
# Specialty Crop Block Grant

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**USDA AMS**
**Project Number**
**12-25-B-0799**

# Final Performance Report

DECEMBER 30

# 2011

PROJECT TITLE
**MONTANA LOCALLY GROWN PROJECT**

PROJECT SUMMARY
Farmers markets are traditionally the first outlet through which Montana specialty crop producers (SCPs) market their products. As more consumers become aware of Montana farmers markets and attend them, the more SCP are purchased. Reaching consumers is a difficult issue, however, so we determined that a need for increased signage and other materials directing the public to the markets would be a way to address that need. Additionally, Montana farmers markets are organized mostly by volunteers with little experience in developing and hosting markets. A farmers market association appeared to be a tool through which we could address the needs of developing more markets and enhancing the effectiveness of the current markets.

PROJECT APPROACH
Below is a summary of the activities performed:

- Montana farmers market marketing materials:
    - Printed and distributed cooperative marketing posters (820) for Montana farmers markets to use to market to buyers and specialty crop growers.
    - Printed and distributed Montana farmers market directories (700) to Visitor Information Centers in Montana to encourage tourists to buy Montana-grown produce from farmers markets.
- Montana Farm to Table Connection 2010
    - Hosted grower education during which 10 Montana chefs and distributors shared local products success stories and preferred purchasing methods.
    - Hosted trade event during which 10 Montana chefs and distributors negotiated contracts with 31 growers.
- Montana Farmers Market Association development meetings
    - Through our hired contractors, AERO and NCAT, hosted meetings for 12 Montana farmers market vendors and managers to formulate a Montana farmers market association that would provide grower-seller insurance, cooperative marketing, grower education, etc.
- Montana Direct Marketing Grower meetings
    - Through our hired contractors, AERO and NCAT, hosted grower trainings for 20 growers to teach best practices for direct marketing and to liaise with local county sanitarians.

- Montana Direct Marketing Manual
    - Through our hired contractor, AERO, developed a Direct Marketing manual for Montana produce, egg, and meat producers. The objective of this manual was to provide guidance on state regulations and direct marketing best practices. This manual is not yet published because there are some regulations that don't follow state laws; therefore our Department attorney is working to correct the problems.
- Montana farmers market startup and EBT expansion grants: awarded 6 grants for Montana farmers markets to start a new market, start or expand accepting EBT. The recipients were:
    - Whitefish Downtown Farmers Market Startup Grant
    - Carousel Sunday Market & Festival Startup Grant
    - Columbia Falls Farmers Market Startup Grant
    - Bozeman Winter Market Startup Grant
    - Jocko Valley Farmers Market Startup Grant
    - Polson Farmers Market Startup Grant

GOALS AND OUTCOMES ACHIEVED

- According to our survey data, sales at farmers markets in 2010 were approximately $1.9 million, a 7% increase in reported sales over 2009.
- Reported vendor numbers also increased 12% over 2009.
- The number of reported farmers markets increased from 47 to 52, a 13% increase over 2009.
- The Montana Farmers Market Association did not come to fruition. After several attempts to secure meetings to formalize the structure of the organization, our contractors reported back the lack of interest in the formation of the association. However, we will continue to host the farmers market website.

BENEFICIARIES

The groups that benefited from this project are as follows:

- Montana specialty crop growers

- Low-income Montanans: More Farmers markets now accept EBT, allowing more low-income Montanans to purchase fresh produce from Montana growers.

- Montana Farmers Markets: received more than $22,000 worth of promotion statewide, encouraging more people to attend farmers markets to purchase Montana-grown products.

LESSONS LEARNED

- We also found that providing generic signage was not the markets' preference and not always useful.

- We found that, contrary to the information provided in surveys, Montana farmers markets are not interested in or capable of formal organization. Market managers change year to year, and many of the markets don't have consistent contact information. Furthermore, since market managers are mostly volunteers, and usually farmers themselves, they don't have the time or the wherewithal to help organize an association. We had a hard time even getting managers to attend formation meetings.

- Also, since Montana is a large state with daunting distances between "centralized" meeting sites, it was difficult to get managers and vendors to attend any sort of training consistently.

- In the future, if trainings are to be held, I would look into webinars available on-demand, rather than live trainings for which the participant must travel long distances.

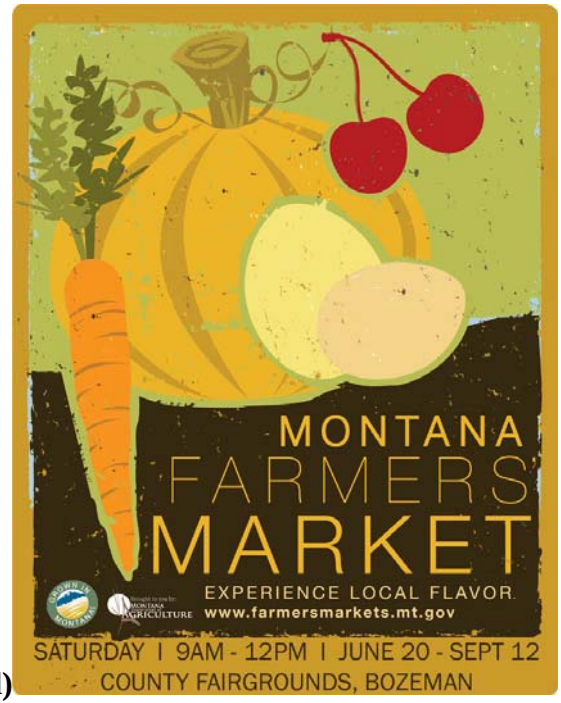
- After we began the direct marketing manual, we found that writing a comprehensive manual for Montana was impossible. This was due to the fact that many of the regulations were assumptions, not necessarily following state or federal laws. Also, in many cases, laws were too confusing or contradictory for even our lawyer to understand, or rules between different departments were contradictory. A helpful outcome from this failure is that our Department is coordinating an effort between 2 other agencies to re-write the rules and make the regulations make sense to Montana specialty crop growers (without the need to hire a lawyer to explain everything to them).

BUDGET

Because of cost-saving measures, $1,013.00 of this grant is left unspent.

| Date | Expense | Amount | Running Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| | *Balance* | | *$ 17,566.00* |
| 6/1/2009 | Montana farmers market posters | $ 663.39 | $ 16,902.61 |
| 2/1/2010 | Montana Farm to Table Connection 2010 expenses | $ 33.98 | $ 16,868.63 |
| 4/1/2010 | AERO (contractor) expenses: Montana farmers market association development | $ 400.00 | $ 16,468.63 |
| 5/1/2010 | AERO (contractor) expenses: Montana farmers market association development | $ 499.00 | $ 15,969.63 |
| 5/1/2010 | Montana farmers market directory printing costs | $1,179.16 | $ 14,790.47 |
| 9/1/2010 | Montana Farm to Table Connection 2010 buyer recruitment printing | $ 437.23 | $ 14,353.24 |
| 9/1/2010 | Montana Farm to Table Connection 2010 producer recruitment printing | $ 512.29 | $ 13,840.95 |
| 9/1/2010 | AERO (contractor) expenses: Montana Direct Marketing Manual development | $1,200.00 | $ 12,640.95 |
| 11/1/2010 | Montana Farm to Table Connection 2010 conference expenses | $2,864.95 | $ 9,776.00 |
| 12/1/2010 | Montana Direct Marketing Manual development (Nov Missoula & Bozeman grower meetings) | $2,276.00 | $ 7,500.00 |
| 12/1/2011 | Whitefish Downtown Farmers Market Startup Grant | $ 500.00 | $ 7,000.00 |
| 12/1/2011 | Carousel Sunday Market & Festival Startup Grant | $ 799.00 | $ 6,201.00 |
| 12/1/2011 | Columbia Falls Farmers Market Startup Grant | $ 800.00 | $ 5,401.00 |
| 12/1/2011 | Bozeman Winter Market Startup Grant | $1,388.00 | $ 4,013.00 |
| 12/1/2011 | Jocko Valley Farmers Market Startup Grant | $1,500.00 | $ 2,513.00 |
| 12/1/2011 | Polson Farmers Market Startup Grant | $1,500.00 | $ 1,013.00 |

**Montana Farmers Market Posters – example (820 distributed)**



**Enhancement of the Capability of Disease Testing and Disease-free Seed Source Production**

PROJECT SUMMARY

This project had two main objectives. The first objective was to optimize Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) protocols for the detection of Potato Virus A, Potato Virus Y and Potato Virus X in potato samples coming into the potato lab. Our lab has traditionally used E Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay (ELISA) for detection of these viruses due to the efficiency and low cost of the technique. PCR is a higher cost technique, but published reports have shown that it is on average 100X more sensitive that ELISA. This could be very valuable in evaluating tissue culture mother stock, and very early generation potatoes. The second objective of this project is to evaluate different growing systems for mini-tubers. Mini-tubers are produced in greenhouses and are used as nuclear generation potatoes. Farmers like using them because they can plant them mechanically in the field, and the plants have higher vigor that nuclear generation plants produced from tissue culture or micro-tubers.

Project Approach

During the winter of 2009, potato leaves and tuber sprouts were assayed by ELISA and compared to tuber core samples assayed by PCR for Potato Virus X and Y and A. The three tissue samples represented the same tuber. There were 447 individual tubers tested for a total of 2682 ELISA tests, and 1341 PCR tests. PCR of tuber core samples matched ELISA 93% of the time for PVX and 95% of the time for PVY. PVA was not detected in any samples for comparisons. The cost of PCR was determined to be around $6.00 per sample for 1 virus. The second virus would add about $3 more.

Tubers infected with PVY and PVA were obtained from the field in August, 2010. During the fall of 2010, core and sprout samples representing the same tuber were assayed by ELISA and PCR for PVY and PVA. There were 214 individual tubers tested for a total of 856 ELISA tests, and 856 PCR tests. Comparison with leaf tissue is in progress. PCR of tuber core samples matched ELISA 86.4% of the time for PVY and 98.6% of the time for PVA. PCR of sprout samples matched ELISA 94.4% of the time for PVY and 94.6% of the time for PVA.

Minituber production has always consisted of growing tissue culture plants in large metal bins which uses a great deal of potting soil which is costly and also difficult and time consuming to dispose of. In our experiment we compared four different growth medium treatments for their ability to produce Potato minitubers from tissue culture plants. Treatments consisted of the standard large bins (9'x 2' x 8''), which have been used in the past, filled with commercial potting soil mix (sunshine mix); 2.5 cu' bags of sunshine mix into which the plants were planted directly; 14"x20"x4" flats filled with sunshine mix; and 3 gallon plastic grow bags filled with coconut fiber. Each treatment filled a 2'x8'space and equal amounts of tissue culture plants were planted/ square foot. Four replicas of each treatment were placed randomly within the greenhouse. Plants were grown for approximately 4 months. Tuber size, numbers of tubers and cost /treatment were all considered in our final evaluation. The large bins continued to produce the largest number of tubers (avg/235/bin) and also the largest sized tubers followed by the 2.5 cubic foot bags (203/bin). The other two treatments, while lower in tuber number {195/sq. flat &175/coconut fiber bag} were the least costly for materials. For all treatments the percentage of larger tubers compared with the smaller size was the same. The ease of preparation and harvest of the 2.5 cubic foot bags would result in a large labor savings which over time could reduce these costs even further. The low cost of materials for the square flats would offset the difference in the number of tubers. Based on this experiment it would be reasonable to pursue the 2.5 cubic foot bag option or the square flats as a viable method of minituber production to replace the large bin method previously used. While the results from the coconut fiber bags were the least

effective a better fertilization program for the coconut fiber bags should be tried before ruling out this method.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved

The development of these protocols for comparing the sensitivity of ELISA and PCR have enabled us to perform PCR tests on samples submitted to the lab that require a lower threshold for detection. During the winter of 2010, we had request s for virus tests on tubers being sent to Canada. We did not have enough time to perform sprout tests, but had confidence in the data from the tuber core samples (which have a lower titer of virus), that we could provide a valid virus test which would allow the grower to ship the potatoes to Canada without delay.

We have also adopted multiplex PCR methods which allow us to test for multiple viruses in one sample, and also to identify specific strains of PVY. This has been very helpful for evaluation of samples that have unique symptoms which aren't consistent with commonly observed mosaic viruses.

Through this project, we demonstrated the relative effectiveness of different methods of growing mini-tubers in the greenhouse. We showed that a traditional bin type growing method produced the largest number of tubers with the largest size, but also used significantly more potting soil and proved to be more difficult to harvest. Growing the potatoes directly in the potting soil bags or smaller flats used significantly less potting soil and also proved to be much easier to harvest.

Beneficiaries

We had a new mini-tuber grower start up a 5,000 sq. ft. greenhouse operation using the method where the plantlets were planted directly into potting soil bags. He had a successful season, and is planning on growing mini-tubers using this method again in 2011. Another established mini-tuber grower is planning on testing the bag method in comparison to their traditional in ground bed system.

Lessons Learned

Through work on both objectives of this project, we paid close attention to labor needs and supply costs for the different techniques tested. We were able to identify distinct differences in costs and benefits of the individual techniques, the value to the potato lab, and the value to the growers. Even if a technique is superior, such as the bin method for microtuber production, if the cost of production is proportionally higher than the extra gain in yield, another method may prove to be more economical.

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**Actual Spending**

| | Budget | Spent |
|---|---|---|
| Centrifuge | $12,000 | $14,621 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Analytical Balances | $2,400 | - |
| ph meter | $1,000 | - |
| Water Purification | $5,000 | $7,440 |
| molecular reagents | $2,000 | $2,244 |
| greenhouse | $1,400 | $791 |
| greenhouse supplies | $2,000 | $1,855 |
| hydroponic supplies | $1,000 | |
| growth chamber | $1,200 | $600 |
| tissue culture | $2,000 | $2,449 |
| Total | $30,000 | $30,000 |

Project Title

**Organic**
The organic project supported by this Specialty Crop Block Grant included three separate initiatives:

1. Facilitation of international marketing;

2. Staff training to better understand and serve organic specialty crop growers; and

3. Provision of organic certification for specialty crop growers.

Project Summary
The overall purpose of the department's specialty crop projects was to enhance the value and diversity of Montana agriculture by increasing the production and marketability of specialty crops in Montana. The organic projects served these same purposes.

Organic certification provides enhanced marketing opportunities to specialty crop growers. Unfortunately, some of the highest value markets for organic specialty crops require additional international certifications. SCBG funds were used to support the department's accreditation under the International Standards Organization (ISO) Guide 65 program. This accreditation, in turn, allows the department to offer certification to international organic standards. International certification provides additional high-value marketing opportunities to specialty crop growers.

To facilitate international marketing of organic crops, the department entered into a cooperative agreement with the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA). Under this agreement, producers certified by the department may apply for additional certification under WSDA's International Organic Program (IOP), which provides verification of compliance with European Union (EU) regulations pertaining to organic agricultural products. The department conducts the annual inspection for both certifications, eliminating the need for a separate inspection by the WSDA. This agreement provides Montana specialty crop growers with access to value-added international markets in the EU, without the department bearing the full cost of EU recognition or passing those substantial costs onto the growers. SCBG funds were used to fund the cost of IOP certification for Montana specialty crop growers.

In order to provide organic certification (service) to specialty crop growers, the department needed staff adequately trained to understand the unique production systems and certification requirements of organic specialty crop producers. Three staff, involved in inspection and review of organic certifications, were sent to organic certification training in Portland, Oregon. This training included National Organic Program (NOP) sessions presented by the USDA; professional development sessions presented by the Accredited Certifiers Association; and International Organic Program training provide by the Washington State Department of Agriculture.

The department has certified, or continued certification of, 44 specialty crop growers in CY 2011. Another 18 certifications are in-process, as of 12/14/2011. To keep up with this demand for certification service, the department has utilized qualified independent contractors to review applications and inspection reports and provide certification recommendations. Funds from the SCBG were used to pay these certification contractors for work related to organic certification of specialty crop growers.

Organic specialty crop growers fall largely into two categories. One category are small scale fruit and vegetable producers who market their products locally through farmer's markets, direct sales and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) arrangements. The other are larger-scale grain growers who grow pulse crops as a means of diversifying their crop rotations, providing fertility and enhancing weed, pest and disease management. Montana needs more growers in each category.

There is a significant un-met demand for locally-grown organic food. Existing organic fruit and vegetable growers report that they "turn customers away," due to inadequate production. Farmers markets are in place in most of Montana's towns and see great interest from consumers. Even given the economic recession, many consumers see buying locally-grown organic foods, shopping at farmers markets and preparing (more) food at home as methods to save money and eat healthier- having their vegetables and eating them too!

Montana has long been a leader in organic grain production. Our state's organic producers consistently seed and harvest more acres of organic wheat than any other. Unfortunately, the long term sustainability of many farms is imperiled by inadequate crop diversity. Traditionally, Montana farmers have grown wheat in alternate years with fallow in order to preserve soil moisture. In years with more moisture, they grow more wheat; in drier years more land is fallowed. Organic growers have too often used this same farming practice. Statistics published by the USDA (Economic Research Service) consistently indicate that Montana has more than four acres of organic wheat for every acre of all other crops combined. One may wonder how all of that wheat qualifies for certification. Perhaps more importantly, wheat monoculture systems are definitely not sustainable under organic management. More crop diversity is necessary to maintain soil fertility and organic matter, manage weeds, pests and disease, and to prevent soil erosion. Pulse crops, such as dry peas, lentils and vetches are among the best alternative crops to add needed diversity to organic rotations. These specialty crops may be harvested for seed, used as forage, or incorporated into the soil as "green manure." The latter practice is especially beneficial to improving soil fertility and organic matter, while still preserving soil moisture. If Montana is to continue to be a leader in organic crop production, it will have to increase the acreage devoted to specialty (pulse) crops.

Each of the initiatives supported by this SCBG built on previously-funded projects. By utilizing this SCBG, we were able to:

- Enhance the knowledge and expertise of existing certification program staff to better understand organic specialty crop production and better serve organic specialty crop growers;
- Maintain ISO Guide 65 accreditation, so as to provide additional, international, certifications for organic specialty crop growers;
- Fund the cooperative agreement with the WSDA, which provides IOP certification to organic specialty crop growers;
- Utilize contractors with demonstrated expertise in inspection and review of organic specialty crop operations improves the quality and timeliness of certification services.

<u>Project Approach</u>

1. Maintaining ISO Guide 65 accreditation and funding IOP certification through the WSDA to facilitate international (organic) certification of specialty crop growers.

The first initiative of the organic project was to facilitate marketing of specialty crops. This was to be done by providing organic certification to specialty crop growers and by offering additional, international certifications. Providing certification to additional organic standards provides our growers with access to high-value international markets for organic crops and products. In order to provide these certifications, the department has to maintain accreditation under the International Standards Organization (ISO) Guide 65 program. This accreditation requires annual audits. SCBG funds were used to fund the costs of maintaining the ISO accreditation.

While ISO accreditation is necessary to offer certification to international standards, it is no longer sufficient. In 2008, new regulations in the European Union (EU) required that certifying agents be directly accredited by the EU commission. The department was able to negotiate a cooperative agreement with the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) to provide our organic growers with international certifications, under the WSDA's International Organic Program (IOP). Under this agreement, the department acts as an inspection body for the WSDA. We conduct the on-site inspections, provide reports to the WSDA and they issue the IOP certifications. SCBG funds were used to fund the direct costs of IOP certification for Montana specialty crop growers.

2. Training program staff to better understand and serve specialty crop growers.

Organic certification is a marketing tool, which allows growers to sell, label and represent their crops as "organic." Often there are substantial premiums for organic crops, relative to prices paid for non-organic version of the same commodity. Certification to additional standards may "open the door" to even greater value-added international markets.

Organic is the fastest growing segment of Montana agriculture. As a result, the demand for certification services is also rapidly growing. Keeping up with this demand for service is a challenge. In order to meet the need for additional certification services, particularly for operations seeking certification to international standards, the department needed staff trained to provide IOP inspections and better training (for staff) on certification of specialty crop production.

In February 2011, the department, using SCBG funds, sent three staff to Portland, Oregon for an intensive series of organic certification training sessions. The trainings included organic certifier training provided by the USDA; profession development training (for certification staff) provided by the National Association of State Organic Programs and the Accredited Certifiers Association; and specialized training in IOP inspections provided by the WSDA. These trainings enhanced the skills and qualifications of program staff and resulted in improved service to organic specialty crop growers.

3. Providing organic certifications to specialty crop growers.

The department certified, or continued certification of, 70 specialty crop growers in CY 2010. These certifications included six new or first-time applicants, indicating the growth in demand for organic certification from specialty crop growers. To keep up with this demand for certification service, the department has utilized qualified independent contractors to review applications and inspection reports and provide certification recommendations.

In addition to program staff, six well-qualified and experienced contractors are utilized to review applications, organic system plans and inspection reports and to recommend certification decisions. The use of these contractors has enabled the department to improve the quality and timeliness of service and meet the continued growth in demand for certification services without having to hire (or train) additional permanent staff. SCBG funds were used to fund the direct costs contracted certification services for specialty crop growers.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved

As described above, the activities completed were:

1. Facilitation of international marketing;

2. Staff training to better understand and serve organic specialty crop growers; and

3. Provision of organic certification for specialty crop growers.

In 2007, the department certified 88 organic crop producers, including 48 growers of specialty crops. By the end of 2010, we had certified 101 crop producers and 70 specialty crop growers. This represents a 15% increase in the number of organic crop producers and a 46% increase in specialty crop growers. The percentage of organic growers producing specialty crops increased from 54% to 69%. We also certify 44 (food) handling operations, including 32 (72%) that process and/or purchase specialty crops. These organic food handlers provide a growing market for grower-producers of specialty crops. We continue to see tremendous opportunity for specialty crop growers in the organic market and significant opportunities for organic growers to add specialty crops to their operations.

The number one goal of this project was to increase the number of organic specialty crop growers in Montana. We projected a 10% annual growth and a total of 64 certified growers by the end of 2010. As indicated, we actually certified 70 specialty crop growers in 2010, 15% annual growth.

The second goal was to increase the number and value of markets for specialty crop growers. Our success in this area was (is) much more difficult to quantify. As previously articulated, organic specialty crop growers in Montana are of two primary types- intensive producers of fruit and vegetable crops for local markets and extensive producers of pulse crops. Each group presents unique challenges in quantifying their market value.

For the intensive producers, the markets are direct sales, farmers markets and CSA's. While these growers use organic certification as a marketing tool, they do not receive a measurable premium for organic crops, per se. We have interviewed several of the growers and found that they feel certification may increase the number of customers who seek out their products, more so than the prices they charge. There is no practical means of measuring the added value of certification for these growers.

For the extensive growers, pulse (specialty) crops are grown for three distinct purposes, in this order of importance and volume: as green manures, as seed for subsequent use on the farm or by neighboring producers, and lastly as food or feed crops. Each year far more organic peas, lentils and vetches are incorporated into the soil than are actually harvested. While there is a definite value of

the green manure crops, it can only be quantified indirectly. The value is in the enhanced production (yield) and value of subsequent crops. Similarly, crops grown for seed are not reported as income and are thus difficult to value. Even crops "sold" to others as seed are often provide in barter or other non-cash transactions, which do not show up on the sales report. The value of organic specialty crops that are indicated on sales reports is a miniscule fraction of the true value of the crops.

Overall, we believe that the project has been successful. That success is most readily measured by the 46% increase in the number of specialty crop growers. The increase in growers also may be assumed to have increased the production acreage of specialty crops. Providing certification and international certification options to specialty crop growers has undoubtedly increased the number and value of markets for specialty crops, though this outcome is difficult to quantify.

Beneficiaries

A number of groups have benefited from this project. Among them are the (existing) organic growers, who have access to additional international markets for their products. Also, the new certified organic growers who now have value-added markets for their crops, due to certification. Both groups benefited from the improved forms, which will improve the efficiency of the certification process. Finally, our program staff and those growers that we serve have benefitted significantly from the training and increased expertise of our staff.

Lessons Learned

Lessons learned from this project include the impressive number (70) and percentage (69%) of certified organic crop producers who grow specialty crops. Another interesting observation concerns the prevalence of pulse crops, especially dry peas that are grown as green manure by organic producers. It was surprising how few of the pulse (specialty) crop growers harvest their peas and that even fewer sell peas as a cash crop.

Another interesting observation was that the fruit and vegetable growers do not report a direct premium from the organic market. While most growers felt that they had more customers due to being organically certified, they were unable to assign a direct economic advantage to the certification.

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Project Title
**Mission Mountain Cooperative Development Center**

Project Summary
The Mission Mountain Cooperative Development Center provides technical assistance to specialty crop producers to enhance their competitiveness in local, national, and world markets. There was an emphasis and outreach to specialty crop producers in targeting and reaching new emerging markets. The center provided assistance to the Western Montana Growers Cooperative, a thirty member cooperative of specialty crop producers, and to organic seed producers. The Montana Farm to College Program was established to bring locally grown specialty crops into the college cafeterias in order to promote health and the idea of buy fresh, buy local. Our Farm to Institution Program worked with the Western Montana Growers Cooperative and the University of Montana in the development value added specialty crop products. During this project the following activities were performed to project objectives.

1) Provide assistance in developing cooperative structures that will assist specialty crop producers in targeting and reaching new emerging organic seed markets

Project Approach
In collaboration with the Organic Seed Alliance and the Northwest Cooperative Development Center a survey was developed and sent to 170 organic seed producers and organic specialty crop producers throughout Montana. The survey (25% returned) results indicated there was an interest amongst Montana producers to learn about organic seed production, on-farm seed selective breeding, and how they could collaborative work together to enter new markets. A presentation was given at the annual meeting of the Montana Organic Association in collaboration with the Organic Seed Alliance. In the presentation the results of the survey were shared and models of organic seed cooperatives were presented. Several specialty crop seed producers indicated they would like to explore cooperative seed marketing.

The Western Montana Growers were assisted and facilitated in a strategic planning session and the completion of a two year strategic plan. They were assisted with outreach and communication to expand their markets through the development of a cooperative newsletter and promotional materials that was distributed throughout western Montana and attending the Montana Farm to Table Connection- hosted by the Montana Department of Agriculture. At the Farm to Table Connection the cooperative met with several potential buyers and also participated in a round table discussion on distribution issues in Montana and how they might be solved collaboratively. The Western Montana Growers Cooperative was promoted at the Salish Kootenai College Food and Fitness Food Fair.

Goals and Outcomes:
The cooperative has increased their retail box program from 50 subscribers to 100 subscribers. They have added five new producer members to the cooperative.
The center and the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center were notified by WMGC of several specialty crops produced by WMGC members that were in surplus and had potential value added processing. Three crops; winter squash, pumpkins, and tomatoes were targeted and several test batches of value added products were conducted. Five products have been developed; cooked roasted pumpkin puree, roasted tomato sauce- two blends, blanched winter squash cubes and frozen pitted cherries. The samples were sent to University of Montana, Salish Kootenai College, and several local schools. The project is collaborating with the grower cooperative to supply the University

of Montana Dining Services Fall Festival- Celebrating Montana Food Cycle with processed specialty crops for a 2300 person meal.

To date 1000 lbs. of pumpkin and squash, 2000 lbs. of tomatoes, and 3,000 lbs. of cherries have been processed. The University of Montana has approved the pumpkin puree, winter squash cubes and frozen cherries as menu ingredients and has placed several orders of the product. Several local schools have expressed interest in the products and one has placed their first 40# order of the squash product. Our staff has been invited to attend the Office of Public Instruction Cooperative Purchasing Forum. The forum will introduce our product line to the Office Public Instruction bid process and if approved the products will be offered to all Montana School Districts. This is a huge opportunity for specialty crop producers in getting their produce to local schools.

Lessons Learned

The Buy Fresh Buy Local Campaign was not launched by Alternative Energy Resource Organization and the Montana Department of Agriculture therefore this objective did not have any activity conducted.

The center will be actively working with the Western Montana Growers Cooperative and the Montana Department of Agriculture in a statewide distribution working group who will be mapping existing and potential distribution routes in Montana. The focus of the group is to determine distribution opportunities for locally-produced specialty crops and how through communication software and networking a distribution system for local food production can be developed.

Contact

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**Total Funds Expended**

| Budget Line Item | Budgeted Expenditures (Dec 1, 2008– Dec. 31, 2010) | Cumulative Expenditures | Balance (Budget less Cumulative Expenditures) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Salary & Wages | 15,350.00 | 15087.37 | 262.63 |
| Contractual | 7000.00 | 7344.44 | -344.44 |
| Travel & Training | 1,500.00 | 1,545.17 | -45.17 |
| Office & Production Supplies | 1,000.00 | 855.94 | 144.06 |
| Communications | 150.00 | 117.08 | 32.92 |
| Other- workshop | | 50.00 | -50.00 |
| **TOTAL** | 25,000.00 | 25,000.00 | 0 |