

Final Report
Grant No. 12-25-B-0656
Specialty Crops Block Grant Program
South Carolina Department of Agriculture

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Introduction

The South Carolina Department of Agriculture received \$110,424.99 from the Specialty Crops Block Grant Program, Grant No. 12-25-B-0656. The Department used the funds to promote and encourage food safety, to provide website development and internet marketing opportunities, to provide for farmers markets at two major universities, to support specialty events at state farmers markets, and to expand a restaurant program called “fresh on the menu”. These efforts have expanded the scope of the South Carolina Marketing and Branding Program by addressing food safety and handling issues to help insure the quality of locally grown products. A new audience of young adults is exposed to healthy, locally grown products and information related to healthy eating habits. The program funds have supported retail and wholesale through flower shows and other special events at South Carolina’s three state farmers markets. The restaurant program has expanded with more than two hundred restaurants highlighting locally grown products on the menu.

Projects

Project items, outcomes and goals achieved, beneficiaries and lessons learned are included in this section.

Item 1. *Food Safety Audits – To provide incentives to encourage firms in the fruit and vegetable industry to engage in food safety audits that encourage good agricultural practices and good handling practices from the field to wholesale.*

Funds for this project allow the Department to provide food safety audits for 30 firms. This USDA/SCDA audit costs \$75/hour and \$1.32/mile. With these funds, the Department can offer an incentive to cover \$400 of the cost for these audits. The expectation is to insure that at least this many firms are practicing good agricultural and good handling practices. The audits will show these firms where they are falling short so that proper adjustments can be made.

Outcomes and Goals Achieved, Item 1.

The Grading and Inspection Division put out notices to the produce industry of the availability of the incentive for the GAP and GHP audits. As a result, the Grading and Inspection Division has met the goal of providing audits to 30 firms. It has also created interest in the issue and has many additional requests for the audits. The Department will continue the program with additional funds from the latest Specialty Crops Block Grant. The Good Agricultural Practice and Good Handling Practice Food Verification Program is a FDA/USDA developed program taught by the department's trained personnel.

Beneficiaries and Lessons Learned, Item 1.

The beneficiaries are the 30 firms and their employees who now have a better understanding of food safety and food safety certification issues. Firms are beginning to understand that food safety requirements and concerns will continue to advance. Each of these firms has customers who also benefit from a safer product.

The lessons learned generally center around starting earlier with notification of the program. Scheduling issues also came up since these audits need to be done when firms are in the busy season. Some of these firms are very seasonal and this delayed performing some of the audits.

Item 2. *Website Development/Internet Marketing – To improve website, highlighting locally grown information and availability. To install Market Maker as an internet marketing tool.*

The expectation is to have the Market Maker program installed and set up. Clemson University will be offering training on the program and how to use it and will be signing producers up for the program. It is expected that at least 75

specialty crops producers will have information up on the site and operating by the end of this grant period.

Outcomes and Goals Achieved, Item 2.

The outcomes and goals of this project were met as the SC MarketMaker site went on line in February, 2009, <http://sc.marketmaker.uiuc.edu/>. The site has 338 producers and 84 farmers markets on the site (see attached). The MarketMaker site has had more than 1.25 million hits and more than 40,000 users since going live. This was accompanied by an upgrade of the Certified SC Grown website, <https://www.certifiedscgrown.com/>, which went online in April, 2009 and has had more than 3.9 million hits. The Certified SC Grown program has more than 600 members that are listed on the site in directory form.

Beneficiaries and Lessons Learned, Item 2.

The beneficiaries include the more than 300 producers who have signed on to the Marketmaker site and producers that use the farmers markets listed on the site. Going forward it will benefit many more producers as they learn of the availability and effectiveness of this internet marketing tool. Any customer with internet access now has an effective way to locate products of interest.

Lessons learned include the need to acquire assistance in locating and signing up producers. The Department was fortunate to receive enthusiastic support from extension and Farm Bureau in signing up producers and helping load information. The Department also learned the importance of having work shops and extension meetings to educate producers in how to use the site and how to load and update information.

Item 3. *USC Farmers Market – To develop and operate a farmers market at the University of South Carolina using students to run the market with assistance from the Department.*

The University has expressed interest in working with the Department to set up a farmers market on campus. The Department will assist students in setting up this market. The expectation is to have the market set up and operating by the first of May. Exposing 30,000 students, faculty and staff to South Carolina grown products.

Outcomes and Goals Achieved, Item 3.

The “Healthy Carolina Farmers Market” has been a great collaborative success with the South Carolina Department of Agriculture, the University of South Carolina and the USC Student Government. The main campus in Columbia has more than 30,000 students and staff. The market was set up in the middle of campus near the student union building where traffic is greatest. The first market was launched in September, 2008 ran through

November, 2008 and picked back up in the spring of 2009 with dates that ran through spring and summer into fall all the way to November, 2009. The Department assisted with promoting the farmers market and had a great opening event that included the wife of the USC President and the SC Commissioner of Agriculture sharing in the ribbon cutting and opening of the market. The State Newspaper, WIS-TV and Free Times all covered the market opening. Posters are placed around campus for each market date (see attached). Each market has had 15-26 vendors selling locally produced fruits and vegetables. Total sales per market, as reported by vendors, range from \$3,635 to \$13,490. The Department initially provided a staff person to assist in managing the market. This person helped train a graduate student to manage the market and now the University pays a part-time salary to a graduate student to manage the market. The market manager conducted an opinion survey to gather thoughts from participating vendors (see attached) and comments were overwhelmingly positive. Additional information gathered from the survey is listed below:

Average amount of money spent per/person	\$8.69
Breakdown by percent of attendees	
Faculty	6.8
Staff	21.6
Student	67.4
Community Member	4.2
Breakdown of specialty crops purchased as percent	
Flowers	11.0
Fruits	22.1
Vegetables	42.8
Market visit, planned or unplanned	
Planned	60.2
Unplanned	39.8
How often do you visit the market?	
Every time	60.8
First time	20.3
Second time	10.8
Third time	4.7
More than three times	3.4

Beneficiaries and Lessons Learned, Item 3.

There are three groups that directly benefit from a well run farmers market: the farmers, the consumers/students and the community. The 15-26 participating farmers have direct access to markets, while consumers/students have access to locally grown products. The farmers market benefits the community by helping provide a setting to promote healthy eating habits, nutrition education and by helping maintain important ties linking rural and

urban populations. An additional beneficiary is Clemson University who had representatives visit and evaluate the “Healthy Carolina Farmers Market” and moved to set up a similar market on the upstate campus.

A number of lessons have been learned from this process of setting up and running a farmers market on a college campus. Some of the lessons identified by the collaborating partners are listed below:

- Need to coordinate the time, location, and season to meet the needs of farmers, consumers, and the local community.
- Need a central, visible and permanent location.
- Need a diversity of products and producers and need to find a balance related to competition.
- Need fair and enforceable rules and regulations
- Need a strong market manager who is passionate about the market
- Need a management structure that allows vendor input
- Need a marketing plan that clearly defines a target audience with a strategy for reaching that audience.
- Need adequate funding
- Need community involvement
- Need continuous self-evaluation.

Item 4. *Clemson University Farmers Market – To develop and operate a farmers market at Clemson University using students to run the market with assistance from the Department. (This project was approved as an adjustment to the original proposal)*

Clemson University has expressed interest in working with the Department to set up a farmers market on campus. The Department will assist students in setting up this market. The expectation is to have the market set up and operating by summer of 2009. This project will expose 20,000 students, faculty and staff to South Carolina grown products.

Outcomes and Goals Achieved, Item 4.

The Clemson “Farm Fresh Market” is a collaboration of the South Carolina Department of Agriculture and the Clemson University, College of Agriculture, Forestry and Life Sciences. This market was inspired by the “Healthy Carolina Farmers Market” at USC described above. Organizers from Clemson visited the USC market and developed a plan for the Clemson market. A site was selected near the Student Union in the middle of campus where traffic is heaviest. The market began operating at the beginning of the new session in August and has set the third Tuesday of the month as the standard date for operation (see attached flyer). The Department provided assistance with market management until a student manager was selected in September and helped recruit farmers to participate. The Department assisted with promoting the market and had a great opening event that included the Dean of the College of Agriculture, Forestry and Life Sciences and the SC Commissioner of Agriculture. The market has gotten off to a good start with 19 vendors participating. Evaluations and surveys will be conducted at the end of the first season in November, 2009.

Beneficiaries and Lessons Learned, Item 4.

As with the USC market the beneficiaries are the 19 farmers who participated, the consumers and students, and the community. Benefits will continue as the market will be an ongoing activity on campus. The market will provide a venue to include information about locally grown products and the healthy benefits of fresh fruits and vegetables. It provides an opportunity to influence and educate a young adult community.

The Clemson market has benefited from the USC Market’s early entry into this market and learned from its experience. The primary lessons learned are to plan well, start early and use the expertise available.

Item 5. *Plant and Flower Shows, Other Special Events – To provide promotional funds to support specialty events at the three state farmers markets, in particular Spring and Fall plant and flower shows.*

Funds used in this project will be used to promote these special events with the expectation that visitors to the market will exceed those numbers that were estimated in previous years. The funds provided for similar activities in the 2006-2007 grant made a significant difference in the traffic at these markets and the expectations for this grant is to again increase traffic.

Outcomes and Goals Achieved, Item 5.

The Department manages three state farmer’s markets in Columbia, Greenville and Florence. All three markets sponsored spring plant and flower shows in April. Columbia and Greenville sponsored fall shows. All of these events were a great success. The events lasted four days and highlighted the greenhouse/nursery industry. The promotion

supports the local vendors and provided opportunity for other vendors from across the state to participate. Specialty crops funds were used, along with farmers market fees, to provide a comprehensive advertising and promotional program. Estimates from staff and the use of traffic counters indicate that more than 150,000 people attended the spring shows. This represents an 11% increase in traffic from the year before. A survey of vendors indicates that sales also increased with more than a 10% increase from the year before. Participating vendors indicated that they were very pleased with the results of this year's show. The Florence market had an additional benefit with the grand opening of a new building. A dedication ceremony was held at the Plant and Flower Show that brought a great deal of coverage from local media.

The two fall shows held in October were also a success with more than 60,000 people in attendance for the shows in Columbia and Greenville. The promotional funds provided a great opportunity to reach the general public about these special events. The Department provided banners and signs with all the new logo related to SC locally grown. All available vendor spaces were taken for all the shows.

Beneficiaries and Lessons Learned, Item 5.

The beneficiaries were the more than 200 farmer vendors who participate in the plant and flower shows. They were able increase sales and also acquire exposure that translates into opportunities for increased sales in their yearly business. The many consumers mentioned above have had an opportunity to purchase locally produced products and experience the enjoyment of going out to the farmers market and enjoy these seasonal events. These events help maintain important social ties, linking rural and urban populations.

Lessons learned include the importance of planning, promotion and adequate staffing to support the crowds. The Department is also planning for means to provide additional opportunities for participating in the shows since all space is taken. A new building in Florence has helped. A new state farmers market in Columbia will provide additional space to expand opportunities.

Item 6. *“Fresh on the Menu” – To work with selected restaurants to place locally grown products on the menu and use the certified South Carolina emblems to identify locally grown products.*

This project started off with a bang last year in Charleston. Interest has grown and other areas are interested in participating in this program. Expectations are to move in to the Myrtle Beach area and the Columbia area this year with at least 20 restaurants participating.

Outcomes and Goals Achieved, Item 6.

The “Fresh on the Menu” program has exceeded all expectations. Since beginning in Charleston with 60 local restaurants initially participating, it has grown quickly into a statewide program with more than 225 restaurants participating. The Department is assisting these restaurants in finding and sourcing locally grown products. Chefs have embraced this program and regularly develop menu items with local product. Department has also conducted work shops with major food service companies and farmers to help them understand and overcome logistical problems in sourcing locally produced fruits and vegetables. The Department has provided the “Fresh on the Menu” materials to participating restaurants to use in promotions and to designate their status in the program. The “Fresh on the Menu” program is highlighted on the Department’s website at <http://agriculture.sc.gov/>.

Beneficiaries and Lessons Learned, Item 6.

The beneficiaries include the chefs in the 225 restaurants who have new opportunities to source and promote locally grown products. Restaurant patrons have new opportunities to choose menu items produced with local products. Participating farmers and farmers markets have new opportunities to sell into a higher value market. Farmers also have opportunities to contract to produce specialty items such as herbs.

While the Department knew of the growing interest in the “Fresh on the Menu” program, it underestimated how fast this interest would grow. This caused some logistical problems in getting materials and providing needed assistance to these restaurants. The Department had to put additional staff on this program to keep up with the interest.