**Project 8. Promoting Minnesota Specialty Crops to Wholesale Markets, Institutions and Consumers**

**Renewing the Countryside**

This project is not funded by any other state or federal grant programs

**Project Abstract**

Many small to mid-scale specialty crop producers are interested in selling to wholesale and institutional markets: restaurants, school food service, caterers, and grocers. Diversifying into these markets can help producers grow their business and manage risk.

While producers can directly market to consumers through a number of avenues, there is a considerable need for expanded direct marketing links between farmers and food buying institutions. This project seeks to continue a series of statewide “Got Local?” farmer-buyer networking workshops that expand opportunities for small- and mid-scale specialty crop producers to direct market to wholesale and institutional food buyers.

We will partner with the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Family Development and the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture to deliver eight Got Local workshops throughout the state targeted at food service, wholesale, and institutional buyers. Workshops will include farmer-buyer “speed-networking,” training for growers on post-harvest handling for wholesale markets, and sessions on building farm to institutions/wholesale relationships. We will also conduct farmer/buyer field trips to school cafeterias and local farms to build greater understanding and solidify relationships. Finally, we will conduct outreach to the public to inspire them to request locally-grown specialty crops from their schools, institutions, restaurants, and grocers.

**Project Purpose**

Direct marketing has become a vital strategy for many producers seeking to maintain viable small or mid-sized specialty crop farming operations. While farmers have several established avenues for directly marketing to consumers they often find it difficult to connect with wholesale and institutional buyers who want to serve local foods. At the same time, there is an increasing demand for local foods. In 2011, there were 145 school districts participating in Farm to School in Minnesota: that represents 900 schools and 558,000 students.

This project addresses that gap by creating spaces where food service directors, institutional buyers, restaurant buyers, grocers, caterers, and food distributors can effectively and efficiently connect with specialty crop producers. The project also provides practical training to farmers and food service personnel that will increase the success of these farmer-buyer relationships. It also strengthens public interest in Minnesota Grown specialty crops.

This project has four major goals: 1) to develop new and expanded markets for Minnesota specialty crop producers; 2) to increase the volume and diversity of locally and sustainably grown specialty crops being served in school cafeterias, Minnesota restaurants, catering services, groceries,and other institutions; and 3) to increase farmers knowledge on post harvest handling for wholesale markets; 4) to expand demand for locally/regionally grown specialty crops.

This project will build on the series of successful “Got Local?” Farmer-Buyer networking events Renewing the Countryside has organized and implemented annually across Minnesota since 2008. We will conduct this round of workshops in partnership with University of Minnesota Extension Center for Family Development and with the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. Both of these entities have been partners in past workshops – and both bring a wealth of connections and expertise to the table.

As we have heard from numerous participants, the Got Local workshops are a highly effective mechanism to establish new revenue streams for Minnesota specialty crop producers as well as local sources for Minnesota food buyers. Recently, 200 individuals who attended Got Local workshops were surveyed. Fifty responses were returned, and the feedback was very positive. One attendee wrote that “this reinforced my belief in the importance of buying locally - enjoyed meeting the farmers and hearing their stories.” Most farmers who completed the survey said they had made a new business relationship at a Got Local workshop, with a few finding 5 or more new customers as a result of the event, and maintaining those relationships over several years. Furthermore, over 75% of food producers and buyers who filled out the survey said they would attend again.

Three new components will be added to this round of workshops. First, we will include training for growers on post-harvest handling for wholesale markets. This knowledge is critical for farmers to be successful in this portion of the food industry. The workshops give producers important information about industry standards in terms of product quality and quantities for various goods, freshness and appearance, packaging, as well as information about delivery options. Second, we will implement farmer/food service field trips. In each region where we hold the workshops, we will plan and implement a follow-up field trip that will bring school food service people together with local farmers for a joint tour of a school cafeteria and of two farms. This experiential learning will help to solidify understanding and relationships between farmers and food service personnel.

To date, five farmer-buyer networking workshops have been held under the 2010 grant with over 270 people attending. Two of these workshops were held in conjunction with Farm to School conferences and one in conjunction with the Immigrant and Minority Farmers conference. A final workshop will be held in the early fall of 2012. Recent research from the University of Minnesota notes the importance of internal advocates when it comes to purchasing local foods from farmers. The 2012 grant expands upon the previous work by taking buyers to farms and thus strengthening their connection and their interest and by adding post-harvest handling training.

Project Potential Impact

Since 2008, we have helped produce 18 Farmer/Buyer Networking events. Over 1,100 people attended these workshops. Given our past success, and our ability to bring on additional outreach partners (e.g. Minnesota Grown, Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, etc), we are certain that attendance at the 8 workshops will be at least 500, and participation in the Farmer/Buyer field trips will be at least 200. These workshops will expand interest in sourcing local specialty crops, will result in new business connections, and will train growers and food service professionals to work more effectively with each other.

We are excited to include new and needed training for producers on post-harvest handling for wholesale markets as part of these workshops. The impact of this component will be to give farmers the information and tools they need to be successful. Without proper post-harvest handling, it is difficult for growers to maintain successful business relationships with farmers. We will also work to incorporate Food Safety training through the Agricultural Health and Safety Program at the University of Minnesota.

The farmer/food service field trips that are a part of this proposal will increase understanding between farmers and buyers and solidify interest and commitment from buyers to sourcing local, specialty crops.

While all our meetings will take place in Minnesota, we will market the program to producers and buyers across state lines – especially in areas where there are regional hubs like Fargo, Sioux Falls, and La Crosse. We will also reach out to beginning farmers through our Young Organic Stewards network that we manage in partnership with MOSES (Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service). We also have strong links to socially disadvanted farmers through the Rural Enterprise Center and the Hmong American Farmers Association.

All of the above components lead to increased economic success for farmers, better foods for children in our schools, and ultimately, they help support a shift in consumer tastes and behavior towards greater consumption of locally and sustainably grown specialty crops.

Expected Measurable Outcomes

We have identified four specific indicators of success for the project: 1) number of participants registered for workshops, 2) number of new business relationships developed between specialty crop producers and institutional food buyers, 3) economic value of new specialty crop sales resulting from workshops and field trips, and 4) specific alteration of post-harvest handling practices by pecialty crop producers as a result of workshop participation. Outcomes include:

Goal: Increased relationships between growers and buyers

Target: Establish 50 new grower-buyer relationships through workshops and field trips. Performance Measure: Information collected from evaluation being developed for this project. Benchmark: Number of grower/buyer relationships prior to field trips and workshops.

Goal: Increase farmers understanding of post-harvest handling for wholesale markets

Target: 50 farmers will increase their knowledge through this training.

Performance Measure: Information collected from evaluation being developed for this project. Benchmark: Increase in knowledge based on a pre and post workshop survey

Evaluation results will be published online, shared with partnering organizations, and reported to SCBGP.

Budget Summary and Narrative

Budget Summary and Narrative

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Category | Estimated Project Expense | Matching Dollars |
| PERSONNEL | $25872 | $32000 |
| FRINGE BENEFITS | $6468 | $6000 |
| EQUIPMENT |  |  |
| SUPPLIES |  | $300 |
| CONTRACTUAL | $7,000 |  |
| OTHER |  |  |
| a) Field Trip Costs | $6,400 |  |
| b) Communication | $600 |  |
| c) Speaker fees | $1,600 | $8,000 |
| d) Printing | $2060 |  |
| PROJECT INCOME |  | $7,000 |
|  |  |  |
| TOTAL | $50000 | $46,300 |

Budget Narrative

1) PERSONNEL – $25872

Brett Olson, Creative Director, .50 FTE, $9760 (6 months per year)

.25 FTE, $ 4880 (6 months per year)

Sarah Wolbert, Program Manager, .50 FTE, $7488 (6 months per year)

.25 FTE, $3744 (6 months per year)

2) FRINGE BENEFITS – 25% for both employees. $6468

3) EQUIPMENT – 0

4) SUPPLIES

5) CONTRACTUAL

1. $5,000 – To MISA to coordinate post harvest handling and wholesaling components of the workshops. MISA will be receiving additional support from the Family Farmed organization who has successfully delivered these workshops in several states. Because this is a partnership, rather than strictly a contract, we have not put this piece out to bid.
2. $2,000 – To hire an evaluator to design and complete an evaluation of the project. We will post request for proposals for an evaluator in the first quarter of the grant period. Evaluator will be paid for the project and not on an hourly wage.

6) OTHER –

a) Field Trip Costs - Bus rental $400; Farmer Stipends 2 x $200 = $400 = $800/trip x 8 trips = $6,400

b) Communications: long distance $600

c) Speaker/Trainer fees – 2 per workshop at $100 each speaker = $200 x 8=$1,600

d) Printing 5,000 brochures for public outreach event = $1,500

7) PROJECT INCOME – Registration fee of $10/person x approx 700 people = $7,000. This income will be used to offset the cost of the lunch provided at the workshop. Caterers will be asked to purchase ingredients from local farmers for the meals.

In kind provided by MISA, Center for Family Development, and Family Farmed.

**Work Plan**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Project Activity** | **Who** | **Timeline** |
| **Meet with partner organizations to establish individual agendas, workshop locations, and assist in outreach and recruitment of workshop participants** | **Renewing the Countryside (RTC) staff, MISA staff and Center for Family Development (CFD) staff** | **November 2012** |
| **Develop marketing and outreach strategies - including advertising, internet registration, list development** | **RTC Staff and Partner Organizations – Brett Olson** | **November 2012** |
| **Work with Family Farmed to plan post harvest handling workshop component.** | **MISA – Jane Jewett** | **November 2012** |
| **Identify and hire evaluator for project. Provide info so he/she can develop evaluation plant** | **RTC staff will hire** | **November 2012** |
| **Begin marketing and outreach to invite producers, buyers, and presenters** | **RTC Staff and Partner Organizations – Brett Olson; Sarah Wolbert** | **November 2012** |
| **Hold series of 8 networking workshops** | **RTC Staff and Partenr Organizations** | **December 2012 - April, 2013** |
| **Conduct follow-up survey to establish what connections were made, orders placed, and practices modified as a result of workshop attendance** | **Evaluator** | **December 2012 - May 2013** |
| **Meet with partner organizations to identify dates and locations for farmer/buyer field and cafeteria tours** | **RTC Staff and Partner Organizations** | **January 2013** |
| **Begin marketing and outreach to invite producers, buyers, and presenters to field and cafeterial tours** | **RTC Staff and Partner Organizations – Brett Olson** | **March 2013** |
| **Hold series of 8 Field Day Tours** | **RTC Staff and partner organizations** | **April - September, 2013** |
|  |  |  |
| **Assemble all data gathered and publish on website, share with partner organizations, other interested individuals, and report to SCBGP** | **Evaluator and RTC staff** | **October 2013** |

Project Oversight

Brett Olson, Creative Director, will supervise implementation of all project activities with oversight and guiding direction from Renewing the Countryside Executive Director Jan Joannides. Mr. Olson will carry out management functions (as directed on work plan) including the establishment of partnerships with other organizations, marketing and outreach efforts, inviting speakers/presenters, and emceeing workshops. Sarah Wolbert, Program Manager, will conduct specific responsibilities to ensure the smooth flow and function of the workshops such as managing registration, payment collection, and scheduling.

Jane Jewett at MISA will provide leadership on the post-harvest handling and wholesaling workshops.

Project Commitment

This project has received support a wide variety of Minnesota Specialty Crop Producers, many of whom are past workshop attendees satisfied with the outcomes of their attendance. In past years we have actively partnered with Minnesota Grown, the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, and Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, and the Initiative Foundation, and demonstrated a strong ability to work in conjunction with partners to develop successful events.

We have also engaged an existing partnership with the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota to carry out the outreach and advertising efforts outlined in our workplan and essential to the success of the project. Further support has also been expressed by Valley Natural Foods who selected these events as the beneficiary of their Green Stamp Community Donation Program.