

Refrigeration, Transportation, & Technology Upgrade

To improve the infrastructure capacity and expansion of a Pittsburgh farmers coop distribution channel—through the acquisition of refrigerated and other equipment to ensure fresh quality products are delivered to consumers. The resulting capacity expansion will allow this group of small family farmers in western Pennsylvania to remain viable on their land, enhancing the healthy local food supply while strengthening their relationship with the local community. The “Upgrade Project” will allow the coop to accommodate and expand its farmer membership, as well as add new consumers and expand its current restaurant roster.

[Final Report](#)

2007 USDA-AMS FMPP GRANT
FINAL REPORT SEPTEMBER
2009



PENN'S CORNER FARM ALLIANCE:
REFRIGERATION, TRANSPORTATION, AND
TECHNOLOGY UPGRADE PROJECT

Submitted by Neil Stauffer
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Summary of the Project

The Penn's Corner Farm Alliance (PCFA) Refrigeration, Transportation, and Technology Upgrade Project set out as an initiative to build and improve the operating infrastructure of PCFA. Penn's Comer was the first cooperative in the Pittsburgh area to work directly with chefs looking for fresh, local produce. With the growing market for fresh and local farm foods, PCFA was in prime position to help meet the increasing demand. Many of the top chefs in Pittsburgh relied on PCFA to source fresh, high quality products. By 2007, PCFA had over 8 years of experience working with chefs and about the same in developing CSA's.

But, in order to utilize that experience and to supply the growing market in the Pittsburgh region, PCFA was in significant need of all elements of the Upgrade Project- transportation, refrigeration, and technology. Before the grant, the PCFA delivery truck was on its very last leg, the co-op had no refrigeration to work with, and we had zero computer/internet supplies to speak of. An organization that relied on the sweat, tears, and hard work of its farmers needed a little boost.



Description of the Addresses Issues

Penn's Comer had experienced many of the difficulties of a low-capital, grassroots organization. The organization relied heavily on the dedication of a few of the farmers who "made it work" even when it was difficult and stressful. By 2007, those few dedicated farmers were about all that remained of the start up organization. They knew it was time to move



forward or move on. And, it was the FMPP Grant that helped make that decision a positive one.

The PCFA Upgrade Project addressed the three main infrastructure needs that Penn's Corner had in 2007. First, the grant allowed us to purchase a refrigerated box truck (a 16' Isuzu box truck). Although PCFA ended up spending additional funds on top of the grant, these funds allowed us to keep deliveries going when the old truck broke down in the middle of 2007. Second, the grant also provided the opportunity to utilize refrigerated storage, which PCFA never had access

to before. This storage is an important tool in getting fresh, local products to market in the form of restaurant deliveries and CSA. And, finally, the grant also provided funds to equip a one person office, which did not exist before either.

Project Partners

We would like to thank the following project partners for their role in the Upgrade Project grant:

- Fred Michaels at Allegheny Ford, where we purchased the delivery box truck. Fred was patient and helpful as we decided what type of truck best fit our needs.
- David Wilson at Penn Detroit Diesel Carrier, who installed the refrigeration unit on the truck. David was knowledgeable and creative as we figured out how to make the most of the money we had. We ended up transferring the delivery box off of our old truck onto our new truck, and then installing a new condenser unit onto the old box.

- Mark and Margie Dagnal of Goose Creek Gardens, and Pam Bryan of Pucker Brush Farm; both of whom offered the land and facilities to construct the two walk-in coolers. As founders of PCFA, they were both quick to step up and help to make this



- arrangement work. They truly embody the spirit of the farm cooperative. They understand that you have to be willing to help everyone involved in order to help yourself as well.
- Dale Humke at Barr, Inc., where we purchased our walk-in coolers. Dale was thorough and professional. We were impressed by their selection and prices for the coolers.
 - Louis T. Ursitz Heating and Air Conditioning, who installed the walk-in coolers.

- Zalesky Concrete and David R. McCance & Co., who poured the concrete floors for the coolers.
- Circuit City and Dell Computer, where we purchased our office computers.
- And, last but not least, Simon Huntley at Small Farm Central, where we developed our website. Simon supported our vision perfectly. In addition to setting up our basic website, he also developed a CSA platform that proved invaluable as our CSA numbers grew. And, in addition, he also created an e-commerce section of our website that allows us to sell products directly to our customers on our site. Oh, and Simon also joined our CSA as a member!



small *farm* central

Community Partners & Neighborhoods

- Our CSA program includes the following neighborhoods:

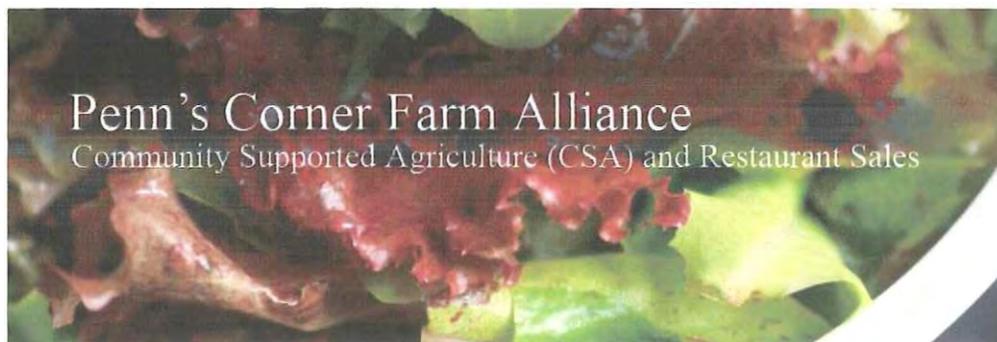
Results. Conclusion, and Lessons Learned

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of the FMPP grant on the current success of PCFA. First of all, the delivery truck from the grant arrived just in time to replace the old PCFA truck that was no longer repairable. With only a few weeks of rental vehicles in between, we were able to keep our CSA and restaurant deliveries running smoothly for our customers. Now, the new delivery truck is on the road 3 to 4 days a week during CSA season, as opposed to the one day a week that it ran before 2007.

In addition to the advantages of the new truck, we also quickly relied on the power plug-in ability of the new condenser unit. This allowed us to store perishable goods overnight on the truck. Without the new unit (and the extra overnight storage space it creates on our truck), our coolers would have overflowed during peak season. Plus, not offloading all produce from the truck is a real bonus during watermelon season!

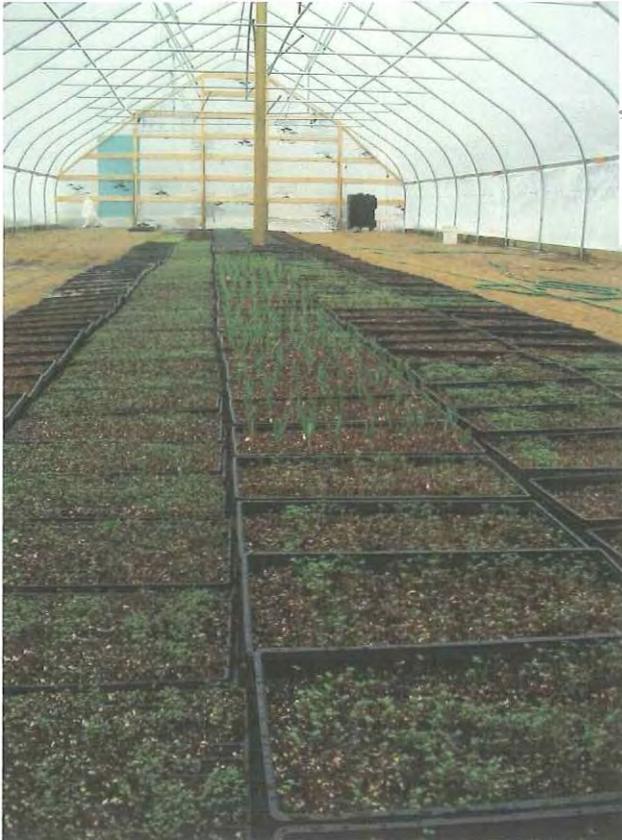
Second, the walk-in coolers are used continuously by more than 2 dozen farmers. The coolers allow PCFA to collect, hold, and redistribute much higher volumes of perishable products. Our quality of products has increased with this new infrastructure. As a result of this and the other improvements, the gross sales went from approximately \$70,000 in 2006, to \$200,000 in 2007, and to \$425,000 in 2008. And, all signs are that gross sales will increase again in 2009.

Third, the computers and website are highly utilized on a daily basis. Specifically, the website was our primary tool for beginning and increasing the size of the CSA. **I**t was our main source of advertising. In the 2006, the CSA was approximately 10 members. **I**n 2007, it jumped to about 200. **I**n 2008, it doubled to over 400. And, in 2009, the CSA grew again to about 500 members.



Current Benefits

The infrastructure gained through the FMPP grant makes up a majority of PCFA's current capital assets. Thanks to these assets, we are now doing more than seven times the amount of business we were before. Our farmers, chefs, and CSA members are directly benefiting from the advantages of the infrastructure upgrade.



Now, with these infrastructure assets being utilized, we are able to look forward to our next stages of growth. Our delivery truck and walk-in coolers are approaching their full capacities. Our office work is expanding and now requires more staff time and more equipment. Of course, these are great problems to have!

Though margins are always slim and we continue to watch our pennies; PCFA now spends less time worrying if we can pay our bills each month. Instead, we have focused on expanding the range of services we provide our customers and the amount of product we can use from our farmers. With the established infrastructure, we can now service as many as 30 farmers- whereas we were only working with about 8 beforehand.

Future Research and Projects

As PCFA moves forward from this point, we have many hopes and dreams. Our fanners are more dedicated to the cooperative due to the success of the past three seasons. We are continually finding ways to partner with other organizations, events, and customers in the community to strengthen the connection between fanners and the chefs, CSA members, and community that they are a part of.

One of our next hopes is to expand our CSA to operate year round. With the continually growing interest in local foods, we hope to find creative ways to make a diversity of products available throughout the year. This expansion will allow us to utilize our delivery truck (as well as



the other elements of our Project) throughout the year. The year round element of our business will also allow us to work with more specialty fanners who have products that can be available during the cold months of the year. And, it will also encourage our produce fanners to find more ways to extend their growing season.

One way we have started this process is by beginning a monthly Farm Stand. It began in the summer months, but will continue throughout the winter months as well. It is an opportunity of CSA and community members to pre-order and pick up all types of farm products directly from PCFA throughout the year. Hopefully, by next winter, this will also include a CSA box option as well. As this process develops, we may be able to work with FMPP to strengthen and share the experience.

Marketing Materials

2009 marked the 10th anniversary of Penn's Comer Farm Alliance. As our "founding farmers" like to say, they've received an unofficial "college education" along the way-lots of lessons learned. For our anniversary, we did a little bit of advertising in a local foods magazine in western Pennsylvania called, *Edible Allegheny*. But while print and web advertising did help to spread the word about PCFA, the best advertisement continues to be word-of-mouth by satisfied customers!

Celebrating our Tenth Anniversary

Now you can cook with what top Pittsburgh restaurants have been choosing for years

Subscribe to Penn's Corner local form fresh foods

Penn's Corner CSA, a Community Supported Agriculture program supported by 13 southwestern PA family farms, brings just harvested produce right to your neighborhood.

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