

## **Healthy Foods, Healthy Families - NEW EBT Project**

**Big River Economic & Agricultural Development Alliances (BREADA)** of Baton Rouge, Louisiana received \$52,566 to implement a new EBT system that increased underserved consumers' access to local healthy food at three farmers markets in the Baton Rouge area. The project assisted farmers in the use of the new EBT system, and provided nutritional and outreach education for new consumers who had not previously shopped at farmers markets.

[Final Report FY09](#)

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**BREADA Final Performance Report**

**USDA FMPP Grant Agreement # 12-25-G-0938**

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**Big River Economic & Agricultural Development Alliance (BREADA)**

**Healthy Foods, Healthy Families New EBT Project**

**DATE: 12/31/2010**

**GRANT NUMBER: 12-25-G-0938**

**BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA**

**REPORT SUBMITTED BY PROJECT DIRECTOR: COPPER ALVAREZ**

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## **Project Summary**

The outreach programs for BREADA and its special project Red Stick Farmers Market have always emphasized two things: a) improving direct sales opportunities for Louisiana's independent family farms and b) providing access to local foods for everyone in our community, no matter what their income.

With the new EBT project awarded through this FMPP grant for 2009-2010, we have made our 3 locations of Red Stick Farmers Market EBT-accessible as a benefit not only to customers but also as an economic boost to our small-scale family farmers and producers.

Louisiana had 31 farmers markets in 2009 and only 3 of these markets accepted SNAP EBT. Since the beginning of BREADA, the organization has always strived through WIC and SR Coupon clients to provide access to local foods to an underserved population in our community. Louisiana has a high percentage of qualified SNAP benefit clients that we were not reaching. In 2009 when FMPP proposed funding to encourage markets to provide SNAP EBT benefits, we were awarded a grant of \$52,566 to implement the program in our Markets. As a small sustainable agriculture organization, the awarded grant gave us the opportunity to meet what had always been a goal and value for BREADA. The grant would not only assist us in meeting our long term goals, but would also provide our community the access to local foods that had not been available in farmers markets in the Baton Rouge area.

## **PROJECT APPROACH**

Copper Alvarez attended an introductory meeting in November 2009 in Alexandria, Virginia for training from FMPP staff. The networking opportunity at the meeting with other grant recipients and FMPP staff was most beneficial. Following the meeting, the BREADA Board of Directors approved hiring a research assistant to work part time with Ms. Alvarez in early 2010 to execute the action plan for the EBT program. Staff changes had limited our Local Foods outreach efforts.

We felt it was very important to the success of the program that we assess our capacity for implementation and secure a coordinator for management of the project during markets. Copper Alvarez would continue to serve as the project director during most of the year, but when the time came to kick off the program at our markets, we wanted the program to fall under a soon to be hired Local Foods Coordinator.

The grant was announced to our farm members at the December 2009 Red Stick Farmers Market's general membership meeting. Several farmers also participate in the Crescent City Farmers Market in New Orleans and were happy to hear that the EBT benefits would be introduced to our Market. We met with these particular farmers to hear first hand about their experiences at Crescent City Farmers Market and what advantages or problems they might have found.

Early in 2010 the BREADA Board of Directors held its January/February meeting with an emphasis on strategic planning for the coming year. The Board gave priority to outreach efforts for the new EBT program and the Red Stick Farmers Market representative volunteered to serve as liaison for communications to the Farmers Market as the project progressed.

By March we had hired Emily Neustrom to work with BREADA part time as a consultant for researching best practices of EBT projects and to establish the work plan priorities for implementation of the new EBT project. Neustrom had completed her Masters in Science, School of Plant, Environmental and Soil Sciences from Louisiana State University. She had worked closely with the LSU AgCenter on SARE and Southern SAWG grants. She brought critical thinking skills and an understanding of small farms to the table.

During April and May, Ms. Neustrom reviewed our work plan, met with Crescent City Farmers Market and created a timeline for the action plan. She assisted us in developing a job description for our Local Foods Coordinator that would include responsibilities for management of the EBT project.

In June 2010 BREADA hired Betsy Fazekas to work along side Ms. Neustrom in preparing the action plan for the EBT Project. We realized that it would take the summer to put the pieces in place for a smooth transition to providing EBT benefits to our customers. We selected October as the beginning of the program and began organizing our activities. A committee of staff and Board volunteers was put in place to effectively carry out the timeline. Ms. Alvarez as project director managed oversight of the Board committee. The action plan included the following components:

- Establish internal operations for setting up EBT transactions at Markets. Decision to use a centralized token system;
- Outreach education for Board members, market farmers and producers, EBT clients, public on new token system to accept EBT at BREADA's farmers markets;
- Summer pilot program with YWCO Early Head Start parents to introduce them to shopping at a Farmers Market;
- Develop a database of agencies who serve LA Purchase (SNAP) clients & send regular announcements;
- Recruit volunteers to assist with token system at market hospitality booths;
- Develop training packets for farmers and for volunteers;
- Prepare forms for farmer agreements;
- Luncheon meeting with farmers to explain system and its advantages;
- Enroll all farmers to participate;
- Complete administrative duties for project including EBT authorization, decision on technology and purchase of equipment, order tokens, signage, postcards;
- Training on EBT machines and insure acceptance of EBT SNAP;
- Accounting system in place and ACH training for staff;
- Press release about kick off event, invitations to Mayor and other partner organizations;
- Promote program through media outlets, appearances on radio & television shows; add to Facebook page & website, secure articles in newspaper & magazines.
- After program is underway, create data collection and evaluation methods. Meeting with LSU for possible intern to assist in 2011.

- Determine projected annual cost for project in 2011, solicit donors and/or grants to cover annual cost;
- 2011 plans for expansion of outreach education and ongoing publicity to SNAP client base. Explore group promotion to schools, churches and senior citizen assisted living centers;
- Increase the potential of sales to chefs, caterers and movie network.
- Monthly reviews of how the system is working.

Project Director Copper Alvarez attended the November 2010 FMPP Grantee meeting in Arlington, Virginia. The second meeting was most valuable for gathering information from the other grantees. There were several ideas that may be incorporated as we further implement the EBT program in 2011. Networking continues to be one of the most valuable outcomes of any meeting. For Farmers Markets and other similar sustainable agriculture organizations, it is often difficult to share ideas with our peers. We often work in “silos” and with a limited time to research best practices. When we can learn from each other and from other parts of the country in a support group setting, it is always beneficial for capacity building of small organizations. The two meetings hosted by FMPP proved to be very helpful to BREADA.

### **GOALS & OUTCOMES ACHIEVED**

After several months of planning for EBT usage at our Markets, we decided to host a pilot project during the summer with 30 parents from the Early Head Start programs at Istrouma High School, Glen Oaks High School and the Dedicated Dads program of Family Counseling. The parents were mostly in their late teens or early twenties and all had children in the Early Head Start programs. They attended a cooking class on menus using local ingredients and received a cookbook for seasonal menus. They also visited one of our blueberry farms and had a shopping party during one of our Farmers Markets where they met farmers and learned about how to shop at a Farmers Market. They all received tokens to use in the fall when our EBT SNAP program would begin.

On October 21, 2010 we introduced the EBT SNAP token system at Red Stick Farmers Market. The Kick Off event was held as a Harvest Celebration at our Thursday Perkins Road market. We planned the event for a mid week market since a smaller market could handle any unexpected problems with the equipment more smoothly. The event included Louisiana music, chef demonstrations and a proclamation from the city's mayor.

The celebration of EBT SNAP access continued at our Saturday and Tuesday markets throughout the week. We were encouraged to find that the families from our summer program attended the event and have also continued to shop at Red Stick Farmers Markets.

Our goals for the program were twofold. We wanted not only to include the EBT SNAP benefits for everyone and make usage a reality at our markets, but also to increase sales for our farmers and producers from a new client base. Overall, the feedback from farmers has been positive. We did experience a limited bit of resistance from some of the farmers. There were two value added members of Red Stick Farmers Market who resigned from the Market rather than agreeing to accept the tokens. We have encouraged them to reconsider and let them know by letter that if they changed their minds, their membership could be renewed.

The EBT SNAP project for any Farmers Market takes a good bit of planning and front-end preparation. We found it a bit overwhelming at times but we knew that it was a very important project for the mission and vision of our organization. We were most thankful to have received the grant from FMPP because we knew it would have been difficult to take on the EBT SNAP project without the support. Not only was the financial support important to BREADA, but also the networking proved invaluable for guidance from others who had previously managed an EBT SNAP project.

BREADA will continue outreach goals for its EBT SNAP program during 2011. We have January meetings scheduled with Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation members to explore the Extra Bucks program. With additional funding, EBT users could be offered matching dollars incentives for spending their SNAP benefits at a Farmers Market. Our

Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center is working with us on educational materials to positively impact healthy eating in Baton Rouge. The materials will be distributed to the SNAP benefit clients.

The *"Healthy Foods, Healthy Families NEW EBT Project"* only began in late October and although it has operated for just two months, we feel confident that the possibilities for achieving long-term goals are endless. Our early successes have encouraged both our farmers and our community partners to understand that involvement in the EBT SNAP project will help us achieve the major goals of 1) access to local foods for everyone no matter what their income and 2) more direct sales opportunities and economic benefits for our farmers! In addition there have been secondary outcomes which we call in Louisiana "lagniappe" or a little extra. Chefs, caterers and movie production teams all want access to local foods & the receipts they receive from one EBT credit or debit transaction make this possible.

As with all projects, the success in 2011 of continuing to expand this project will happen if we market the program to a variety of constituents.

## **BENEFICIARIES**

By giving BREADA's farmers markets a new form of commerce, the members of Red Stick Farmers Market have benefited from increased sales and additionally, heightened awareness of Louisiana's local producers. By having a new angle for local media coverage, we realized that now the Market's public relations story could be told from economic, health and community interest related stories. We could reach a larger audience than the ongoing coverage from Baton Rouge's food writers and the newspaper's food section.

When chefs are attracted to shop at the Market, several of our food producers secured weekly contracts with restaurants or caterers. One of the movie production's caterers bought 4 whole hogs from a meat producer he met at Red Stick Farmers Market. What started out as a large purchase of goat cheese for feeding the actors and production crew, turned into a purchase of meat to be delivered weekly. The same

economic benefit happened for other farmers and one of our baked goods vendors.

BREADA has made several new partnerships with groups as a result of the EBT SNAP grant. The pilot project with parents of young children who attend the Early Head Start Program was a featured presentation for the Louisiana Obesity Council. After that presentation we made several connections with organizations that serve the SNAP Louisiana Purchase clients. We have now been invited to present at community meetings and workshops with several local churches, YMCA community centers and at a City Council sub committee for the Mayor's Healthy City Initiative.

We have been invited to participate in Neighborhood Revitalization Advisory committee meetings as a way to reach the SNAP client base. As a result of these meetings, we are now a collaborative partner on two grant proposals for childhood obesity and community garden efforts.

Thirty-three families are now eating seasonal menus and working with BREADA's chefs at Main Street Market to design shopping and cooking activities for their children as part of the summer pilot project. As a result of the success of this project, BREADA has been selected to serve as a pilot program for the WIC Coupon holders in East Baton Rouge Parish.

While it is too early to suggest what our EBT SNAP numbers will show in the first year, the success and accomplishments of just the first two months indicate that the EBT SNAP project is fulfilling an important need for families. Comments from the first 36 LA Purchase customers indicate that shopping at a Farmers Market is very important to them and would not be possible without the benefit of EBT SNAP.

From BREADA's perspective, it has given us credibility with our donor base and increased our funding for this year's Annual Campaign. Comments from donors indicated that a local food system for everyone, no matter the income, is very important.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

Our staff has been frustrated by the difficulty in getting everything in place. Authorization as an EBT SNAP approved business is geared toward retail establishments and major food store chains. The forms and questions do not fit 'Farmers Market' entities and it is not easy to answer the questions about ownership. Non-Profits that work under the auspices of community Boards of Directors do not fit the standard. We do not usually have a bricks and mortar location, but often utilize street closures or parking lots serve as our street address. It would be terrific if a form were developed specifically for Farmers Market authorization.

We also found that equipment for EBT and working with the Chase representatives was daunting. We continue to have problems with equipment accepting EBT SNAP, since the company JP Morgan Chase had us use was not even certified for SNAP and we didn't learn that until a month into the process. Chase continues to work with us on solving these issues but technical assistance and software updates seem to be continuing issues.

The problems when using EBT machines have occurred for accessing debit or LA Purchase cards (EBT SNAP). The manual back up system with a machine that requires electricity has been an effective alternative plan for EBT SNAP but requires that we call in the food stamp number to check funds for the customer, have a paper form for receipts and generally puts the EBT SNAP customer in an awkward situation. We received a \$1000 grant from St. James Episcopal Outreach Committee and we've used the money to match dollars when the inconvenience has happened. This seems to have helped with customer satisfaction, but until a smooth EBT system is in place consistently we are concerned that customer satisfaction is a problem. We do not want to lose any EBT SNAP customers early in the process while we are working out the kinks with the equipment.

We also were naïve in understanding the SNAP benefit customer's routine. We did not realize that benefits are used mostly in the first week to 10 days of the month. Our grand opening event was planned

around the media and their convenience – and by the 21<sup>st</sup> of October it was difficult to find LA Purchase cardholders who still had funds in their account.

For 2011 we will meet with Mike Morris from the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services EBT Section to determine how best to serve the SNAP Customer base. The USDA Food & Nutrition Service Louisiana Field Office has been extremely helpful.

In addition we have learned that it is very important to reach out to our farmers and continue to build relationships. We found that several farmers were afraid of the addition of the token system to the Farmers Market. We met individually with our farm members who had the most concerns and misconceptions about how the project would affect their livelihood. Some farmers did not hear well at the general meetings and we generally felt approaching them in one-on-one meetings and giving them a chance to ask questions worked best. We have a membership of 56 farmers, fishers and food artisans. In the end we did have two members resign.

We have learned that social media is an excellent tool to use in marketing the debit credit advantage to customers. Not only can we post seasonal offerings available at the Market, but also we can remind our social media 'friends' that there are special giveaways for token use on a certain day. And we've run a gift token holiday bag special for those who want to introduce their friends to the Farmers Market. The minimal fees we charge are not as high as getting cash from an ATM machine and most of our customers have commented that the convenience is very important to them.

The best advice we received from other market managers was not to expect grand results at first. It does take time to grow the program and to reach the EBT SNAP benefits customer. That certainly seems to be true. The addition of the EBT debit credit customer however has been far better than expected. We see an opportunity to expand our capacity to serve local chefs by providing a receipt for them for tokens.

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

BREDA Final Performance Report

December 31, 2010

A power point presentation is being prepared to send to FMPP soon that will illustrate through graphics and photographs the project's management and operations at Red Stick Farmers Market.

We will include in the Final Report packet a schedule of token inventory and usage for the months of October through December.

#### A. Income Changes

The following is a review of the 2-½ month project:

- Credit/Debit card tokens issued: \$6,818
- EBT Tokens issued: \$ 361
- One chef of a Movie Catering Co \$1,700
- The chef's purchases covered a 4 week period

We did not anticipate that business could be generated from the token system for our farmers outside of the Market days. When the movie production chef shopped at the Farmers Market, he also contracted for bread deliveries, cheese deliveries and meat deliveries on a weekly basis to his movie production catering company. This was in addition to the \$1,700 he spent during the Farmers Market.

Now that the token system is in place BREADA has added to all its marketing information a line that states "At all 3 locations of Red Stick Farmers Market ,we gladly accept LA Purchase cards, debit and credit cards." All future applicants for the Farmers Market will understand that to be a part of our Market they must complete an agreement form to accept tokens as part of the applicant package.

We also plan annual meeting with farmers to remind them of how the system works when accepting EBT SNAP tokens at the Market. We will continue to ask for the input on how to make the system better. We will encourage farmers to post signs at their booths to indicate their support of EBT SNAP customers. Annually, we will assess the program and make recommendations for improvement.

## B. Customer Impact October 21 – December 31, 2010

Briefly, we have added over 30 customers to the Farmers Market on a regular basis from our summer pilot project with young parents of Early Head Start centers. We have had an additional 35 EBT SNAP customers who had not previously shopped at a Farmers Market anywhere.

Response from the customers who are swiping their credit cards has been most positive and most comments generally mention two things: the convenience and the opportunity to spend more when they run out of cash. We also now can provide “gift bags” of tokens to generate new customers and we can accept donations or payment for our promotional merchandise with tokens. The organization will also benefit from the additional form of commerce.

## C. Organizational Impact

BREADA has long sought the opportunity to provide access to local foods in the community no matter what a person’s income happens to be. Without this FMPP grant, it would not have been possible to add acceptance of EBT SNAP benefit cards at our Markets. Now that we accept the LA Purchase card (EBT SNAP) at all three markets, we are recognized for service to the public *and* for building a stronger local food system. Local foundations acknowledge BREADA as a vital collaborative partner.

Through the grant we are building relationships with public health partners that will benefit both the organization and the community. Blue Cross Blue Shield has asked that we create a series of presentation for their employees on healthy eating and request that we explain the benefits of a centralized token system.

Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center is interested in establishing a partnership to match dollars for EBT SNAP benefits. The Baton Rouge Clinic, a primary medical clinic of over 120 doctors, will assist us with nutrition workshops for EBT SNAP clients.

The Mayor's Healthy City Initiative is exploring how they can assist us in getting EBT SNAP clients transported to our markets.

Red Stick Farmers Market in just two months has seen an increase in sales for farmers. We operate our Farmers Markets year round and this should only expand their annual sales. EBT SNAP benefits are available for most products in the market and this increases sales for all our farmer & that is different from the Senior Coupon benefits. For both the farmers and the EBT SNAP customer, the interaction will build relationships as customers learn about adding locally grown, seasonal produce to their menus.

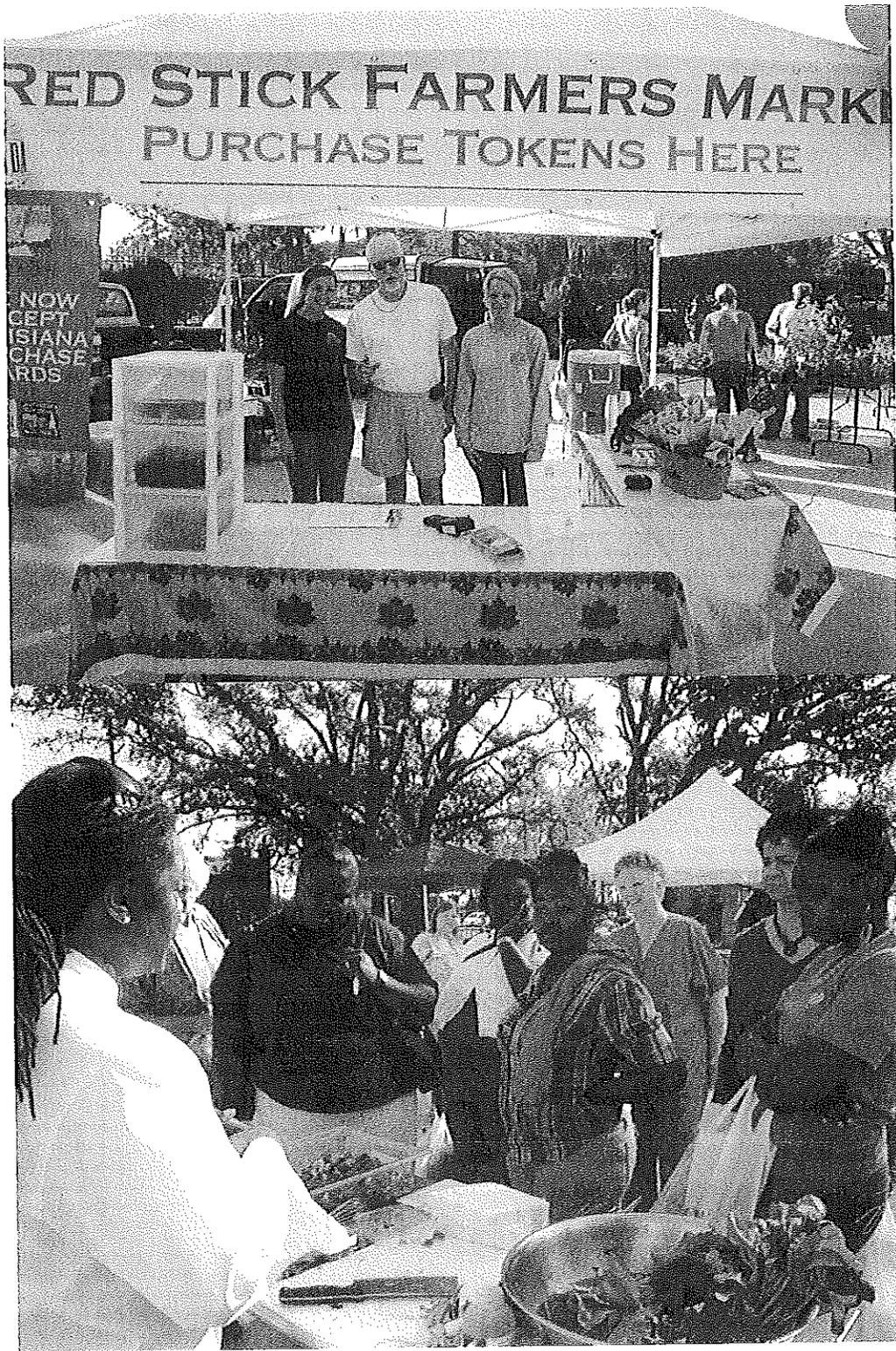
In the coming year we expect to improve the service to our customers. The ACH weekly payments to farm vendors have proven to be a great benefit. The problems with the equipment still remain a challenge.

This is a daunting task to establish the token system in a Farmers Market. We do not have the same administrative capacity as the larger chain food stores. Without the FMPP grant, it would not have been possible to create the system and put it in place.

Moving forward to expand the use of tokens in our Markets we must create a successful marketing plan and find volunteers to help us increase the numbers of customers using LA Purchase cards. Staff size is limited and a strong volunteer pool is critical. LSU interns will be sought for publicity and marketing. Now that the system is set up we will have more time to spend on securing funds for the future and creating a strong marketing plan.

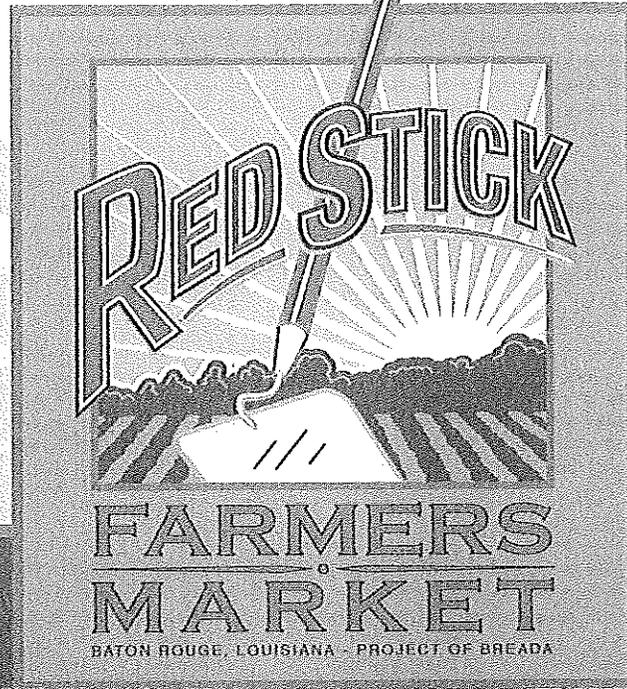
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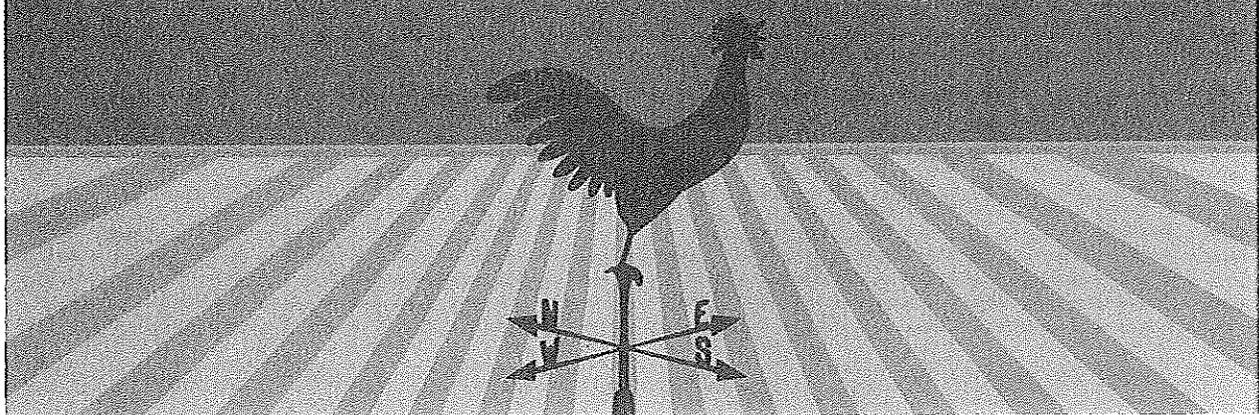


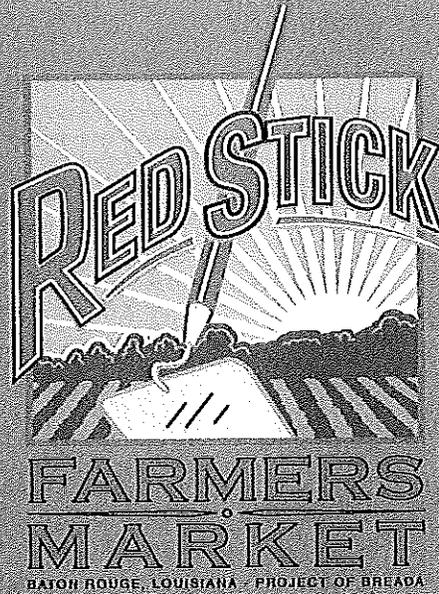




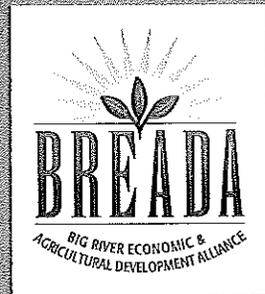


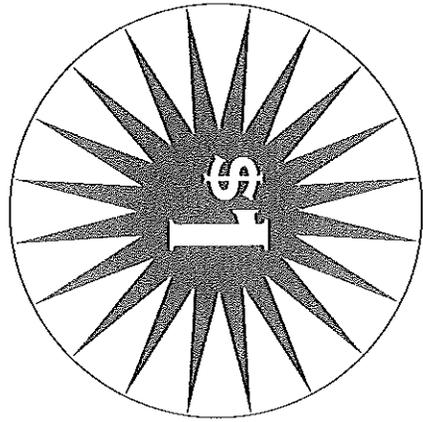
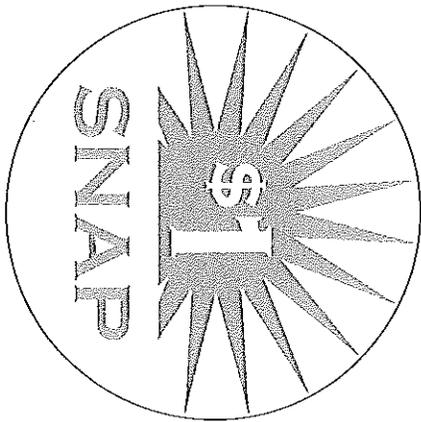
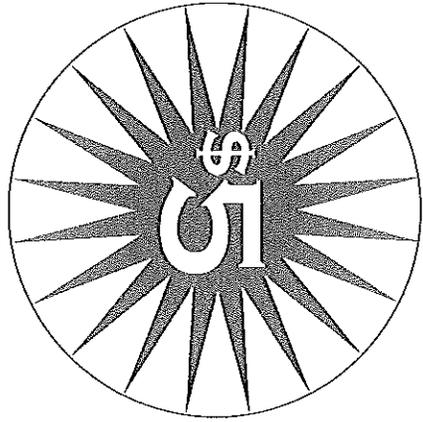
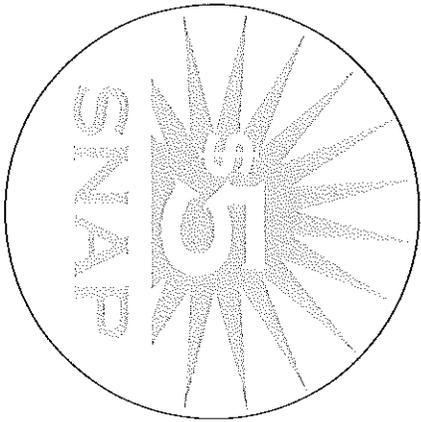
**WE GLADLY  
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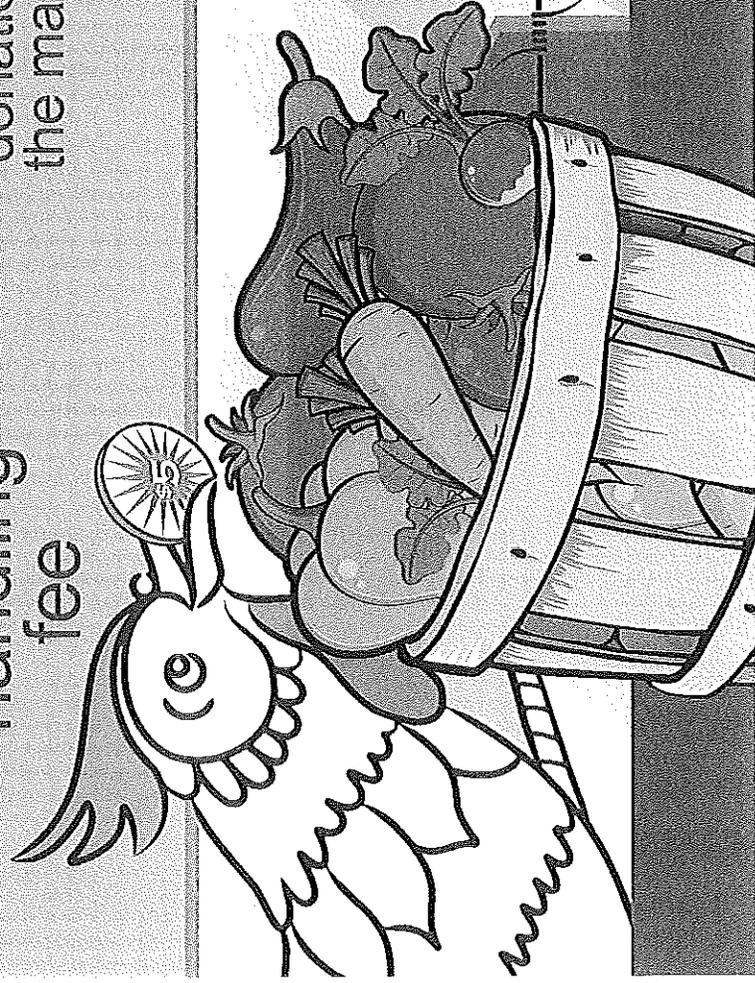


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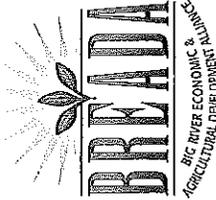
**OPTIONAL**  
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donation to  
the markets

**FUNDING**  
for market  
outreach  
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we  
gladly  
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# Red Stick Farmers Market

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