

*Rapid Assessment Planning for On-farm Sustainability*

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*“A vision without a plan is just a dream. A plan without a vision is just drudgery. But a vision with a plan can change the world.”*

*- Old Proverb*

About the tool and our project:

The “Rapid Assessment Planning” guidebook is a prototype planning tool that is being developed in conjunction with the **Women and Minority Farmers Research and Outreach Project**, a project of the UWEx Environmental Resources Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

The guiding principle of the project is to help Wisconsin’s women and minority farmers gain a solid foothold in Wisconsin agriculture. Our focus is on three areas:

**Education:** help farmers find useful information and assistance,

**Environment:** promote strong stewardship of Wisconsin’s family farms to maintain a healthy environment and keep farming sustainable,

**Networking:** help like-minded farmers find each other to promote sustainability.

Our goal is to improve the effectiveness of UW-Extension’s education and outreach programs.

Our methods include surveys, interviews, focus groups, and reviews of previous research to develop a better understanding of specific farm groups in Wisconsin. Then we build better outreach tools for these groups.

**Our website** will feature resources for new farmers and specific farm groups such as women farmers and Hispanic farmers. Look for the link on agricultural sustainability. [www.uwex.edu/farmandhome](http://www.uwex.edu/farmandhome)

If you are a farmer and would like to collaborate with us, we’d greatly appreciate your help to test and improve this tool Please contact Sharon Lezberg at [slezberg@wisc.edu](mailto:slezberg@wisc.edu) or 608-265-3473.

This project is funded by:



## Rapid Assessment Planning for On-farm Sustainability

This simple toolkit will help you get started on developing a strategy to meet your own goals of managing a sustainable farm.

Agricultural sustainability is an essential part of operating a farm. Like business planning, having a sustainability plan can increase your profitability and contribute to a successful farm. This toolkit provides steps to include sustainability in your farm vision and planning process. Exercises described in the toolkit help you identify your vision, goals, and environmental priorities for agricultural sustainability

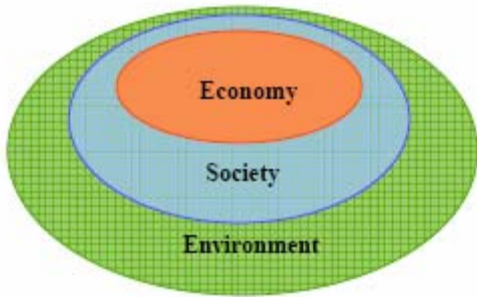
These exercises may include things that you've been thinking about for a long time. They merely help you and your farm partners and/or family write down a collective vision and plan, and provide means to assess and evaluate which actions best contribute to reaching your goals. To begin, put yourself in a frame of mind that allows you to devote time and thought to this effort.

### **Rapid Assessment Planning: A five step process**

- 1) Develop a sustainability vision for your farm that includes environmental, economic, and social considerations,**
- 2) Create a baseline assessment of environmental issues and priorities,**
- 3) Make a plan of action – identify your priority goals, strategies to reach these goals, and a timeline,**
- 4) Identify the resources you already have available to address your priorities, and those you need,**
- 5) Research options and sources of assistance.**

## Step 1: Developing a vision statement for your farm operation:

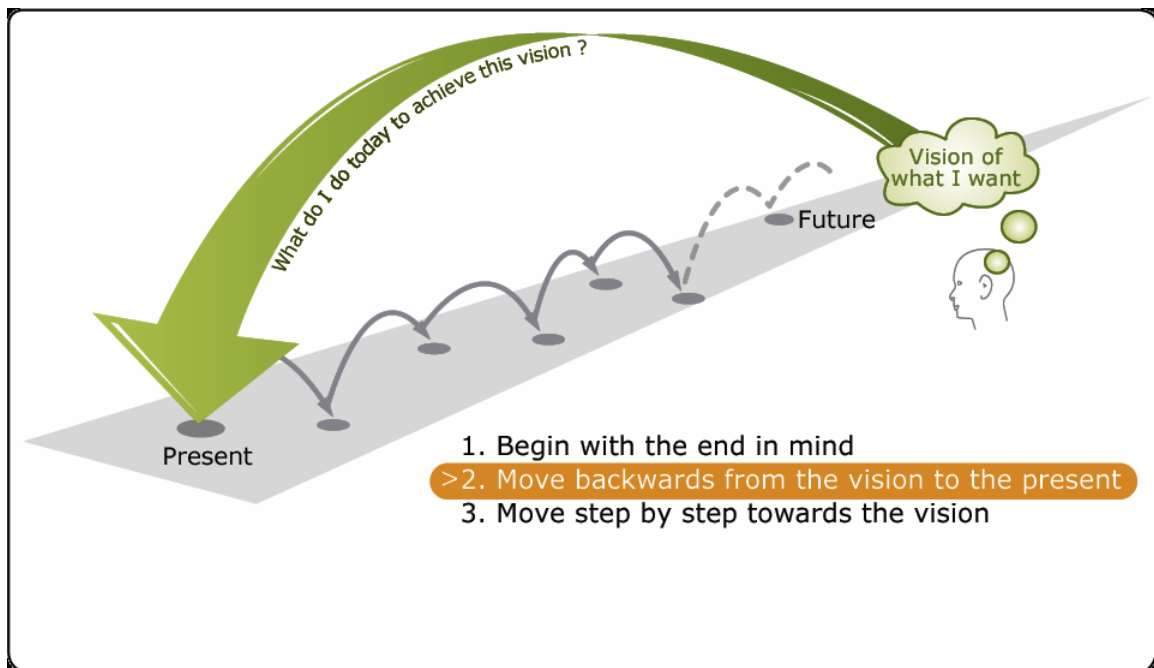
A **vision statement** is a vivid, idealized description of a desired outcome that inspires, energizes and helps you create a mental picture of your target. A vision for your sustainable farm operation should include aspects that relate to economics, environment, and social parameters (e.g., family, community).



This image represents a rethinking of the relationship of environment to the economy and society. We've become used to looking at three overlapping circles to show the intersection of these parameters. However, since the 1990s many people have recognized how the environment supports or constrains the other two parameters. This diagram shows the importance of prioritizing environmental planning.

Image by Jerry Hembd  
UW-Extension Center for Northern Community & Economic Development

**Backcasting** is a way of planning in which a successful outcome is imagined in the future, followed by the question: ***“what do we need to do today to reach that successful outcome?”***



<http://www.thenaturalstep.org//it/backcasting>

Getting Started on developing a Vision Statement:

- ❖ If you are a visual thinker, try starting with the *Overlapping circles* picture exercise.
  
- ❖ If you are a verbal thinker, try starting with the *Writing exercise*.

After creating your circles diagram or your written statements, write it down in an inspirational and compelling statement.

- 1) summarize your vision in a powerful phrase (e.g., 'Our farm will be an ecologically sound unit that returns as much to the land and its people as it takes out')
  
- 2) next, write as much as is necessary to create a powerful statement that is able to inspire and motivate all members of the farm operation.

Ultimately, everybody in the farm family and farm operation should be involved in the development, refinement and updating of the vision statement (and of all parts of the assessment). Remember that the vision provides a long-term understanding of values that motivates and inspires all who are involved.

## ***Developing a Vision Statement: Overlapping Circles Picture***

Materials: colored paper pieces of different sized circles, pens.

Process:

1) Each member of the family/farm team gets a set of circles.

2) Individual members should write down those aspects of farming that they feel will lead to sustainability. Those pieces that are deemed most important by the individual get the biggest circle; those deemed significant – but less of an emphasis – get smaller circles.

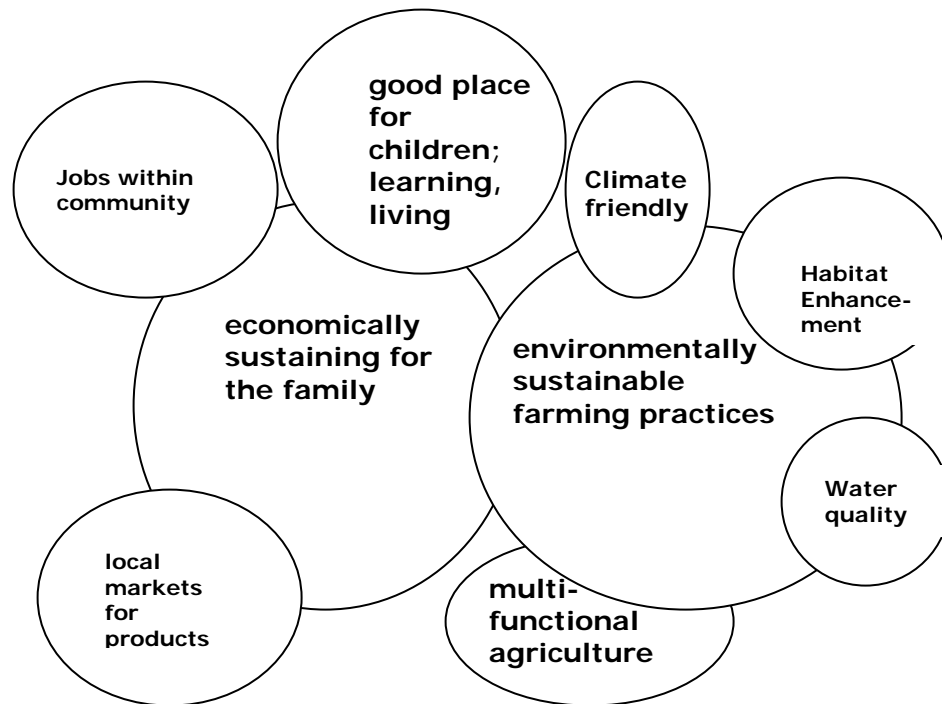
Listed below are some possible aspects (pick those that are priorities – you can also write your own):

- economically sustaining for the family
- farm generates profit
- environmentally sustainable farming practices
- erosion control; soil health
- ensure ground-water quality and surface water quality
- multi-functional agriculture
- integration of animals and cropland
- adherence to organic standards
- reduction of chemical use (fertilizer, pesticides, herbicides)
- closed loop system (no inputs brought in, no waste exported)
- compliance with regulations
- conservation management
- protection of wildlife habitat
- climate friendly farming
- generate our own energy
- protection of air quality
- produce high quality, safe food products
- healthy farm environment
- healthy animals
- habitat for pollinators
- aesthetically pleasing landscapes
- fair and just employee relations
- good wages to employees
- good citizenship/community relations
- local purchases of inputs
- local markets for products
- example of good farming
- education center
- place for people to visit; participate in farming
- good place for children; learning, living

3) Individuals create a circle diagram using the circles to show relationships

- 4) Presentation and explanation to other members
- 5) Group works together to create one circle diagram that represents the collective vision for the farm.
- 6) Use the circle diagram as a vision 'image' for your farm.

**Example:**



## ***Developing a Vision Statement: Writing Exercise***

Start with the following statement:

I envision a farm that . . .  
(picture your farm, family, dreams, why you are farming, land base, resources on your farm) . . .

Think about the present, but expand your thinking to 5-10 years into the future, then on to the next generation.

1) List some of the desired outcomes of the farm operation (DREAM BIG: better than the best possible outcome); include environmental aspirations.

Examples:

I envision a farm:

- that is a positive, supportive place for people to live and work
- where healthy cows graze on a diversified grass base and water quality is improved due to management practices
- where a supportive community of people steward the land, work on the farm, and eat healthy food grown there
- that is supportive of the larger community and provides benefits to that community
- that is a viable economic operation able to financially support the farm family and send kids to college

2) Include some inspiring outcomes of your farm operation, e.g., something that you want to work towards (write down the thing that inspires/motivates you the most).

Examples:

My farm inspires me because it is:

- an environmentally sustainable operation
- an economically successful operation and family-sustaining operation, where the operators are working reasonable hours
- a nurturing place for my children to live and learn

## ***Developing an Environmental policy statement***

An environmental policy statement expands a vision statement into a more detailed description of the environmental policies of your farm. The environmental policy directs goals, responsibilities and the establishment of performance milestones against which the management system is judged. The environmental policy can be shared with stakeholders and customers.

An environmental policy will develop over time and should be reviewed and revisited often.

An environmental policy:

- ✓ Declares and clarifies your commitment to the environment
- ✓ Provides a framework for setting environmental objectives and targets
- ✓ Creates a unifying vision of environmental stewardship for everyone involved

### **EXAMPLE ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY:**

#### **Beautiful Valley Farm**

We acknowledge our responsibility as stewards of the land and are committed to protecting, improving and sustaining the health of the environment in and around our farming operation. We will strive to contribute to the quality of life in our neighborhood and community through the business of farming. We are committed to:

- Full compliance with all environmental, health and safety rules and regulations.
- Continuous improvement approach to management.
- Ensure the health of our crops and livestock.
- Pollution prevention and conservation of resources in all aspects of our operations, products and services.
- Implement and maintain practices to protect and improve the quality of the water, air, land and wildlife habitat on our farm and in our region.
- Encourage environmental awareness and practice to all family members, employees, consultants and partners.
- Protect the health and ensure the well being of all who live on, work on, or visit our farm.

Signed:

Date:

Signed:

Date:

## **Step 2: baseline assessment of environmental priorities:**

### **Exercise 1: Farm Transect and identification of environmental aspects.**

Start with a map or drawing of your farm. If you have an aerial photograph of the farm, you can overlay a sheet of thin paper on top of this, to jot down notes. Note in your drawing the location of buildings, fields, natural resource assets, etc.

Consider walking around your farm with your map, a notepad and pen to jot down notes. This is best done together with your 'farm management group' (family or top decisions makers on the farm).

Stop at all the spots where any member of your group thinks or says something like: "I really need/want to take care of this . . . ." – in other words, anywhere someone in the group wants to make a change or improvement (e.g., fix the barn, grade a slope, extend the watering system, fence a new pasture, terrace a slope, move the compost area, organize farm implements, put up a windmill, etc.). Accept and write down all suggestions. The goal here is to get everything down, no matter how large or small a project it is.

If you can't walk the farm, use your map or drawing as a guide and go through the farm in your head. Photos of the farm will also help you. As you 'mentally walk', think through all the places where you'd like to make a change or do something with the land.

### **Exercise 2: Building a list and setting priorities**

(1) From your walk-through, create a list. These will probably be the most immediate concerns for you. Do not worry about the priority order right away (you may differ from others in your farm operation as to what the priorities are).

(2) Lump items in your list that fit into specific categories, and make a list using the table that follows (you can put larger categories in the bolded rows, and detailed tasks in the white rows).

(3) Have each person in your 'farm management group' identify their top three priorities.

This is your "immediate" (and probably important) list – the environmental aspects that you have been thinking about and



## Environmental concerns list; Identifying priorities

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS	Is this a concern on your farm?	Ranking of top concerns
Soil and Water Conservation		
<b>Soil erosion</b>		
<b>Soil organic matter</b>		
<b>Soil compaction</b>		
<b>Storm water management</b>		
<b>Soil water infiltration capacity</b>		
<b>Other:</b>		
Manure Management		
<b>Manure storage facilities</b>		
<b>Manure hauling and spreading</b>		
<b>Barnyard run-off</b>		
<b>Other:</b>		
Groundwater Protection		
<b>Nitrogen leaching</b>		
<b>Pesticide leaching/infiltration</b>		
<b>Well contamination/protection</b>		
<b>Other:</b>		
Surface Water Protection		
<b>Manure run-off, phosphorous management</b>		
<b>Soil erosion, sediment delivery, streambank erosion</b>		
<b>Pesticide runoff/transport to waterways</b>		
<b>Other:</b>		
Energy Use on Farm/Energy Conservation		
<b>Milk house (electricity, cooling and heating)</b>		
<b>Home and Barn (electricity, heating and cooling)</b>		
<b>Tractor (diesel use)</b>		
<b>Greenhouse or hoop house</b>		
<b>Other:</b>		
Water Use on Farm		
<b>Milk House (cleaning, etc.)</b>		
<b>Irrigation, including for frost protection</b>		
<b>Produce packing area</b>		
<b>Other:</b>		
Pesticide, Fertilizer, and Other Agriculture Chemicals		
<b>Human health/toxicity (e.g., pesticide exposure)</b>		
<b>Pesticide drift</b>		
<b>Storage and handling</b>		
<b>Pharmaceuticals/animal health</b>		
<b>Other:</b>		

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS	Is this a concern on your farm?	Ranking of top concerns
Air Quality/Emissions		
<b>Air quality – odor/dust</b>		
<b>Ammonia (NH4) emissions</b>		
<b>Engine Exhaust emissions</b>		
<b>CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (from all farm equipment)</b>		
<b>Other:</b>		
Wildlife and Habitat		
<b>Develop, maintain, or improved wildlife habitat</b>		
<b>Protect rare species habitat</b>		
<b>Invasive/exotic species control</b>		
<b>Other:</b>		
Other Environmental Aspects		
<b>Waste generation, recycling, disposal</b>		
<b>Pest and plant disease management</b>		
<b>Farmstead appearance and aesthetics</b>		
<b>Food Safety</b>		
<b>Community Relations</b>		
<b>Other:</b>		

### **Step 3: Creating a Plan of Action**

#### **Exercise 1: Identify your priority goals and do a SWOT analysis (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat) of options to address these goals.**

This step helps you to identify which issues to work on, and to identify options for addressing environmental impacts.

- 1) From the list of environmental concerns listed above, choose those concerns that are of highest priority for you, your farm partners, and your family. Turn that concern into a goal.

#### Example:

Concern: Our farm is concerned about water quality in the stream.

Goal: Our goal is to help improve water quality of the stream and watershed.

You may have one priority goal, and a very clear path to how to reach that. You may have several goals, with alternative paths to reach those goals.

- 2) Identify several different ways to meet your goal.  
You may have a clear preference as to how you'd like to address your concern, but you worry that you do not have the resources to implement your option. At this stage, you want to be true to your vision, and not rule out any options. Consider all realistic strategies that could help you to meet your goal.
- 3) Conduct a SWOT analysis (assessment of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) for each of the options that you've identified (see the following pages for a template and examples).
- 4) Evaluate which option(s) will work best for your farm. Which option moves you step-wise toward your vision for your farm? Which option addresses multiple environmental sustainability concerns?

**SWOT Analysis Template : Use this template to evaluate environmental management options**

**Goal:**

**Option #1:**

**Strengths**

**Weaknesses**

**Opportunities**

**Threats (internal or external)**

**SWOT Analysis Example #1, Option #1**

**Goal – to improve water quality and reduce runoff into stream**

**Option #1: Redesign barnyard to redirect runoff into holding pond**

**Strengths**

1. It would work; most of runoff comes from slope off of barnyard
2. Avoid spreading manure in winter
3. Long-term strategy

**Weaknesses**

1. Costs a lot
2. More manure injecting/spreading
3. Still have to deal with spreading and injecting manure

**Opportunities**

1. Cost-share available through soil & water office
2. Engineering and technical assistance available

**Threats (internal or external)**

1. Mandates?
2. Neighbors and environmental groups are attentive to water quality

## SWOT Analysis Example #1, Option #2

**Goal – to improve water quality and reduce runoff into stream**

**Option #2: Change production practices toward a rotational grazing system**

### Strengths

4. It would work; there would be less manure handling
5. Long-term strategy
6. Many other benefits beyond manure handling (less tractor work, healthy animals, appeals to our lifestyle)
7. Farm is appropriate for grazing
8. Kids want to move into this management practice.

### Weaknesses

4. Long transition period
5. Need to build new expertise on this management strategy
6. Impact on milk production and income?

### Opportunities

3. Cost-share available through soil & water office
4. Grazing networks can provide assistance
5. School for Beginning Dairy Farmers

### Threats (internal or external)

3. Mandates?
4. Neighbors and environmental groups are attentive to water quality
5. What would the neighbors say?
6. Would this limit opportunities for expansion?

**Exercise 2: Create a timeline**

You can use “backcasting” (as was used to develop the vision) to help you develop a timeline.

By realizing that it may take several steps to reach your goal – but always keeping the goal and vision in mind – you can move step by step in the desired direction.

A timeline should include the steps needed to get to the desired goal – in detail – and the anticipated time frame to implement each step.

**Some examples of timelines**

General timeline with tasks

Environmental action	Specific tasks	Time to implement
1. Create grassed bufferway by stream	1. Build cattle exclusion area; fences	Fall/winter 2010
	2. Plant buffer zone to native grasses	Spring 2010

Stacked bar timeline

Task	Jan - March	April - June	July - Aug.	Sept. - Dec.
<b>Research options</b>				
<b>Consult with NRCS, soil &amp; water</b>				
<b>Create cattle exclusion area</b>				
<b>Build fences</b>				
<b>Till soil in area to be grassed</b>				
<b>Put in erosion control</b>				
<b>Plant native grasses</b>				

**Step 4: Identify the resources you already have available to address your priorities, and those you need**

Now that you know what you want to accomplish and have established priorities and a timeline, you are almost ready with your plan. The next step is to identify resources you already have and start a list of sources for assistance.

You doubtless have many resources on-hand, from individual expertise to materials. Your project will proceed better if you do an inventory up-front to determine if you have resource gaps, and to identify how these gaps can be filled.

Below is a simple example of a resource table. The table that you develop will be specific to whatever project you decide to do. The resource table, like the timeline, breaks your project into steps and helps you to develop a complete plan up front. You'll then know what resources you need , as well as what additional research is necessary.

Example of Resource Table

<b>Resource needed</b>	<b>People on farm</b>	<b>Materials</b>	<b>Financing</b>	<b>Sources of Assistance</b>	<b>What do I need?</b>
<b>Expertise on fencing</b>	<b>Me</b>			<b>County Ag. Agent</b>	<b>Designs for fencing</b>
<b>Fencing materials</b>		<b>Posts, wire, diggers</b>	<b>NRCS or County Soil and Water Svcs.</b>	<b>NRCS</b>	<b>Materials, funds for purchase; labor help</b>
<b>Expertise on grass buffers</b>	<b>Partner</b>			<b>Prairie non-profits</b>	<b>Research on grasses</b>
<b>Seeding materials</b>		<b>Land prep., seeds</b>	<b>?</b>	<b>Agrecol or other seed company</b>	<b>Funds for seed purchase</b>
<b>Erosion control materials</b>	<b>Neighbors?, Contractors?</b>	<b>Not sure</b>	<b>?</b>	<b>Ck. For guidelines with Cty. Soil &amp;Water</b>	<b>Funds for purchase of materials</b>

## **Step 5: Research options and sources of assistance**

The last step for your sustainability plan is to review your resource table and note where you need more help or information. Then, start a list of where to go for this help and information.

The internet is a great starting point for doing your research (you'll find a short internet resource list at the end of this booklet). Your county agriculture agent is another. You probably already consult with other farmers, farm organizations, or equipment dealers. Ply your network with specific questions.

If you attend conferences, workshops, or other meetings, you'll now head into these meetings ready to use your plan as a guide to focus your thinking and ask specific questions.

### **Wrap up:**

By now, you should have a clearer understanding of your environmental and sustainability priorities are, your plan of action to address these, and the resources you need to implement your plan.

You'll be more focused in your work and save time and money while you pursue the sustainable farm business and lifestyle that you envision.

Good luck implementing your plan! Congratulations!