

New EBT Project, Growing Farmers, market Access and Professional Development at the Greene-Sumter Farmers Market, Alabama

Alabama State Association of Cooperatives of Epes, Alabama received \$70,266 to recruit new farmers and vendors for the Green-Sumter Farmers Market, train new farmers/vendors in the use of a hoop houses and drip-irrigation to expand production, and provide consumer education and training to the market manager.

[Final Report FY09](#)

Final Performance Report

Date: February 24, 2012

Recipient Name: Alabama State Association of Cooperatives

Title of Project: Greene/Sumter County Farmers Market Cooperative

Grant Number: 12-25-G-0906

Location (City/State): Epes, Alabama

Project Summary:

The Greene/Sumter County Farmers Market Cooperative which is located in Eutaw, Alabama (Greene County), lies in the middle of a rich belt of prime, flat farmland, yet a limited amount of the local harvest reaches the local population. Instead, people travel to the two supermarkets in the county to buy food that often has traveled across the country or farther. Poverty is twice as common as it is in the state of Alabama, especially among the non-white population. Farmers struggle to make ends meet, and many take off-farm jobs. Most vendors at the Market are authorized to accept Farmers Market Nutrition Program coupons from WIC beneficiaries and seniors, but none are able to accept payment under the Supplemental Nutrition Program (SNAP). Because Greene County has one of the highest poverty rates in the United States at 34.3%, a large portion of the population is unable to shop at the Market.

Organized in 2005 by the Greene/Sumter County Farmers Market Cooperative, a group of farmers looking for a way to efficiently market their produce, during the Market's peak years, grew to include 35-40 members, of which an average of 10-12 sold at the Market on a given market day. The Market is open every Saturday morning from May to October and attracts customers primarily from Greene County (Eutaw) and to a lesser extent adjoining Sumter, Hale and Pickens counties. The Market received a grant from the State of Alabama to erect a pavilion at the site to house vendor stalls. This pavilion provides a relatively comfortable and professional environment for both vendors and customers. The Cooperative added a walk-in cooler, used to store produce picked during the week until Market day.

According to the 2000 Census of Population, Greene County, Alabama, is a rural county with just under 10,000 people, of whom 80.8% are black and 34.3% have incomes under the federal poverty line. Neighboring Sumter County has a similar demographic picture. In recent years, because farmers did not have irrigation, drought ruined many crops planted with the Market in mind. Therefore, about two-thirds on average do not come on Market day. In addition, the vendors have been limited by climate to growing only to the natural climatic schedule. The members did not have season extension equipment (hoophouse or greenhouse) enabling them to plant and harvest early or plant and grow late. Because of these limitations, the Market was at a disadvantage competing with supermarkets at the beginning and end of the normal growing season.

Project Approach:

The Market is governed by a committed Board of Directors that meets monthly and is composed of eleven members, of whom six are farmers and five are representatives of state agencies, the USDA and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives. This group of members works diligently to ensure that farmer-members of the Cooperative Market, receive information and resource that will improve their farm viability.

In 2009, the Alabama State Association of Cooperatives assisted the Greene/Sumter County Farmers Market Cooperative in securing a grant through the Farmers Market Promotion Program to develop the market into a more viable and sustainable entity by growing new farmer/vendors, providing consumer-based education, and professional development for the Market Manager. Furthermore, through this grant, the cooperative market purchased and installed a hoophouse (for season extension) that is owned and operated jointly by Cooperative members and drip irrigation systems (for drought protection) which were installed on five vendor farms to improve production.

The Market Manager and board members increased the number of farmer-members and continued to reach out to the community through promotion and advertising in the media, events and attractions during Market sessions, and are currently developing a website, to further advertise the market's members and activities.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved:

Below is the list of goals and outcomes achieved in the project:

- ✓ Assisted 5 farmers in being qualified to obtain drip irrigation systems;
- ✓ Installed 5 drip irrigation systems;
- ✓ Erected the hoophouse that will extend (and demonstrate) the growing season;
- ✓ Recruited 3 new members of the Farmers' Market Cooperative membership;
- ✓ Surveyed over 70 farmers to develop a baseline data for recruitment and technical assistance;
- ✓ Developed fliers to publicize the Market's opening dates. Advertisement was also done through the local newspaper and over the radio station
- ✓ Farmers' Market members attended a two-day training event on hoop house production hosted by the Alabama State Association of Cooperatives
- ✓ Secured an Americorps VISTA member to assist the Market Manger;
- ✓ Attended a series of workshops on hoophouse development, solar irrigation systems, and other farmers' conferences.

Beneficiaries:

- Most farmers that received the drip irrigation systems were able to increase their production of vegetables, even though during more favorable production years, farmers reported doubled yields when drip irrigation systems with plastic mulch was used.
- The Greene/Sumter County Farmers' Market Cooperative attracts customers primarily from Greene County (Eutaw) and to a lesser extent adjoining Sumter, Hale and Pickens counties. This year, Senior citizens receiving the Farmers Market Nutrition Program coupons had access to fresh, locally grown vegetables.
- During this year's growing and marketing season, we anticipate that vegetable productivity in the hoophouse will extend vegetable production well past the conventional growing season.

Lessons Learned:

1. To meet peak markets, plant early, and take advantage of the favorable planting dates. When planting with drip irrigation systems, the soil needs to be moderately dry, and well ploughed up, allowing the installation equipment to work with ease. Also, depending on the drip irrigation and plastic mulch equipment used, a tractor needs to at least have 70 HP. Installation of drip

irrigation systems also needs to be in a well drained area, and not too flat, or on a hill where the water will just run off. It is important to get a soil test, and to plant according to the soil type.

The weather pattern in 2011 made it extremely challenging for a lot of farmers to successfully grow and harvest their vegetable products. During the late winter/early spring, we experienced a heavy raining period that delayed a lot of farmers from planting their crops. When the late spring/early summer came, we experienced a very hot, dry period, and a lot of the crops were basically scorched by the sun.

Although these weather patterns affected a significant number of farmers, there were a few farmers, however, that took advantage of the very short 'windows of opportunity' in the early spring, and did grow and harvest their vegetable production. Some of the farmers stated that during favorable weather patterns, they are able to double their productivity, when vegetables are grown on plastic mulch, drip irrigation systems.

The first farmer stated that this was a very difficult year because of the weather. Due to the excessive heat, the landowner who planted watermelons on one acre of plastic only had gross earnings of under \$2,000. In the past, this same producer was able to double his productivity and profit for watermelons grown on 1 acre of plastic ranging from approximately \$2,500 to \$5,000.

The second farmer stated that the drip irrigation system with the plastic mulch enabled him to have a better yield this year on his farm.

2. Develop a sound record keeping systems of: the number of vendors/customers that participate in the farmers market; the demographics of the consumers; productivity and profitability of farmers that have drip irrigation systems, etc. Nurture your customer base, and be prepared for return visits. Committed customers can easily get discouraged if you do not make it to the market according to the timetable advertised.

3. Ensure as much coordination, collaboration and networking among all the stakeholders of the project. Successful implementation of programs/projects requires a strong commitment from a key group of people (ex. Board or Advisory committee) and grass roots organizations that have a strong desire to enhance the welfare of poor communities.

4. The resources that FMPP provided enabled some farmers with limited financial resources to implement drip irrigation systems with plastic mulch. Due to the cost of the equipment and supplies, this may have proven to be very difficult to implement. Consequently, limited resource farmers might continue to be left-behind in accessing such technical resources.

Additional Information:

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