

# Regional food infrastructure network

## Final Report for CNE07-033

Project Type: Sustainable Community Innovation

Funds awarded in 2007: \$25,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2010

Region: Northeast

State: Pennsylvania

Project Leader:

[Leah Smith](#)

PASA

## Project Information

### Summary:

The Regional Food Infrastructure Network Project has provided networking, consulting, and educational opportunities. These resources and opportunities have been made available for livestock farmers developing value-added products and diversifying marketing strategies. In the early stages of the project, PASA assembled working groups and identified farmers and operations interested in developing business plans for value-added processing. From 3,000 surveys, 300 farmers contacted PASA and explained their interest in adding value to their farm products. Of these farmers, 43 were identified as livestock farmers in Western Pennsylvania interested in business planning. These farmers were informed of the opportunity to receive business planning assistance. PASA partnered successfully with the University of Scranton Small Business Development Center Agribusiness Specialty Center (SBDC) to offer business planning education and consulting to livestock farmers in Western Pennsylvania. A total of 60 farmers attended business planning workshops, 22 farmers requested and were provided with business planning resources, and twelve livestock farmers took advantage of one-on-one business planning assistance to develop plans.

### Project Objectives:

Task 1. Establish working groups.

Task 2. Develop business plans.

Task 3. Design and implement networking and learning opportunities for livestock farmers and potential buyers.

Task 4. Provide technical assistance.

Task 5. Evaluation.

### Performance Target:

Of the 3,000 farmers who learn about the project, 10 of those will open new markets by selling at least \$20,000 of their value-added meat products at 5 marketing outlets by 2010. (The performance target was originally expected in 2009, but has been adjusted in consideration of the the extension of this project through May

2010.)

#### Introduction:

The Regional Food Infrastructure Network (RFIN) began in 2005 with an early planning phase and the pooling together of resources and foundational studies. Some key findings in this early research pointed to the challenges faced by livestock farmers in Western Pennsylvania, and the potential for the expansion of locally produced meat and dairy value-added products. It became clear that there was a lack of local meat products available in both farmers markets and retail stores, and that there were clear challenges for livestock farmers to process products locally.

The SARE-funded Regional Food Infrastructure Network Project initiated the second phase of RFIN, with a focus on helping livestock farmers increase farm profitability by adding value to their products, improving direct marketing strategies, and developing business plans to reach their goals. A key partner in the final phases of this work was the University of Scranton Small Business Development Center, which through the Agribusiness Specialty Center, provided professional business planning education and assistance to all interested livestock farmers.

## Cooperators

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## Research

#### Materials and methods:

This project took place from May 2007 through May 2010. Over the three years, the methodology of the project has focused on the establishing working groups, working with farmers and agricultural development specialists to develop business plans, and providing on-going networking, consulting, and educational opportunities for farmers. Through these networks and opportunities, livestock farmers may gain knowledge and resources to develop products, direct marketing strategies, and seek financing.

One lesson learned from early phases of the project was that while working groups provided excellent networking and learning opportunities for livestock farmers, in addition to valuable information that would ultimately inform their business decisions, the work of creating a formal business plan was a more personal and individual process. Thus, beginning in August 2009, the project made focused efforts on direct outreach to livestock farmers to provide one-on-one business planning assistance.

Business planning workshops were offered in the region in 2009 and again at the 2010 PASA Farming for the Future Conference. Phone calls were made informing livestock farmers of resources available and a business planning resource packet developed by PASA and the SBDC was mailed to those who expressed interest. One-on-one meetings with a PASA staff person were arranged for those wanting more in-depth assistance with their plan narratives, and follow-up assistance for financial planning was provided by professionals from the SBDC. The on-line business planning template “Ag-Plan” was promoted by the project and utilized by farmers.

#### Research results and discussion:

One valuable outcome of this project has been the farmer education and awareness of the importance of business planning as a key to business development. Business planning assistance is vital in these economic times, as farmers look to diversify and add value to their products and develop strategies to remain profitable.

Project outreach and promotion increased and improved PASA’s communication with livestock farmers in the region. As a result, PASA as an organization became more aware of livestock farmers’ needs and educational interests, and can now better tailor the development of future programs. In fact, we have scheduled a range of programs geared towards these needs and interests of livestock farmers for the coming months including Master Classes on topics ranging from the availability and variety of local meats available in Western Pennsylvania to Beef Butchery at a local USDA certified meat processing plant, in addition to cheese-making. A Grass Fed Beef Cook Off will be held this August to raise awareness of locally available grass fed beef among consumers and provide education and networking opportunities for farmers, chefs, and food industry professionals. Finally, the 2011 Farming for the Future Conference will feature tracks for livestock farmers and business planning workshops.

As a result of our partnership with the University of Scranton SBDC Agribusiness and Food Specialty Center we have brought a critically needed expertise to the Western region, and this partnership will continue beyond the duration our SARE funding, resulting in the continued availability of one-on-one business planning assistance for livestock farmers in Western Pennsylvania.

Providing the highly-valued resource of business planning assistance has created an opportunity for PASA to reach beyond our membership to farmers just beginning to think about sustainable agriculture, and through this project we are able to educate and inform them, invite them into the sustainable agriculture community, connect them with others, and help them create plans to develop new markets or new products. This has been especially important to dairy farmers, who are seeking new alternatives to make their businesses profitable.

### **Participation Summary**

## Project Outcomes

#### Project outcomes:

In April 2009, PASA hosted a Business Planning Field Day in Slippery Rock, PA for farmers in Western Pennsylvania. A total of 19 farmers attended this workshop taught by professionals from the University of Scranton Small Business Development Center Agribusiness and Food Specialty Center (SBDC). Building on the strength of this collaboration, in September 2009, PASA established a

partnership with the SBDC to offer business planning resources and consultation to livestock farmers in the Western Region, and the SBDC repeated the business planning workshop at the 2010 PASA Farming for the Future Conference, as well as held one-on-one consultations with farmers during the conference.

We have learned that business planning is a very personal process, and not one that can be automated. Thus, we have focused on providing personal and individual assistance to farmers to help them complete their plans. A business planning resource packet was created to facilitate the use of the free online business planning template AgPlan. This online system allows farmers to easily share their business plans with professionals from the SBDC as well as other reviewers. PASA has organized business planning meetings and individual consultations with farmers to assist in the development of business narratives, and the SBDC is reviewing business plans and assisting with the development of the financial portion of the plans. This partnership has strengthened the services we are able to offer farmers.

Over 40 farmers were called to re-engage them in the business planning process, and of these, 22 farmers requested and were sent the business planning resource packet, and twelve farmers took advantage of the one-on-one business planning consulting. We are interpreting the qualification of "livestock farmer" broadly for the purposes of this grant, because we have found that these services are critical to not only beef farmers, but also to dairy farmers, those that keep goats or sheep, and even bee keepers.

An important lesson that we have learned in the course of providing business planning assistance to farmers is that they often have difficulty setting aside the time to actually write their business plan, and many benefit from hands-on coaching around writing and developing financial documents. An individual consultation of one to two hours can help farmers get the information they need out on paper and facilitate the completion of the narrative sections of the plans.

Business planning is an on-going process, and for many of the farmers that PASA and the SBDC have worked with, working through the business planning process has identified key areas for farmers to focus on to reach their business goals. An important long-term piece of this project is to provide technical assistance for participants so that they are able to open new markets and increase profitability. Through this process, PASA has learned more about the technical assistance needs of livestock farmers and begun to shape our programming to meet these needs.

For example, we have begun providing technical assistance for many of the participating farmers, especially in terms of education and networking opportunities. One farmer has begun the research and education to scale-up a dairy goat and cheese making operation and PASA has helped him to network and connect with professionals to learn from; a struggling conventional dairy farmer is pursuing education to begin making and direct-marketing cheese, and PASA has connected him with numerous courses and networking opportunities, a grass fed beef farmer developing a beef CSA received technical assistance in developing his marketing materials.

In summary, we have learned that while working groups and meetings are an effective way to disseminate information about business planning, marketing, and product development, the hands-on process of completing a business plan requires individual consultation. Our partnership with the SBDC has provided farmers with this important individual attention by reviewing plans, creating custom financial templates, and helping farmers conduct the analysis necessary to make business decisions.

Finally, we have learned that the business planning process helps farmers identify

key educational and technical assistance needs that will help them reach their business goals, and PASA is well-positioned to help meet those needs by continuing to provide workshops and networking opportunities for livestock farmers in addition to basic business planning assistance.

#### Assessment of Project Approach and Areas of Further Study:

### Potential Contributions

PASA is currently collaborating with the Ohio State University on an USDA-SCRI program entitled “Social Networking, Market and Commercialization Infrastructure for Midwestern Fruit and Vegetable Crops in Local Food Systems.” This project focuses on creating on-line networking tools to facilitate collaboration and business plan development for farmers. The Regional Food Infrastructure Network Project can help to inform this work, in that we have learned both the value of, and challenges in forming regional networks and on-line business planning tools.

### Future Recommendations

PASA plans to build on the momentum of the Regional Food Infrastructure Project to develop on-line networking tools for farmers and agriculture and food industry professionals to connect, create working groups, and find resources. Thus, it is recommended that the lessons learned from working with livestock farmers is applied to create resources and tools useful to farmers producing other crops and products as well.

A second recommendation is for PASA to promote business planning as a tool for farmers to identify their needs to develop their business, and for the organization to meet these needs through regional workshops (Master Classes) and Farming for the Future conference programming. A Beginning Farmers Conference track will be offered at the conference in 2011, and include business planning, but it is important to recognize that business planning is an on-going process important to seasoned farmers as well, and opportunities to learn about business planning should be offered regionally as well as in the general conference.

Finally, while the University of Scranton Small Business Development Center has provided excellent resources, there are advantages to having connections with business planning professionals located within the region in which we are working. It is a recommendation to build these regional connections and resources, and a relationship is being formed with the Center for Women’s Entrepreneurship at Chatham University in Pittsburgh.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or SARE.



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