The Development and Testing of a Blueprint for Establishing a Coastal Area Farmers' Market

Florida West Coast Resource Conservation & Development Council of Ellenton, Florida received $54,959, to develop a training program for beginning farmers. Funds were used to train farmers in direct marketing, business assessment, marketing techniques, local niche markets, branding, public relations, and launching a new business.

Final Report FY09

FMPP Final Performance Report

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Recipient Name: Florida West Coast RC&D Council, Inc
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Project Summary

Taking New Farmers to Market has been a training project specifically targeted at new and beginning farmers hosted by the Center for Integrated Agriculture, a program of the Florida West Coast Resource Conservation and Development Council (FWCRCD) located in the Tampa Bay area of Florida. This was a three-pronged project aimed at assisting new and beginning farmers in the following ways:

1. Delivering farm business-friendly training sessions that outline key strategies and logistics of agricultural direct marketing in Florida;
2. Providing one-on-one training and technical assistance to beginning farmers on their unique situation with direct marketing including business assessment, marketing techniques, local niches, branding, public relations, and business launching assistance;
3. Offering hands-on mentorship during initial business launch with experienced direct-market farmers.

The goal of the project was to accelerate market-readiness for new growers through formal and experiential training. These methods of assistance were intended to increase local food opportunities for farmers and to improve access to fresh products for consumers.

In 2009 FWCRCD pursued the Farmers Market Promotional Program award as a means to address the emerging need of "local food" system development. Communities in the four county area of the FWCRCD had taken numerous steps to improve the capacity in the small/beginning farmer sector such as the development of agricultural policy councils, adoption of support strategies into comprehensive plans, promoting farmers' markets, piloting farm-to-school efforts, opening public-lands to food projects, and more. However, many issues still existing and were standing in the way of success for the aforementioned efforts, such as a lack of growers for local farmers markets and long waiting lists for several local CSA's indicating increased demand and short supply. Business opportunities existed but a lack of ability to meet the demand was apparent, and many existing farmers were searching for ways to innovate and provide local food with limited infrastructure and entrepreneurial support. Small and beginning farmers indicated a need for formal training, mentorship, and experiential learning opportunities.

Project Approach

In 2005 the FWCRCD made a shift to focus its organizational efforts on economic development activities in sustainable food and agriculture. The organization established two training farms in 2007 and 2008 and set up an apprenticeship program for new farmers. *Taking New Farmers to Market* became a critical program under the Center for Integrated Agriculture program to provide training modules, technical assistance, and mentorship to these entrepreneurs. The project partnered with other ongoing projects of FWCRCD including Geraldson Community Farm, Gamble Creek Farm, and the Local Food Buying Club. Together, the projects providing a staging ground where new members of the local food market could experiment with new product lines and direct marketing, as well as receive training and work under farmer mentors.

Training sessions were provided to small groups of farmers on topics such as recordkeeping, food safety, business planning, integration and use of EBT, direct marketing, and area market trends and challenges. FWCRCD personnel met one-on-one with inquiring farmers to assist in business plan development, CSA training, logo development and branding assistance, and institutional partnership development. Apprentices at training farms learned the basics of crop planning and production and escalated to gaining valuable experience marketing products to customers through a CSA, cooperatives, and farmers' markets. The experience was enhanced with the opportunity to work under experienced farmer mentors to gain valuable insight into day-to-day operations, long term planning, and customer relations.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved

Objective 1*: Deliver farm business-friendly training sessions that outline key strategies and logistics of agricultural direct marketing in Florida. (Goal – direct benefit to 125 farmers)*

FWCRCD initially developed 6 training sessions with the intent to deliver each of the sessions on 4 separate occasions throughout the four-county area of Hillsborough, Manatee, Pinellas, and Sarasota. The training sessions developed were:

1. *Business Planning*: topics covered included writing a business plan, financial management, risk management, operations and profitability
2. *Food Safety*: topics covered included identification and mitigation of food safety risks, post-harvest, processing, and storage.
3. *Direct-to-Consumer Marketing*: topics covered included marketing venues, regulations, and branding
4. *Integration & Use of EBT*: topics covered included application process, equipment use and benefits
5. *Record Keeping*: topics covered included field production information related to total farm sale goals, yield and production data, accounting data, regulatory recordkeeping needs, organic certification.

6. *Area Market trends & challenges*: topics covered included current market analysis, regulation issues and niche markets.

Upon initial development and delivery of each of these sessions feedback from attendees as well as other interested parties in the community was solicited and some modifications were made to the program to include more specific opportunities under some of the course headings. For example, the *Area Market Trends & Challenges* was successful, but opportunities to capitalize on new emerging markets led to developing and delivering two sessions on rare and tropical fruits. Throughout the course of the grant project, other sessions were added based on feedback and willingness of local experts to participate:

1. *Alternative Markets for Rare Fruits*
2. *Crop Planning for Consecutive Markets*
3. *Lessons from Market; Managing an Effective Farmers' Market Booth*
4. *Whole Farm CSA Planning*
5. *Alternative Enterprise Marketing Opportunities*
6. *Fundamentals of Beekeeping; Hive Management and Value-Added Products*

In the 26 months of this grant project, FWCRCD hosted a total of 22 individual training sessions and had a total of 161 attendees, exceeding the goal of providing direct benefit to 125 farmers.

Objective 2: *Provide one-on-one training and technical assistance to beginning farmers on their unique situation with direct marketing including business assessment, marketing techniques, local niches, branding, public relations, and business launching assistance. (Goal – direct benefit to 25 farmers)*

From the beginning of the project, the technical assistance and one-on-one training aspect of *Taking New Farmers to Market* was in unexpectedly high demand. There were ultimately requests for assistance that could not be met through this project due to time and budget constraints, therefore had to be directed to other projects within the organization as well as other service providers. Project staff tried to prioritize requests and deliver tangible products and services to as many as possible.

FWCRCD ultimately assisted 40 farmers and farmer-related organizations, training programs, markets, and co-ops, exceeding the goal of directly benefiting 25 farmers. The following are some highlights and statistics of the technical assistance component of *Taking New Farmers to Market*:

- Created 8 logos
- Assisted in the development of 2 local food marketing campaigns
- Assisted in the development/enhancement of 5 farmers' markets
- Local Food Buying Club generated average $20,000 annual income over two years among 15 individual vendors (average of $1,330 per vendor/year)
- Assisted with 4 CSA startups

The Local Food Buying Club was established to assist farmers and vendors of value-added products with reaching new markets for their products. Sales through the Local Food Buying Club were tracked annually. Over two years, the club sold an average of $20,000 annually in products from these vendors. It began with just seven vendors and around 50 customers. By the end the buying club had 15 vendors[1] and over 100 regular customers. The average sales per vendor were noted as being around $1,330 annually through the Buying Club, assisting the vendors in establishing a new customer base in the local food market. Vendors were relayed customer feedback on their products and given advice and assistance to better meet the needs of the local food market.

Other technical assistance recipients received support with business planning, marketing, branding, public relations, navigating regulations, and business assessment.

Objective 3: *Offering hands-on mentorship during initial business launch with experienced direct-market farmers. (Goal – direct benefit to 6 farmers)*

The two training farms partnered with this project, Gamble Creek Farm and Geraldson Community Farm, utilized their experienced farm managers to provide direct day-to-day mentorship to farm apprentices. Throughout the course of this project 11 individual apprentices received direct mentorship. While many of the apprentices are enrolled in a 3-year apprenticeship program, therefore are still undergoing mentorship without project support, several have gone on to start or manage farm operations themselves. This exceeds the goal established of 6 farmers receiving a direct benefit from mentorship through this project.

Apprentices enrolled in this program received daily guidance from experienced farm managers and began by learning some basics of crop production. When ready, apprentices became involved in crop planning, marketing, and customer relations for CSA and market. Farmer mentors generally began their day going over the work plan with apprentices, discussing how to plan and prioritize and what actions should be taken so that products could be ready for market. As apprentices gained more experience they were given increased responsibility coinciding with areas of weakness or lack of experience the mentors felt they needed to address.

All 11 participants gained experience in all of the above areas, ultimately having the opportunity to participate in the crop planning process for CSA, independently staff farmers' market booths, and assist in advertising and customer retention for the CSA operations. They also benefited from having direct access to FWCRCD staff to discuss their own business aspirations and begin the business planning process for their own farms.

[1] Although the Local Food Buying Club was originally intended as part of the mentorship program, the 15 vendors have been added to the total of Objective 2/recipients of technical assistance, and not to the total of farmers receiving mentorship due to the nature of assistance provided.

Beneficiaries

The beneficiaries of this project are diverse in nature and meet several key areas of the total local food system of the Tampa Bay area. There were a total of 212 beneficiaries of this project. They consisted of individual producers, cooperatives, farmers markets, and service providers. Below is a chart breaking down the general makeup of the beneficiaries of *Taking New Farmers to Market*:

Beneficiary Type	Numbers Served
Farmers' Markets	5
Organizations/Service Providers	6
Farmer Groups	2
Individuals/Independent Farms	199

The farmers' markets assisted through this project included the Phillippi Creek Farmhouse Market, 14th Street CRA in Bradenton (pilot project), Harrison Ranch (pilot project), Manatee County Health Department (pilot project), and a new market hosted by Geraldson Community Farm. Organizations included extension offices in Manatee and Sarasota counties, Community Haven, Bradenton Central Community Redevelopment Association, Palmetto FFA, and Ridgecrest Community Garden. Farmer groups served were the Florida Food Policy Council and Agventures, a collaborative of farmers promoting agritourism in southwest Florida.

Individual and independent farms served by this project included a very diverse group of farmers who received mentorship, technical assistance, or attended training sessions. While demographics are not provided for all that were served, a snapshot of 84 participants willingly provided information on gender as well as self-identified themselves as limited resource and/or socially disadvantaged farmers. Below are the approximate results of the 84 participants:

Male	52%
Female	48%
Limited Resource	36%
Socially Disadvantaged	21%

Program evaluations were distributed and filled out at many of the training sessions delivered through Objective 1. Sessions included in the evaluations included "Marketing Opportunities and Regulations for Small and Beginning Farmers", "Opportunities in Local Food", "Selling Your Products Locally", and "EBT for Farmers Markets". A separate evaluation was performed for "Keeping Your Business Open: A Lesson in Food Safety". Results are as follows:

Marketing Opportunities and Regulations for Small and Beginning Farmers, Opportunities in Local Food, Selling Your Products Locally, EBT for Farmers Markets (combined results)			
Question	**Yes**	**No**	**No answer provided**
Was the information presented useful?	100%	0%	0%
Was the content what you expected?	95%	5%	0%
Would you recommend this course to others?	95%	0%	5%
Were the materials given helpful?	100%	0%	0%
Will you attend another farmer training program?	95%	5%	0%
Will you attend a future business development training session?	95%	0%	5%

Keeping Your Business Open: A Lesson in Food Safety (results are based on pre- and post-tests administered during the session)	
Category	*Increase in Knowledge*
Food Safety Standards	33% showed no increase in knowledge 33% increased from “moderate” to “considerable” knowledge 33% increased from “minimal” to “moderate” knowledge
Food Safety Self-Inspection	33% increased from “minimal” to “moderate” knowledge 66% increased from “minimal” to “considerable” knowledge
Third-Party Auditing Process	66% increased from “minimal” to “moderate” knowledge 33% increased from “minimal “ to “considerate” knowledge

As stated earlier, 15 farm businesses increased their income by an average of over $1,330 per year as a result of marketing produce directly to consumers through the Local Food Buying Club generating over $20,000 in additional dollars being circulated annually in Manatee County alone. Over 65% of Florida small farmers were earning less than $10,000 per year through farm sales at the time this project commenced, so a revenue increase as seen through the buying club is indicative of significant sales opportunities for local producers by marketing local food.

At the time this project began, 246 farms were listed on LocalHarvest.org in the state of Florida. There are now 492 farm listings in Florida on LocalHarvest.org, which is a 100% increase in just over two years!

Lessons Learned

As noted above, additional training sessions were added to the original curriculum based on farmer feedback. This was a result of the recognition of market opportunities and a lack of

expertise and knowledge available to local farmers in accessing those markets. Some of the sessions added were simply a more specific version of one of the original sessions. The original plan for the training sessions was to have farmers be the presenters by carefully selecting farmers that showed particular skills in certain areas and asking them to share their expertise. We quickly learned that there was a demand for information that could only be provided by non-farmers in some cases, as there were no local farmers with extensive knowledge that was relatable to the audience.

One example is with the food safety session. There were very few local food safety experts who could relate to the small-scale farmer in our audience. Most farmers in our area have stayed away from the topic of food safety based on false assumptions, therefore the only seasoned and experienced farmers that were knowledgeable operated on a large scale, therefore had no relevant experience that could be shared. We contacted local food safety auditors and also a local organic produce distributor to come educate the audience and dispel some of the myth and rumor about food safety, ultimately proving to the audience that food safety was about more than passing an audit, and that it is an accessible topic and an achievable goal for farmers of all scales.

Another lesson learned was to be aware of the potential conflicts with a training session attendee's schedule and family obligations. We quickly realized that hosting sessions at times that were convenient to the organizational staff would result in low-turnout. Ultimately we decided to vary the days and times we offered sessions, holding some on weekday mornings, weekday evenings, and even weekends. We also came to realize that much of our audience would have childcare considerations or second jobs. Holding a session in a library or classroom when an audience member has their young child with them is not an ideal situation. Also, holding a session about farm planning in a classroom is also very limiting. We ended up offering several sessions on our training farm sites and in a much more casual manner such as "coffee with the farmer" or as a "farm tour". Offering a variety of opportunities resulted in exceeding the goal of 125 farmers for Objective 1.

Another "lesson learned" came from the business planning aspect of the project. We found that participants engaging in technical assistance for business planning were not always as likely to follow through without face-to-face meetings and/or group training sessions. Participants who came to business planning training sessions actually began the process in a group setting where they were given handouts outlining the process. These individuals were more likely to follow through and complete their plan, as were those who worked with us in person. Individuals who were communicating with us through email and sending handouts back and forth electronically were much more likely to be discouraged by the process. Another significant note is that farmers who were given examples of business plans less intimidated by the process of writing a business plan. Showing samples from successful farms helped to calm the anxiety and prove that it was not an insurmountable hurdle. They also saw concrete examples of how a business plan could be useful to them, therefore were more encouraged to see the process through.

Additional Information

FWCRCD was fortunate to have many willing participants in executing this project. Among them were Karen Dakin, of Dakin Dairy, who assisted in delivering a training session on business planning. Stephen Gran, of the Hillsborough County Agriculture Economic Development Division was instrumental in teaching participants about local and state regulations. Mitch Blumenthal of Global Organics assisted in education participants about organic farming and food safety. Other helpful individuals were Tim Brown of Brown's Grove, Al Davis of the Manatee Rare Fruit Council, and Laura Morton of the Natural Resource Conservation Service. Tina Price, a local food safety auditor and expert, and Kim Lyons of Merchant Services (EBT distributor) were also incredibly helpful resources through the project. A couple of the hosts for our training sessions were also instrumental in providing free meeting locations including Ruskin Southshore Library and Marie Selby Botanical Gardens.

Contact Person

For more information about the results of *Taking New Farmers to Market*, please contact Jacob Leech, leech@fwcrcd.org or (919) 300-1628.