

## **FERN Report, May 2016**

During the grant period beginning in November 2014, the Food & Environment Reporting Network produced 25 stories, including eight international stories, on subjects ranging from the devastating 90-percent decline in the Pacific sardine stock to the hidden toll of World Bank-financed development projects on some of the planet's poorest people. We added new partnerships for a total of 34 mainstream media publishing partners, including the *The Guardian*, *Sunset*, *Fast Company*, *Harper's* and more. We continued to expand our broadcast work, producing broadcast radio reports as well a multi-platform investigation in partnership with *Rocky Mountain PBS*.

## **Impact and Assessment**

We were gratified to learn in May 2015 that FERN won a second James Beard Foundation Award for our story, "The Quinoa Quarrel: Who Owns The Greatest Superfood?" Written by Lisa Hamilton, the story appeared with original photography, also by Hamilton, in *Harper's Magazine*. FERN, *Harper's* and Hamilton took home the award for best reporting in the category of Food Politics, Policy and the Environment. In addition, our story "Fields of Toxic Pesticides Surround the Schools of Ventura County," by reporter Liza Gross for *The Nation* won an investigative reporting award from the *Association of Health Care Journalists*.

Our April 2015 deep dive into the issue of farmworker health "Fields of Toxic Pesticides Surround the Schools of Ventura County," by reporter Liza Gross in partnership with *The Nation*, revealed how California's Latino communities—and the schools they attend—get disproportionately dosed with pesticides, many of which are linked to a range of health problems. The story began to accrue impact in May and June. Starting May 28 in Sacramento, the California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) held five workshops, getting public input on new standards to improve school pesticide notification procedures and reduce the risk of exposure. There were four other meetings in key farming communities, including Ventura County, which has more schools with high concentrations of nearby pesticide use than any other county in the state. The DPR workshops followed a briefing on pesticide use near schools for legislative staff in Sacramento last month, hosted by the advocacy group Pesticide Action Network North America. Gross was invited to lead off the briefing by sharing the principal findings of

her story, in which she reviewed six years of data for 66 pesticides identified by health officials as most likely to drift and cause harm.

Gross says an acquaintance at EPA told her confidentially that the story was remarkable for having put environmental justice back into the framework of civil rights, and that staffers at the agency who are on the “right side” of the Environmental Justice program are trying to figure out how to capitalize on the way the story “moved the discourse” in a way they hadn’t seen before. Gross’s article instigated a potential legislative solution and has caused federal regulators to pressure the California DPR to explain how this inequality persisted for so long. State pesticide regulators finally said they will seek to strengthen restrictions on pesticide use near schools.

In October 2015, we released “With No U.S. Standards, Pot Pesticide Use Is Rising Public Health Threat,” by reporters Erica Berry of FERN and Katie Wilcox of *Rocky Mountain PBS I-News*, which explored the glaring absence of oversight on the legal marijuana industry. Our collaborative pot-and-pesticide story was the top story of a rolling 30-day period surrounding its publication on the *I-News* site in terms of traffic.

*Rocky Mountain PBS I-News* distributes stories to its news partners and other institutions, including all members of the Colorado Press Association, public radio and commercial TV stations, some schools and universities, and several foundations and businesses. The story received strong interest and engagement from this audience. It was the lead story in their newsletter, *Rocky Mountain PBS I-News Weekly*, an opt-in subscription list of RMPBS members which has 1,100 subscribers. The story also was featured on its weekly public-affairs television show, *Colorado State of Mind*, on Oct. 2. It drew an audience of 5,557 households.

In the wake of the story, Jim Jones, who heads the EPA’s office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention, reached out to *I-News*. He said his office had gotten specific approval from the Justice Department to begin working with states that had legalized marijuana cultivation to test which pesticides can be used safely on marijuana.

“Children Left Vulnerable By World Bank Amid Push For Development,” which was published on *The Huffington Post* in October 2015, and was the latest installment of “Evicted and Abandoned,” a yearlong investigation into the hidden

toll of World Bank-financed development projects on the some of the planet's poorest people. The story was part of a collaboration with the *International Center for Investigative Journalists* and *HuffPost* and has won numerous awards. The series also prompted the World Bank in December to announce sweeping reform of its social criterion for bank loans, in an effort to better protect people in the path of development.

In 2015, FERN also revamped its social-media strategy to expand the impact of its reporting, including increasing and routinizing the posting of content to our social-media accounts and using popular Twitter hashtags (such as #FollowFriday) to "join" social-media conversations and increase the reach of our tweets each week. From June through December, 2015, we earned over 680,000 impressions on Facebook, 150% increase over the previous six months for a total of 1.1 million Facebook impressions in 2015. FERN Facebook page followers increased to 7,000, 33% jump. On Twitter between June and December 2015, we earned a total of 2.5 million impressions, an impressive 178% increase over the previous six months which adds up to a total of 4 million impressions on Twitter for the year. FERN's Twitter followers went from 16,500 to 20,000, an increase of 22%, in that period.

### **Business Development**

During 2015, we also added a new business line to diversify revenue, introducing a paid "professional" product. Originally launched as a free email newsletter in early 2014, FERN's Ag Insider includes daily policy reporting, analysis, and aggregation by long-time agriculture reporter Chuck Abbott. The product is aimed at an audience of policymakers, advocates, and food-industry representatives. The free newsletter acquired an immediate following with ten-fold subscriber growth.

For a small annual fee, subscribers gain access to reporting, including a full archive on our website, with a subject-tagged organization. The email newsletter, now including only summaries of the full stories, remains free. With a minimal marketing effort, we have gained over 200 paid subscribers and made several sales to university libraries, including Stanford University, New York University, Harvard Law School and the University of California, Berkeley. We see FERN's Ag Insider, particularly institutional and corporate sales, as a significant area for earned revenue growth.

We also have begun to expand our reporting team for Ag Insider. We recently added Kristina Johnson as our Western states correspondent. And two freelance correspondents attended the Paris climate talks, from where they filed a number of pieces for AI. We intend to do more of this in the future, leveraging our reporting contacts to augment Ag Insider coverage. In addition, we began syndicating content from Ag Insider to other outlets, such as Agriculture.com, that serve a similar audience, both as a revenue stream and a marketing opportunity. We will leverage existing writer relationships to generate these moderate-length stories, and bring infographics to the column as well.

We continue to seek a balance between producing stories and providing the editorial support that each deep-dive investigation requires.

This year, FERN has continued to expand our media partnerships, working with *Discover Magazine*, *Eating Well*, *Harper's* and more. In September 2015, we launched FERN's Friday Feed newsletter, a.k.a. the #FFF, a weekly survey of the stories in our areas of interest that have been published by other outlets. Some selections are at the top of the news while others are prescient or in-depth features that we think our readers should know about. We send this newsletter weekly to a subscriber base of 3,100 as a way to enhance engagement with an audience that is mostly distinct from our social-media audience. This initiative is designed to establish FERN as a source for curation and guidance in navigating food media, and not only a producer of original journalism. This added touch of engagement has also helped us to hone in on which topics resonate most with our audience. Overall, what all of the added developments over the period of this grant term have in common is something that is fundamental to FERN's mission: getting reliable and non-ideological information to people who need it--especially people who can use it to make smart and effective change.

## **Funding and Finances**

First and foremost, we exceeded our funding goal, raising \$850,000 for 2015, our highest total ever, with grants from The 11th Hour Project, the TomKat Foundation, the Emerson Collective, the Woodcock Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, Gaia Fund, the Soros Fund Charitable Foundation, the Investigative News Network, the Doris Duke Foundation, and the Claneil Foundation among others. In addition, we've received nearly \$310,000 from individual donors. We also earned \$49,000 in fees in 2015. We have set a 2016 budget of \$950,000 and have \$805,000 in committed funds and another \$150,000 in prospective funding. The

budget increases allowed us to increase our reporting capabilities, including hiring photographers and creating graphics and explainers to accompany stories.

## **Our Work**

Our stories from the grant period include:

- Death of a Family Farm looked at the complications of farm succession and appeared at *Fast Company*, which has over 39 million average monthly page views.
- Hu Tieu, a Vietnamese Dish Spiced with Prosperity and Climate Change describes how the country's investment in shrimp farming in the Mekong Delta threatens to destroy the delicate balance between saltwater and freshwater and exacerbate the impact of climate change in the region. It ran in *The Guardian*, which draws half a million readers from around the world.
- Seven Ways Climate Change Could Kill You (Really), another piece from our partnership with *The Guardian*, delivered a disturbing roundup of all the health problems that researchers have connected to climate change—from deadly bug bites and asthma to obesity and depression.
- Everything You Need To Know About Nanopesticides provides a fascinating look at the under-reported darker side of the promise of using nanotechnology in agriculture. This appeared in *Modern Farmer*, which draws 2 million readers each month.
- Leave It To Beavers, which appeared in *OnEarth*, the magazine of the Natural Resources Defense Council, examines an unexpected twist in the California drought cycle: Beavers, long reviled as a nuisance, are actually helping mitigate the water woes that pit farmer against fisherman.
- Unraveling The Gluten-free Trend separates fact from fiction in the raging debate about the role of gluten in a range of maladies, from skin rashes and joint pain to gastrointestinal distress and depression. It appeared in *Eating Well*, which has nearly 2 million total readers of each issue.
- The Lethal Legacy Of The Vietnam War is one of our most-successful pieces to date in 2015: George Black's powerful cover story in *The Nation* showed how the tons of unexploded ordnance, herbicides, and defoliants the US dropped on Vietnam during the war plague farmers, and agricul-

ture, there today. *The Nation* has 1.3 million monthly readers in print and online. Prominent and longtime political activist Tom Hayden was among the many who sent *The Nation* letters praising Black's work.

- Climate Change Poses Serious Threats To Food Distribution introduced a new and troubling frame to the conversation about climate change, agriculture, and access to good food. Published March 4, 2015, by the *Earth Island Journal*, it was shared on social media 500 times and the 1,500 (and counting) folks who read it on the *Journal's* site spent an average of five minutes with the piece—pretty good engagement in our click-and-flit digital world.
- The Fisherman's Dilemma is a story about a radical experiment that closes hundreds of miles of California coastline to fishing. It was featured in *California Sunday*, which has a readership of 700,000.
- As Himalayan Glaciers Melt, Two Towns Face The Fallout was a story for which reporter Daniel Grossman traveled to the remote mountains of northern India to describe the lives of people living at the edge of global warming. His story appears in the online magazine *Yale Environment 360*. We also produced a stunning video of this valley at the top of the world, our first short documentary.
- Battling Drought On A California Farm was a profile of Cannon Michael, a Central Valley farmer who devised a water-sharing scheme to help his struggling neighbors cope with the epic drought. After more than 60,000 views on *Ensis* and its syndication partners, *Business Insider*, *Quartz*, and *Climate Central*, it had nearly 2,000 social-media shares. Twitter highlights include *Ensis* (30.3K followers); *Sunset Magazine* (62.6K followers) and *NPRFood* (48K followers). Michael also began appearing in stories about the drought in outlets like *The New York Times* and *NPR*.
- Fields Of Toxic Pesticides Surround The Schools Of Ventura County , with infographic which was published in *The Nation*. As of April 15, the story-- which was online only—had more than 8,000 views at *The Nation's* website and nearly 5,000 social-media shares.
- Borderlands Food Bank: Cutting Food Waste At The Border is a story about a woman who singlehandedly changed the game on the sprawling and complex problem of food waste. This story established an important partnership *Latino USA*, which airs on 141 *NPR* stations nationwide, was

featured on NPR's *The Salt* blog, and was picked up by *Georgia Public Broadcasting* and cited on *The Huffington Post's What's Working* blog.

- [Urban Farming Is Booming, But What Does It Really Yield?](#) explores whether community gardens and rooftop farms can really play a role in feeding our burgeoning population. It was published with *Ensia*.
- [Scorched](#), our newest California drought-related story in which reporter Lauren Markham focuses her lens on the human cost of this slow-motion environmental crisis. The story was published online and in print with a new partner, *Pacific Standard*.
- [Zambia: Wildlife Poachers Trade Guns For Gardens](#), published with *Al Jazeera America* about a nonprofit that is creating an alternative livelihood for poachers.
- [A Little Fish with Big Impact In Trouble on U.S. West Coast](#) investigated the devastating 90-percent decline in the Pacific sardine stock and fingers a daunting list of culprits, from climate change to aquaculture to burgeoning demand for fish oil and other supplements. The decline could be disastrous for marine animals farther up the food chain which depend on sardines for food. Published in *Yale Environment 360*.
- [Heart of Agave](#), by Ted Genoways, appeared in *Mother Jones*. It's the story of an optometrist who is trying to wean the Mexican tequila industry from agrochemicals—and is distilling a superior product in the process.
- [The Forgotten Filipino-Americans Who Led the '65 Delano Grape Strike](#), by Lisa Morehouse in collaboration with *KQED's The California Report*, uncovered a little-known story about the origins of the most significant labor action of the modern era, the farmworkers' grape strike that dragged on for five years in the 1960s.
- [Uncharted](#) was published in collaboration with *California Sunday Magazine*. Writer and photographer Lisa M. Hamilton traveled to one of the most remote corners of Australia with a group of plant geneticists searching for wild relatives of rice. The scientists hope these wild strains contain traits that can help cultivated rice withstand climate change.
- [Meet the Scientists Hunting and Saving Wild Sunflower Seeds](#) Published in *Modern Farmer's* fall issue, this piece by Nelson Harvey takes a close

look at sunflowers, which are native to North America. They are a vital oilseed crop, a dietary staple in China, and the second-most-cultivated hybrid in the world after corn.

- With No U.S. Standards, Pot Pesticide Use Is Rising Public Health Threat, by reporters Erica Berry of FERN and Katie Wilcox of *I-News*, found a glaring absence of oversight in the burgeoning legal marijuana industry.
- Children Left Vulnerable By World Bank Amid Push For Development, by Jocelyn Zuckerman and Michael Hudson, was published by *The Huffington Post* in partnership with the International Center for Investigative Journalists. It was part of "Evicted and Abandoned," a year-long investigation into the hidden toll of World Bank–financed development projects on some of the planet’s poorest people.
- Allan Savory and the Science of Tracking, for which we partnered with *Discover Magazine* to send writer Judith Schwartz to Zimbabwe, examines the global guru of sustainable land-use’s ideas about the lost art of animal tracking. Travel for this story was supported by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.