

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This project was supported by RSDP (Regional Sustainable Development Partnership). With the help of a graduate student (the author, hereafter referred to in first person) from the University of Minnesota, Agua Gorda Cooperative undertook a project from February to May of 2020 with the following objectives:

1. Research and develop a market analysis for Cooperativa Agua Gorda's local produce.
2. Develop a marketing plan for the Cooperative identifying opportunities for establishing and growing business partnerships.
3. Outline Cooperativa Agua Gorda's key network opportunities and recommendations for Central Minnesota region.

The motivation for this project came from seeking other options to sell Agua Gorda's products in and around Long Prairie, Minnesota.

We used a 60 mile radius to determine the region for our market analysis and the following question to guide the research project:

How can Agua Gorda Cooperative use a marketing strategy and a regional market analysis to illustrate the value of their farm to the community, build partnerships with stakeholders, and take advantage of the social and capital resources that are available to farmers in the region?

As part of this project, I completed a literature review, conducted 39 interviews, participated in 5 webinars, organized an undergraduate internship to support Agua Gorda this summer, and continue to have conversations with stakeholders with regards to Agua Gorda's objectives to share resources and maintain the energy of this project.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Of all the information gathered as part of this research project, it is clear that there exist many opportunities to improve the support for wholesale farmers and buyers. Some of the obstacles I identified that prevent the success of wholesale farmers in West Central Minnesota include:

- The imbalance of advanced technical capacity of larger distributors and markets as compared to small and medium-sized farm enterprises
- Poor use of data to communicate the economic, social, and environmental benefits of supporting wholesale farmers to the public and buyers
- Lack of cultural competency of employees of state agencies and the accessibility of state and federal resources for farmers whose first language is not English
- Need for technical and physical infrastructure to strengthen the regional coordination of food systems
- Messaging that fails to communicate to institutions the multiplier effect of their investments in regional farmers and the potential to develop a regional brand of agritourism
- Little technical assistance to help wholesale farmers with financing and marketing



SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS FOR AGUA GORDA COOPERATIVE, IN BRIEF

Within the next 3 months:

- Identify between 3 and 5 new markets or buyers to diversify your marketing channels. Use the resources in Appendix B to follow up on the conversations that we started with buyers in the region as part of this project.
- Invest money either in the technical tools or people who can take control of communication between what's happening on the farm and the buyers. Maintaining communication and the relationships is key for sales.
- Finish the website launch and take advantage of the marketing recommendations in this report to avoid having to come up with offers or specific messages.

Within the next 6 months:

- Make a list of local businesses and influential people in Long Prairie and communicate with them to highlight that Agua Gorda is indeed open and ask them about the opportunity to share updates through their newsletters, emails, videos on Facebook, etc.
- Begin to develop relationships with the restaurants in the region so that when they open they already have information about Agua Gorda's product availability.
- Identify between 5 and 10 people that can serve as mentors to improve the development of Agua Gorda as a business and ask them if they can provide advice.

Within the next year:

- Review 2020 finances with a certified public accountant to identify opportunities to refine the marketing strategy, set sales goals for 2021, and identify funding resources that can support these goals.
- Begin, or continue to develop, a relationship with the Department of Agriculture, nonprofits, the University of Minnesota and technical colleges in the region that can help with the recruitment of new farmer members for Agua Gorda.
- Review the website to see where there are opportunities to improve the copy and the ordering systems.
- Based on the opportunities and goals of Agua Gorda, seek local businesses you can work with on projects to increase the visibility of the Cooperative in the community and the region.

COVID-19's disruption of the food system in March 2020 represents a unique moment in history and an opportunity to evaluate which systems we want to preserve, change, and eliminate altogether. The losses for farmers this year illustrate the fragility of the systems that control the production and movement of food at all scales, but they also indicate the coming of a new era. I hope that the information in this report advances the conversation of developing infrastructure for wholesale farmers, systemic racism, and ways that we can move forward with love, compassion, and humility to do better at the community, state, and regional level.