



EXPANDING MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SMALL FARMERS: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF THE FARM TO SCHOOL (FTS) PROGRAM IN ALABAMA

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ABSTRACT

For many small, limited-resource farmers, marketing their products is the most challenging aspect of the farming process. The marketing process is not restricted exclusively to selling, but it also involves buying, handling, transporting, processing, storing, financing, and advertising their products. In addition, in order for small, limited-resource farmers to be successful at marketing they must also have access to relevant market information regarding potential opportunities. Farm to School (FTS) is a potential opportunity for farmers in Alabama. The FTS program connects local school systems to local farmers. School systems purchase locally grown products based on quality, freshness, customer requests for local products, and the availability of unique products. Selling to schools provides small, limited-resource farmers with many advantages such as the ability to be flexible in the crops being grown, premium prices, and a reliable market throughout the growing season. The overall goal of this study is to provide an assessment of the Farm to School Program in Alabama and to explore how small, limited-resource farmers can penetrate these markets. The data for this study will be collected using qualitative interviews, document analysis, and participant observations.

INTRODUCTION

For many small, limited-resource farmers, marketing their products is the most challenging aspect of the farming process. The marketing process is not restricted exclusively to selling, but it also involves buying, handling, transporting, processing, storing, financing, and advertising. In order for small, limited-resource farmers to be successful at marketing they must have access to relevant market information regarding potential opportunities. Farm to School (FTS) is a potential opportunity for farmers in Alabama. The FTS program connects local school systems to local farmers. The FTS program enables school children to have access to nutritious food while simultaneously benefiting the community and local farmer by providing a consistent, reliable market.

According to a report released by the National Farm to School Network, there are more than 30 million children eating school food at least five times a week, 180 days a year. School meals play a significant role in reducing childhood hunger and improving childhood nutrition. In recent years, there has been a tremendous push to provide healthier food choices in our school systems given the high obesity rates among our youth. The same report found that obesity rates among children have doubled in the last 10 years; and that 27% of our children are overweight. In an effort to address the obesity epidemic, many school systems are collaborating with local farmers to expand their FTS program. School meals form a potentially lucrative market, estimated at more than \$10 billion per year. Selling to schools provides small, limited-resource farmers with many advantages such as the ability to be flexible in the crops being grown, premium prices, and a reliable market throughout the growing season. The overall goal of this study is provide an assessment of the FTS Program in Alabama and to explore how small, limited-resource farmers can penetrate this market. The specific objectives are:

- To identify key characteristics of the Farm to School Program at the national and local levels;
- To establish benchmark information regarding potential Farm to School opportunities in Alabama; and
- To identify marketing strategies for small, limited-resource farmers trying to expand into the Farm to School industry in Alabama.

Farm to School Opportunities for Farmers in Alabama

	Opelika schools	State program	Bullock County	Pike County
Contact	Wendel Fleming- Produce vendor for Opelika school district	Alabama Department of Agriculture	Keith Stewart- Superintendent Ruby Douglas- Child Nutritionist	Linda Felton Smith- Superintendent
Products of interest	Quartered potatoes, sliced squash, fresh fruits, salad mix with mixed greens, and satsumas	Seedless watermelons, cantaloupes, peas, carrots, and strawberries	Fresh fruits and veggies from more local farmers	Watermelons and fresh fruits for daily consumption during summer months

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The qualitative case study methodological approach was selected for this study. Qualitative research involves the utilization of words and thick descriptions to understand and examine a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Issac & William, 1995; Merriam, 1998).

Selection of Cases

Purposeful sampling was used to select the cases for this study. Purposeful sampling typically is used when "one wants to understand something about those cases without needing or desiring to generalize to all such cases" (McMillian & Schumacher). The cases that were selected for in-depth analysis included:

- Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries and Department of Defense Farm To School Program
- Opelika, Alabama School District Farm To School Program
- Bullock County School District Farm To School Program
- Pike County School District Farm To School Program

Data Collection Techniques

The official collection of data extended over a two-month period, from January 15, 2009 – March 15, 2009. The following techniques were used to collect the data: semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. The three techniques were selected because of their usefulness in eliciting data that would provide a holistic understanding of the research phenomena, in this case the Farm to School Program in Alabama.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in two different phases: (1) simultaneously with data collection while in the field and (2) after the data had been collected. The data was coded, tentative themes were developed and basic categories were constructed.

RESULTS

The primary goals of the Farm to School Program are to increase the use of fresh, healthy, nutritious locally grown fruits and vegetables in school lunch programs and to improve small farm viability through increased access to institutional markets. The results of this study indicated that the Farm To School Program is occurring at two levels in the State of Alabama. The Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries in conjunction with the Department of Defense operates a Farm To School Program as does the FTS programs that are occurring at the local level. Key features of each program are outlined below:

- The statewide programs are operated by private enterprises that bid on the farm to school accounts whereas the local system allows individual districts the purchasing power to buy local products from farmers at their discretion.
- The Statewide program is currently seeking farmers who can produce the following crops in sufficient quantity: sweet potatoes, seedless watermelons, cantaloupes, satsuma oranges, and apples.
- The Farm to School Program in AL has two menu options: Standard versus Nutrient based (NuMenus). Although many schools elect to use the statewide program where private enterprises bid on farm to school accounts, some schools have the ability to purchase locally grown produce. The Opelika school district opted to use the NuMenu program which analyzes the nutritional values of every recipe prepared. Menus are set up where students obtain 100% of calories within nutritional range on seven different measures (carbs, protein, sodium, cholesterol, vitamin C, vitamin A, and fiber).
- Both programs provide a reliable and stable marketing outlet for farmers to sell their products. Farmers have the potential to receive premium prices for locally grown products through the statewide system as well as the Opelika school system. This can be a very profitable marketing outlet for small and/or limited resource farmers in AL that are not large enough to participate in the statewide program.
- The statewide program best suits farmers capable of providing large quantities of produce for all school districts in Alabama as well as other quality, packaging, insurance, and grading requirements. Farmers should consider joining a cooperative or group to increase sustainability in program and ensure supply demands are fulfilled. The local program allows individual farmers the opportunity to sell smaller volumes of products to individual school districts.

The requirements for participation in either market include:

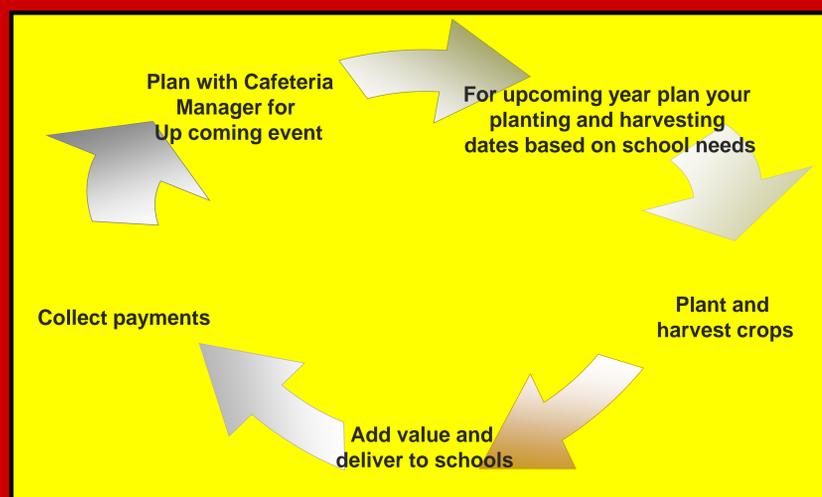
- Farmers must be able to meet the supply requirements and meet USDA grading standards. Produce must be package in 40lb boxes and must be inspected by a federal or state representative. And farmers must plant crops out of growing season (early spring and late fall) to satisfy school dates.
- Requirements for the Opelika school system are: Farmers must obtain liability insurance, institutional sizes are recommended not required, value added products are preferred due to time limitations, and the highest quality assurance standards possible are followed.

Despite success with the Farm To School Program, there are numerous challenges for the small farmer. On an individual level, small farmers have not been able to satisfy the demand for the products in the State Program; there is limited or no access to processing facilities (grading is currently completed by hand) as well as access to refrigerated trucks; and finding reliable labor is a challenge.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Small, limited resource farmers interested in penetrating the FTS market have to work collaboratively in order to successfully penetrate this market. It is a great opportunity for small farmers; however, it is based on providing a quality product in a consistent timely manner. Planning and communication are key.

Farm to School Cycle



DISCUSSION

The results indicated that there is wide support for serving locally grown products in schools. Farmers interested in selling to schools in Alabama should first consider if they can meet the supply needs of both the state and local programs. Farm to School Programs are a very reliable and stable market for farmers to sell their products. They can provide schools with healthy and nutritious meals for students who may not receive them otherwise. Key factors to implementing a successful Farm to School Program will include building relationships based on trust, communication, respect among key stakeholders, patience, and persistence from those initiating the changes.

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