

2008 SCBGP 12-25-B-0861
Alabama Department of Agriculture & Industries
Final Report – June 2012

Alabama Department of Agriculture & Industries
(ADAI)
Specialty Crop Block Grant
Agreement # 12-25-B-0861



Final Report
Contact Person
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Title: Food Innovation Center (Incubator Kitchen):

Project Summary

The mission of the Chilton Food Innovation Center (CFIC) is to provide a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Alabama Department of Public Health approved facility and certified personnel for the development and production of value-added food products thus allowing specialty crop producers to be more competitive. The CFIC will have a positive economic impact for specialty crops producers in the area through preparing higher margin products and extending sales beyond the summer season. A preliminary survey was conducted and of 100 producers interviewed, 30% indicated interest in using this type of facility.

Few large producers and no small producers can afford their own FDA approved facility. Local producers have to either go to Florence, AL or out of state (e.g. GA or TN). Similarly, retailers in the area have to sell product grown and packaged in another state due to lack of local alternatives. As a result, producers and retailers of fruits and vegetables had no alternative but to discard a portion of their produce which could be converted to value-added food products with the availability of a suitable facility.

Project Approach

In meeting the objective of the Specialty Crop Block Grant, CFIC was formed to provide an approved facility for producers to bring quality, excess fruits and vegetables to process them into value-added products. Two planning meetings were held and a Board of Directors was determined.

Alabama Cooperative Extension System's (ACES) Food Safety Specialist was approached to assist with kitchen planning and about recruiting a Food Scientist to be the Director of the facility. ACES agreed to assist with funding the Food Scientist position. The Chilton County Board of Education granted CFIC the use of a former middle school cafeteria kitchen.

Grading and landscaping in front of CFIC was begun to help with a drainage problem. Preparation began to replace the floor in the space where a walk-in cooler/freezer had been removed prior to our occupancy. Modifications were made to one wall to facilitate conveyance of produce from the washing equipment to the preparation area. Fruit washing equipment was acquired and refurbishment was begun. These activities were necessary for the use of this building as a food processing center. All funds were expended by performing the activities listed above.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved

This was a launching portion of a much larger project. This grant allowed us to investigate the interest in a facility such as this. We were also able to connect with people

who will serve on the Board, donate equipment or otherwise help establish the CFIC. Our goal of investigating the need and interest of a facility and organizing the board was met during this grant period. Several people were introduced to our plan and came forward to help. We completed the task of finding a suitable building and acquired fruit washing equipment through a generous donation.

The increase of value added production is estimated to be near 20% as the facility is currently underway. CFIC strives to have producers transition to value added production exponentially within the future.

Future plans of the CFIC are to continue in the work that was started with this USDA Specialty Crops Grant project. Our future plans include the acquisition of fruit washing equipment and other food processing equipment. Modifications to the building to accommodate the equipment, electrical, plumbing and gas work will all have to be done. Future plans also include: hiring a Director for the Center, promoting the Center, evaluating insurance needs, evaluating labor needs, organizing individuals that can help clients with marketing and other business aspects of starting a food business and begin planning educational workshops involving CFIC such as food safety and food preservation.

Beneficiaries

There was a positive impact with polling farmers. We determined that it would be a viable project benefitting agricultural producers in central Alabama. Both the planning stage and further plans to continue forming the processing facility have benefitted local businesses through use of their products and services.

Lessons Learned

A project such as this will take the work and coordination of many types of people. A good relationship with supportive organizations such as Auburn University's Experiment Station, Alabama Cooperative Extension System, the City of Clanton, and the Chilton Board of Education have made the planning of this project very productive and maintains the original fervor to see it through. We have learned that this type of facility is of interest to farmers, businesses, entrepreneurs and consumers. The timing of this project is very good as it compliments a nation-wide trend towards buying local, locavorism and agri-tourism.

Contact Persons

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Title: Marketing/Promotions/Education

Project Summary:

The purpose of this program is to assist Alabama Specialty Crop producers with direct marketing, value added operations, consumer education, agri-tourism and general promotions. As a result of receiving funding, we will continue to promote specialty crops through point of purchase materials to be used at farmers markets, roadside stands, in-store promotions and other venues.

Project Approach:

The Ag Promotions staff conducted outreach demos at stores and handing out information at state fairs, conferences and other agriculture venues. Advertising was taken place to encourage consumers to buy locally grown produce and nursery products and to also ask for them in their local grocery stores. The materials highlighted seasonal fruits and vegetables and greenhouse and nursery products; maps to direct consumers and tourists to u-picks, farmers markets, and agri-tourism trails and farms. Locations and addresses of specialty crop producers have been provided. These items were given out at state fairs, to teachers in the classroom, in-store demonstrations, conferences, trade-shows and other events relative to promoting Alabama Specialty Crops.

Due to staffing reductions the actual number of demos, which Ag Promotions staff conducted could not be obtained. However, we feel this number was well over fifty (50). Please note, ADAI does not have an Ag Promotions staff. Multitudes of information were passed around state fairs and conferences across Alabama. Majority of information was distributed at state fairs across Alabama. Alabama has over 30+ fairs across the state from August to December during given year. This has been a great opportunity to expose the public to the Alabama Specialty Crop Industry.

Goals & Outcomes Achieved:

- **Point of Purchase Materials-** Materials were distributed to retailers, farmers markets, roadside stands and Ag associations and cooperatives. These materials promote buying local and fresh specialty crops and nursery products.

The department wants to offer growers materials that will be beneficial in promoting the competitiveness of specialty crops. A new logowas created and ag promotions staff continued to educate the public and show that the Alabama Department of Agriculture stands behind the quality of specialty crops produced by Alabama farmers.

- **State Logo- A+ Alabama Agriculture-** Since the inception of the program, Ag Promotions staff have found it to be a useful tool in encouraging consumers to buy locally grown “Specialty Crops.” The logo program was started in 2003 and

has opened doors to retail outlets for many Alabama farmers. However, the marketing strategy was in need for change.

Therefore, during a portion of this grant period the Ag Promotions staff refurbished the logo and recognized this as our new Specialty Crop logo. The message of buying fresh and locally grown produce continues to be resonating with consumers according to farmers. Advertising for both print and electronic media outlets that will educate consumers on the significance of eating locally grown food took place and this has been a big push in Alabama.

Partner agencies, such as Alabama Tourism and Travel, Alabama Farmers Market Authority, our three land grant universities and other groups have assisted our agency on this project activity.

The grant has allowed the entire department to create and cultivate relationships with retailers and farmers through providing point of purchase materials and with consumers by educating them on what is grown and sold from the soil in Alabama.

In summary, we feel this State Logo program was a positive push to outreach to consumers concerning locally grown products. However, ADAI could not obtain an accurate number of specialty crop producers who are currently using the refurbished logo.

Beneficiaries:

The overall goals of the project(s) were a great idea and were strategically sought after. However, due to fiscal constraints and severe staff reductions all portions of this project activity did not take place. However, the Ag Promotions staff was able to implement portions of this project activity. Certain areas, such as Agri-tourism promotions has increased over the past 18 months, state wide, as a result of this outreach program.

Lessons Learned:

Measures to take stronger working relationships with partnering agencies are needed to ensure consistent information is given to consumers concerning locally grown products. Also, consistent project management is needed to ensure the activity is functioning properly and as set forth in the approved state plan.

Ensuring that projects are well documented in order to gather accurate and reliable statistics to be used in the future is valuable lesson to be learned.

Title: Good for Alabama Kids Infant Nutrition Program

Project Summary:

This purpose of this project is to encourage Alabama families, mothers and caregivers in particular to adopt a healthy diet and by incorporating fresh fruits and vegetables into their meal plans. However, due this project was unable to be implemented and completed as originally proposed.

Project Approach:

The program would consist of three stages spanning two years. The first being the introduction of the program and recruiting the participants. The second stage would provide training workshops for parents and families by nurses and nutritionists through our partnership with the Alabama Department of Public Health. Upon completing the training, participants would receive the ‘Good For Alabama Kids’ kit and would fill out a pre-survey asking what there current eating habits are. Stage three would consist of a post questionnaire that would help us evaluate the program’s success and we would give parents a new information packet encouraging them to continue their participation.

Goals & Outcomes Achieved:

No goals or outcomes can be reported due to lack of implementation due the project not being implemented as proposed.

Beneficiaries:

Anticipated this project would benefit children of Alabama. However, this was not complete due to the project not operating as proposed.

Lessons Learned:

Therefore, a lesson learned is for the future is to have stronger working relationships with partnering agencies and accounting representatives. While there were outcomes not anticipated ADAI’s feels the biggest lesson learned was project persistence and time. Additional time was needed for project specifics based on Department goals.

**Title: Mid-South RC&D
Plasticulture/School Gardening/Value Added Initiative to Increase Production and
Consumption of Specialty Crops in Alabama**

Project Summary - Introduction to Plasticulture Value Added Initiative

Alabama is not a fruit/vegetable exporting state. Approximately 90% of Alabama's fruit and vegetables are imported. There are many reasons for this situation from Alabama's history of a small numbered and scattered population, a farm history of row crops, and a complete lack of a produce infrastructure consisting of re-packing sheds, fruit/vegetable cooperatives, and available commercial flake ice machines for product shipping. Along with these obstacles' Alabama is way behind successful fruit and vegetable states in the use of plasticulture for specialty crops. Recognizing an opportunity for Alabama farmers to enter the wholesale produce business through growing collard greens for two local value-added processors we acquired these grant funds to coordinate farmers to sell their greens to these processors.

These grant funds were to initiate one-acre plasticulture projects to produce collard greens for two local collard green processors. The goal in coordinating the farmers and processors is to recognize farmers capable of participating in this wholesale market, realize problems and future problems in supplying the processors with enough collard greens to satisfy the processor's markets and create an atmosphere to initiate a co-op between the farmers to produce greens for the processors.

Project Approach

The project recognized two collard green processors in central Alabama who chop and bag the greens for sale in local grocery stores. One processor, Clint Howell, had been in the vegetable business for 15 years and needs 50 dozen collard greens a week for processing. But the other processor, Al Hooks, was just starting in the value added business of processing collards so his market needs were uncertain.

Mr. Howell has been going to the established collard green growing area of south Georgia to get his greens for fifteen years. Though the farms he buys from are 170 miles away (an eight to ten hour round trip), he can get everything he needs there on one stop. The entire product is grown, harvested and iced for shipment in a professional manner. There are no farms, or an area of farms, in Alabama, which can supply Mr. Howell's market needs. Howell has established a market of selling a total of 300 dozen-collard greens a week. Of that 300 greens, 50 dozen are needed for processing. It is this 50 dozen a week (approximately 2000 lbs of chopped leaf) this grant is trying to provide Mr. Howell.

Mr. Hooks is not only one of the processors, but also one of the farmers on the grant. Mr. Hooks has farmed fruit and vegetables for over 20 years. Recently, Mr. Hooks received a FSA grant to build a health department approved facility at his farm where he re-packs his own and other farmers' products for wholesale. Mr. Hooks decided to enter into the green processing business by making large 10 pound bags of chopped collard greens for sale to restaurants. One of the project's acres was placed at his farm.

The grant supplied Mr. Hooks with one acre of plasticulture which is enough for ten thousand plants. The project looked for these 10,000 plants to satisfy his young market, but the project was prepared to supply more greens from other project farmers if needed. Please keep in mind, federal specialty crop dollars were used to purchase the collard green plants.

The project put six different farms in one acre of plasticulture for 10,000 collard green plants (by using materials left over from past and present plasticulture projects, we were able to put in a seventh farmer a one acre project for the sole purpose of direct sales at the farm. This was at no extra expense to the grant). The six farmers dedicated 5000 of the plants to the processors. Five of the farms are located approximately 10 miles of Tuskegee, Alabama and with one farm north of Prattville. Each farm was about 30 miles away from Mr. Howell's processing operation. The extra direct market project is located within the Clanton city limits in Chilton County.

On request from Mr. Howell for a need of collard greens for processing, the farmers would have their work force in the field in the mornings while temperatures were still cool and cut the appropriate number of greens for processing. The greens were loaded on a refrigerated truck and then processed at Mr. Howell's operation. Mr. Howell paid .30 cents a pound for the chopped greens.

Goals Achieved

Through the month of November and December, all of Mr. Howell's chopped/ processed greens came from project farmers. All of Mr. Hooks processed greens came from his project's acre. However, Mr. Howell still went to South Georgia to get his whole leaf bunched greens, one of this project's goal was to capture his 50 dozen greens a week needed for processing. The other goals of recognizing growing and shipment problems and creating an atmosphere of cooperation among the farmers were also accomplished.

Results and Conclusion

Because of a lack of resources, land, irrigation, refrigeration, and experience there is not one of the farmers involved in this project who could supply the 300 dozen collards a week needed for Mr. Howell's markets. This would consist of a minimum of 80 acres to meet that number. The processed greens would require 30 of those acres. Even if one farmer could achieve the acres, the new immigration labor laws in Alabama could prohibit harvesting such a large labor intense crop economically.

Our goal to supply Mr. Howell's processed market was achieved here in the cool winter months which made the handling of the heat sensitive greens easy and inexpensive. But to supply greens year round in the Alabama heat would take a flake ice machine to keep the greens from spoiling. This ice machine would cost approximately \$15,000 and would need to be placed in a central local for all the farmers to use it efficiently. It would be impractical for one farm to take on that expense without having a large acreage of greens or other crops to justify the cost. To supply Mr. Howell in the future with at least his greens for processing, it will take a co-op agreement between a number of area farmers.

Each farm and farmer is different. Due to lack of water supply for irrigation or a lack of land, or a lack of labor makes not all farms suited for profit in the wholesale market. The

project found that not all of the project farmers are suited for the wholesale market and its particular demands of time and quality product. However, this project sees a number of suitable farmers cooping their efforts by pooling money and experience that could start a wholesale market of collard greens, which then could expand to other specialty crop products.

Progress on Long Term Measures

All project farmers and additional farmers along with the processors have agreed to meet in late January to discuss a cooperative effort to supply Mr. Howell and Mr. Hooks with their collard green market's needs.

Additional information

Pictures

Introduction to Plasticulture School Gardening Projects

Unfortunately, Alabama ranks among the highest in childhood obesity, childhood diabetes, and other health problems related to poor nutrition practices. Also, less than 70% of Alabama's children meet normal requirements for daily physical activity. It is Alabama's Black Belt region where these two facts are most obvious.

This unacceptable path is not only a medical financial burden today, but a burden in the future to an already stressed medical system. More than just the financial aspects of the situation that needs correcting, there is the physical and social handicap the obese child or adult must endure in their pursuit of happiness.

These two pilot projects at Black Belt elementary schools addressed the problems of nutrition education and exercise through the placing of school gardens on the school's grounds.

Project Approach

The project attempted to create a nutrition and exercise program hidden in a fun farm project by executing four primary goals: 1) teach horticultural methods to the students, 2) provide exercise opportunities through farming activities, 3) nutritional education, and 4) provide a healthy meal to the whole school with the crop they had grown. The secondary goal was to sell excess crop to the public to make the project sustainable.

The project chose two Black Belt elementary schools to conduct the projects. One was at Parmer Elementary in Greenville, Butler County, Alabama and Fort Deposit Elementary in Lowndes County, Alabama. At each school site we laid approximately 700 feet of plasticulture. This gave us the room for 800 collard green plants. With the help of community partners and volunteers we punched the holes in the plastic for the plants. The school's 3rd grade classes planted all the greens. The children put hay for weed control and mud control between the plastic rows. All during the growing season the children would walk the field looking for worms and any weeds to pull. The children then helped in the harvesting of the greens (These activities constituted the horticultural and exercise elements of the project). Harvested greens were prepared for the kitchen to cook. The greens were then served to the whole school the next day where a nutritional

power point presentation was presented to the school children (these activities constituted the nutritional education and the serving of their healthy crop).

Goals Achieved

At each school the four primary goals of horticultural lessons, exercise through farming, nutritional education, and serving the crop grown to the whole school was achieved. Unfortunately, the secondary goal of selling the excess crop to make the projects financially sustainable was not reached. This was due to a number of simple problems. At both sites, the crop was planted very late. This reduced the size of the plants at harvest that caused more collards needing to be cut to serve the school and less to sell. Planting late also had the crop ready for harvest after Thanksgiving. With Thanksgiving being the premier selling period for collard greens sales, it left the schools at a disadvantage in moving a large volume in a short period.

However, the Greenville project did collect \$130 in sells for a one day selling event in December (The \$130 is in the Parmer account ear-marked for future farm/nutrition programs for the school) Along with planting late, the Fort Deposit school had to contend with deer damage. The deer ate over half the crop, but there was still enough greens left to feed the school, but none to sell.

With the environment controls of water and fertilizer provided by plasticulture, plants can achieve ½ to 1/3 increase in size which would make for more 6 pound bunches using less plants and less land needed to achieve the quantity desired. However, this extra size was not uniformly prevalent in the 2011 crop.

Results and Conclusions

Though the financial results in maintaining sustainability were disappointing, the sustainability in excitement of the children, school administration, and community was encouraging for long term education in horticulture and nutrition for the area's elementary school. It is the tying together of these three elements: students, administration, and community that will make a school farm/nutrition program succeed. By having the children "hands on" plant, help grow, and harvest the crop made the four main goals of the project--- horticulture education, exercise, nutritional education, and providing a healthy crop to the school which they would eat--- easy to accomplish.

Making the program financially sound by creating its own money is also basic for positive long term outcomes. The two projects will again be funded by outside sources this spring. The farmer sells his product to the processor at .18 cents a pound. The processor chops, bags, and delivers to stores at \$1.10 a pound. The store sells the bags to the final consumer at \$1.90 a pound. We look for these spring crops to make the gardens financially sound for the coming fall crops.

For future crops and farm/nutrition classes at these schools--- and other schools that now want to participate --- having their own resources of money generated by the farm along with community involvement will allow them to shape a farm/nutrition program to their own needs and abilities.

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Consultations have taken place with the Alabama Department of Health and Alabama Department of Education. According to representatives, there are no statistics indicating a reduction in illnesses due to this program.

Progress on Long Term Outcome Measures

Exposing the children to an experience with farming, and education on the importance of exercise and nutrition will give the children an opportunity to make gardening, exercising, and good nutrition a life long practice. The long-term outcome is determined by the administration and community support of the school gardens so that they can continue from class year to class year to deliver the message of exercise and nutrition.

Additional Information

Pictures

Newspaper articles

Tuskegee Extension power point presentation to schoolchildren

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