

Coalfields Micro-Farm Alliance

Rural Appalachian Improvement League of Mullens, WV received \$16,357 to develop and promote a new farmers market in Pineville, West Virginia, that serves Wyoming and McDowell Counties. Funds were used to provide educational programming; recruit farmers, purchase signs, tables, and other equipment; and pay for promotional materials for the market.

Final Report

Final Performance Report

Date: October 31, 2011

Recipient Name: Rural Appalachian Improvement League, Inc.

Title of Project: Coalfields Micro-Farm Alliance Grant

Grant Number: WV-213-2008-G-0769.

Location: WV

Project Summary

The highest concentration of poverty-stricken counties in the United States is in the coalfields regions of eastern Kentucky, southwestern Virginia, and southern West Virginia. For the last century, this region has depended almost entirely on the coal industry for its sustenance, and this dependence has created not only economic depression but also loss of diversified skills that were once necessary to survival in these rugged mountain areas. Neither Wyoming nor McDowell counties have a farmers' market or any type of local or specifically regional farm support organization. The nearest farmers' markets are in Logan, Beckley, and Princeton - all at least an hour's drive from Pineville. When farmers do sell directly to consumers, it is typically out of the back of a truck beside the road. Consolidating and organizing these scattered vendors will allow collective marketing and other resource sharing, benefiting vendors and consumers alike.

As a result of this initiative family garden spots are appearing all within the area we serve and today our community garden is the best ever. While we do not have a local formal Farmers Market at this time our planning is to keep the initiative in force until we can find volunteers to take on the staffing responsibility. The CMFA founded the Fall Festival that is a successful event each year that allows families to sell products produced in their garden.

Project Approach

1. The goals and objectives of the project.

Until the middle of the twentieth century most families living in the Appalachian coalfield region relied on a garden to provide their fresh fruits and vegetables. With the coming of the Great Society, welfare, commodities, and food stamps the second and subsequent generations of mountain people found that gardening was not necessary to provide food from the garden. At the end of WW 2 nearly all families had a garden spot. During the next fifty years most of these gardens were abandoned. Our goal was to get families back in the garden to raise food for themselves and enough to take to the farmers market that was established with help from funding from this grant.

Expected Outcomes and Project Evaluation

1. Established Coalfields Micro-Farm Alliance—*these goals were achieved.*

- a. Create a farmers' market in Pineville, WV for 2009 season
 - i. Goal of five consistent vendors at peak of 2009 season
 - ii. In first year, goal will be working directly with at least ten farmers to enhance the production capacity, marketing, and sustainability of their farm operations
 - iii. Market will become self-sustaining with volunteers
 - iv. Vendors will compose a majority of the market board
 - v. Market will have a measurable positive impact on incomes of 'micro-farms' in Wyoming and McDowell Counties
 - vi. Market will have a measurable positive impact on Pineville businesses
 - vii. Market will be a well-documented model that can be repeated in other coalfields counties

- b. Study feasibility of region-wide Coalfields Micro-Farm Alliance
 - i. Produce feasibility study by 10/2009
 - ii. Will be a road map for organizational expansion
 - iii. Will make recommendations about cooperative farmer marketing and purchasing groups, regional labeling, community commercial kitchens, and value-added marketing opportunities
 - iv. Will evaluate partnership opportunities for region-wide CMFA
 - v. Will make recommendations for sustainability of CMFA
 - vi. Will determine need to launch CMFA as a separate 501(c)(3)

2. The type of strategies that were used to achieve those goals

Educating the people of the fact that gardening was not only a way to provide food for the table but could help with providing cash for needs by selling excess at the Farmers Market. We brought residents to monthly meetings to relearn the skills in farming.

3. The main activities that you did in support of those strategies just listed.)

Provided 1 to 3 staff members to bring community, experienced, and potential gardeners together to build a coalition to grow and produce for their table and an excess to sell at the weekly Farmers Market.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved

The Coalfields Micro-Farm Alliance (CMFA) was a program of Rural Appalachian Improvement League (RAIL), and provided farm support in Wyoming and McDowell Counties. The primary activity for the first year of CMFA was to organize a farmers' market in Pineville, WV. CMFA helped ensure that farmers in Wyoming and McDowell Counties met the production demands of this market by 'growing farmers' through educational programming, on-farm trainings, marketing assistance, regional networking, increased technology and information access, and encouragement of cooperative efforts.

The secondary project activity was to produce a feasibility study for sustaining and expanding CMFA to a region-wide organization. Various potential partnerships between existing non-profit groups and government agencies was explored, and recommendations made that will

help replicate the Pineville market model across the region, and that will help fill in the five-county coverage gap of the WVU Extension Service.

Beneficiaries.

- a. Farmers in Wyoming and McDowell Counties will see increased marketing opportunities, income, and self-sufficiency
- b. Businesses in Pineville, WV will see increased income as an indirect result of market
- c. Overall economy of coalfields region will become more diversified
- d. Agricultural land/natural environment will be preserved in low-impact production
- e. Farmers, farmers' markets, and other organizations in coalfields will receive support, access to resources, and new partnership opportunities as a result of CMFA
- f. Organizations like WVU and Heifer, Int., may have a framework by which they can expand their activities without significantly increased cost
- g. Citizens of coalfields counties will benefit by having better opportunities to purchase fresh and healthy food products, as well as benefiting from the creation of a regular community social event

Lessons Learned.

The CMFA program was well staffed and continued for two years due to a hunger program grant from the Presbyterian Church and a small grant from Food Lion Stores. In an impoverished area volunteers are scarce who will commit to long term program management positions.

Consequently without funding the program is somewhat diminished at this time. However the results of the program are ongoing in that the Fall Festival is an annual event, the community garden is thriving and expanding, and the many gardens established are still providing fresh vegetables for the table as well as surpluses to go to produce cash. The Farmers Market is still high on RAIL's priority of projects to follow up on. Selling produce is now done at the monthly craft show.

Additional Information:

Given the enduring economic and environmental depredations of the coal industry, the coalfield region badly needs a more diversified and sustainable economy. The topography, climate, isolation, and economy of the coalfields represents a significant challenge to many types of traditional agriculture, but these challenges also provides a framework and common ground for any regional agriculture organization to work within. Rather than offering competition with coal mining, agriculture represents an alternative option for some families to increase their income. A farmers' market program provides this opportunity and also gives consumers a place to buy fresh, healthy food. Please know your assistance in helping deal with these challenging issues is most appreciated. We thank you very much and be assured your funding was used to help families in the coalfields live a better lifestyle.

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