

Episode Title: Pilot Spotlight – Examining Support Systems for Farmers’ Mental Health

Summary: Throughout May, we’ve been talking with pilot grant recipients about their projects to support farmers’ mental health. For today’s episode, I sat down and spoke with Yanni Liang about her 2020 pilot grant, “Examining the role of agricultural cooperatives in protecting farmers’ mental health.” Yanni said the goal of her project was to understand what resources are available that already exist in communities that can potentially help farmers mitigate stress. Academic pilot grants are awarded to students, staff, and faculty at academic institutions to create new agricultural safety and health knowledge or assess best safety and health practices to prevent illness and injury resulting from agricultural work exposures.

We have compiled mental health resources for our listeners. If you, your friends, family, neighbors, or customers are experiencing stress, check out the links provided in the episode resources section. These links provide farmer-specific and state-specific mental health and crisis resources.

Expert: Yanni Liang

Episode Quote:

“The question for my project was: what can be done at the community level to more effectively carry out these conversations about farmers’ mental health? Because we know it’s kind of a stigmatized topic.”

– Yanni Liang, PhD, 2020 GPCAH Pilot Grant Recipient

Transcript**00:04 K. Crawford**

Welcome to the FarmSafe Podcast brought to you by the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. May is Mental Health Awareness Month, and we’ve been talking with pilot grant recipients about their projects to support farmers’ mental health. For today’s episode, I sat down and spoke with Yanni Liang about her academic track pilot grant. The academic track is for students, staff, and faculty of academic institutions who are creating new agricultural safety and health knowledge or assessing best safety and health practices to prevent illness and injury resulting from agricultural work exposures.

As a PhD student in 2020, Yanni received a pilot grant for her project called “Examining the role of agricultural cooperatives in protecting farmers’ mental health.” Cooperatives provide farmer-members market stability, technical support, and support networks, and Yanni wanted to know if and how these supports affected farmers’ mental health.

Thanks for talking to me about your project Yanni. Can you introduce yourself and tell me where you’re working now?

01:04 Y. Liang

Hi! My name is Yanni Liang. I am an epidemiologist in occupational health and safety in the Department of Public Health in Wisconsin, but I’m actually working for the University of Wisconsin Madison campus.

K. Crawford

Tell me about your pilot grant. How did you get the idea for it?

01:22 Y. Liang

During my last couple of years of PhD studies at the University of Iowa College of Public Health, my research project was focused on farmers’ mental health. The goal of that project was really [to] try to understand from a community level, but also from an organizational level, what are some of the resources that are available [that] already exist [in] the communities that can potentially help farmers mitigate the mental health risk. Because, for context, that project really started at a time where we had heard a lot of, at least from the news and media, about farmers’ depression and suicide in the Midwest. And especially like for instance, like in the

dairy state up in Wisconsin, where I am located right now, we had a lot of small size dairy farmers, who were really in financial trouble. So that lasted for a couple of years, and in addition to that dairy sector— there's also the grain sector as well, that was impacted by very low market prices for a few years. So financially, farmers were suffering. And then of course also in a rural setting, there's also a concern with the support networks getting smaller and smaller. So, the question for my project was: can we try to really figure out what can be done at the community level that might be able to more effectively carry out these conversations about farmers mental health? Because we know it's kind of a stigmatized topic.

02:57 K. Crawford

You know, we've been talking all month about mental health and the importance of sharing resources people can use when they're dealing with stress. I like hearing about your project since it focuses on identifying what support systems are already in place that are helping people. Then we can help support and promote those so people can get help earlier on and maybe we can lessen some of that stress. I'm also interested in hearing your experience as a student getting a pilot grant. Can you talk a little about that?

03:26 Y. Liang

It was an interesting process. It was not an easy process for sure, for a student that tried to pick out a research project, but at the end I would say it's totally worth it and it's really a very rewarding process to go through and to learn what you can do with a research question. And then what you can see you are doing to try to gather funding.

K. Crawford

Why did you need a grant for this project? What were you able to do with the funding?

03:57 Y. Liang

The big part of funding I spent was recruiting for my project because we tried to reach out to farmers and farmers are busy, and they're not always available for taking a survey or getting on the phone to answer your questions. So, with the pilot grant, I was able to work with the Iowa Social Science Research Center and hire those professional interviewers that who actually spend time calling farmers and recruiting farmers and delivered the survey on the phone. So, really without the funding I would not be able to do that, because it's very expensive to pay interviewers to call people up for you, and they had to call the farmers multiple times. And it's not always easy cold-calling people and convincing them that this project is worth it, and that really their feedback would be helpful. Even with that help, we also got a lot of farmers who said they just weren't interested, but eventually with persistence, we were able to generate some interest.

Yeah, so recruitment, and then compensation also. We compensated farmers for their time. So that was the biggest two expense items. And then another component was paying access to contact information, so that we know who to call and how to reach the farmers. So that's really a very critical piece of it— having access to the contacts and then being able to have the staff to call potential participants, and then actually deliver the surveys.

K. Crawford

What did you learn from the project? Any big take-aways?

05:49 Y. Liang

I think, a takeaway from the research side of it is really very interesting. We recruited co-op and non-co-op farmers. The question was, does belonging to a co-op impact a farmer's reporting of stress and depression? And our finding was yes, co-op farmers tend to report lower stress and depression. And then the other question we asked was does using services and engagement programs from co-ops and non-co-ops impact a farmer's reporting of stress and depression? And then, that's interesting because it really depends on what type of programs that they use. We also asked whether satisfaction has an impact. And in fact, it does have a greater impact than the amount of services, or the number of services or programs that they attended. And then, finally, we also were interested in social support because again, it's social support at a larger— at a community level. And that's also an interesting finding as well so people intuitively say yes, social support is helpful to mitigate stress, and then we also see that in our data as well.

That's the data side of the takeaway, but I think there's the other takeaway I would want to emphasize as a PhD student, is to try to figure out their whole idea. Like what kind of project that I would really want to spend time on and try to figure out how to tag out these research questions that I had, and how I'm going to execute that from the idea to the data collection to really having that data analysis and writing up your report.

I think the pilot grant is a great, great opportunity for me, at least personally, to go through that because I think, without going through that process, it's hard to really imagine, like how does that research question turn into a publication? But going through that whole process of trying to develop a grant proposal, figure out what to put in the grant proposal, try to convince the grant reviewers that your ideas are worth pursuing and try to convince them that it would be really helpful to get the funding so that's really a great skill set to develop. So that's for the grant writing piece of it. But then, once I got the money, then there's another great experience attached to it, which is, to figure out how to manage the grant money. How do you figure out who to work with to help recruit your participants? Because participants don't just come to your doors and say, "I'm interested in your study," even though you compensate them. People are busy, and people have priorities so that's a great way to again to experience that. How do you navigate all these little hurdles that are out there for you to figure out as a PhD student?

So, the piece of recruiting participants and trying to figure out how to work with community members is really rewarding, because I think that kind of really led me to open myself and talk to different groups of people and people interested in ag and interested in farmers' well-being. I really tried to meet people, and I naturally am a bit shy, personally, I would say, but I think going through the process of trying to figure out who can help me to promote my study really let me out of my comfort zone a bit so it's interesting. Definitely, I would encourage any PhD students who are interested in Ag Safety and Health to go through that process because it's really very meaningful.

09:29 K. Crawford

Do you have any other recommendations for students who may be thinking about applying for a pilot grant?

09:34 Y. Liang

I think I would just say, even before writing the proposal, talk to your professors or the staff members at the [Great Plains] Center, that you are actually thinking about this type of project and hear their feedback. Again, I think people really are very willing to help the students out, and I know people are busy. Everybody's busy, but I think also, people are willing to help. So, I think sometimes as a student we just need to be a little bit more out there, and to share what our thoughts are. And then I definitely, highly recommend to reach out to the Center— the Center staff. And even the people that might not be on your committee. It could be like your professors or anybody on campus that you feel like could get you some positive feedback, I would reach out to those people.

K. Crawford

As we wrap up, do you have any final thoughts you'd like to share?

10:32 Y. Liang

I will say one thing, I guess step back at the college level when you're still in graduate school and thinking about what would I want to do once I graduate? And then also, how would I make my research relevant to the people that I'm really interested in helping? I think for me it was really helpful to draw the connection. It made it more meaningful to me when I started talking to the community members and talking to farmers and shared my interests about these studies and then let them hear it and then also ask them for feedback. I think people appreciate that. They appreciate that someone is interested in their well-being, and also someone is interested in that and in hearing the feedback and asking them for inputs. I think people welcome that type of genuine open communication. And so, I think I would encourage, if students who might be interested in community engagement, or had an interest to work with communities to just be brave and go out there and then introduce yourself, and that's how I started it. I didn't know anything about dairy farming. I honestly didn't know any dairy farmers so I basically just called people up and called different co-ops and different farmers' groups and said "Can I come meet with you? Can I talk to you about my study?" So, people are really willing to help and willing to give feedback if you show a genuine interest.

12:05 K. Crawford

Thanks for talking about your experiences with your pilot grant and showing how it helped you investigate systems that support the mental health of farmers. We have compiled resources in this topic for our listeners. If you, your friends, family, neighbors, or customers are experiencing stress, check out the links provided in the episode resources section of our website. We have linked to [Farmstress.org](https://www.farmstress.org), which provides farm stress and mental health resources for the north central region of the US. This website includes regional resources and state-specific services, depending on your needs.

We have also linked to a resource page at [Farms.com](https://www.farms.com) which provides farmer-specific mental health and crisis resources, support groups, and hotline numbers for each US state and Canadian province and territory.

We also provided a link to the Pilot Project page on the Great Plains website. Check out this page to find out more about pilot projects and opportunities for funding. There's contact information on the website, so please reach out if you have any questions.

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Episode Resources

- [FarmStress.org](https://www.farmstress.org)
- [Minnesota Farm and Rural Helpline Farms.com Farmer-Specific Mental Health and Crisis Resources \(by state and territory\)](https://www.farms.com)
- [GPCAH Pilot Grant Opportunities](https://www.gpcah.org)

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