Opportunity
Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (NESARE) switched to an outcome funding framework in 2001 for its Professional Development (PDP) and Research and Education (R&E) project funding. In 2006, NESARE engaged Yellow Wood Associates to assess the impact of the outcome funding framework on principal investigators and beneficiaries of the 16 PDP and 32 R&E projects funded between 2001 and 2005. NESARE invested a total of $4.4 million in these projects over a five-year period, $.2 million in PDP projects and $3.2 million in R&E projects. NESARE wished to determine whether evidence existed that the changes described in projects’ performance targets had actually taken place, what factors led to enhanced project results, and what, if anything, NESARE could do to improve the effectiveness of its grant making.

Approach
Yellow Wood reviewed all project files, including proposals, budgets, interim and final reports. Then we developed interview schedules and cover letters for both principal investigators and project beneficiaries. As a result of a pretest, we added team members to the interview schedule. Yellow Wood contacted principal investigators (PIs) by mail and email to explain the NESARE evaluation and alert them to the fact that we would be contacting them for a phone interview. PIs were asked to provide contact information for beneficiaries (8 beneficiaries within each beneficiary category, 4 within the PI’s sphere of influence and 4 outside of the PI’s sphere of influence).

Outcome
Yellow Wood used outcome funding criteria to determine which projects funded from 2001-2005 were highly successful, moderately successful, or relatively unsuccessful. Yellow Wood’s detailed recommendations for NESARE in moving forward, included: continuing to use the outcome funding approach; addressing common barriers to understanding the outcome funding approach in its outreach, training, and project selection activities; screening projects early on for signs of success and shortcomings; supporting more active relationships between project liaisons and PIs; and more. NESARE continues to use the outcome funding approach for its PDP and R&E grant programs.

Client
Northeast SARE (www.nesare.org) offers competitive grants to projects that explore and address key issues affecting the sustainability and future economic viability of agriculture. NESARE serves Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C.