Using On-Farm and In-Market Mentoring of New Growers, Supply Chain Management, Retail Theater, Holistic Business Planning, Regional Certification, and Market Banks with New EBT Programs to Create and Expand Farmers Markets in Arkansas

Delta Land & Community of Almyra, Arkansas received $76,420 to improve sales at two existing certified locally-grown farmers markets, and establish two new farmers markets in Arkansas through a series of on-farm and in-market training programs for market managers, new farmers and vendors.

Final Report FY09

Final Performance Report

Date: November 11, 2011

Recipient Name: Delta Land & Community

Title of Project: Using On-farm and In-Market Mentoring of New Growers, Supply Chain Management, Retail Theater, Holistic Business Planning and Regional Certification to Create and Expand Farmers Markets in Arkansas

Grant Number: 12-25-G-0909

Location: Almyra, Arkansas

Project Summary Since developing our proposal for FMPP funds, our farmers markets have grown from under $300,000 in sales at two seasonal markets **to $1.556 million in sales at four seasonal markets and one year-round market.** Three other markets we helped start during this period are independently run, but had sales in 2010 which brought the total direct impact of our FMPP project to over $2.1 million. We have also more than doubled our number of farmer/vendors. In addition, we have helped organize the Arkansas Food Policy Council to pursue policy change to benefit all farmers markets and patrons of farmers markets in Arkansas. We have also established an annual conference in Little Rock in conjunction with several partners. We expect at least 2000 people to participate in trainings and participatory learning experiences this winter at that event. Funds from FMPP were crucial in our progress.

Project Approach We employed three main strategies to achieve our objectives of growing sales and numbers of growers: training market managers, attracting and training potential new growers, and increasing visibility through better logos, signage and internet presence.

We provided training and support for market managers in the three areas: supply chain management, retail theater, and holistic business planning. Each session was experiential learning in actual farmers market settings.

To grow our number of farmer/vendors, we began by developing and publicizing a Beginning Farmer website and holding planning and training of trainer meetings with the farmers and market managers who conducted the workshops. Then we conducted workshops on whole farm planning beginning with values clarification, holistic business planning to demystify financial tools such as cash flow, breakeven, sensitivity, income statements, and balance sheets. We held a Day at the market. Can you sell? Training session where participants learned how established farmer/vendors sell at traditional farmers markets and a CSA (Basket-a-Month). Another workshop was on include instruction in how to set up a webpage for an on-line market including pricing and inventory--including allocations between on-line and traditional markets.

We also held an Amish country study tour. The unique, efficient and effective system used by Amish farmers was explored by participants. Established

farmer/vendors Melvin Stutzman and Dennis Miller provided mentoring in establishing enterprises around greenhouse tomatoes, eggs, milk, baked goods, jellies and jams.

One very popular session was on Marketing to chefs. Participants interacted with Chefs who specialize in local foods. Twelve top chefs from central Arkansas explored the needs of chefs and the best ways for farmers and chefs to work together—including how farmers can best handle on-line ordering from chefs.

Get your hands in a vegetable bed. On-farm training in vegetable production by Jay Fulbright of Arkansas Natural Produce was also very well received. We explored the evolution of his marketing approach from farmers markets to restaurants, supermarkets, and on-line farmers markets.

Our final session pulled all of these trainings together with the Foodie Fest where This event incorporated all the major themes we have emphasized in our training supported by FMPP: the uniqueness of the *terrroir* of local foods, retail theater, and farm-to-chef collaboration The event featured 10 top chefs working with 20 farmers to create and sell their own unique creations using locally grown strawberries. This was the final event of our project. It was participatory learning at its best with both farmers and chefs learning from each other and educating customers about the best means of creating healthier living through using healthy local food products in central Arkansas.

We also developed a brand and logo which stresses the unique experience available at each market including the local, fresh nature of everything sold at the market. Using this brand and logo, signage was developed for restaurants, the internet, and on roadsides near the markets. Public communication was improved through email and Facebook communication through a database system created for each market. This communication was activated for each new product offered at each market and tailored to each of our markets. The on-line farmers market was expanded to serve all new locations. We also worked to improve communication to the media by working with the media to get them to cover our message as news. We developed key print pieces such as newsletters, brochures, flyers, and postcards.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved Our ultimate goal is increasing consumption of healthy local food by Arkansas consumers through farmers markets. The specific goal for this project is: quintuple total sales from the initial market by establishing new markets and a 70% increase in growers. As stated in our proposal, our objectives were:

Objective 1. We will increase by 70% the total number of farmer/vendors at four markets through a holistic, participatory, on-farm and in-market mentoring program.
Objective 2. Increasing annual sales from $300,000 in one market to $500,000 in each of two markets and $240,000 in annual sales at each of two new markets.
Objective 3. We will establish two new farmers markets in Conway and Searcy which presently have no farmers markets.

Here's what we have accomplished.

Objective 1: Though our beginning farmer program we were able to attract 32 new farmer/vendors. This more than doubles our number of farmers and passes our goal of a 70% increase. In addition, every single one of the new farmers we added in 2009 succeeded and came back in 2010.

Objective 2: Through our series of trainings (more appropriately referred to as participatory learning experiences) in *terroir* (uniqueness of local foods), retail selling, retail theater, marketing to chefs, supply management, and holistic business planning, both on-farm and in-market we have achieved 50% more than we projected. Our sales have quintupled since we began this project.

Objective 3: Instead of our projected two, we have established six new markets: Hot Springs Village II, Conway, Searcy, Mountain View, Fort Root VA Hospital and Pulaski Academy. The latter is a part of our farm to school effort. The market at the VA Hospital provides healthy food and a wholesome, healthy experience for patients and families of veterans needing care. We have also transformed one seasonal market into a year-round market with a deli and a catering service.

Details and Caveats. We wrote our proposal in April of 2009 and received funding in October of 2009. Our proposal was based on our situation after the 2008 season. At that time we had 25 farmer/vendors who participated in two farmers markets: Hot Springs Village and Argenta. Argenta is in a low-income food desert which is on the edge of a rapidly gentrifying urban renewal area. Hot Springs Village is a retirement community. Based on their approximately equal potential market size, we anticipated that both of these markets would grow at an equal pace.

Instead, the two markets took opposite paths. Hot Springs Village market split into two different groups of farmers with two different philosophies: one group wanted to sell everything they could and especially the lamb one farmer imports from western states. The second group is more purist. They want to sell what they grow and not let pin-hookers and resellers in their market. Needless to say, such different philosophies had a hard time coexisting.

Two competing markets developed in Hot Springs Village. The sell-anything group has, through adept promotion, grown rapidly. The purist group has grown more slowly. Sales data from neither group is included in our totals because neither has a full-time market manager who collects such data. We estimate their combined sales are nearly $400,000. If we include these results (since they did stem from our organizing effort), total sales of markets we have organized comes up to almost $2 million in the 2010 season.

Six new markets. Besides the new, pure Hot Springs Village market, we have established five other new markets. Two of those we predicted in our proposal: Conway and Searcy. Conway had an extremely successful first year in a very rapidly growing part of Arkansas with no other source for quality home-grown produce, meat and eggs. However, we have not included Conway in our sales results because one of the growers near Conway has decided to manage that market independently—though within our guidelines for local food only. The sales from that market were about $150,000 this year. Including sales from this market, whose founding we also organized, brings sales resulting from the efforts supported by the FMPP grant up to over $2.1 million.

Three others markets (Mountain View, Fort Root VA Hospital, Pulaski Academy) were established when local volunteers or city government saw a local need and asked us to help fill it. Mountain View has 11 farmer/vendors and operates independently, but

according to our locally certified guidelines. Their sales were $45,000 in their first year. This total is substantial for a small rural community where many people have gardens. The market benefits from tourist trade. Mountain View has plenty of potential to grow—especially if they begin to participate in our year-round, on-line farmers market.

Pulaski Academy's development underscored our need to become more involved in policy work. This market is in one of the fastest growing areas of Arkansas—west Little Rock. When we set up this market in the school parking lot for sales to parents as they picked up their children, we were approached by a pin-hooker who wanted to sell imported watermelons at our local-only market. We turned down his application. He complained to the city which shut down the market for alleged city code violations. After we recruited several local sustainable agriculture policy wonks to help with the problem, the city relented and allowed us to continue to grow the market. Sales did suffer since we were only open for 16 market days in the whole season, but we are very excited about the future of fresh, local, healthy food markets in the west Little Rock area.

Beneficiaries. One of our proudest accomplishments was establishing the market at Fort Root Veterans Hospital. Wounded veterans have many social, emotional, and physical needs which a farmers market can help provide. We didn't have a high volume of sales at this market, but we are confident we are providing a valuable service to veterans and their families. We feel the most important beneficiaries of our project were the customers who were able to obtain healthy, fresh food. We are also very pleased that an increasing number of African-Americans from the low-income food desert in which the Argenta Market is located. Part of this is probably due to the regular entertainment provided by African-American entertainers such as Fire and Brimstone.

Other beneficiaries were the 32 new farmer/vendors we attracted and trained. All plan to be back next year--which is the best indicator of their success financially and in quality of life. In addition all 57 growers benefited from the quintupling of sales our markets experienced.

Our final beneficiaries were our market managers. They became more adept and successful and were key to making the growth we experienced.

Lessons Learned. Since the proof of the pudding is in the eating, our project's success is best judged by increases in number of farmer/vendors and sales. Attributing cause of our successes to our training is more difficult since we are exploring a very chaotic system composed of multiple complex adaptive systems.

Evaluation methods which can be employed to tease out effectiveness of training are multitudinous, contradictory, and prone to misinterpretation. In our proposal we described both qualitative and quantitative methods which have been proven valid in many independent studies. However, we are not certain our survey results are scientifically valid. After conducting a number of personal interviews, we became convinced that the interviewer is a huge influence on the responses of the interviewee. Some interviewers routinely got positive responses and others got negative responses. So, we changed our evaluation methods to a combination of semi-structured interviews coupled with survey monkey on-line surveys.

Though removing interviewer bias and increasing ease of administration and analysis, we have been very disappointed in the number of people participating. We have tried

numerous methods, but people just don't like filling out surveys—even if it is on-line. These small numbers make us even less confident in our quantitative results. However, both our personal interviews and survey monkey data have revealed some interesting qualitative data.

Participants surveyed rated the FMPP-provided signage as very to extremely useful and certainly resulted in increases in sales.

Farmer/vendors participating in training rated on-farm production training and the retail theater and holistic business planning sessions highest. Comments:

"It helped tremendously to meet other farmers using similar methods."
"I like learning from folks you can trust—who have really done it."
"Networking was the best part. I made very useful contacts for canning my produce and for obtaining compost."
"Retail sales helped us a lot. We learned to have daily specials and samples. It's definitely increased our sales."
"Retail theatre showed me how customers can be your best sales force if you establish a personal relationship with them and bring them into your life on the farm."
"I realized I don't like selling and I just like to farm. So my friend is selling my stuff for me."
"Most farmers aren't good businessmen and could really benefit from the holistic business planning course."
"The online marketing session was great. Now I even put my whole planting plan for next year on-line so everyone can know what I'm doing."

Market managers participating in training rated the retail theater, marketing to chefs, and supply management sessions the highest. Comments:

"I learned you have to always be available and help the vendors whenever they need it."
"Being flexible about market 'rent' and not requiring payment up front has worked much better for me."
"Outdoor theater is the way to go."
"Making an attractive area where people just want to hang out is where we need to go."
"We developed a series of 'foodie fests' with lots of chefs and farmer-chef interaction."

Focus on the future. Participants in our interviews and surveys also gave us lots of ideas for what we should focus on in the future. Most important is educating consumers on local foods. Second was getting more growers, though some felt we have enough produce growers and need farmer/vendors who have something to sell throughout the season.

"People just haven't bought into the local thing enough."
"We need more producers so we are sure of having a supply during bad years."
"We need more local growers."
"Get to the masses. Educate 'em."
"More farmers here and everywhere are what the world needs."
"We drive 120 miles to sell at this market because people don't value local food where we live."
"The market depends on produce growers. They get people here. We need more of 'em."
"Get people to be green."

Evaluation summary. We still aren't exactly sure why our sales and numbers of vendors have grown so much. It's hard to determine why some markets are more successful than others. Certainly, our successes come when we adapt systems which have been successful at other markets. The FMPP funds were crucial in enabling us to recruit great speakers and training resource people who have been successful at farmers markets and at farming. Our two main training audiences (farmer/vendors and market managers) both agreed that you learn the most from people "who have already done what you are trying to do."

We have also learned we have much more to do—especially in educating consumers in Arkansas on the value of healthy, local food.

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