FARM DIRECT DISTRIBUTION

USDA United States Department of Agriculture
National Institute of Food and Agriculture

Situation

Redesigning the way food is grown, stored, packaged, and transported is critical to addressing our current food systems' contribution to climate change, global financial instability, social injustice, the high demand on fossil fuel inputs, and pollution of land, water, and air.

The current system results in a loss in energy calories to produce the average one calorie of nutritional value. This indicates an unsustainable system where energy input exceeds energy output.

Professional + Producer Grant

Title: Farm Direct Distribution

Project Number: FW07-303

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SARE Grant: $25,444

From left, Char Her of Cha Ver Vang Farm, Johan Smit of Hidden Star Orchards, and Bill Vang of Nou Vang Farms display their produce at the farmers market.

— Photos from Marin Agricultural Institute

Over time, this will become less sustainable as the demand for food increases and the energy equation becomes increasingly imbalanced.

New distribution models must be created to replace old models that rely heavily on the movement of food over long distances creating a dependence on high fossil fuel inputs.

Objectives

1. Promote stewardship of natural resources by directly supporting small, local, and sustainable family farms
2. Promote and improve the economic viability for our member producers
3. Support a direct connection between customer and farmer, which increases the investment on both sides to support quality products and sustainable practices
4. Encourage product/crop diversification by increasing direct market opportunities for farmers to provide new products to educated customers
5. Improve our understanding of the economic, social, and environmental implications of adopting sustainable practices by demonstrating the economic and environmental benefit of purchasing from local farms

Actions

Our model, Farm to Fork, delivers locally and sustainably produced products and provides education to local institutions, while creating direct market opportunities between local and sustainable food producers and neighboring institutions. To accomplish this, we have worked on the following:

Research distribution systems

Marin Farmers Market conducted research on distributors Veritable Vegetable,

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Marin Produce, and North Bay Produce, and did a general survey of other area distributors including US Foods and Sysco.

<u>Develop easy-to-use ordering and delivery systems</u>

Marin Farmers Market developed a simple system using Excel, Word and Quick-Books to process product availability and delivery. A consultant team then helped develop a database order processing system that is more integrated, automated, streamlined, and user-friendly.

<u>Train producers</u>

Participating producers received individual mini-trainings on how to participate and improve packaging and labeling to match program quality and standards.

<u>Conduct educational outreach to producers and customers</u>

Marin Farmers Market developed and used hand-outs, brochures, fliers, emails, presentations, and marketing tools to reach out to and provide information for producers and customers.

Results

Over two years, Farm to Fork's activities resulted in farm fresh products being purchased directly from farmers markets by local hospitals, schools, and restaurants. The program has simultane-

ously created a new opportunity for small, sustainable farmers to add boxes of product to their farmers market-bound truck, which then loads onto a single truck delivering directly to local businesses and institutional customers.

In 2007, during the initial startup and development phase of Farm to Fork, about $100,000 of locally grown and produced foods were purchased by and delivered one day a week to local institutions.

In 2008, revenues doubled to about $200,000 and the program instituted a small markup to help recover program costs.

During development, the program remained small and manageable, growing in small

increments. Despite the declining economy, sales have grown steadily and the program maintains a positive and growing contribution to both customers and farmers.

Potential Benefits

This program is poised to expand and increase its focus on education and training of producers, share its findings with other communities, and help create this new paradigm, guided by practical experience and effective systems.

Farm to Fork brings additional income – about $4,500 per producer a year for 70 producers – during the time they participate. Local customers are learning more about local food production, which generate long-term loyalties to purchasing from these local producers.

August 2008 surveys gauged program satisfaction. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being excellent:

Farmer Response:

- Benefit to business = 3.2
- Quality of program = 3.7

Customer response

- Quality of the product = 4.3
- Quality of the services = 4.9