

Developing a Local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Model for Maintenance of a Sustainable Agricultural Base in Sonoma County, California

Regents of the University of California of Oakland, CA received \$56,221, to enhance and promote a newly created Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operation in Sonoma County. The project facilitated a direct-to-consumer supply chain for Sonoma County-based livestock producers.

Final Report

USDA Farmer's Market Promotion Program
Final Report
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Submitted by
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Summary of issue being examined

The University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) has been a leader in the area of niche marketing. From the beginning, UCCE has helped agriculture producers in Sonoma County address marketing needs. Now the consumers are demanding more and more locally produced sustainable products.

In a 2007, UC Davis conducted marketing study, in the Bay Area. The study asked consumers who purchase meat, what were their priority issues when purchasing. Consumers listed locally grown as the highest priority in their changing purchasing dollar. Items such as grass fed, organic and humanely were also listed as priorities in purchasing. Ever since Michael Pollen's "*The Omnivore's Dilemma*" consumers now seek local, sustainable agricultural commodities. The Regents of the University of California project was written to address these emerging issues, connecting food sources with consumers and increase the availability of these desired foods, however not without challenges. The gross value of the agriculture sector in Sonoma County is over \$650 million, yet faces pressures such as population growth and competition for land and water, rising fuel costs, increasing regulations, and competition from out-of-state/overseas markets – all of which make it difficult for producers to stay profitable.

Exploring niche markets for local livestock producers thus became a priority for UCCE for several reasons. We applied for this grant because of the need to create sustainable food systems that addressed production practices, marketing and distribution, consumer education, and policies that could make farming in Sonoma County economically viable, environmentally sound, and socially responsible over the long term.

Descriptions of how the issue was addressed

The concept of buying local and buying organic is increasingly important to consumers. A viable system to deliver these local and organic goods from the producer to the consumer did not exist and was not being addressed by existing resources. Situated just north of a large metropolitan area (population eight million), Sonoma County ranchers and farmers appeared to have access to vibrant and valuable marketing opportunities. However, beyond the logistical difficulties in actually bringing products into that market, producers also faced environmental and economic challenges as they raised their livestock, earned a living, and maintained farmlands for present and future generations. These challenges resulted from the changing nature of commercial agriculture, economic downtrends in the dairy and beef industries,

urbanization and the resulting high cost of land, increasing regulatory oversight, limitations of natural resources, and a continuing need for farmers to identify new sources of income. Ranchers also faced strong economic pressures to consider selling land for development. Even in cases where development rights have been sold, the new landowners may have difficulty keeping their lands in active agriculture.

The FFMP grant hired a program coordinator to serve the Sonoma County agricultural community by producing educational workshops; organizing working producer groups; offering consultation and assistance with farmers market promotion. In order to achieve these goals, the coordinator supported local growers' communities, integrating parts of the farming system into an ecological whole. Through this education, the re-empower of local communities, fostered environmentally sound agriculture and celebrated and supported local food production. The FMPP, through collaboration of partners, catalyzed a movement to create a healthy, sustainable and safe environment for Sonoma County and beyond.

Our specific goal was to create a buying club that is financially self-sustaining in the long run and could serve as a model for other communities. We aimed to establish a supply chain for processing and marketing, and for consolidating consumer buying power, that would be logistically and financially sound on a local and regional level.

Our overall goal was to strengthen the local food economy by, first, enhancing consumer access to locally and sustainably produced meats and, second, creating a stable, profitable marketing channel for county livestock producers who want non-commodity marketing options, especially those that recognized and rewarded them for production practices such as humane treatment and environmental stewardship.

Specific contributions of project partners

During our project, we worked with two USDA processing plants, Sonoma Direct and Hagemann Meat Company (now Golden Gate Meats). They were excellent partners and truly supported the concept of buying locally raised meats.

We also worked with several vegetable Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)s, Canvas Ranch, Terra Vegetables and Laguna Farms were three of the pick up locations for the buying club. We also worked with a new group in Sonoma County called "Go Local." They had several meetings open to the public centered on economic localization, cooperatives, and supporting local agriculture. The coordinator attended their meetings and on occasion, spoke o the participants.

Results, conclusions and lessons learned

The project created the first local Meat Buying Club to market locally raised beef, pork, lamb and goat through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) and through Farmers Markets. It was our goal to create more opportunities for producers to sell through farmer markets and we achieved this result. This goal was accomplished through outreach and educational meetings

held with Farmers Market managers, several who had had very limited experience with selling meat products at their markets.

In the CSA, we accomplished:

Results (1) establish a sustainable food system to create and facilitate opportunities, promoting and marketing agricultural products grown and/or processed in Sonoma County.

Niche marketing (i.e. the newly created Sonoma County Meat Buying Club) was established to promote local meat producers to local consumers.

Provided information on funding opportunities and related meeting announcements for producers via an Internet list serve. Assisted in the content development of and provide input into the design of an agricultural marketing website for Sonoma County.

Results (2) Explore and Create Marketing Avenues for Local Agriculture Products

Work with local processors, retail store, and restaurants on the use of local products. Increase the number of livestock producers selling at local Farmers Markets and through their own CSAs.

Result (3) Label approval

We gained label approval by the USDA to place labels on our beef, pork, lamb and goat. We developed a procedure on how to accomplish this and provided this to interested producers.

Results (4) Range to Plate

We promoted the buying club and farmers markets through the creation of the “Range to Plate” event which highlighted Sonoma’s diverse livestock products.

Results (5) Scholarships

From this event, we offered two scholarships for a high school student studying/or planning to study Agricultural Science or Culinary Arts at a California College or University.

We learned there are many rules for selling meat either at CSAs or Farmers Markets. We developed information for interested producers along with Farmers Market managers to help alleviate the confusion. We also learned it is much more expensive to raise and sell locally produced meats. Education is needed for consumers to better understand cost differences.

Current/future benefits derived from project

This project established and strengthened ties between producers and consumers within Sonoma County, giving county residents not only the ability to purchase local foods but the opportunity to support the survival of their region’s cherished agricultural landscapes, by “eating the view.” The project also served as the first clear model for other counties and areas on how to develop local meat CSAs and access and marketing for meat products at Farmers Markets.

New Markets: We have attained access for one of our grass-fed beef producers to sell their beef in a local supermarket chain (Oliver's Market) in Sonoma County. He will begin to provide the three stores with whole carcasses at the beginning of January 2010.

Additional information available (pubs, websites)

Sonoma County Meat Buying Club: <http://groups.ucanr.org/LocalMeatProd/>

UC Delivers: <http://ucanr.org/delivers/impactview.cfm?impactnum=722>

Educational Handouts and Presentations: We spoke at the Niche Meat Marketing Conference, in Modesto held by the University of California Cooperative Extension, about the meat buying club. We also provided information to several other counties in California on starting a meat buying club and selling at Farmers Markets. We discussed the process for obtaining entrance into local markets and the requirements necessary to sell.

Recommendations for future research needed, if applicable

Marketing Dot Studies

With this new marketing channel, it would be helpful to survey the customers at local Farmers Markets and determine if they are (1) buying local meat and (2) why or why not. Through these surveys, we could begin to understand the buying preferences of consumers.

Cost studies

We will develop a cost study for the meat buying club, along with a business plan. This information will help verify the reason why local meat is more expensive than meat that is found in the super market. There also will be information included about the global impact of buying meat in the supermarket rather than from local producers

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Description of people, organizations, marketing entities and/or communities that have benefited from the project's organization

We provided the residents of Sonoma County many benefits from this project along with all those that were provided information through educational meetings and the internet statewide and regionally.