ND AGTECH
NSF AgTech Engine in North Dakota

AgTech Champion Communities

12-Month Community Capacity, Workforce and Innovation Program

PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

Designed for rural North Dakota communities

NDSU | EXTENSION

1. PROGRAM OVERVIEW

AgTech Champion Communities is a 12-month, community-driven program designed to help rural North Dakota communities prepare for and participate in the future of agriculture and technology. The program brings together local leaders, producers, agribusinesses, educators, economic developers, Extension, employers, entrepreneurs, youth-serving organizations, regional partners and residents to identify local opportunities and turn them into action.

Communities will build leadership and collaboration, conduct a locally grounded workforce needs analysis, strengthen their entrepreneurial and workforce ecosystems, expand youth and work-based learning opportunities, increase awareness and adoption of agricultural technology, and implement or substantially advance at least one locally selected AgTech initiative.

Connection to the AgTech Engine Workforce Strategy

AgTech Champion Communities is a local delivery and learning model within the broader National Science Foundation AgTech Engine in North Dakota. Participating communities will not only complete local work; they will also help test, document and improve approaches that can be shared and adapted by other rural communities and regional partners.

Who Should Apply?

The program is intended for rural North Dakota communities with a population under 20,000 that demonstrate:

- A desire to build workforce capacity and prepare for the changing agricultural economy.
- A diverse group of community leaders willing to work together throughout the program.
- Willingness to assess community strengths, workforce needs, challenges, resources and gaps using stakeholder input.
- Interest among producers and agribusinesses in AgTech innovation and adoption.
- Interest in expanding AgTech career awareness, education, youth engagement and work-based learning.
- A commitment to entrepreneurship, innovation and creating a community where people want to live and work.
- Readiness to identify, test and advance meaningful local Ag Tech opportunities and share what is learned.

What Participating Communities Receive

Dedicated community coaching: A rural development coach who provides facilitation, resources, connections, accountability and support throughout the 12 months.

Community Workforce Data Profile: Each community will receive a customized workforce data profile developed by the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) or the NDSU Center for Social Research. The profile will highlight key workforce demographics, trends, and indicators to help community leaders better understand their current workforce, identify emerging needs and opportunities, and inform the Community AgTech Opportunity and Action Plan.

Workforce needs analysis and stakeholder engagement support: Tools and facilitation to gather input from employers, producers, educators, youth, entrepreneurs and other community stakeholders and translate that feedback into priorities.

Strategic planning and facilitation: Guided community assessment, priority setting, inclusive discussion and development of a practical Community AgTech Opportunity and Action Plan.

Leadership and team development: Opportunities to strengthen the local team's leadership, trust, collaboration and ability to move ideas to action.

Connections to AgTech and entrepreneurship networks: Introductions to statewide and regional partners, innovators, entrepreneurs, technical experts, higher education, Extension, and other resources.

Workforce and youth pathway support: Tools and connections to strengthen AgTech career awareness, youth engagement, education, EDventures, dual credit, ND Career and Technical Education, work-based learning, internships, job shadows and training.

Youth kits, lesson plans and digital content: Access to designated AgTech youth kits, lesson plans and other digital content that each community will use as part of its youth workforce engagement.

Implementation Support and Project Funding: Participating communities will receive educational, facilitation, and implementation support throughout the program at no cost to the community. Each community will also have access to **$10,000 in project funding** to begin addressing local priorities and support the development or implementation of its AgTech initiative. Funding may be provided through reimbursement or start-up support, depending on the activity and program guidelines. Your community coach will work with you to identify appropriate uses for these funds and explore additional grants, partnerships, and other resources that can help grow and sustain your work.

Shared learning: Opportunities to learn from other Ag Tech Champion communities and to contribute tools, examples and lessons that can be shared through the future AgTech Champion Community toolkit/content hub.

Overall Program Goals

1. Build a strong, collaborative local leadership team and a broader network of engaged stakeholders.
2. Increase AgTech awareness and strengthen an entrepreneurial mindset in the community.
3. Identify local workforce needs and opportunities to attract and retain talent and entrepreneurs.
4. Develop a focused Community AgTech Opportunity and Action Plan informed by broad stakeholder feedback.
5. Implement or substantially advance at least one community-driven, regionally responsive AgTech/workforce initiative or pilot.
6. Create stronger local support for entrepreneurship, innovation and employer adaptation to technology.
7. Develop the next generation of AgTech talent through required youth engagement and expanded education/work-based learning pathways.
8. Accelerate AgTech awareness, adoption, demonstrations and applied innovation.
9. Document results, lessons and tools so successful approaches can be shared, adapted and scaled.

2. THE 12-MONTH PROCESS

The program is organized into two connected phases. Phase 1 builds the team, gathers broad stakeholder input, completes the workforce/community assessment and develops the action plan. Phase 2 puts the plan into action, expands workforce and youth activities, and documents the practices needed to sustain and share the learning over the 12-month period.

PHASE 1 – Discover, Connect and Plan | November 2026 to March 2027

Goal	Key Activities and Outputs (refer to Appendix A for suggested specific activities and outputs)	What the Community Gains	Evidence of Progress
Goal 1: Build a collaborative leadership team and stakeholder network	Form a 10–12-member cross-sector core team; participate in team and leadership development; map stakeholders and resources; create a stakeholder engagement plan that identifies who must be heard and how input will be gathered.	A functioning core team, stronger relationships, broader community ownership and a clear understanding of who should be engaged in the work.	Team roster and participation; leadership activities completed; stakeholder/resource map; stakeholder engagement plan; sectors and stakeholder groups represented.
Goal 2: Build an entrepreneurial mindset and AgTech awareness	Participate in AgTech/ entrepreneurship learning; connect with innovation networks such as Center on Rural Innovation (CORI); inventory entrepreneurial resources; meet entrepreneurs, producers and AgTech companies; gather feedback on local innovation barriers and opportunities.	Greater understanding of AgTech trends and entrepreneurship; stronger statewide connections; clearer view of ecosystem gaps and opportunities.	Learning activities; resource inventory; connections made; stakeholder feedback; local Ag/AgTech problems or opportunities identified.
Goal 3: Conduct workforce needs analysis and identify conditions that support talent and entrepreneur retention	Gather workforce input from employers, producers, educators, students/youth, workforce partners and other stakeholders; identify current and future skill needs, hard-to-fill jobs, training gaps and work-based learning needs. Use the Community Capitals Framework1 to assess housing, childcare, broadband, transportation, amenities, gathering spaces, quality of life and other retention factors.	A locally grounded understanding of workforce demand, skill and training gaps, and the community conditions that influence attraction and retention.	Workforce needs summary; stakeholder groups engaged; employer/producer feedback; priority skill/ training gaps; retention priorities and potential partners/resources.
Goal 4: Develop the Community AgTech Opportunity and Action Plan with input from at least 50 community members	Use multiple engagement methods to gather feedback beyond the core team (for example: interviews, focus groups, surveys, community forums, youth discussions or employer roundtables). Synthesize findings; select one priority AgTech workforce initiative; define goals, partners, strategies, education/ training components, timeline, funding possibilities and measures of success.	A practical, community-owned roadmap that links AgTech with workforce, entrepreneurship, education and community development and reflects broad stakeholder priorities.	At least 50 community members engaged; summary of stakeholder feedback and how it influenced priorities; completed action plan; selected priority initiative/ pilot; baseline measures established.

[1] Flora, C. B., & Flora, J. L. (2008). Rural Communities: Legacy and Change (3rd ed.). Westview Press.

PHASE 2 – Activate, Implement and Sustain | April 2027 to October 2027

Goal	Key Activities and Outputs	What the Community Gains	Evidence of Progress
Goal 5: Implement at least one community-driven AgTech/workforce initiative or pilot	Assign leadership; launch or substantially advance the initiative; use NSF Engine project funding for regionally responsive education/training or pilot activities; secure partners/resources; pursue additional funding; track and adjust progress based on participant and stakeholder feedback.	Visible local action, new partnerships, leveraged resources and a tested approach that responds to identified regional workforce or AgTech needs.	Initiative/pilot launched or advanced; participants served; milestones met; funding/resources leveraged; feedback collected; adjustments documented.
Goal 6: Create an environment that supports entrepreneurship and innovation	In collaboration with community coach, connect entrepreneurs to mentors, expertise and funding; engage innovators with leaders; explore innovation spaces/demonstration sites; provide innovation-ready employer training; use stakeholder feedback to identify barriers and improve local supports.	A stronger support network for entrepreneurs and employers; more ideas, pilots and business opportunities; stronger employee innovation skills.	Entrepreneurs supported, mentor/resource connections, ideas/pilots, employer training and engagement, stakeholder feedback and resulting changes.
Goal 7: Develop the next generation of AgTech talent	Implement two new AgTech talent-development programs/lessons, and/or expand two current ones.	More youth exposure to AgTech careers, stronger education-to-employment pathways, and better access to emerging talent for employers.	Youth participating in kit/digital content activities; students engaged; pathway activity developed/expanded; internships/job shadows/WBL; employer-school connections; courses/pathways added or expanded; youth/educator/employer feedback.
Goal 8: Accelerate AgTech adoption and innovation	Develop or host at least one opportunity for AgTech adoption and innovation, such as demonstrations, technology showcases, expert panels, field plots, applied research, micro-credentials, producer/adult upskilling or on-farm pilots. Gather participant feedback on usefulness, barriers and next steps.	Producers and businesses gain hands-on exposure, expertise and confidence to evaluate and adopt useful technologies.	Demonstrations/activities; participants; feedback; pilots; technologies tested/adopted; technical assistance provided; next-step adoption opportunities identified.
Goal 9: Document and share the community model (Ag Tech Champion Community model)	Maintain simple records to report activities, tools, decisions, outputs, participant feedback, outcomes, adaptations and lessons learned as provided by the community coach. Participate in peer sharing with regional partners and other communities during a final statewide event.	A clear record of what worked, what did not, and what another rural community could adapt; greater visibility for local success and stronger regional learning.	Completed case example; documented workforce pilot; tools/templates submitted; lessons and adaptations recorded; success stories; peer/regional sharing completed; recommendations for future model implementation.

3. EXAMPLES OF WHAT YOUR COMMUNITY MIGHT DO

Each AgTech Champion Community will have different needs, assets, and opportunities. The activities below are examples of the types of learning, engagement, and projects that may be part of your community's 12-month experience. Your community will work with its community coach to select activities that support local priorities and program goals.

Build Your Community Team

Strengthen the leadership and collaboration skills of your AgTech Champion Team through activities such as:

- CliftonStrengths Finder or Everything DiSC
- Board and community leadership best practices
- Facilitated community conversations and stakeholder engagement

Explore AgTech and Entrepreneurship

Build awareness of emerging opportunities and connect local leaders with ideas, innovators, and resources through activities such as:

- AgTech conferences and learning events
- Visits to other communities or AgTech innovation sites
- Conversations with AgTech companies, entrepreneurs, and producers

Understand Workforce Needs and Opportunities

Use community data and local input to better understand your current and future workforce through activities such as:

- Reviewing your Community Workforce Data Profile
- Youth, educator, and workforce partner discussions
- Identifying workforce gaps, emerging skill needs, and opportunities to attract and retain talent

Prepare Employers and Entrepreneurs for Innovation

Help local businesses, employers, and entrepreneurs respond to technology and workforce change through activities such as:

- Helping employees adapt to new technologies
- Building employee problem-solving and innovation skills
- Creating workplaces that attract, develop, and retain employees

Develop the Next Generation of AgTech Talent

Create opportunities for young people to explore AgTech careers and connect education with local employers through activities such as:

- AgTech career exploration and designated youth kits/digital content
- CTE, dual credit, EDventures, work-based learning, or other AgTech learning opportunities
- 4-H AgTech programs and industry/youth partnerships

Increase AgTech Adoption and Innovation

Give producers, businesses, and community members opportunities to see, test, and learn about agricultural technologies through activities such as:

- AgTech demonstrations and technology showcases
- On-farm demonstrations or pilot projects
- Applied research, field demonstrations, or conversations with AgTech experts

4. COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS

Selection is a commitment to active participation. Each community will be expected to:

- Designate a 10–12-member Community AgTech Champion Team representing agriculture/agribusiness, education, economic/community development, Extension, local government, local Chamber, and regional partners, with other sectors included as appropriate.
- Identify two local co-leads who coordinate meetings, communication, participation, stakeholder engagement and reporting.
- Work with assigned community coach and participate in training, peer learning, community assessment, planning and implementation.
- Identify local workforce needs and opportunities by reviewing the community workforce data provided through the program and gathering input from employers, producers, educators, workforce partners, and other key stakeholders.
- Engage at least 50 community members for feedback in Phase 1 and use multiple methods to gather this stakeholder feedback beyond the core team. Engagement should include, as appropriate, producers, businesses, employers, educators, youth/students, entrepreneurs, workforce partners and residents.
- Select and implement or substantially advance at least one regionally responsive AgTech/workforce initiative or pilot.
- Develop two new and/or expand two current AgTech talent-development opportunities, including the required use of designated AgTech youth kits/digital content and at least one education-to-workforce pathway activity.
- Develop or host at least one AgTech adoption and innovation opportunity for producers, businesses or the broader community.
- Track participation, activities, outputs, partnerships, leveraged resources and outcomes using common program measures.
- Document your Ag Tech Champion Community local 12-month program to include tools utilized, lessons learned, adaptations and success stories for NSF AgTech Engine reporting and future toolkit/content hub development.
- Participate in peer learning and share tested practices with regional partners and other communities.

Suggested Time Commitment

Communities should expect regular core-team meetings plus stakeholder engagement, program learning, coaching, community assessment, youth/workforce activities, implementation and reporting. The exact schedule will vary by phase and local initiative. Applicants should demonstrate that team members and their organizations understand the commitment and will prioritize participation.

5. BENEFITS TO YOUR COMMUNITY

By the end of the 12-month program, a successful AgTech Champion Community will have:

- A sustained, cross-sector Community AgTech Champion Team and broader stakeholder network.
- A completed workforce needs analysis informed by employers, producers, educators/workforce partners, youth and other stakeholders.
- Documented input from at least 50 community members and evidence that feedback shaped local priorities.
- A completed Community AgTech Opportunity and Action Plan.
- At least one regionally responsive AgTech/workforce initiative or pilot launched or substantially advanced.
- Stronger regional and statewide partnerships and more effective connections between entrepreneurs and resources.
- Greater employer and workforce engagement.
- Two new and/or expanded AgTech talent-development opportunities, including required youth kit/digital content use and an education-to-workforce pathway activity.
- Increased producer/business exposure to and understanding of AgTech through at least one adoption/innovation activity.
- Progress on local conditions that affect attraction and retention of talent and entrepreneurs.
- Additional public or private resources leveraged for community priorities.
- Your community case example, pilot programs and reusable tools that can contribute to the AgTech Champion Community toolkit/content hub.
- A clear plan for sustaining leadership, partnerships and priority initiatives after the program.

FOR QUESTIONS, PLEASE CONTACT:

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Deadline to apply: October 23, 2026

Apply online:

https://farmsfeedstheworld.com/resources/

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