

# CSA in the Northeast: Growing the Movement

## Final Report for LNE00-136

Project Type: Research and Education

Funds awarded in 2000: \$49,063.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2002

Matching Non-Federal Funds: \$42,955.00

Region: Northeast

State: Massachusetts

Project Leader:

[Kathy Ruhf](#)

New England Small Farm Institute

## Project Information

### Summary:

Community supported agriculture (CSA), wherein producers and consumers establish seasonal partnerships, provides a compelling alternative for agricultural production and distribution. In this project, which builds from a previous Northeast SARE funded project, we focused on strengthening the support infrastructure for CSA farmers and promoting the CSA model. We improved and expanded services at the Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources at Wilson College in Pennsylvania, strengthened links with regional and national CSA support efforts, conducted a research study, and held a conference that drew 350 farmers and other CSA supporters. We focused outreach on new farmers and the public. We revised and implemented the national CSA farm census for 2001 and analyzed and reported on the 1999 CSA farm census.

### Introduction:

Since its introduction into the United States in 1985, CSA has become one of the most vital emerging sectors of the Northeast's food system. CSA, which creates a direct relationship between producer and consumer, offers an alternative model for sustainable agricultural production and distribution. Farmers secure a committed market and up-front capital, and consumers receive a share of a fresh, healthy, local harvest, plus the gratification of being linked to a farm and farm family. For CSA to flourish, the movement needs several things: 1) information, technical, and educational support for farmers engaged in CSA or who want to start CSA farms; 2) promotion, so that consumers will learn about the concept and become shareholders and supporters; and 3) data, research, and analysis that moves CSA beyond the anecdotal and the mystical.

In this project, we focused on these three activity areas. We improved and expanded services at the Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources (RVEC). RVEC is located at Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. It manages the CSA website, information, and referral, the National CSA Farm Directory, publications dissemination, a technical assistance provider service and a speakers' bureau. We

solidified and improved these core services. We established RVEC as a national resource for CSA by strengthening links with national and other regional CSA support efforts. We conducted a research study that examined aspects of economic viability on CSA farms. We held the third Northeast CSA conference that drew 350 farmers and other CSA supporters. In this project, we focused on new farmers both in terms of outreach and conference focus. We produced a report on the 1999 national CSA farm census. We revised and implemented the census for 2001.

As a consequence of this project, hundreds of established and new CSA farmers received information, support, technical assistance, and new members. The public was exposed to CSA through promotional information that appeared in dozens of news outlets. RVEC appointed a national advisory group and secured its future at Wilson College and as a national resource center. Thousands of citizens learned about CSA and many hundreds joined CSA farms; CSA farmers reported increased membership as a direct result of our management of the directory and other informational resources. Solid, contemporary data was obtained, analyzed, and shared about CSA production, economics, and other critical variables to success and sustainability.

#### Project Objectives:

Please note that this project proposal was approved before the outcomes approach was institutionalized by Northeast SARE. The objectives of this project were to:

Improve and expand regional support services to reach new users;

Promote the development of new CSA farmers through a regional conference;

Lead and manage national data management and research initiatives;

Sponsor a regional research project on priority CSA topics; and

Take final steps toward sustainability and self-sufficiency of the Robyn Van En Center.

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## Research

### Materials and methods:

The overall approach to this project was to focus on building service infrastructure to support CSA farmers and to implement activities that would promote and strengthen the CSA movement in the Northeast and nationally. Project activities addressed our five objectives.

Improve and expand regional support services to reach new users. Support services to existing and new CSA farmers and to potential customers of CSA farms are now firmly established at the RVEC. With generous matching support from Wilson College, RVEC has a part-time coordinator, office, and communications facilities, and financial and computer technical support. As a part of this project, RVEC streamlined and improved its service practices. It implemented improvements to the CSA web site ([www.csacenter.org](http://www.csacenter.org)), handled and documented inquiries, made referrals, gave interviews, displayed CSA materials at conferences and other events, and monitored and expanded the web-based technical assistance provider service and speakers' bureau. RVEC activities were overseen by the project coordinator (Kathy Ruhf) and the project team, which was composed of CSA farmers, extension educators, and representatives of community-based CSA support organizations.

Promote the development of new CSA farmers through a regional conference: One of the highlights of this project, and a highlight for nearly every CSA farmer in the region, is the CSA conference. In December 2001, 350 farmers and others attended the third Northeast CSA Conference in Claryville, NY. We raised over \$15,000 in matching funds in the form of sponsorships to help support the conference and make it affordable for farmers, shareholders and grassroots organizations. We offered special mini-schools for new farmers and on other specific topics. For this event, we conducted a national outreach effort to get representative farmers and support organizations from other regions to the conference. Two other SARE regions provided support for farmers to attend. Our scholarship fund enabled over two dozen farmers and support organization representatives from every region to be present.

We hired Beth Holtzman as conference organizer. Beth worked with the CSA project team and a conference organizing committee comprised of farmers and support organization representatives. Sub-committees focused on workshops, logistics, food, etc. All meals were largely composed of local and regional farm ingredients. Beth was responsible for all conference logistics, fund-raising, and evaluation.

Lead and manage national data management and research initiatives: In the previous SARE-funded project, we worked with USDA/SAN to transfer ongoing management of the national CSA Farm Directory to the RVEC. SAN continues to provide technical support, for which the project team and RVEC remain grateful. The directory lists all CSA farms and is searchable by state. It is updated continually by RVEC staff. The first CSA farm census was conducted in 1999. Selected information from the census is entered into the directory, and also into a database that

researchers use for analysis. In this project, we revised the census survey tool and administered it again through the RVEC. Collaborating researchers were Dr. Daniel Lass, Department of Resource Economics, University of Massachusetts, and Dr. Steve Stevenson and John Hendrickson, Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, University of Wisconsin. Their generous in-kind contributions of time were instrumental to achieving the professionalism and efficient design of the instrument. The survey was sent to every CSA farm in the existing database, plus any new names received from soliciting regional and local CSA support organizations (e.g., NOFAs, MACSAC (WI), INCA (IA), CSAWest (CA), etc.). This national collaboration was essential to the success of the census initiative. The census tool included questions about respondents' willingness to participate in research projects on CSA, and about their interest in offering technical assistance or being a speaker about CSA. Those checking affirmative in any of these categories received appropriate follow-up. RVEC staff entered all data and relayed it to Dr. Lass.

The study builds from a previous research project on CSA farm economics by Dr. Lass. A survey tool was sent to 283 farmers, and the sampling was gathered from those farmers who responded positively to a question on the census, in the conference evaluation, or on a special form available at the conference. Jeremy, who also has a masters degree in plant and soil science, was responsible for outreach to farmers -- recruitment and follow-up. We had a response from 76 farmers, a 26.8% response rate. A student under Dr. Lass' supervision entered the data. Dr. Lass is in the process of completing the write-up. The final report will be posted on the web site, disseminated to other appropriate outlets, and promoted on list serves. Dr. Lass will seek publication of the study as well.

Take final steps toward sustainability and self-sufficiency of the Robyn Van En Center: In the previous project, a detailed business plan was prepared for the RVEC. It proposed several strategies to achieve sustainability of the core services provided by the center. It was clear that grants and contracts would continue to be a necessary funding stream in addition to sustained in-kind support from Wilson College. Revenues from sales of CSA products and services would be a small contributor. Among the other strategies to explore were contributions to RVEC from CSA farms and shareholders and contributions from CSA support organizations. In this project, we conducted two pilot initiatives at CSA farms in Massachusetts and New York to gauge the response by shareholders to a voluntary donation added to their share price for RVEC. The response was favorable; several hundred dollars were raised from each farm and contributed to the RVEC. However, these farms had farmers who were leading champions of CSA and RVEC, so we interpreted this response with some qualification.

To investigate these options, a meeting was called of CSA support organization representatives from across the country, which was offered as a mini-school at the 2001 conference. Fifteen representatives attended. We discussed the needs of the CSA community and the appropriate level of response -- local, regional, or national, in a framework of nested and coordinated services. We agreed that RVEC is a national resource, that coordination among the various support organizations at all levels was crucial, and that this meeting was a solid foundation for that process.

We discussed membership fees and capital campaigns. We agreed that shareholder solicitation and voluntary contributions were viable options, and that proceeds from such donations would be shared between the local and regional support entity and the national RVEC.

#### Research results and discussion:

Please note that this project proposal was submitted before the outcomes approach

was adopted and milestones were not originally specified. The following represents what could be considered milestones, and the extent to which we met them.

Improve and expand regional support services to reach new users:

1. Install new and improved services: web site, technical support providers, speakers' bureau, downloadable reports, the upgraded directory, and CSA-related job postings were all added or improved features.
2. Increase use of RVEC by the public: During the first two years of the RVEC (and the first SARE-funded CSA project) the average number of inquiries was 41 a month, with a 50% increase in the second year. During the two years of this project, the average number of monthly inquiries was 80 -- double from the start of this project.
3. Increase the number of hits to CSA website: we are pleased to report an average of 3000 visits per month to the CSA Farm Directory, with another 1500 per month to the CSA home page and 50 to 60 per month to the technical assistance program page.
4. Publicity about CSA: 22 separate articles about CSA, many mentioning RVEC, appeared during the two years of this project.

Promote the development of new CSA farmers through a regional conference:

1. Outreach to at least 1000 CSA farmers and other CSA supporters: we mailed over 3000 conference brochures, and posted the event on several list serves.
2. Four hundred farmers and others attend the conference. This was a projected attendance as stated in the proposal. We had 350 participants. This is an excellent turnout, considering that the events of 9/11 were a factor for some people deciding not to travel.
3. Participants are positively impacted by the conference: conference evaluations revealed that, as a consequence of attending the event, 94% of respondents indicated that they were likely to make a change to their CSA operation or their involvement in CSA organizations or networks.

Lead and manage national data management and research initiatives:

1. Send 2001 census survey: survey was sent to 866 addresses, with a 41% response rate.

Sponsor a regional research project on priority CSA topics:

1. Send research survey to 283 participants for a 26% return rate.

Take final steps toward sustainability and self-sufficiency of the Robyn Van En Center.

1. Identify and evaluate steps: this was done in the RVEC business plan.
2. Develop strategic plan for next steps: this was discussed and concrete steps were taken at the CSA support organization meeting, and by Wilson College

## **Participation Summary**

## Education

Educational approach:

As described, outreach efforts were significant. RVEC staff promoted the web site, which resulted in thousands of hits. A CSA speakers' bureau was organized. There was an average of five to ten press contacts per month to RVEC. CSA and RVEC materials were displayed at conferences, expos, festivals, and other events on an

average of once every two months during the project. CSA, RVEC and the National Directory were mentioned in at least two dozen publications, and over a dozen web links. Three thousand conference brochures were mailed.

No milestones

## Project Outcomes

### Impacts of Results/Outcomes

This project has had a substantial positive impact on hundreds of farmers, dozens of service providers, and thousands of consumers in the Northeast. Some of these impacts are directly measurable and reportable. For example, of the 350 attendees at the conference, about 50% were farmers (including new farmers in their first few years of operation or pre-farmers -- audiences specifically targeted in this project). Thirty-five percent of attendees returned evaluation forms. Of these evaluators, approximately one third were pre-farmers or were farming for less than five years. Ninety-four percent reported that they were likely to make a change in their farm operation and their involvement in CSA organizations as a result of attending the event. About 40 percent indicated that they would make specific changes in their farm operations; nearly 30 percent reported that they would improve the advice that they gave to others regarding CSA. Sixteen percent stated that they would start a CSA operation as a result of attending the conference.

Approximately 100 people attended one of four pre-conference mini-schools (starting a CSA farm; setting share price and farm economics; building leadership and participation in shareholder groups; and next steps for CSA networks). Of those, 94 percent predicted that they would make a change in their farm operation or their service work as a consequence of the mini-school. Of those, 43 percent reported looking to new or different sources of information, and 40 percent reported their intent to launch a new CSA operation.

These numbers are heartening but don't begin to tell the full story about this event. Many people said that this conference was one of the most inspiring farming events in the region. The energy and vitality of the gathering was palpable. How do you measure the impact of nearly 200 farmers -- and many of their children -- along with devoted shareholders and service professionals breaking local bread or contra-dancing together? Yet it is such experiences that motivate and inspire farmers and the community that supports them to begin or to continue.

Farmers need support as well as inspiration. This project was instrumental in institutionalizing the Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources and enabling a suite of services that directly benefit farmers as well as supporters of CSA. The number of inquiries to RVEC doubled from the previous two-year period. Three thousand hits per month to the National CSA Farm Directory resulted in dozens of inquiries by potential shareholders directly to CSA farms. Farms reported between 8 and 50 percent of members joining as a direct result of the directory. An average of 25 new or revised directory entries were received each month -- a testament to how important farmers think the directory is. Other ways that farmers benefited from RVEC as a result of this project include using the technical assistance provider (TAP) feature. This is a web-based service that lists TAPs -- experienced CSA farmers, Cooperative Extension professionals, and others from CSA organizations who responded to an inquiry and completed a detailed form describing their area of

expertise and mechanisms for delivering assistance. There are TAPs listed in ten states, and between 50 and 60 hits to the TAP page per month.

There was an average of 500 hits per month to the postings page that lists CSA-related jobs (e.g., farm looking for farmer, farmer looking for assistant, etc.) and general information about CSA. There are books, guides, information sheets, and CSA brochures that farmers order to improve their operations and recruit members.

Farmers benefited indirectly from the outreach and promotion about CSA sponsored by this project. All the hits to the RVEC web site by non-farmers are from several audiences: potential shareholders, interested consumers, agricultural service providers, writers, reporters, researchers, and students. All these audiences received information about CSA and either made direct connections to a farm, learned about CSA to better serve their farming customers, produced articles informing about CSA, or produced information such as research about CSA. There were an average of five press inquiries per month. A RVEC display appeared at over a dozen events, from a local apple festival to an Earth Day celebration to an organic food expo. During the two years of this project, CSA, RVEC and the National Directory were featured in nearly two dozen media outlets, including Audubon magazine, Yes Magazine, the Denver Post, Washington Post, Mother Earth News, Organic magazine, Cooking Light magazine and Marketplace on National Public Radio.

The research project focused on costs and returns for CSA operations, exploring the factors affecting farm viability. Because the research data is still being analyzed and the final report is not written, it is not possible to identify outcomes as a consequence of the study. However, we might safely assume that a well designed research project on CSA would be a valuable contribution to the small base of research literature on this subject, and help CSA advocates and others understand and help improve the model.

Project leaders worked closely with key Wilson College personnel to establish a sustainable relationship on the part of the college to RVEC. As a consequence, Dr. Inno Onwoume, director of the college's Fulton Center for Sustainable Living, affirmed the college's long-term commitment to RVEC and RVEC has been incorporated into the administrative structure of the college. The college will continue to provide infrastructural support, and seek additional funding. During the course of this project, the college and the project leaders collaborated on a funding proposal to a private foundation.

Building from the RVEC business plan developed under the previous SARE grant, the project leaders were successful in addressing long-term sustainability of RVEC in another way. RVEC was increasingly seen as a national resource. The project fostered investment in RVEC at the national level and enhanced partnerships among CSA support groups across the country. Of the more than two dozen CSA support organizations invited to the conference, specifically to the CSA network mini-school, 15 attended. As a consequence of this meeting, it was agreed that RVEC should establish a national advisory group. This is a positive and significant outcome of this project, in that the advisory group will provide direction, oversight, legitimacy, and visibility to RVEC. One of the central goals of this project was to insure sustainability for RVEC and its services to the CSA community, and to pass the baton from NESAWG to the CSA community. This has been accomplished. This project met all of its objectives. As a result of this project, the CSA movement has substantially more service infrastructure available to farmers and shareholders, and those services have been improved and stabilized. CSA has received a lot of publicity, which has directly affected CSA farmers in positive ways, often by attracting new members. Research and data have contributed to the body of study about this promising

model for generating markets and connections for northeast farmers. New CSA farmers have received support and guidance to start operations. The commitments of Wilson College and the establishment of a national RVEC Advisory Group assure sustainability of the support network that will in turn foster the sustainability of CSA farmers in the Northeast.

## Areas needing additional study

There is substantial need for further study of CSA. The model is still in its infancy, with many variations on the theme. Research at the national level should be a priority for the movement. Topics include CSA farm economics, operations, and management; shareholder characteristics; comparison of models (core group versus not, on-farm pick-up versus away site, CSA-only versus enterprise mix, multi-farm CSAs, land tenure, legal structures); entry, exit and longevity; and other dimensions such as attitude changes, values profiles, and CSA in the larger social and political context of food systems change. Other valuable areas for study include production topics such as issues around intensive production of many crops, maintaining soil fertility, post-harvest treatment, etc.

## Information Products

- [News from the Robyn Van En Center The Community Farm Spring 2001 through Winter 2002](#)

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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