

Planning for Success: Growing and Strengthening Farmers Markets in Western North Carolina

The **Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project** of Asheville, North Carolina received \$69,289 to strengthen and expand farmers markets in Western North Carolina for the support of local working farms. Funds were used to develop training modules and materials including: best market practices in food safety, market regulations, display and salesmanship, market structure and management, and promotional techniques and strategies.

[Final Report FY09](#)

FINAL PERFORMANCE REPORT

Recipient: Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project

Title of Project: *Planning for Success: Growing and Strengthening Farmers' Markets in Western North Carolina*

Agreement number: 12-25-G-0966

City, State: Asheville, NC

Contact Name/Number: Charlie Jackson/828-236-1282

Project Summary

Farmers market growth in the region is hampered by the absence of strong, capable market management, the inability to attract and retain desirable farm vendors, and a lack of knowledge about food regulation, best display strategies, how to interact with customers, and effective marketing strategies. Project activities addressed these issues through the development and delivery of materials and resources relevant to markets and market conditions in this region. Project modules provided vendors and managers with knowledge, strategies, and skills to address barriers and increase the viability of farmers' markets in the region.

Project Approach

This project provided current and new direct farm marketers in Western North Carolina with training and education on best market practices and conducted strategic planning with two farmers markets. Project activities developed and delivered four training modules: (1) Market Structure and Management ("Farmers Market Management"), (2) Display and Salesmanship ("Sell More! Farmers Market Workshop"), (3) Marketing, Outreach, and Promotion ("Marketing Your Farmers Market"), and (4) Market Regulation ("Regulations, Risk Management, and Food Safety"). Relevant elements of food safety, originally planned a standalone module, are included in two of the four modules: Market Structure and Management and Market Regulation. Modules were delivered to farmers market vendors and managers through regional workshops and through strategic planning with farmers markets.

To meaningfully engage farm vendors and market managers in the development of module content and structure, ASAP's approach combined resource development with farmer delivery and feedback. ASAP conducted needs assessments with market managers, vendors, and market board members to identify and prioritize direct market training topics. Surveys and interviews asked participants their opinions about the needs and issues facing the health of markets. Project staff used the results to inform the content and structure of the training modules. All modules were delivered to farmers in draft form to solicit additional farmer feedback; feedback was incorporated into the final documents.

The modules were presented at 10 separate workshops over the two year time period; four of these workshops were conducted at ASAP's regional marketing conference,

which provides training and technical assistance to over 200 farmers annually. Module content was also used in strategic planning sessions with two farmers markets in the region.

In-depth strategic planning provided two farmers markets with the opportunity to address market level issues and concerns and promote market stability and growth. The strategic planning process began with needs assessments with vendors, board, and managers. The results of the needs assessment set the priorities for strategic planning with each market.

Goals, Outputs, and Outcomes Achieved

Outputs:

ASAP developed 4 farmers market modules: (1) Market Structure and Management (“Farmers Market Management”), (2) Display and Salesmanship (“Sell More! Farmers Market Workshop”), (3) Marketing, Outreach, and Promotion (“Marketing Your Farmers Market”), and (4) Market Regulation (“Regulations, Risk Management, and Food Safety”). Relevant elements of food safety originally planned a standalone module are included in two of the four modules: Market Structure and Management and Market Regulation.

Program outreach efforts reached 65 farmers markets in the region with information and resources (at least 600 individual farms). Modules were presented at 10 separate workshops over the two year time period. Combined, 200 participants attended these workshops. Module content was also used in strategic planning sessions with two farmers markets in the region, which combined serve over 100 farm vendors.

ASAP launched a webpage with the content of all the modules:

http://www.asapconnections.org/farmers_market_promotion_program.html

Qualified ASAP staff met with the vendors, managers, and boards of two farmers markets for in-depth market strategic planning. ASAP staff conducted 5 strategic planning sessions each with the Watauga County Farmers Market (in the High Country of Western North Carolina) and the West Asheville Tailgate Market (in the central mountains of Western North Carolina). In addition, ASAP conducted consumer surveys for the West Asheville market on three market days. The strategic planning with the Watauga County Farmers market resulted in a document outlining a plan for a market move and in the development of a formal grievance process and a process for rules enforcement. The result of the strategic planning with the West Asheville Tailgate market was the development and implementation of a marketing plan.

Outcomes:

The module on Market structure and Management provided market organizers and (would-be) managers with the skills and knowledge to more effectively manage the business, marketing, and human resource market components and enhance market

stability, growth, and customer appeal. Market Regulation provided managers and vendors with knowledge and understanding about market regulation and best food safety practices to protect vendors and markets and consumers. Market vendors and managers have an understanding of the regulations that govern farmers' markets (what they can and cannot sell at market, how product can be labeled, who is subject to licensing and inspection, etc) and act accordingly.

Modules on display, salesmanship, and promotion provided best practices to enhance the visibility of farmers' markets and individual vendor stalls, increase new customer traffic and repeat customer traffic, and increase direct sales.

Two individual farmers' markets engaged in in-depth strategic planning processes and implemented strategies and practices to help ensure their survival and growth. The Watauga County Farmers Markets, after a needs assessment with vendors, the manager, and board, defined the need to relocate the market and developed a relocation process. The focus on market relocation raised internal market issues, which led to the development of formal processes to enforce rules and air grievances. The West Asheville Tailgate Market also defined priorities and actions steps based on the results of a vendor needs assessment. With assistance from ASAP, the market developed and implemented a marketing plan; since its implementation the market has increased the number of vendors and its customer base. This process was shared with other markets through farmers market marketing workshops and through inter-market networking.

Beneficiaries:

Market vendors and farmers' markets in Western North Carolina are the beneficiaries of this project. Project activities reached the region's 65 farmers markets through a combination of outreach efforts, training, and resources (at least 600 farmers). Trainings and resources were developed to provide new and existing farm marketers with the knowledge, strategies, and skills to access and expand into direct markets more successfully.

In addition to the markets and farmers that this project reached directly, the nearly 12,000 family farms in the region will benefit from stronger, more sustainable farmers' markets in their communities. The regional farm economy will benefit from a strong and vibrant farmers' market sector, which will bring more visibility to local farms and food and excite residents and visitors about finding local food and supporting local farms.

Lessons Learned:

The needs assessments ASAP conducted with farm vendors, managers, and market board for use in the development of the modules and with the strategic planning were crucial to the success of this project. As a tool, needs assessments enable project activities to be responsive to the reality of market conditions and to the needs identified as most pressing by farmers within the overall goal of strengthening markets.

Strategic planning, too, as a process enabled project activities to be responsive to the fluidity of markets in terms of changes in vendors, managers, and board. The strategic

planning process with the Watauga County Farmers Market initially, after a needs assessment, defined the process for moving the market. Efforts to relocate the market brought to light internal struggles with the market – namely vendor issues and adherence to market rules. This internal issue became more pressing and accordingly ASAP helped the market develop a formal grievance process and a process to enforce market rules, which the Watauga Market is implementing now.

Piloting and modeling are powerful tools. The outcome of the strategic planning session with the West Asheville Tailgate Market was the development and implementation of a marketing strategy; through workshops, the market manager shared both the process of developing the plan and implementing the plan. This kind of exercise is powerful because it modeled a real process that other markets can benefit from. The outcome of this process for the West Asheville Tailgate market is a more vibrant market with more vendors and customers.

Participatory workshops involve farmers in a meaningful way and generate relevant information and knowledge. In the Sell More workshop, workshop leader Mike McCreary actively engaged farmer vendors in the production of knowledge around best vendor practices. A pre-workshop orientation provided participants a structured framework to conduct market visits to identify practices that can increase sales. Each participant visited two markets and the results of their market visits informed the content of the workshop and the final content of the Display and Salesmanship module. Visit http://www.asapconnections.org/sell_more_farmers_market_workshop.html for the details of this module.

Additional information:

All of the modules developed for this project are published online at:
http://www.asapconnections.org/farmers_market_promotion_program.html

The Mountain Tailgate Market Association, a marketing association of 22 markets across 8 counties, was a key partner in market outreach.

Contact person

Charlie Jackson, Executive Director of ASAP
charlie@asapconnections.org
828-236-1282 ext 105