

BattleGround to Breaking Ground's Veteran Farmer Streamline Eligibility Program

Background

In 2012, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service developed Texas AgrAbility, which is a program that assists farmers and ranchers with disabling/chronic health conditions to start or stay engaged in agriculture operations starting with a one-day workshop, *BattleGround to Breaking Ground: Agriculture Workshops for Military Veterans (BGBG)*. BGBG was created as an online business planning training program to expand the one-day workshop into a year-long educational program as well as online production, with the added benefit of continuing education through field days and hands-on learning opportunities. Successful graduates of the year-long program have the option of accessing leased land, equipment, and established markets to start or expand their operations. The Veteran Farmer Streamline Eligibility Program (VFSE) was developed in cooperation with the United States of Agriculture Farm Service Agency (USDA). The goal of the program is to build upon BGBG in order to provide graduates of VFSE to receive a waiver for the FSA Loan requirement of having three years of industry experience. Successful VFSE graduates will receive access to FSAs Farm Ownership Loan and Beginning Farmer Down Payment Loan.



Relevance

American farmer/ranchers are disappearing at an alarming rate. With the average age of the American producer at 58 years old, our nation's food security could be challenged over the next 20 years. Many veterans are pursuing self-employment and turning to agriculture-based enterprises to accomplish their goals. Veterans struggle with unemployment in rural farming areas and also struggle to transition into civilian life after leaving the military. Farming and ranching has become a highly sought after career for many veterans, offering self-sustainability, therapeutic healing, meaningful and flexible self-employment, continued service, among other benefits.

The most challenging barriers for veterans entering into production agriculture include access to capital and access to land. Veterans seeking funding for their farm enterprise have faced several lender challenges in qualifying for financing. Among those challenges are creating viable business plans, obtaining relevant education, and acquiring experience.

Research has shown that this population is able to achieve higher levels of financial performance if they have written a business plan and utilize standard financial management practices, which can be addressed through increased access to training and hands-on learning opportunities.

VFSE Target Audience:

Military Veterans



Active-duty Military



VFSE is funded by the USDA Farm Service Agency

BattleGround to Breaking Ground Entrepreneurial Training Project

BGBG Program Accomplishments



Total number of participants served through the BGBG program:

962

97.3%

of participants expect to benefit economically from the information gained through BGBG



Number of veterans served:

712

100%

of graduates from BGBG have started or expanded agriculture operations



BGBG goals:

- Increase the number of veteran and other new and beginning farmer/ranchers in Texas through:
 - Face-to-face and online educational training in farm management and production-specific agriculture practices
 - Individualized educational planning and guidance to support diverse agriculture business interests
 - Hands-on learning opportunities connected to online course content
 - Peer-to-peer mentor support

To accomplish these goals, BGBG will:

- Enhance the sustainability of Texas' new veteran beginning farmer/ranchers.
- Offer an array of veteran transition and disability support services to reduce self-employment barriers for veterans (particularly those with disabilities) to enter into production agriculture by providing veterans the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to make informed decisions to start, establish, and manage successful agriculture enterprises.

BGBG Participant Benefits:

1. Development of and a professional review of your Business Plan
2. Education in business planning including goal setting, risk management, business management, operations planning, financial planning, veteran resources, and more
3. Education in agriculture enterprise production, online and hands-on
4. Hands-on skill building with mentors and/or through educational workshops and mentorship
5. Individual Education Plans developed specifically for each participant, including referrals to additional programs (online/flexible)
6. Disability-specific technical assistance to improve overall quality of life and increase farm/ranch sustainability
7. Assistance in applying for additional programs and funding grants
8. One-on-one coaching for veteran transition assistance and for agriculture enterprises
9. Access to network of veteran farmers/ranchers and veteran support organizations
10. Access to USDA's FSA Farm Ownership Loan
11. Access to USDA's FSA Beginning Farmer Down Payment Loan

The **BGBG** project is a 3-phase training program conducted over 12 months, providing veterans with hands-on training and financial planning.

<u>Phase 1</u>	<u>Phase 2</u>	<u>Phase 3</u>
<p>Battleground to Breaking Ground Ag Workshop</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Business Ideas • Business Planning Basics • Resources 	<p>Online Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16 weeks of business planning courses • Individual Education Plan • Community of Practice • Develop your business plan! 	<p>Production Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentorship • Hands-On Training • Production Agriculture Online Courses

BGBG graduates receive:

1. Access to lease land and equipment through **BGBG** partner training farms
2. Access to CSAs and farmers markets through **BGBG** partner training farms