



Ecotrust

AG OF THE MIDDLE ACCELERATOR

*Program Evaluation
Executive Summary*

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Introduction

In 2016-2017, Ecotrust developed an implementation plan for scaling mid-sized, environmentally and socially responsible farming and ranching in a cohort model, referred to as the Agriculture of the Middle (AOTM) Accelerator program. The AOTM Accelerator was designed as a two-year business development program for farmers, ranchers, and community-based fishermen, that would support them as they navigated a multitude of challenges and decisions necessary to become a mid-sized operation. Over the course of 5 years (2017-2022), the Accelerator served 65 food and agriculture businesses from across the region, from California to Alaska;¹ engaged with 16 consultants and service providers who supported program delivery and technical assistance; and was supported by six Ecotrust staff.

Purpose of this study²

The evaluation is intended to be a discrete activity that utilizes existing documents and information collected throughout the four cohorts of Agriculture of the Middle (AOTM) (2017-2020). This study intends to:

- Assess the performance of the AOTM accelerator program.
- Understand the program's alignment with Ecotrust's current strategic goals as written in its 2021-2026 Strategic Plan.
- Inform future programs in the food systems field, centering business technical assistance targeted to Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) and frontline community-based agriculture and food producers.

Evaluation question 1:

What has been the impact of the program on producers' overall business viability, including growth and expansion?

Indicators:

- I. Baseline and change in gross sales and employment
- II. Business Viability³, indicated by:
 - A. Actions taken in support of greater business viability
 - B. Benefits of program
- III. Business Expansion, indicated by actions taken to support business expansion

1 Food producers included vegetable, legume, grain, fruit, nut, seed, flower, mushroom, herb, spice, and medicinal plant growers, cattle and sheep ranchers, pork and poultry producers, dairies, fishers, and value-added producers.

2 These results come with one important caveat: they are not measured relative to a plausible counterfactual, meaning a plausible scenario of what would have happened without the AOTM Accelerator program.

3 "Business viability" is a difficult-to-define concept that differs from business to business. Generally, it refers to the overall health of a business, or its ability to remain in operation over a period of time.

Baseline and changes in gross sales and employment

Key Findings: The AOTM Accelerator was successful in supporting most of the participants in taking one or more actions to improve business viability, based on two key pieces of evidence:

- The majority of the participants (67%) grew their sales during the program
- The majority of the participants (58%) grew their number of employees during the program.

Business Viability

Key Findings: The AOTM Accelerator was successful in supporting most of the participants in taking one or more actions to improve business viability, based on two key pieces of evidence:

- A large majority (83%) of participants took one or more actions in support of business viability during the program.
- A large majority of participants (74%) cited at least one of six key benefits of the AOTM Accelerator program for their business (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Business benefits of AOTM Accelerator Program by cohort year

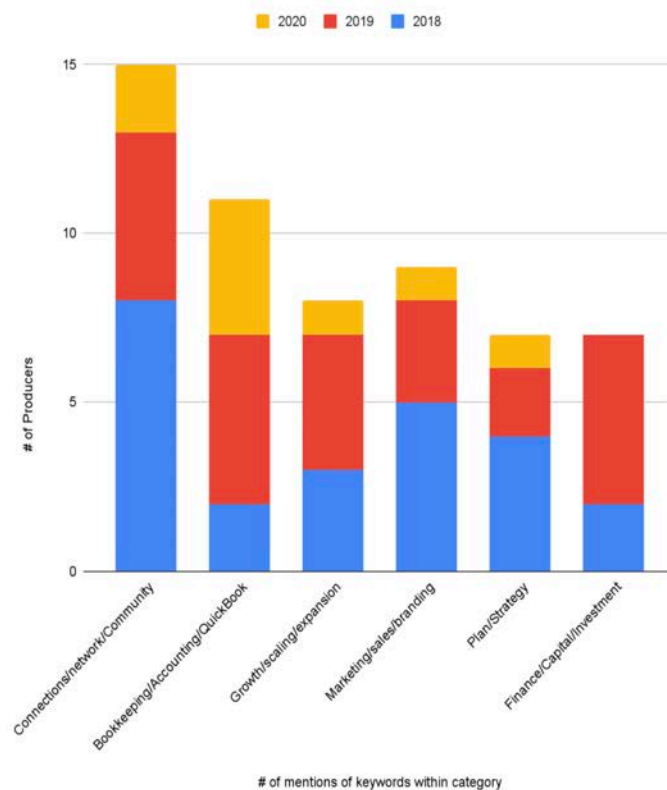


Figure 1 above summarizes the answers to the question, “Please describe how training, tools, and connections that you gained in the AOTM program have impacted your business?” by cohort. Participants gave qualitative responses to this question.⁴

⁴ We sorted the answers by # of mentions of groups of keywords: (1) connections, network, or community, (2) bookkeeping, accounting, or QuickBooks, (3) Growth, scaling, or expansion, (4) Marketing, sales, or branding; (5) Plan or Strategy; (6) Finance, capital, or investment.

The category most commonly mentioned overall, as well as in two of the three cohorts with responses (2018 and 2019) was “Connections, networking, and community” with 15 total mentions. For the 2018 cohort, this benefit far outranked all others. For the 2019 cohort, this benefit was tied for first with two other cited benefits: “Bookkeeping/accounting/Quickbooks” and “Finance/capital/investment”. We did not have data for the 2017 cohort as it was not a question in the final evaluation for this group.

Business Expansion

Key Findings:

- 58% of participants took one or more actions in support of business expansion during the program.
- From 2017 to 2019, the total number of actions taken in support of business expansion increased and diversified; the total number then decreased in 2020, but remained diverse (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. Actions Taken for Business Expansion by cohort year

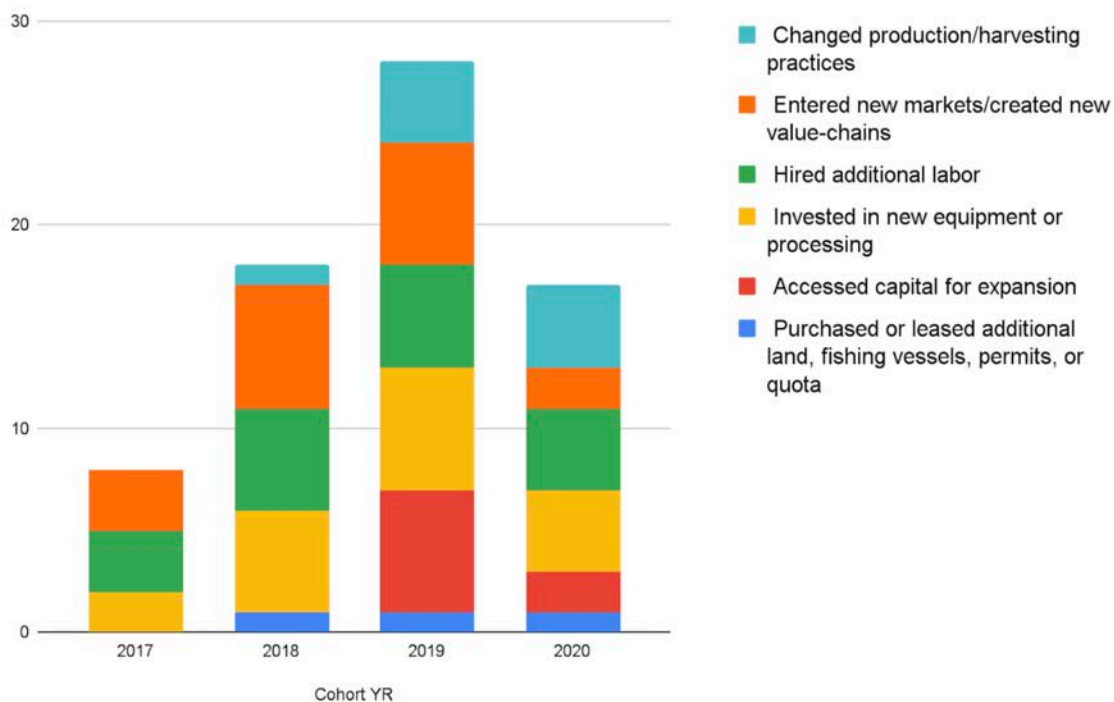


Figure 2 tracks actions in support of business expansion by cohort year. From 2017 to 2019, the total number of actions taken in support of business expansion increased and diversified; the total number then decreased in 2020, but remained diverse.

In summary, our data reveal a pattern of the majority of participants engaging in multiple actions to support both business viability and expansion. On average, participants across all cohorts took about three (mean=2.8) actions of this nature during the program. We found that most of these actions are mostly weakly to moderately positively correlated with one another. It appears that participants took groups of related actions, rather than just one or another action, towards meeting their goals of healthier, stable, and growing businesses.

Evaluation question 2:

What indirect impacts or ripple effects did the program have on the communities?

Indicators:

- I. Peer-to-peer support
- II. Community economic benefit
- III. Anti-racist action

Key Findings:

- The majority of participants (73%) in the 2018 and 2019 cohorts were interested in being mentors.
- Local/Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)/Direct sales and Antiracist/Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) were consistently cited as community benefits for all three cohorts, especially 2019 and 2020.
- The majority (at least 60%) of participant respondents from each cohort said that they were inspired to take anti-racist action.

Figure 3. Community Economic Benefits by cohort year

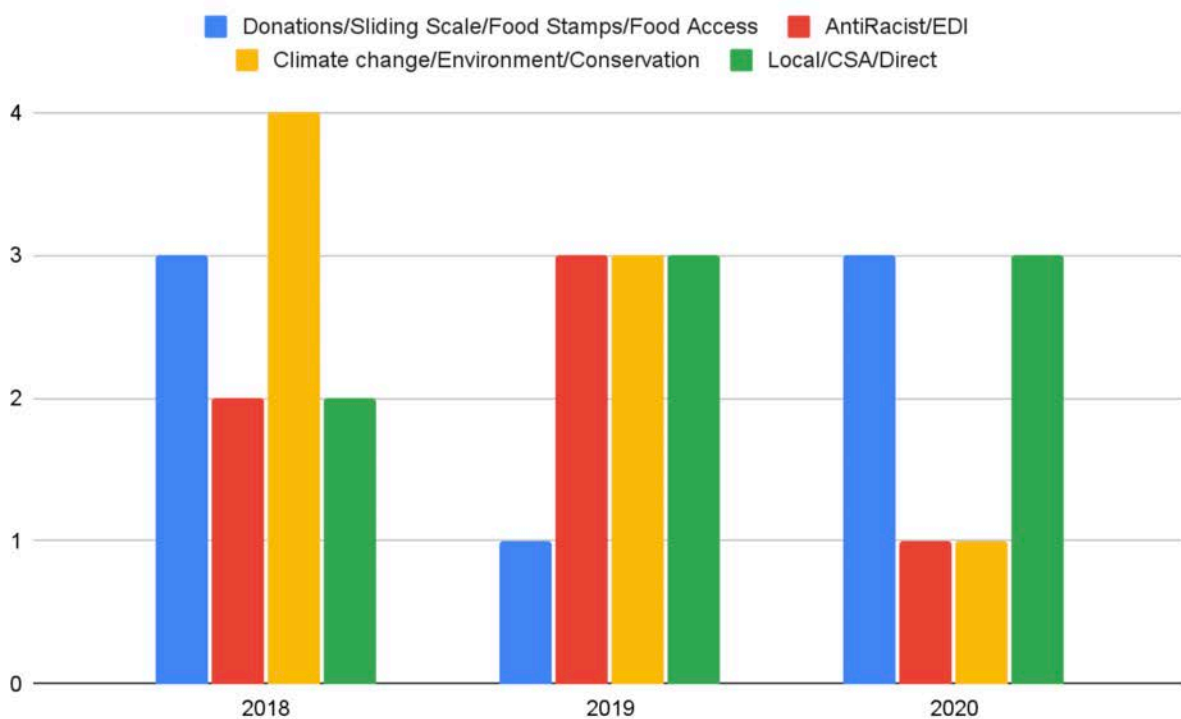


Figure 3 shows that each cohort placed emphasis on different areas. Local/CSA/Direct sales and Anti-racist/EDI were consistently cited as community benefits for all three cohorts, especially 2019 and 2020.⁵

5 We did not have data for the 2017 cohort as it was not a question in the final evaluation for this group.

Evaluation question 3:

How satisfied were participants with the program?

Indicators: Participation and satisfaction data

Key Finding:

- A large majority of participants (96%) were satisfied with the program overall, and the majority of participants surveyed were satisfied with each of its elements.

Selected quotes from participants:

“ This is a terrific program that provided me with a lot of information that is not readily accessible to ag producers working at this scale. We are regularly exposed to opportunities for learning about production practices, but rarely do viable opportunities emerge for learning to enhance the business side of an operation.

“ I was incredibly inspired to delve into my business in a more serious and thoughtful way as well as recognizing the many components that make up a business and how these pieces are related and separate as far as liability, legality and importance to making my business successful.

Evaluation question 4:

Does AOTM’s historic activities/outcomes advance Ecotrust’s strategic goals?

Indicators: 3E Scorecard⁶

The AOTM and Measurement & Evaluation (M&E) teams used Ecotrust’s internal 3E Scorecard to collaboratively score the AOTM Accelerator program. The M&E team facilitated the conversation, asking the AOTM team to answer questions related to the mission, decision-making, and impact of the program. The program’s final score was 6 (out of a maximum 30 possible points), which places it at Level 1, the second lowest level out of a range of levels 0 to 5. Level 1 projects are those that incorporate some aspects of racial diversity and inclusion into fairly traditional economic and environmental objectives; these projects do not address social or racial equity or justice nor support dismantling systems of oppression.

Key Finding:

Based on the scoring rubric, as a Level 1 project, the AOTM Accelerator is minimally aligned with Ecotrust’s Strategic Goals, as established in 2021.

⁶ The 3E Scorecard is a tool used to establish a simple, easy-to-use rubric to track progress towards greater alignment with our mission, values, and Strategic Plan using a 3E lens—equity, environment, and economy. The Scorecard is its second iteration and currently circulated internally. We hope to share a publicly-available downloadable version in the near future.

Conclusion

The AOTM Accelerator completed four cohorts, which ran from 2017-2022. This report demonstrates that the AOTM program was successful in supporting overall business viability and related community impacts. As Ecotrust deepened our commitment to racial equity, the AOTM team made many attempts to make the AOTM Accelerator more accessible and inclusive to support increased participation from BIPOC communities. This did not result in substantive changes and prompted Ecotrust to dig deeper into the structure and foundation of the program and ultimately, come to a decision to sunset the Program.

In 2021, Ecotrust made the decision to sunset the AOTM program and refocus our energy on projects and programs that are more squarely aligned with our Strategic Plan. We understand now that co-creation and community-centered program design are critical components to building equitable initiatives that result in meaningful impact for BIPOC and frontline communities.

As a result of the AOTM Accelerator, we have built expertise in intensive capacity building, advising on capital/land access, and developing anti-racist practices, among others. These skills are being channeled into other projects such as Ecotrust's Community Asset Development (CAD) Program, BIPOC Farm to Market Program, and emerging work to support Land Justice in our region. As well, the AOTM program has inspired other organizations to develop and implement similar programs, such as the Local Catch Network's Scale Your Local Catch program, and Northwest Ag Business Center's Resilerator NW.