

FERN Report**Grant Period: August 1, 2016 - July 31, 2017**

During the grant period beginning in August 2016, the Food & Environment Reporting Network produced 22 stories, including four international stories, on subjects ranging from how climate change is affecting the foodways of Louisiana's Native Americans to a tale of a New England fishing mogul who for years outsmarted seafood industry regulators with a brazen scam that pointed up flaws in the region's catch-shares program. We added new partnerships for an overall total of 51 mainstream media publishing partners, including *National Geographic*, *The Nation*, *EatingWell*, *New Republic* and more. We continued to expand our broadcast work, producing broadcast radio reports.

Impact and Assessment

Our range of impact is rising. We continue to emphasize a variety of partners and audiences. Some are small but highly focused, such as *Ensisia*, which caters to environmental policy makers, advocates and media or *The Lens*, which is New Orleans' first independent, nonprofit news site. Others are broad and mainstream, like *Eating Well* or *National Geographic* or *Vogue*. We believe we succeeded in alerting millions of "new to the issues" readers and priming them for reform.

Our work during the grant period began with "Oil barrens" for *Audubon* magazine and written by Jocelyn Zuckerman. The piece reveals how palm oil plantations are clearing away rainforests in Indonesia and giving poachers easy access to an endangered bird whose beak is prized in China. It was our first piece with *Audubon*, an important new partner with a surprisingly broad total reach of 1.5 million people and whose editor, Mark Jannot, wrote a note to his readers, unsolicited, describing the importance of FERN to quality journalism at a time when such journalism is under duress. "Zuckerman's powerful investigative report," Jannot wrote, "is a tribute to FERN and the new model of cooperative journalism it's pioneering." It was an eloquent reminder that we are involved in something important.

“Is dry farming the next wave in a drought-plagued world?,” by Ari LeVaux, was published online with National Geographic’s *The Plate*, which averages more than 200,000 readers a month. The story presents a promising approach to agriculture in the age of climate change, when droughts are becoming ever more prevalent. By cutting off irrigation, the farmers in this story offered a radical approach to dealing with water scarcity. It is the kind of alternative approach that is one of the pillars of FERN’s journalistic mission. We want to not only shine a light on what isn’t working, but showcase what is working, or what might work. The story got more than 10 thousand page views at Nat Geo. On its Facebook page, the story received 7,500 “likes,” and was shared more than 800 times.

“Immigrant communities are on the front lines of the Bay Area’s soda-tax battle” came on the eve of a slew of Election-Day decisions about soda taxes. PRI’s *The World* aired Bridget Huber’s report on the immigrant shop-owners who had been enlisted by both sides of the soda-tax debate as the public face of their campaigns. Would the new tax hurt small businesses and cash-strapped immigrant shoppers, or would it strike a blow for better health and the local economy? The story gave *The World*’s 3 million weekly listeners a smart new take on an issue that has global interest, and it performed well, with more than 200 shares on social media and a total reach of nearly 160,000. The story also was accompanied by our first data animation, which illustrated the changing approach to soda marketing as well as the money being spent on both sides of the soda-tax fight. That, too, performed very well, reaching more than 6,000 people through FERN’s Facebook page alone. We learned a lot from doing this, and will apply it to more and better data visualizations in the future.

“Seeding doubt,” by Liza Gross, was an investigative takedown of an influential group called Sense About Science, a London and U.S.-based charity and self-appointed arbiter of sound science that is actually a shill for industry-funded research. It marked new territory for FERN, in terms of our publishing partner, *The Intercept*, known for its critical voice and investigative focus. It also blended investigative reporting on corporate power, media criticism, and agricultural and environmental science. As such, it was an important example of “accountability journalism” – that is, holding powerful interests accountable – and was evidence of an increasingly valuable and sophisticated journalistic approach to the food

and ag “beat.” It also made a list of the best science stories of the year from Longreads, which said: “At a time when even the concept of truth is debatable, and no fact can be taken for granted, such deep dives into the reliability of our public messengers are more essential than ever.”

“‘Restoration economy’ strives to protect pollinators, create jobs,” by Alexis Marie Adams, is the story of an innovative effort to both restore pollinator habitat in a spectacularly biodiverse region along the Arizona-Mexico border, and connect that sustainability project with economic development for the struggling citizens who live there. It was published in *Scientific American*, our first piece with them, and benefitted from the magazine’s 7.1-million-reader global reach (it publishes editions in 14 languages and 30 countries). By December, the piece had about 3,000 readers who spent an average of two minutes with it, which is pretty good engagement. But this is a more significant measure of its impact: Adams’ piece was cited in an op-ed published in *The New York Times* about the best solutions-based journalism stories this year. The point was that, in a time when the media is widely criticized for being too cautious and consumed by superficial things, there are news operations (like FERN) that are pointing the way forward.

“This Kansas farmer fought a government program to keep his farm sustainable,” by Kristin Ohlson, is the outrageous story of a farmer who lost his crop insurance simply because he grew cover crops. It is the kind of senselessly regressive policy that can stymie efforts by farmers to adopt more sustainable processes, and the kind of thing FERN exists to tell the public about. The story was read by more than 3,000 readers at publication partner *Ensisia*, who spent over six minutes on the story -- a high level of engagement per user. It reached a wider audience through syndication via Regeneration International, Society of Environmental Journalists, Food and Ag Policy.org, and the Organic Consumers Association as well as social media sharing by the likes of Michael Pollan and others.

“The violent costs of the global palm oil boom,” by Jocelyn Zuckerman, looks at a series of assassinations of environmental activists who were confronting the palm oil industry. It was part of our ongoing series about the global industry, which touches half of all supermarket products, and was our first piece published

online with *The New Yorker*. The outlet has also been quite successful building an audience, reaching 20 million users a month earlier this year.

In 2017, we published a number of successful stories—including our first piece to be optioned for a film—and we added some important new partners, including *Highline* (*Huffington Post*’s longform channel), *Gravy*, the award-winning podcast by The Southern Foodways Alliance, *The Lens*, a New Orleans-based outlet devoted to in-depth, public-interest reporting, *National Geographic* and *The New Republic*.

February saw the release of “Revenge of The Lunch Lady: How an unassuming bureaucrat outsmarted Jamie Oliver and pulled off an honest-to-god miracle in one of America’s unhealthiest cities,” by Jane Black, published with the *Huffington Post Highline*. This story really struck a nerve, garnering shout-outs from a host of influential folks, including Tom Colicchio, Kimbal Musk, Michael Pollan, Jonathan Bloom, the *New York Times*’ Ian Urbina, and Questlove. Black was interviewed on Wisconsin Public Radio’s *The Kathleen Dunn Show*, on *Cheddar*, a business-news show that broadcasts from the NYSE, and on *The Huffington Post*. The piece was cited in a number of places, including Food Politics (Marion Nestle’s influential site), *Newser*, and *Longform*, and had a total social reach of 22 million. The response was so strong that the Huffington Post folks want to build a charity event—a Top-Chef-style school-lunch cook-off, featuring celebrity chefs—to raise money for kitchen equipment for needy schools. The planning is underway.

“The Deliciously Fishy Case Of the Codfather: New England’s fishing industry is in deep trouble, thanks in no small part to one mogul’s seriously shady business,” by Ben Goldfarb, was published with *Mother Jones*. It reads like a movie script, and in fact has been optioned for film production (a first for us). Beyond the interest from Hollywood, Ben was all over the media. Goldfarb was interviewed by Hartford’s New England News Collaborative (which feeds stations throughout New England), *Heritage Public Radio*, *KCRW*, and *Nieman Storyboard* along with *Mother Jones*’ *Bite* podcast. It also was included on *Longform*, and got a lot of love on social media, with a total reach of 1.2 million.

“Reclaiming native ground: Can Louisiana’s tribes restore their traditional diets as waters rise?” by Barry Yeoman, was published by *The Lens*, and broadcast on

the podcast *Gravy*. We liked this piece from the start, but were surprised by how much response it got from the wider media world—*Weekend Morning Edition*, and WNYC’s *The Takeaway*, plus a social reach of nearly 7,000 readers. He also participated in a panel discussion in New Orleans about the story which was arranged by our partner, *The Lens*.

Beyond that, though, this was our first fully multimedia piece, with the podcast, online print story, photography and infographic elements. It is part of our ongoing effort to diversify the ways that FERN stories reach multiple audiences.

“Farmers behind barbed-wire fences: 75 years later, Japanese-Americans remember incarceration during World War Two,” by Lisa Morehouse, aired on more than two dozen radio stations via KQED’s *California Report*. President Trump’s executive order banning people from seven Muslim countries from entering the U.S. stirred the decades-old fear and anger of older Japanese-Americans, who recalled how they had been dragged off their farms during World War II and forced to labor in internment camps. It was picked up by PRI’s *The World*, among others, and had a social reach of more than 350,000 readers. The Society of Professional Journalists, Northern California Chapter, honored Morehouse with an Excellence in Journalism award for Features and Longform Storytelling (radio/audio) for this story.

With “Pizza chains are making a desperate push to avoid calories on menus,” by Jane Black, published by *The Washington Post*, we broke the news that something called the National Pizza Community, which is actually just a lobbying coalition led by Domino’s, was trying an (ultimately successful) 11th-hour maneuver to scuttle the new federal rule that will require restaurants to post calories. This story elicited a howl of protest from Big Pizza and its supporters, including a hit piece from *NewsBusters* that called FERN a “Soros-funded” organization. It also got a lot of love; Black was interviewed on *KCUR*, Kansas City public radio, and the story did fairly well on social media. But the larger significance of the piece, for FERN, is that these kinds of breaking-news stories have long frustrated us—they aren’t our main pursuit, yet we feel we need to find ways to address them. And this piece, along with our pieces on *The Salt*, shows that we are finding those ways.

“Terror in the Heartland,” by Ted Genoways, was published with *The New Republic*. After the FBI broke up an election-night plot by homegrown extremists to bomb an apartment complex in Garden City, Kansas, that housed Muslim meatpacking workers from Somalia, the town’s response—to protect and reassure those workers—reflected Garden City’s long history of officially embracing the immigrants who come to work in the area’s packing plants. It is a policy that sets Garden City apart from most other meatpacking towns, and has been a boon to the local economy. This piece placed the food and agriculture issues we cover in the cultural and economic context of the Trump era. But more importantly, it provided a vehicle to look at what the “Heartland” is these days – and how more complex it is than the simple urban/rural, multicultural/white divides we often hear about.

It also was our first piece with *TNR*, which has a monthly reach of 4.7 million readers in print and online. It was a provocative cover story, with narrative that read like a movie script, and it got a lot of attention. Ted was interviewed by *Mother Jones’ Bite* podcast, WNYC’s *The Takeaway*, and Progressive Radio Network. And the story was cited and celebrated by, among others, *Digg*, *Longform*, the Southern Poverty Law Center, *Mother Jones’ “Food for Thought”* newsletter, *Politico’s Playbook*, and *The Huffington Post*.

“African Americans have lost untold acres of farmland over the last century,” by Leah Douglas, published with *The Nation*. The story of how an arcane law enabled the theft of millions of acres of land from African-Americans over the last century—and how it remains a problem today. It is the little-known reason for why there are so few black farmers in America today, and it is a miscarriage of justice that only now is being addressed. This piece also reaffirmed FERN’s editorial judgment. This piece got a fair amount of media attention. Leah was interviewed on *KCRW’s Good Food*, and there were more than 5,000 social shares with an estimated social reach of nearly 400,000 readers. More tellingly, perhaps, is that when our development coordinator, Courtney Eshleman, attended the Sustainable Agriculture & Food Systems Funders conference in Florida just after the story was published, it (and FERN) was the subject of a lot of chatter and praise.

“Inside the multimillion-dollar world of eel trafficking,” by Rene Ebersole, published with *National Geographic*, tells, in wonderful detail, the story of how

the father of New England's glass-eel industry got caught up in the black-market boom when the global eel supply tightened. He goes on trial this summer. This was our first piece with *NatGeo* proper (we had done some shorter things with its now-defunct blog, *The Plate*), and was a good reminder that what we're doing makes a lot of sense to journalists. The editor we dealt with was a veteran who had been at *NatGeo* for decades. He didn't know who we were, and although he was very nice, he was initially less than thrilled to have an outside editor involved. But by the end of the process, he understood the value of FERN—not only in terms of financial resources but also editorial support—and we are off and running, discussing new stories to collaborate on.

The story also was a reminder of how a partner with the audience and global brand of *National Geographic* can really boost the visibility. The New England News Collaborative interviewed Rene, and the story was cited by Vox, New York University's environmental reporting program, and The Sustainable Eel Group. *NatGeo* has more than 18 million Twitter followers, and when it retweeted our tweet of the story, the numbers were impressive: Nearly 400,000 impressions and more than 6,500 engagements.

"How Vermont tackled farm pollution and cleaned up its waters," by Paul Greenberg, published with *EatingWell*, looked at one state's efforts to deal with agricultural runoff, which was fouling Lake Champlain. The article argued that the approach Vermont took could be a model for other states, now that the federal government has stepped aside, even blocked, environmental measures. Greenberg was interviewed on *KCRW's Good Food*, and the story was cited by *Environmental News Bits*, *AGree*, and Reddit's Political Revolution. This story also underscored FERN's editorial consulting role, since it began without our initial involvement. *EatingWell* reached out after a first draft was submitted and we worked with their editors as well as Paul to marshall the story to completion. We also produced an animated map of water pollution issues around the nation. In a testimonial, *EatingWell's* Editor-in-Chief Jessie Price said: "When you work with FERN, it's like having a whole add-on wing to your editorial team that brings spot-on insights about the topics, careful editing, contacts with great writers and creative solutions for delivering information graphically."

Audience Engagement

We are active on three social media platforms — Twitter, Facebook and Instagram — and are starting to use LinkedIn to a small extent. Our full-time Audience Engagement Editor supervises activity on these platforms, including the judicious use of paid promotion (a.k.a. “boosts”) in order to reach beyond our followers (and in the case of Facebook, to reach a significant number of our followers). We also work closely with our publication partners’ social media staff, who are contractually obligated to promote our collaborations as well as to “tag” us within the individual platforms in which they operate. Paid social media promotion has been a very effective, low-cost way to broaden the reach of individual stories and increase FERN’s brand awareness. Our social audience is approximately 40,000 users and total impressions for our posts and tweets is approximately 3 million per year. Our website reaches 125,000 uniques per year while we have newsletter audience of 5,500 people, although it’s worth noting that our expectation is our work finds its audience primarily through our publication partners.

In addition, over the past year, our ability to place stories with major media organizations, such as *National Geographic* and *Vogue*, has increased our reach significantly. Organizations at their scale reach a native audience in the millions through their publications, and additional millions through their own social media accounts. This brings our issues out of the silo of food and environment reporting, reaching broader audiences.

We also utilize a PR firm to pitch media outlets directly on our stories, both to ensure other outlets cover our work and also to feature our writers as subjects for broadcast interviews. We have had good success getting our reporters on public radio shows and some success with television interviews, particularly with MSNBC. From a content perspective, we often produce multimedia elements such as infographics, audio reports and video. These pieces can be shared socially on their own and frequently have a larger reach than the story itself. For earned media throughout 2016 & 2017, FERN has built quite an impressive list, both for stories and awareness around the organization itself. Our stories and reporters have been featured in interviews with WNYC’s The Takeaway, KCRW’s Good Food, NPR’s All Things Considered, WHYY’s The Pulse, New England News Collaborative, Heritage Radio Network, Gastropod, The Leonard

Lopate Show, Nieman Storyboard and more. FERN stories have been mentioned by popular sites such as Longform, DIGG, Newser, and Vox. Influential groups like SlowFood, UC Food Observer, Stone Barns, and Food Tank have been vocal about FERN's work. And influencers such as Marion Nestle, Mark Bittman, Michael Pollan, and Tom Colicchio continue to boost FERN's profile via their social media and personal blogs. Meanwhile, both the American Press Institute and Nieman Lab cited FERN in pieces they did on the success, and importance, of collaborative journalism. And our Editor-in-Chief was part of two separate panels on media partnerships at ONA16 (Online News Association's 16th Annual Conference) and the 2017 IRE Conference (Investigative Reporters & Editors).

We continue to maintain and support *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.

Business Development

We continued to expand our food and agriculture policy news service, *FERN's Ag Insider*. 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. We now have nearly 300 individual and corporate subscribers and a growing number of academic institutional subscribers, including Stanford University, New York University, Harvard Law School and the University of California, Berkeley. This year we added Tufts and Yale to our institutional subscribers. In addition, approximately 2,100 people receive the free newsletter version every weekday while *Agriculture.com* (one of the foremost outlets for commodity farmers), *Successful Farmer* magazine and *Mother Jones* currently syndicate selected *Ag*

Insider articles. We see *FERN's Ag Insider*, particularly institutional and corporate sales, as a significant area for earned revenue growth.

We also continued to expand our reporting team for *Ag Insider* in order to overcome the challenge of having enough content and added value to justify a paid product. We have dedicated resources to Western states reporting and *Ag Insider* contributors have included Christopher Leonard, Liza Gross, Erica Berry, Stett Holbrook, Maryn McKenna and Leah Douglas.

Throughout this run, in 2016 we also managed to produce and publish *The Dirt*, a collection of some of our favorite stories from the first five years of FERN. It was a fruitful period—and a demonstration of the important public-service journalism FERN makes possible at a moment when fact-based reporting is under fire and more crucial than ever.

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

We closed out our 2016 budget by exceeding our funding goals and established a budget of \$930,000, our highest total ever, with grants from the Woodcock Foundation, the Emerson Collective, the McKnight Foundation, Gaia Fund, the Soros Fund Charitable Foundation and the Packard Foundation among others. We received nearly \$317,000 from individual donors and \$395,000 in foundation grants. We also earned \$29,000 in publication fees, \$27,000 in paid subscription revenue and \$18,000 in FERN Talks & Eats ticket revenue, with the remainder coming from funds raised but not spent in 2015. Our 2017 budget was \$950,000, including \$334,000 in individual donations, \$425,000 in foundation grants, \$90,000 in publication and subscription revenue and retained earnings. We also qualified for and have received a \$90,000 line of credit from our bank at a low interest rate that allows us additional flexibility in managing our operations and our cash flow. We will use the credit judiciously to ensure that any seasonality to our revenue flows does not materially impact operations. It also provides an

ability to invest in short-term initiatives that may require upfront investment and insulates us from the notoriously long Accounts Payable schedules of our publication partners. 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:

AUGUST 2016

[Before Steroids, Russians Secretly Studied Herbs](#) written by Kristina Johnson for *National Geographic*. During the Cold War, Soviet scientists experimented with Rhodiola, a plant that shows some promise in helping athletes with endurance.

SEPTEMBER 2016

[Oil Barrens](#) written by Jocelyn Zuckerman for *Audubon Magazine*. As palm oil finds its way into an astonishing half of all grocery-store products, Indonesian rainforests are falling to make way for plantations, releasing vast quantities of CO₂ and giving poachers easy access to endangered Helmeted Hornbills. [Is Dry Farming the Next Wave in a Drought-Plagued World?](#) written by Ari LeVaux for *National Geographic*. Some fruit growers in California eschew irrigation and have escaped the financial fallout experienced by fellow farmers in recent years.

OCTOBER 2016

[Immigrant communities are on the front lines of the Bay Area's soda-tax battle](#) written by Bridget Huber for PRI's *The World*. Huber shows how the industry group American Beverage Association has enlisted small, independent grocers in low-income communities to be the sympathetic face in TV ads opposing these measures, which it has rebranded as "grocery taxes."

NOVEMBER 2016

[Seeding Doubt](#) award-winning writer Liza Gross examines how self-appointed guardians of "sound science" tip the scales toward industry. Published with new media partner *The Intercept*.

[“Restoration Economy” Strives to Protect Pollinators, Create Jobs](#) written by Alexis Marie Adams for *Scientific American*. Conservationists hope to boost livelihoods along the poverty-stricken Arizona–Mexico borderlands by repairing habitat for more than 900 species of wild pollinators.

DECEMBER 2016

[This Kansas farmer fought a government program to keep his farm sustainable](#) Kristin Ohlson puts a human face on crop insurance in this piece produced with *Ensia*. It also details the hurdles to sustainable farming within the commodity system.

[The violent costs of the global palm oil boom](#) writer Jocelyn Zuckerman reports on the dangers facing palm-oil activists. Published with new media partner *The New Yorker*.

JANUARY 2017

[Bears Ears Monument Is A Win For Tribal Food Sovereignty. Will Trump Undo It?](#) — NPR’s *The Salt*

FEBRUARY 2017

[The Long, Slow Trek To Get Americans To Eat Camel Meat](#) — NPR’s *The Salt*
[Reclaiming native ground: Can Louisiana’s tribes restore their traditional diets as waters rise?](#) — *The Lens* and *Gravy*

[How an unassuming bureaucrat outsmarted Jamie Oliver and pulled off an honest-to-god miracle in one of America's unhealthiest cities.](#) — Huffington Post’s *Highline*

[75 Years Later, Japanese-Americans Recall Incarceration, Forced Farm Labor](#) — KQED’s *California Report*

MARCH 2017

[The Deliciously Fishy Case of the “Cofather”](#) — *Mother Jones*

APRIL 2017

[Pizza chains are making a desperate push to avoid posting calories on menus—](#) *Washington Post*

[Is the United States ready for offshore aquaculture?](#) —*Ensia*

[How A Wild Berry Is Helping To Protect China's Giant Pandas And Its Countryside](#)—NPR's *The Salt*

MAY 2017

[“The Only Good Muslim Is a Dead Muslim”](#)—*New Republic*

JUNE 2017

[Inside the Multimillion-Dollar World of Eel Trafficking](#) — *National Geographic*

[How Your Diet Contributes to Water Pollution](#) — *EatingWell*

[African Americans Have Lost Untold Acres of Land Over the Last Century](#) — *The Nation*

JULY 2017

[No Offense, American Bees, But Your Sperm Isn't Cutting It](#) — NPR's *The Salt*