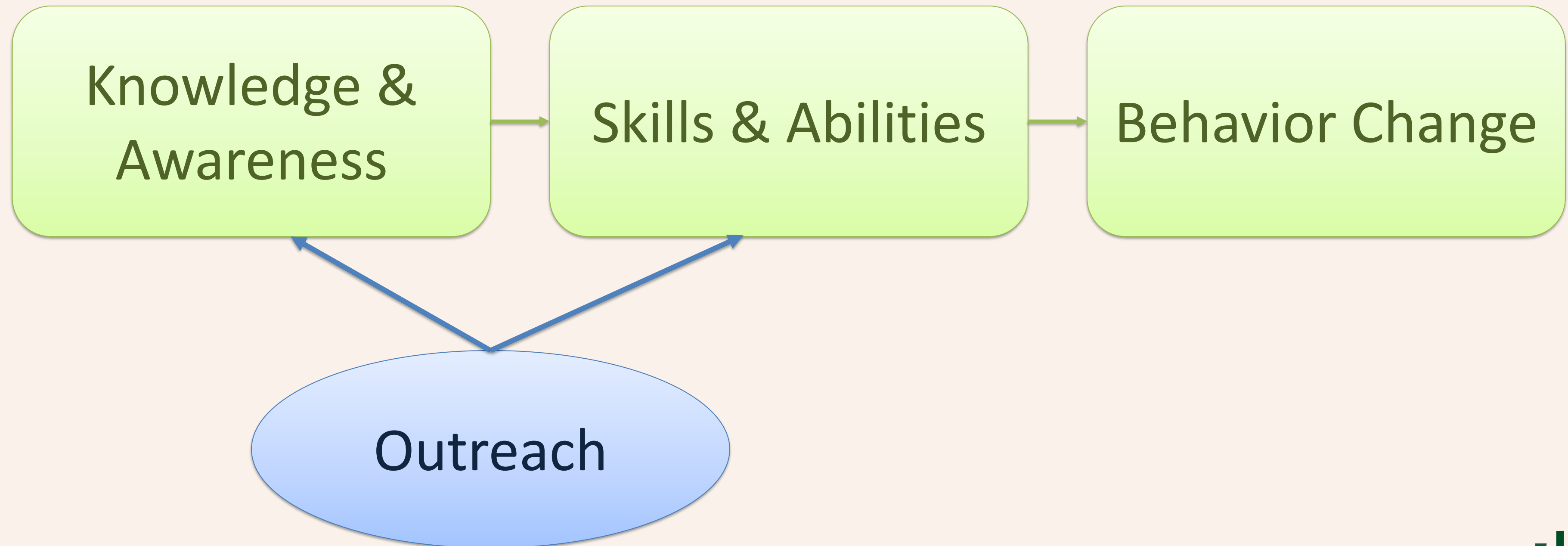
growingoutreach.nwf.org



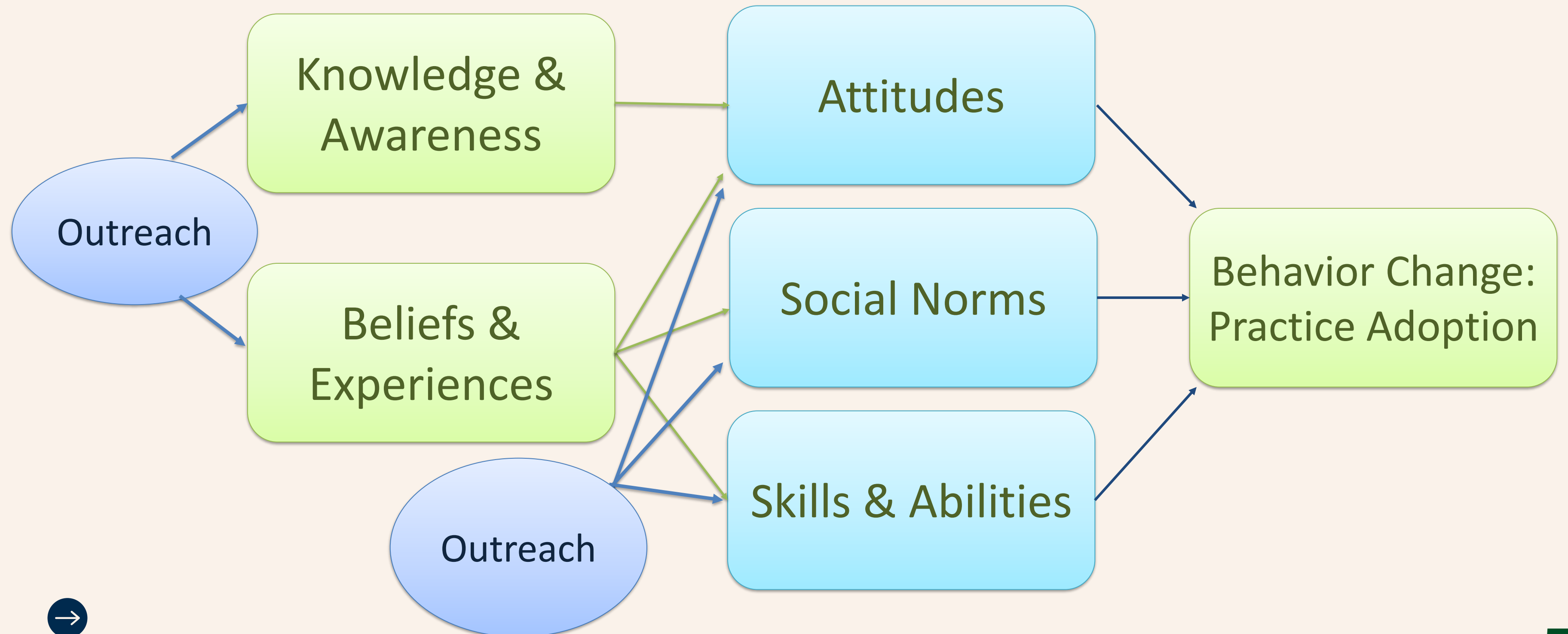
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Traditional Information Deficit Outreach Model



Traditional Information Deficit Outreach Model



Speak their language, not yours



Words to Avoid

- Innovative
- New
- Trial and error
- Learning curve
- Try it
- Every farm is different

Words to Use

- This is what we do
- Common sense
- A key part of (soil/nutrient/risk) management
- Start simple

