

Linking Small-Farm Agriculture to Community Development Efforts in Northern Louisiana

Final Report for CS04-022

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Region: Southern

State: Louisiana

Principal Investigator:

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Project Information

Abstract:

The purpose of this project was to investigate the degree of interest that farmers, community leaders, and agriculture and community development technical assistance providers in Northern Louisiana have: (1) in enhancing and developing local markets for produce grown in Northern Louisiana, and (2) in engaging in value-added activities such as processing and agritourism. We convened a steering committee of area technical assistance providers and community leaders and surveyed area farmers in order to develop a database of area producers who were interested in adding value to agricultural products or direct marketing.

As a result of this grant there has been an increase in the capacity and collaboration of area technical assistance providers around direct marketing and value added agriculture. We have also been able to develop a better picture of the current state of direct marketing and value-added to agricultural products in north Louisiana than was previously available.

Introduction

Agriculture and forestry are the traditional economic backbone of this region. According to the 1997 USDA Census of Agriculture, there were 5832 farms in the 16 parishes to be served by this project. 308 farms were owned by minority farmers (predominantly African-American).

Cotton, corn, sorghum, soybeans, poultry and beef cattle are the predominant agricultural commodity crops produced but agriculture is still very diverse in the region. In addition to the main commodities in the region, farmers are raising such crops as pecans, mayhaws, peaches, collards, sweet potatoes, figs, goats, and horses.

Increasingly, there are few steady, full-time jobs in production agriculture. Fewer large farms are producing the main commodities, and these large farms are increasingly mechanized, reducing the need for year-round farm labor. However, many of the farms in the region are small, very small (the median farm size in the

region is about 200 acres), and provide only a subsistence or supplementary income. In half of the parishes, over 60% of all farms and over 80% of minority farms had sales below \$10,000. Part-time farming is apparently one strategy that many individuals in the region are using to supplement their income. Almost half of all the farms surveyed by USDA for the 1997 Ag Census were headed by individuals whose primary occupation was not farming and in 10 of the 16 parishes more than half of the farmers reported that farming is not their principle occupation.

Because improvements to small-scale, diversified farming operations are unlikely to add large numbers of new, high paying jobs, these farms tend not to be a high priority for state policy makers. However, these farms are important to the economic viability of many rural communities in the region as in many very rural communities there are simply not, and probably will never be, enough full-time, steady jobs to go around. Some jobs are inherently seasonal, some depend on contracts, and some small employers simply do not have the need for full time workers. In a recent focus group in the region of wood products manufacturers, one recurring problem that came up was their inability to retain good employees because they could not provide a full-time steady job for them, but they need access to good employees periodically in order to grow their business. Therefore, improving the financial returns to part-time farmers may raise the overall standard of living for a significant segment of the rural population as it may encourage people who otherwise might leave the area for lack of work opportunities to stay in rural Louisiana and also work part time at other local businesses.

One area where we believe that income improvements in agriculture might be gained is through increasing the capacity of farmers in the region to add value to their crops and their farms, through improved marketing, processing, and agrotourism. Louisiana's farmers have not tended to aggressively pursue value-added enterprises and direct marketing. Much of the produce that is grown by area farmers is sold at small road side farm-stands and off the backs of trucks.

There are currently farmers and technical service providers in the region who are interested in value-added agriculture and developing local markets. For example, a goat marketing association is forming in Northern Louisiana, there are three farmers markets in the region and more are being planned, LA Tech is currently developing websites for local small businesses, many of whom are ag products based, and when the Center for Rural Development issued a press release about the USDA Value-Added Producer Grant program it received calls from over 20 producers in the area who interested in applying. However, most of the work that is being done has been on an ad-hoc basis with little intentional coordination among service providers, farmers, and community leaders. The purpose of this grant is to begin a formal process to coordinate assistance efforts to make it easier for farmers and communities who want assistance in developing value-added processing capacity and markets to get help and for organizations to identify and collaborate on projects.

Project Objectives:

The objectives of this project were:

1. To identify and develop a database of producers in the region who are currently engaged in or are interested in direct marketing, adding value to what they produce, or agritourism. In particular we will attempt to identify and include minority farmers who traditionally have been under-served by agriculture assistance programs.
2. To hold three farmer-focus groups that will identify the barriers faced by small

and limited resource farmers in the region who are engaged in direct marketing and value-added enterprises, to examine the opportunities that they perceive in agriculture, and hear what assistance they believe would improve their situation.

3. To bring together individuals in the region who have the interest and capacity to work on value-added agriculture and a desire to enhance the productivity and numbers of markets of small farms in the region four times.

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Research

Materials and methods:

It turned out to be much more difficult to identify farmers who were interested and engaged in direct marketing or value-added enterprises that we had initially expected. Although many LSU AgCenter agents were willing to share farmer contact information with us, they did not maintain data on the types of crops grown by those farmers, or any indication as to who would be likely to be interested in adding value, or direct marketing. In order to develop a database of farmers that was relevant and provided enough information to be useful, we ended up using a two-stage process to identify appropriate farmers.

First we developed a master list of possible farmers from LSU AgCenter agents and from sign-in sheets from trainings that we conducted on value-added agriculture. Some parish AgCenter staff were not comfortable sharing contact information of producers that they worked with with this project. The AgCenter's regional office sent out postcards to farmers on their databases about the project, inviting those who wanted to be included in the database to contact us. We also issued several press releases about the project inviting farmers to contact us and our student worker, Brandi Tagert went to several farmers markets and farm stands to interview farmers. We also developed a project website.

With the names that we collected, we surveyed the farmers by phone, in person, by mail, and we developed an on-line survey. In this survey we asked information about what they were currently producing, how they were marketing it, how they would like to market it, what value (if any) they were adding, and if they were interested in adding value. We also collected demographic data, information about their current equipment and equipment needs, and whether or not they would be interested in being listed in a directory. We ended up with a database of about 65 area

producers, most of whom were engaged with or interested in direct marketing or adding value to agricultural products.

One area where we were not very successful was in getting data on minority farmers. Although we met with many African American farmers and worked with Southern University Extension on the steering committee, African-American farmers that we contacted in person, by phone, or by mail - even those farmers who knew about the project prior to being contacted for the survey - told our student worker that they did not want to be surveyed.

Because we had had so much more personal contact with some of the most engaged farmers than we had expected when we wrote the grant proposal, and because the project was finishing up during the peak of fall vegetable season, it was decided by the steering committee that the focus groups would not be likely to add much information and farmer turnout was likely to be low. We therefore did not hold them.

Between April and November we did hold four meetings of the steering committee. We held our meetings in three different locations in order to better reach leaders around the region. Over 25 people were involved to some degree with the steering committee. Participants included Ag Extension personnel from LSU and Southern University, Department of Economic Development, SBDC, Planning District Staff, Regional economic development non-profit staff, farmer-leaders, and the Economic Development Specialist from the local utility company. These meetings were excellent opportunities for collaboration and information sharing. In addition, the steering committee members provided a great deal of feedback on the survey design and analysis of the results.

Research results and discussion:

Outcomes

The primary outcome of this project has been an increase in the amount of awareness and collaboration in the region among area technical assistance providers around value-added agriculture and direct marketing.

The best example of this is that the LSU AgCenter is now actively promoting and assisting farmers with the USDA Value Added Producer Grant Program. It was featured at two north Louisiana fruit and vegetable grower conferences. The organizers of these conferences were steering committee members in the project. This year there are three small producers in north Louisiana (that we know of) who plan to apply for VAPG funds. All of these producers are on our database and have participated in trainings that we held in the past year.

Another outcome is a directory of farmers engaged in direct marketing and value-added activities, farmers markets, technical assistance resources, and area processing facilities. This directory is aimed at farmers and processors who do not use the computer frequently and area consumers who are interested in purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables from area producers. We plan to expand this directory and we also plan to put it on-line this summer (2005). Many farmers who engaged in direct marketing were interested in being in a directory. We thought that this directory would also help small food-processing businesses identify area farmers.

The database was also used to disseminate information about the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group's annual meeting in February, 2005. In the past, north Louisiana was not well represented at this conference. This year at least 5 farmers from north Louisiana attended and all of them were on the database. This database seems to be an effective tool for targeting farmers receptive to sustainable agriculture in the region.

The survey and database of area farmers has also led technical assistance providers at LA Tech and in the region get a better picture of the current interest and capacity of area farmers around value-added agriculture and direct marketing. We found:

1. That most farmers in the region (that we identified) are not actually that interested in adding value to what they produce at this time. Most of them would prefer to increase their direct marketing efforts or to access wholesale markets. In part this seems to be due to a lack of awareness on the part of many of the producers about opportunities to add value, but in part it is due to the fact that many of the area producers are elderly and are not looking to change what they do. Based on the survey, and on the types of individuals who came to our value added conference and information sessions about the VAPG program, linking farmers to local food-based entrepreneurs is probably a more viable strategy for adding value to produce in north Louisiana, at least in the short run. Most of the farmers that we surveyed would seem to prefer marketing assistance.
2. That area farmers do not use the internet very often, and definitely will not participate in an on-line survey. Mail and internet-based surveys were not that effective, even with a postcard sent out by LSU AgCenter informing area farmers about the project in advance. We ended up primarily surveying farmers in person and by phone.

Participation Summary

Educational & Outreach Activities

PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:

Education/outreach description:

website: www.latech.edu/tech/rural/income

Issue of Rural Louisiana (the Center for Rural Development's newsletter) devoted to Value Added Agriculture.

Agriculture Resource Guide for Farmers and Consumers in North Louisiana (2005). This is a directory of area farmers who are engaged with direct marketing, area farmers markets, processing facilities, and technical assistance resources. We plan to make this directory available on-line.

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

We held four meetings of the steering committee. Over 20 individuals from around the region participated at these meetings. The interaction of the steering committee members led to:

1. A conference at LA Tech in July 2004 on adding value to agricultural production. This conference was organized by the SBDC and Center for Rural Development in collaboration with LSU Ag Center and ATTRA. It was attended by over 25 area producers
2. A successful VAPG proposal for a soybean processing plant that was written by LA

Tech, in collaboration with LSU in 2004.

3. Increased interest in and knowledge about USDA's Value Added Producer Grant Program in the state. Two training sessions were held by LA Tech's Center for Rural Development on the grant in 2003. Four training sessions were held by LA Tech in 2004, with assistance from LSU Ag Center. These sessions were planned at our second steering committee meeting. In 2005 (for the first time) LSU AgCenter staff are taking the lead on writing proposals for area producers and holding training sessions on the program. The collaborations, (in part) due to this grant have helped more technical assistance providers in the state become aware of this opportunity for farmers and increased their willingness and ability to offer assistance.

4. More awareness among the group members about the sources of expertise in the region regarding value added agriculture, processing, and marketing. At the meetings, participants would often ask other members for advice or assistance with solving a problem that a particular agricultural producer/processor that they were working with was facing.

Recommendations:

Future Recommendations

The focus group idea was theoretically a good one, but had not been well thought out. Probably it would have worked if we had planned ahead and piggy-backed the focus group onto an existing meeting of a regional producer organization such as the North Louisiana Goat Producers Association. One outcome of the steering committee is that we are now much more knowledgeable about local producer groups.

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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