

Linking Producers with Markets, Including Low Income and EBT Consumers, to Strengthen Small Farms and Increase Food Access

Appalachian Sustainable Development of Abingdon, Virginia received \$95,779 to expand and strengthen the Appalachian Farmers Market Association. Funds were used to provide technical assistance and training to farmers market managers, farmers and vendors; and to expand EBT capability from one to three farmers markets in this rural Appalachian region.

[Final Report FY09](#)

June 27, 2011

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USDA Farmers Market Promotion Grant # 12-25-G-0981

Southwest Virginia and Northeast Tennessee

October 2009 – June 2011

Project Summary:

Appalachian Sustainable Development (ASD) formed in 1995 with the mission of building an economy in our region that is good for people and for the land. Our two core programs are in sustainable agriculture and sustainable forestry, and both utilize markets to connect producers to consumers and increase both the economic and ecological health of small farms and woodlot holdings

The Appalachian region of Virginia and Tennessee has for generations been largely defined by timber, coal and tobacco farming. Beginning in the mid 1990's, the profitability and acreage associated with tobacco began a steady decline. In 2004, the federal tobacco program ended. Many small farmers at that point faced the choice of selling their land or finding other crops or farm enterprises. Most of these are limited resource farmers.

This grant sought to use the collective experience and knowledge of several established Farmers Markets to create a climate where new Farmers Markets can hit the ground running and avoid some of the growing pains that often accompany Market development. By building stronger Farmers markets and other direct marketing opportunities, ASD believes that Appalachian farmers can begin to see a brighter future for the fruits of their labors and that we can effectively build a healthier, more robust rural economy in southwest Virginia and northeast Tennessee.

Project Approach:

For the past eight years, ASD has been developing markets for healthy local foods. Farmers markets have played an important role in this, beginning with the Abingdon Farmers Market, which grew from a handful of vendors in 2001, to a market with nearly 50 vendors and over 1600 customers on any given Saturday morning, in 2008. (Abingdon is a town of 8000 people). Building on that success, the growing demand for local foods, and requests from neighboring communities, ASD and the city of Bristol launched the Appalachian Farmers Market Association in 2008. With support from the USDA/FMPP, the Appalachian Farmers Market Association (AFMA) quickly built a core group comprised of 8 farmers market leaders, had hosted a conference and provided outreach and training to more than 75 farmer/vendors and ten market managers, had created a regional farmers market promotion plan, and selected five emerging markets to receive targeted financial support to expand their base of producers and customers. Although at the beginning of this project AFMA had only been operating for seven months, its value to both vendors and market managers/leaders was clear. Continued and expanded outreach, training and education for these groups will help improve established markets, and help launch and accelerate newer markets.

The Association and ASD also have found a strong reception to launching EBT at area markets and increasing the availability of senior and/or WIC Farmers Market Nutrition programs. ASD worked to establish EBT at the Abingdon Farmers Market in 2009 (with USDA FMPP support) and sought to replicate this at other Markets throughout the region

Lastly, the conditions for expansion of the production and marketing of local, pasture raised meats appeared very strong. Eight farmers came together to explore cooperative marketing of pastured beef, pork, lamb and poultry, utilizing but expanding beyond customer bases developed at farmers markets.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved:

Goal 1: Build upon and expand the work of the Appalachian Farmers Market Association (AFMA), including training, technical assistance and promotional assistance to Farmers markets and vendors in the region

- Hosted two successful winter conferences – one day events that brought together Farmers Market vendors and managers for workshops and presentations designed to help both groups to be more effective at selling and running Farmers Markets. Presentations were made by local producers and by folks brought in to share their expertise (successful vendors from other Markets, cooperative extension personnel from TN and VA, and marketing staff from State governments. 275 conference participants in February 2010; 130 participants in March 2011. Conferences also featured a Winter Market where vendors could set up a Market stand and sell to participants and to members of the general public who were invited to shop, and a lunch prepared by area chefs that featured locally grown foods from Market vendors.
- Established the Appalachian Seed Swap event on the first Sunday in December. The event consists of some educational presentations and then a seed swap event where folks can share, swap or sell seeds that have been locally saved. 35 folks attended in 2009 and 45 attended in 2010 (despite a winter storm that kept our keynote speaker from being able to present). This event is gaining traction and we hope that it will grow into a regular, regional event that draws folks from throughout the region.
- Maintained regular, monthly meetings (second Monday evening of each month) of AFMA at the Slater Center in Bristol, TN. These are opportunities for Market Managers to come together on a volunteer basis to share ideas that are working and seek guidance from others when things are not working so well. On occasion, we will host guest speakers to educate ourselves on other ways to improve our markets. Currently we have 24 Farmers Markets on our contact list, 13 of which are active in the monthly meetings. We also shape the AFMA agenda for promotional efforts at these meetings.
- Published an annual Local Food Guide which features local farmers, area restaurants and stores which purchase local foods, social program and cooperative extension contacts and a complete listing of all Farmers Markets in the region. The 2011 Guide lists 105 farms, several dozen stores and restaurants and is also available online at the AFMA website (and on the individual websites of many of the AFMA Markets. Over 5000 copies are distributed each year.
- Contract with a local writer to produce a weekly “Farmer of the Week” column during the Market season for area newspapers. This column highlights local food and makes the connection to local Farmers markets and the work of AFMA. These columns are also reproduced on the AFMA website.
- Maintain an active website that lists and maps the local Farmers Markets (with contact information + a mini web page for “active” AFMA Markets), shows Farmers Market related events on the calendar page, shares links with other groups promoting local food and farming, and publishes articles and items of interest to Farmers Market customers and vendors. There is also a direct link to the online Local Food Guide.
- Offered direct support to 8 “new and emerging” Farmers Markets through the AFMA Mini-grant program. These grants of \$1200 - \$2000.00 to young Farmers Markets help each of these

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Markets to carry out promotional activities while they strengthen their vendor and customer support. These funds have been instrumental in getting these Markets off to a strong start.

- Hosted a variety of independent events to provide educational opportunities to the Farmers Market community including, but not limited to:
 - Farm tours of successful, local farms – 2 tours in 2010 with 60 participants and 6 are scheduled in 2011 (2 of those have happened as of 6/27/11 with 32 participants)
 - Support of the Big Stone Gap Farmers Market Winter Workshop which attracts over 40 folks for a day of farming and marketing workshops. AFMA helps to advertise this event as well as teach classes.
 - Participate in meetings organized by the Tennessee and Virginia State Departments of Agriculture and Marketing to help broaden our support for and increase our educational offerings to the AFMA Markets.
 - Support efforts to make better connections with local hospitals to make healthy, local foods more of a part of the healing experience.
 - Worked with TN Market Managers to advertise a series of meeting in the spring of 2010 to address concerns with the State laws regarding Farmers Markets. These meetings were initiated by a “crackdown” on processed food vendors at several TN Farmers Markets. Local State Government officials were invited to these meeting to hear the concerns of vendors about problems with the State rules. These meetings did inspire lawmakers to take a fresh look at food regulation and how it applies to Farmers Market sales. As a result, several exemptions to the food laws were made for direct-to-consumer sales of eggs and honey. Other changes are being considered.
- Provided individual technical support to area growers through the support services offered by Appalachian Sustainable Development, including farm visits and phone and email consultations.
- Provided direct consultation to Market Managers as needed or requested. Often these needs are addressed at AFMA monthly meetings, but on occasion, direct participation in Market board or planning sessions is needed and helpful.
- Ordered two year subscriptions to “Farmers Markets Today” magazine for 12 of our area Markets in the spring of 2010 – this wonderful publication offers ideas and inspiration for Market Managers.

Goal 2: Increase access to healthy foods for lower income people by expanding the EBT program from one to three markets in the region, expanding use of WIC and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) coupons, and providing assistance and incentives to shop at Farmers Markets.

- AFMA was able to shepherd rapid growth in EBT availability at regional Farmers Markets from 1 in 2009 (Abingdon) to 3 in 2010 (Abingdon, Johnson County, TN and Lebanon) to 9 in 2011 (helped by a grant in Wise County, VA to help set up Wise County Markets)
- An additional grant from the Wholesome Wave Foundation enabled these AFMA Markets to offer their “Double Dollar” program which doubles the amount of each EBT transaction at Market – this incentive is instrumental in attracting SNAP customers to Market. Promotional

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flyers and posters advertising the benefit matching opportunity were shared with Social Services, Food Banks and other locations that SNAP customers might see them.

- Sara Cardinale (Market Manager for the Abingdon Market) has become a major resource person for establishing EBT at Farmers Markets throughout the region (and beyond). Our success would have been impossible without her knowledge and energy.
- Each participating Market worked with Social Services, Health Departments and Cooperative Extension to provide nutritional education and cooking demonstrations for SNAP customers at their Market.
- ASD's Healthy Families Family Farms program (which distributes "second quality" produce from our Appalachian Harvest packing facility to local food banks) advertised EBT opportunities at Farmers Markets in their educational materials, further spreading the word.
- AFMA support and advocacy for the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) was instrumental in establishing that program in all 8 of the Virginia Counties in which AFMA is active.

Goal 3: Increase the size and diversity of market options for healthy local meats and eggs through exploration and testing of regionally-based cooperative distribution models.

- Worked with local free-range and grass-finished meat producers to explore the possibility of cooperative marketing of products through online sales and institutional buyers
- Invited Kim Barker, founder of the Oklahoma City Food Cooperative to address our group and talk about the benefits and drawbacks of cooperative marketing from his perspective of starting and operating a successful co-op.
- Hired local farmer Michael Templeton to facilitate the cooperative marketing process.
 - Came up with the name "Appalachian Farm to Family Cooperative" (AFFC) and established a website for online sales and education – www.affc.locallygrown.net.
 - Monthly sales from the website began in May 2010 and were modest at first, but saw some significant growth in sales when Markets closed for the winter season. From October 2010 through March 2011, local producers sold over \$4,500.00 worth of meats and eggs via the online Market. 10 growers are currently active in the cooperative.
 - AFFC will hold a membership drive in July 2011 to try and boost cooperative members and sales by offering a "freezer filler" prize (containing over \$100.00 of donated product) to be drawn, raffle style, from among the dues-paying members.
 - Michael worked with ASD to explore institutional marketing opportunities with King College and Emory and Henry College. Began sales of ground beef to E&H in January 2011 which continued through the end of term in May. Sales are scheduled to continue for the fall semester. Spring sales amounted to over 1000# of ground beef (at \$3.50 / # to the producers).

Goal 4: Evaluate the impacts and effectiveness of Farmers Markets in the region in expanding sales and improving the viability of farmers and in meeting public interest in local foods.

- Hired an intern to carry out customer surveys at 6 AFMA Markets (representing Markets of varying sizes and capturing a fair representation of our region): Abingdon (VA), Bristol State

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Street (TN), Johnson County, TN, Jonesborough (TN), Lebanon (VA) and Clinch River (St. Paul, VA). These surveys are carried out using the “Rapid Market Assessment System” (or “dot” survey system) developed by Oregon State University. These surveys include:

- A customer count (hourly and a total # of customers for the day)
 - An estimate of what customers plan to spend
 - The frequency with which shoppers attend the Market
 - How customers first learned about the Market
 - Events that shoppers most enjoy at the Market
- We hope to repeat the surveys in 2012 to help measure growth at each Market over time. Results will be shared with all of the Market Managers on the AFMA list and will be used to drive future promotional efforts.

Beneficiaries:

- The 24 (and growing) Farmers Markets throughout our region which have benefitted either directly or indirectly from the work of AFMA through more efficient management techniques, better trained and inspired vendors and/or clearer public understanding of the benefits and availability of local foods.
- Hundreds of farmers and gardeners throughout the region who benefit from stronger markets for their agricultural goods.
- Thousands of local consumers who benefit from diverse, healthy markets close to where they live. *In 2011 we conducted customer surveys at 6 Farmers Markets in our region to attain baseline data on: # of customers, # of vendors, approximation of the money spent at the Markets, and information related to promotion and events at the Market. These figures will be used to measure future growth at these Markets.*
- Dozens of low income families benefit from the SNAP/EBT availability at a growing number of Farmers Markets. Benefit “doubling” funds make these opportunities even more enticing to low income families who gain the nutritional benefit from the fresh produce and other local foods on their tables.
- A stronger, more resilient rural economy due to increased local production and sales of agricultural products.

Lessons Learned:

- 1) In an area dominated by limited resource farmers, it seems that even a small fee (\$20.00) to attend a conference is a significant deterrent to participation. In 2010 we had 275 people show to a free conference in the midst of a freak winter storm. In 2011 we had 130 people (still historically a great turnout for our area) turn out for the conference in fair weather, but registration cost \$20.00.
- 2) Solid Market management is essential to the success of an EBT/SNAP program. Markets that operate on a volunteer management basis or that have some degree so instability in management or in the planning committee are probably not good fits for EBT, as the program demands a good deal of management and record-keeping to be successful. It can also be

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difficult to make EBT work cost-effectively at a small Market (fewer than 12 vendors) – difficult, but not impossible.

- 3) Selling locally grown products to local institutional buyers is a challenge mostly because most of the food services are run by strong, established providers (Sysco, Aramark, and others). Breaking through into their vendor network takes persistence and some strong and vocal support from stakeholders (students, faculty, staff, etc.)

Additional Information:

AFMA website: www.appfma.org

Patricia Zalewski-Harris (Lebanon Farmers Market) and Terry Napier (Bristol State Street Farmers Market) have both been particularly helpful to the project, logging volunteer time well beyond what could be expected.

Sara Cardinale (Abingdon) has been instrumental in our success with establishing EBT capability at AFMA Markets – her knowledge and enthusiasm for the project is refreshing.

Other market managers who have volunteered time and/or been notably active with AFMA include: Juanita Kelly, Doris Fletcher and Connie Kessinger (Clinch River/St. Paul); Chillys Case (Glade Spring); Don Dennis (Johnson City); Tamara McNaughton (Johnson County, TN); Heather Halsey (Jonesborough); Elizabeth Jones (Big Stone Gap); Judy Shelton (Greeneville); Suzie Richert (Wytheville); Carmen Cantrell (Norton). Thank you for sharing your time!

My thanks to the staff of the Slater Center in Bristol, TN for hosting our monthly meetings, our yearly Seed Swap events and the 2011 AFMA Conference.

And to the staff of Coburn Creative in Glade Spring, VA for their fine work designing the AFMA website and the Local Food Guide.

And to my colleagues at ASD for their support and guidance throughout this project.

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