

Healthy Food Access for EBT Recipients Project and Agricultural Direct Marketing Enhancement Project

Solano County of Fairfield, California received \$51,106 to educate local growers about the benefits of direct marketing and to increase the availability of fresh produce and farm products to local residents. Funds were used to develop a logo, promotional materials, signage, and a website.

[Final Report FY09](#)

Date: 12-28-2011

Recipient Name: Solano County Department of Agriculture

Title of Project: Agricultural Direct Market Enhancement Project

Grant Number: 12-25-G-0919

Location (County of Solano, CA)

Project Summary: Establish a countywide branding and marketing program for Solano County farmers and ranchers.

Background: Agriculture in Solano County is divided into midsize commodity farming and smaller direct marketing enterprises. The County as a whole has 62% of its land in agriculture production and is committed to having agriculture serve as an economic driver for the region. To achieve this favorable economic impact, farming must be viable for the producers.

The concept of countywide branding began as one of the recommendations suggested in *The Solano Agricultural Futures Project* <http://aic.ucdavis.edu/solano/4.Recommendations.pdf>, the study which was commissioned by Solano County Board of Supervisors in 2007 provided insight on how local government could strengthen agriculture in the region. In addition to branding, which is the subject of this final report, other suggestions from the study such as zoning changes, land use designations for agricultural enterprises, and encouraging processing facilities are being pursued by the County.

In November of 2011, a **Joint Economic Summit for Solano and Yolo Counties, Adding More Value to Agriculture** was held at UC Davis. The summit which built upon the findings discussed in *The Food Chain Cluster, Integrating the Food Chain in Solano & Yolo Counties to Create Economic Opportunity* report <http://www.solanocounty.com/civicax/filebank/blobdload.aspx?blobid=10984>, (in which the development of Solano Grown is discussed) was well attended. The summit is designed to start a regional workgroup across County lines to encourage the agricultural economy of the region. Discussion points included; food hub possibilities, larger refrigerated storage, shared processing facilities for smaller growers and the need for an Ombudsman position to assist growers through the regulatory process. The event, which was well attended, included an audience from local, state and federal governments along with academics, industry and farmers. A compellation of the summit can be found at http://www.co.solano.ca.us/depts/bos/working_to_create_jobs/joint_economic_summit.asp.

Project Approach:

The project approach focused on **tangible** outcomes that area producers were seeking. To accomplish this goal, local growers were asked to steer the grant administration with assistance from the project manager. A workgroup was formed, "The FMPP Workgroup", they selected how they would address the seven base goals of the grant. They selected the order in which to proceed, and how and what they wanted for a Solano County branding program. It was the collaboration between the growers and the County that led to the successful launch of a new grower marketing cooperative in less than 2 years.

Final Report Solano Grown

Goals and Outcomes Achieved:

The overall goals of the grant included: the establishment of a logo and market brand to differentiate Solano County agricultural products, development of a website highlighting local agricultural producers, educational events for local growers focused on direct marketing techniques, purchase and distribution of promotional products highlighting the brand, and increasing visitation and awareness of local food suppliers in the local community.

Within the grant framework were project deliverables, and also measures. To assist in reporting they are divided below.

Project Deliverables:

- A Name and Logo were created and trademarked (Attachment A)
- A website Solanogrown.org was established which serves as a hub, directing interested consumers to area growers. The website was built with the premise that it would be user friendly and not require extensive programming. It features an events page, farm trails map, room for grower bio's, crop listings and links out to the Solano Grown Facebook page. The site also has a behind the scenes member login area that allows for posting of minutes, scholarship opportunities, events, etc. for growers and includes feed through analytics (measuring traffic to the site which in turn feeds through to the grower's sites). The website was the winner of a 2011 NACo (National Association of Counties) award (Attachment B).
- Four educational workshops were held for growers to strengthen their direct marketing skills; Social Media, Webpage Design and Beyond, Going Organic a Primer Panel and the Everything Eggs Workshop. (Attachment C) Attendance ranged from 15 to 30 growers at each event. All workshops were sponsored through the grant fund and featured speakers who were experts in the various areas. For relevancy speakers by and large were farmers themselves who were already involved in a particular area such as organic farming or users of items like the online tools, in their own businesses.
- Growers also attended other educational opportunities including; the EcoFarm Conference, Placer Grown Grower Education Workshops, Agritourism Classes and The California Small Farms Conference. Feedback was very positive from attendees who noted that networking at the events with growers from different areas was an added benefit to attending.
- Gate signs and promotional materials have been purchased and distributed (shopping bags for farmers markets, logo seed packages, logo pins, produce stickers, calendars, custom banners, a promotional E-Z up tent for use at events, and our very first Solano Grown trails map) (Attachment D) these items have been provided to growers and the public in support of branding activities, and used at Library events, meetings and other gatherings to widen the reach of the brand.
- Solano Grown members participated in the Dixon May Fair, California State Fair Cal Expo and provided information at the Solano County Fair, but definitely the most fun was had at Youth Ag Day, where we sponsored a coloring contest, wrote and educational outline on agriculture, and helped

Final Report Solano Grown

Solano County Supervisor Linda Seifert with a bean mandala of our new logo (Attachment E). The winning picture from the coloring contest graced our county crop report for 2011 (Attachment F).

Member growers also participated by donating products to various events including the Farm Fresh Feast, where California Secretary of Agriculture Karen Ross was presented with a basket featuring Solano Grown farm products.

- An online survey has been developed and deployed on the Website; it includes demographic information to use for future marketing, questions on the perception of the brand and a request for feedback. Initial results (the survey was added in August of 2011) are positive.
- In October 2010 Solano Grown hosted a launch event as a cooperative marketing organization. Since that time the membership has grown to over 160 members. We have also welcomed over 70 “locavores” who are following the growth of the organization as recipients of our newsletter publications. Articles on Solano Grown have been published in the Daily Republic, Vacaville Reporter, Dixon Patch online newspaper and the California Travel and Tourism Commission Newsletter. (Attachment G)
- We have issued two Quarterly newsletters, held three Quarterly general meetings and one “Birthday” fund raiser at Winterhawk winery. (Attachment H). These are in addition to monthly board meetings attended by our dedicated volunteer board.
- On December 13, 2011 Solano Grown became an independent 501(c) (6) nonprofit organization and was provided a licensing and trademark agreement from Solano County. (Attachment I)
http://solano.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=8&clip_id=649&meta_id=225627

Measures:

- Stated Goal from initial grant application *5,000 views of website in first six months of posting.* The website has received 3,548 visitors and 12,863 page views from the launch in October 2010 until September 29, 2011. Traffic to the site has been drawn from the local area 1,300 visitors and also from San Francisco 445 and Sacramento 311 larger markets that we hope to reach more fully through future advertising. Site usage continues to improve with over 300 visitors in December, 2011.
- Stated Goals *Distribute 5,000 copies of Buy Fresh, Buy Local Guide in county. Increase number of Solano County producer listings in Buy Fresh, Buy Local Food Guide from 22 to 30.* An advertisement was placed in the Bay Area Buy Fresh, Buy Local guide 4th edition (Attachment J); this publication was distributed to the greater bay area. Grower listings moved from 20 in that 2010 edition, to 35 as currently listed on the provider’s website for 2011.
- Stated Goal *Increase reported usage of Farm Stands, farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Programs by 20%.* Numbers were drawn from farmers markets with reports of an average of 100-180 visitors per market. Since the start of the grant program two new markets have been opened, the Nut Tree Market and the Totally Local Market. Although successful, the Nut Tree Market did not return in 2011. The Totally Local Market which opened in July of 2011 received

Final Report Solano Grown

support from Solano Grown and was advertised through the Solano Grown website. It features growers from a 50 mile radius only and grower participants are primarily drawn from Solano Grown members. Attendance has been between 300 to 350 visitors at each market and exceeds the 20% gain anticipated.

- *Stated Goal Increase number of Solano County producers participating in farmers markets from 34-40.* Participation by area growers in farmers markets has grown from 34 in 2009 to 51 in 2011 using a measure of certified producer certificates. This exceeds the listed goal of increasing participation to 40 participants.
- *Stated Goal Increase number of Solano County producers who direct market products from websites from 24-30.* Producer websites on the Solano Grown are currently 41 and exceed the grant goal.

Beneficiaries:

As we have grown so have our relationships with other area organizations that are also working to heighten the awareness of Solano County farmers and ranchers. We are happy to have partnered with the Green Valley Agricultural Conservancy in advertising their "Totally Local Market" (Attachment K), participated in the development of the new Pleasants Valley trails map (Attachment L) and have benefitted greatly from the support of the Solano County Farm Bureau, Slow Food Solano and the Suisun Valley Vintners and Growers Association. The organization has also been the recipient of individual contributions of time and expertise from our farmers and ranchers who have made this endeavor a success.

The organization has received support from local, state and federal area representatives who have posted information on their websites and individually recognized the organization. California State Assembly Member Mariko Yamada, California State Senator Lois Wolk and Congressman John Garamendi's office have all provided their support.

Lessons Learned:

There was a considerable advantage to having the grant housed within a larger organization. Resources such as; accounting assistance, counsel, purchasing expertise and Information Technology were available and could be utilized. Support from the Solano County Board of Supervisors (Michael Reagan, Barbara Kondylis, Linda Seifert, John Vasquez and Jim Spering) also enhanced recognition for Solano Grown as an organization at the local and state level.

The adage about learning from history was taken to heart. We sought assistance from experts on branding and requested a meeting with representatives from other grower organizations to learn what to do and what not to do. For example; a logo should be simple and easy to reproduce in both color and black and white reducing printing costs and allowing for use in multiple media types. We hired professionals where we lacked in house expertise. Our logo designer produced our logo but also assisted in art work specifications for various promotional items, leading to higher quality products for distribution.

Final Report Solano Grown

Farmers are busy people. The ability for a family farmer to provide assistance is very limited due to time constraints. Meetings need to be productive and the project manager must ensure continuity. Communication on the progress of the organization was sent to all members on the workgroup and later to the organization as a whole. Although not everyone can attend a meeting it does not mean they are not interested or following the progress. We communicated after every meeting and updated the membership once a month if a meeting was not held.

Recognize that incremental progress is the key for a small organization. There were times when ideas for the future overwhelmed the agenda of the meetings. This was a source of frustration to those who wanted to move the organization forward at a faster pace. Limitations on resources (grant funds) and staffing have to be considered and those entrepreneurial ideas captured for future use.

Additional Information:

Grants by nature are usually one time funds. From the beginning the goal of Solano Grown was to be an independent organization which would continue after funding was at an end. The materials purchased, the website design and the organizations activities have all been geared toward that outcome. Although not a goal of the grant, those participating in the process did not want to expend time on branding if it would halt after funding was exhausted. It is to the credit of Solano County growers that within two years they created an independent marketing cooperative.

Recognition of the achievements of Solano Grown through this grant project have been used to leverage further grant funding. A California Specialty Crop Block Grant in the amount of \$50,000 has been awarded for advertising. Those funds will be used to advertise the specialty crops grown by Solano Grown members.

In the immediate future, Solano Grown is pursuing development of an online market place, where growers can advertise available products and make sales. This web based program will be linked to the Solano Grown website. Also in development is a small scale food hub for Solano County residents.

With many thanks to the FMPP team for their support and guidance and to USDA for providing the initial funding that has made Solano Grown a reality.

Contact Person:

Simone Hardy 707-784-1475 jshardy@solanocounty.com

