

Selling Grass-Fed Beef to College Market

Final Report for ONE04-024

Project Type: Partnership

Funds awarded in 2004: \$6,909.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2004

Matching Non-Federal Funds: \$2,300.00

Region: Northeast

State: Pennsylvania

Project Leader:

[Heather House](#)

PASA

Project Information

Summary:

Grass-based operations are proving to be economically advantageous for the farmer and environmentally benign when compared to more conventional operations, but many farmers have found that consumers who seek out grass-fed products typically purchase only premium cuts of meat. In the case of grass-fed beef, a farmer may be able to easily sell premium cuts such as steaks and roasts but have a good deal of hamburger left over. To keep a grass-fed operation economically viable, farmers need a ready market for grass-fed hamburger that keeps pace with the sales of premium cuts.

Colleges and universities may be an ideal market for excess grass-fed hamburger. Schools may use several hundred pounds of hamburger weekly and require few, if any, premium cuts. However, there must be sufficient demand from the student population for food service directors to offer a grass-fed hamburger option.

In fall 2003, PASA began working with Pennsylvania College of Technology to promote a grass-fed burger being served at the dining hall grill. A sample of the grass-fed burger was offered free to students passing through the grill line, and they were then encouraged to request a grass-fed burger instead of a regular burger when they placed their order. While most students agreed the meat was delicious and seemed interested in the product, few made the request for a grass-fed hamburger.

If students don't order the grass-fed option, food service directors will no longer provide the option. Therefore, students need a motive to select the grass-fed option. PASA aimed to target the student population with a comprehensive education campaign that included but was not limited to point of purchase materials, farmer interaction and fact sheets. Generating student demand for grass-fed hamburger is critical to the success of this innovative farm to college project.

Project Objectives:

Increase sales of grass-fed hamburger at Pennsylvania College of Technology by

administering an effective educational campaign targeting the student population. Encourage other schools and farmers in the region to begin farm to college projects within their own areas.

Research

Materials and methods:

Existing research. We conducted a thorough search of existing research to determine what influences student consumption patterns. We used journal articles, case studies, and information we gathered from organizations and institutions (i.e. Food Routes, University of Wisconsin, Project Grass) which have experience marketing grass-fed products and designing materials to influence student purchasing decisions.

Preliminary research. We conducted our own research among the student population at Pennsylvania College of Technology (PCT). We surveyed n=307 students (total student population is approximately 5000). The purpose of this survey was to determine which messages about food most resonant with students at PCT. Most of the questions were not designed to test their knowledge of grass-fed beef, though we used the results of this survey to design promotional materials for a locally raised grass-fed beef. This survey gave us a general idea of the kinds food issues that interest students.

Train prep cooks and food service personnel. We held two one-hour in-service trainings with food service personnel charged with cooking and selling grass-fed burgers. The purpose of this training was to empower personnel to knowledgably answer questions students may have about the burgers. Also, personnel learned how to properly prepare the leaner burgers.

Design and launch a campaign. Based on what we discovered through preliminary research, we chose themes and images we felt would be effective with students. We worked with a professional designer to develop materials for use in the dining hall best suited for on-going grass-fed beef sales. We scheduled two farmer visits to the school, hosted taste-testing at the annual Spring Food Fair, and released two articles about the project for print in local and national papers.

Determine measurable change in grass-fed hamburger sales on campus. Before, during and after launching the education and marketing campaign, PCT kept detailed records of grass-fed hamburger sales. Registers in the dining hall are programmed to keep a tally of food items sold, including the number of grass-fed burgers sold.

Consolidate data, make conclusions, re-evaluate campaign. We did our best to correlate the data to determine the elements of our campaign that were effective in increasing grass-fed hamburger sales, which can then be replicated the following semester. We also noted influences outside of our campaign that may have actually been more effective in increasing sales of the local, grass-fed burgers.

Research results and discussion:

In May 2004, PASA kicked off work on this project by hosting a table at Pennsylvania College of Technology's (PCT) annual Spring Food Fair featuring Northern Tier Sustainable Meats (NTSM) grass-fed hamburger. The purpose of this event is to showcase new menu items and to allow the students to give feedback on food samples they may/may not like to see offered in the future. Most of the foods

samples were highly processed commercial foods, but students were just as eager to sample the grass-fed burger as the fried cheese balls.

We took advantage of the increase in student traffic at the Spring Food Fair to conduct a 13-question survey. The opportunity to interact with students as we conducted this survey was invaluable to our work. We learned that many students believe that raising cows on grass alone was IMPOSSIBLE. We were also surprised to learn that grass-fed operations have an “image problem,” namely that some students think grass-based operations must be small, alternative, and in the words of one student, “run by pansies.” However, it was encouraging to learn from the survey that 70% of those surveyed were “interested in supporting the local farm economy.” In contrast, these students were not very interested in protecting the environment or avoiding hormones or antibiotics in their food.

Based on information we gathered from the survey and our interactions with students, we set to work on designing an education campaign. However, we had barely put pen to paper when PCT dining services announced that effective fall semester, they would switch from offering both conventionally and grass-fed raised beef hamburgers to offering exclusively grass-fed hamburgers. While this 20,000 pound contract was terrific news for NTSM, it substantially changed the strategy PASA would take to meet the goals of our SARE grant.

With the new, huge demand for their product, NTSM needed a logo and a label to meet USDA packing requirements. In developing a logo for use on educational materials and labels, PASA worked with a local designer who, coincidentally, had spent the previous decade of his life as a designer for PCT. The designer traveled with PASA staff to meet all four farmer members of the NTSM cooperative. Based on what we learned from research conducted by other schools and organizations, as well as what we learned from our own research at PCT, we had the following criteria for the NTSM image:

Students care about supporting the local farmer.

The image should somehow reflect that the farms are local and run by a neighbor.

The dining hall we planned to target is frequented by the students in construction, design, industrial and engineering technologies (i.e. primarily males ages 18-24).

The image should be versatile and easily used for both educational materials and future logo and advertising.

Concurrent to the design of the NTSM image, PASA worked closely with PCT staff to coordinate an in-service training. Three representatives from two of the NTSM farms came to conduct two one-hour trainings for the dining hall staff at PCT to teach them how to cook the leaner grass-fed burgers. An article highlighting this day was released to PASA’s extensive press network, and the subsequent attention was encouraging.

The image for NTSM was completed in October and educational materials were developed and distributed in late November. These materials include three 4’x2.5’ signs featuring NTSM’s logo with the words “Penn College supports local farmers by serving locally raised beef,” brochures that double as table tents, and vinyl decals that stick to the dining hall doors and windows. The hard copy of this report will contain samples of some of the materials developed.

In mid-December, PASA held two networking sessions to attempt to forge relationships between farmers, chefs, and schools in the south central and north central regions. These meetings were attended by a mix of ag professionals, chefs, food enthusiasts, and students representing various regional interests in the farm to college program. A total of 80 folks attended these two meetings.

PCT was the site for one of these meetings. This was an opportunity for the school to discuss the partnership with NTSM and to showcase menu items that could be used in school dining halls. Perhaps the most promising development at these meetings was the interest of other schools to begin their own farm to college initiatives.

The other meeting was held in York County, where York Culinary Institute expressed a strong interest in taking the first baby steps PCT took over ten years ago when they started purchasing from local farmers.

Research conclusions:

The PCT dining service decision to award the 2004-2005 ground beef contract to Northern Tier Sustainable Meats Cooperative had a major impact on the way NTSM does business. The four founding members of the cooperative did not immediately have enough ground beef to supply the college and therefore were forced to find other sources to help meet the demand. This required NTSM to clearly define their standards for meat and to communicate clearly with PCT about the arrangement. As a result, NTSM is helping another organic beef cooperative move their otherwise slow-to-sell ground beef out of inventory and into PCT. Interestingly, this other cooperative previously approached PASA for help in locating a college to buy their hamburger. Although PASA can not take credit for this fortuitous arrangement, it is interesting to note the ripple effect of the PCT/NTSM relationship.

Within PCT, sales of grilled hamburgers are up 6% since introducing NTSM ground beef. Several factors probably contribute to this increase in consumption:

The relationship between PCT and NTSM has received a good deal of attention in the local media thanks, in part, to PASA's effort to promote the project.

According to feedback from students, the grass-fed burgers taste better than the conventionally raised burgers served in previous years.

Educational materials within the dining hall now tout the fact that the burgers are sourced from local farmers; 70% of surveyed students said that they were "interested in supporting the local farming community."

The local media provided valuable support during this project and published our press releases on progress at the school. As a result, many farmers with grass-based operations called Northern Tier's president seeking information on joining the cooperative or selling to institutions. In fact, NTSM expressed that the response was surprising and we had to rethink how to direct questions from farmers and the general public.

The four farmers most directly affected by this project have shared only positive feedback about the work accomplished with PASA. They have been asked to present at a number of workshops sponsored by organizations like Project GRASS, The Community Food Security Coalition, NRCS, Cooperative Extension and, of course, PASA.

Participation Summary

Education & Outreach Activities and Participation Summary

PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:

Education/outreach description:

Farm publications and the local media were very supportive of our efforts to inform the public of the relationship between PCT and NTSM. PASA released two major pieces about the nature of our work with PCT and NTSM.

The first of these pieces announced PCT's decision to award the 2004-2005 beef contract to NTSM. We highlighted the in-service training and provided contact information for the cooperative. The response was a bit overwhelming to the farmers and we agreed that in the future we would ask press and farmers to direct their questions to PASA.

The second of these pieces invited folks interested in learning more about the nature of the PCT/NTSM relationship to attend a farm to college networking session. We had about 40 attendees at each of these meetings.

PASA has developed and maintained a very strong press database over the years. We feel our press releases are well-received, particularly by the media local to "news." In this case, the Williamsport Sun Gazette not only ran everything we sent, they also called to request photos. Likewise, Farm and Dairy was interested in the progress of this project and they ran a very nice piece with pictures. NewFarm.Org played a very supportive role and thanked us for the "juicy, newsy" releases.

PASA ran an ad that appeared in the January/February edition of Passages. This piece featured the NTSM logo and acknowledged the support we received from SARE. We are always surprised by how thoroughly our members read Passages. We have come to learn that we can depend on the newsletter for communicating not only with our members, but with the broader sustainable agriculture community.

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

Farmer Adoption

PASA's goal was to increase sales of grass-fed hamburgers at PCT, and to promote the relationship between PCT and NTSM as a model for other schools and farmers to emulate. PASA cannot take credit for PCT food service decision to award the 2004-2005 beef contract to NTSM. But we are confident that we provided the support and network for publicizing the deal and educating the students about the importance of the decision.

The farmer members of NTSM know that they are providing a model for others to follow. Although they have worked out how to meet PCT's demand for 20,000 pounds of hamburger, they are hoping to attract more farmers to join the cooperative in the future. Part of their reason for wanting others to join the cooperative is that they want others to adopt the practices associated with grass-fed farming. When asked whether farmers in their area are interested in joining the cooperative, one of the farmers said, "Once they see the economics of it, they will be lining up to join."

Another reason NTSM would like more farmer members is because they would like to be able to meet the demand for ground beef themselves and have enough in production to also offer premium cuts sales.

Farmers who attended the networking sessions expressed some doubt about

entering a contract with a school. Indeed, NTSM took a lesser price for their ground beef than if they had sold their animals at the livestock auction. This is due largely to the fact that the US has put restrictions on the importation of Canadian beef, which has driven up the price of US meat. But the NTSM farmers are looking into the future and believe that the security of a contract outweighs the chances they might get a better price at the auction. They have stated that it is only a matter of time before Canadian beef is allowed to cross US borders again, driving down the price for American farmers.

Assessment of Project Approach and Areas of Further Study:

Areas needing additional study

The most important lesson learned during this project is that it is critical to identify the leverage point for affecting change at each individual school. In the case of PCT, the decision to award NTSM the 2004-2005 ground beef contract was driven more by the food service director's interest in serving a better product than by student demand for the burger. Perhaps there is an opportunity here to study the motivations and incentives for food service directors, and other decision makers, for purchasing locally raised products directly from regional farmers.

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.



Sustainable Agriculture
Research & Education [US Department of Agriculture](#)



This site is maintained by SARE Outreach for the SARE program and is based upon work supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under award No. 2019-38640-29881. SARE Outreach operates under cooperative agreements with the University of Maryland to develop and disseminate information about sustainable agriculture. [USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.](#)