

NCR-SARE Farmer Rancher Grant Program

Final Report

I. PROJECT IDENTIFICATION

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Project Title: Bringing the store to the customer. Increasing the farm's direct marketing capability and increasing retail income from meats, eggs, and produce with a mobile store.

- Project Number: FNC09-779
- Project Duration: 2009 - 2010
- Date of Report: 3/10/2011

II. PROJECT BACKGROUND

1. Briefly describe your operation (i.e. how many acres, what crops, types of cropping systems, type of livestock or dairy production, grazing systems, family operation, etc.)

PrairieErth Farm is a 300 acre diversified organic (certified by ICO) farm in central Illinois producing corn, soybeans, oats, wheat, alfalfa, vegetable crops, beef, broilers, and eggs. I have operated the farm since 1981. Our livestock has been raised organically since the late 1980s, and we began to transition crops in 2000. Our first crop fields received certification in 2004, with more added each year.

Typically we have 30 head of grass fed cattle and 1000 broilers finished on the farm each year, and we maintain a flock of about 400 laying hens. All livestock is pastured throughout the growing season and has access to the outdoors all times. We utilize and MIG, multi-species grazing system.

In 2011 my son, Hans, quit his job at State Farm Insurance to join the farm operation full time. His wife, Katie, is also involved in the operation, specializing in herbs and flowers for retail sales.

2. Before receiving this grant, did you carry out any sustainable practices? If so, briefly describe what they were and how long you had been practicing them.

Developing and promoting sustainable farming practices is a high priority at PrairieErth Farm. We developed a multi-species intensive grazing system to better utilize our erodible land and installed solar-powered water and fencing systems to operate off the grid.

We have made extensive use of cover crops and composted livestock manures in order to maintain the productivity of our farm while eliminating most non-renewable fertilizers.

In 2010 I initiated the Central Illinois Cover Crops Initiative through the McLean County SWCD and NRCS to encourage sustainable practices on conventional farms. Over 6000 acres were enrolled in 6 central Illinois counties.

III. PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND RESULTS

This is the core of the report. Consider what questions your neighbors or other farmers or ranchers would ask about what you did with this grant. Describe how you planned and conducted your research, demonstration, or education project to meet your goals and discuss the results.

The origins of this idea can be traced to a hot, humid, miserable August day at a farmers market. The lettuce was wilting faster than any amount of misting could resurrect, and the cooler full of eggs was unlikely to pass any health department's inspection. Someone standing at the table asks if we have any beef. "Yes, but not here . . ." where you can buy it.

Plainly, if we were going to transport and sell our full range of food products in an all-weather kind of way, we would need a better system than coolers in the back of a truck. If the farm was to expand to include another family needing a full time income, a substantial amount of growth would be necessary.

At first we considered a refer truck. Good for transporting refrigerated or frozen products, but where do we put the tomatoes. How will the customer "shop" unless we unload the truck, and then how will temps be maintained while the food is on display. One of our customers had a small trailer with a chest freezer inside which she had used to pick up broilers from the processor. Since she no longer needed it, we purchased both, crammed in another freezer and added a generator on the tongue. The system worked pretty well on a small scale, both for transporting and selling at the market. A larger trailer, I thought, nicely outfitted with freezers, refrigeration, and display racks would give us a means to transport, store, and market all of our products safely and effectively, allowing the operation to expand existing markets and create new ones. And our customers would have a pleasant environment in which to shop. The mobile store would be handy for CSA pickups – and additional food would be available for purchase as well.

One concern was that farmer's market shoppers wanted an outdoor experience, and would be reluctant to shop inside our "store" on wheels. So when the store was finally put into service in late August 2010 at the Bloomington Farmer's market, the kids decided to set up tables under the trailer awning just in case, but no one seemed the least bit reluctant to shop indoors. The next Saturday morning was dark, cool, and rainy. Shoppers and venders ended up in our dry, well lit, store.

GOALS

List your project goal(s) as identified in your grant proposal.

Before the addition of the Mobile Store (and a hungry son and wife), only about 30% of our

vegetable crops, meats, and eggs were sold in a retail market, the bulk going to stores and other wholesale venues. We needed to revise our business plan to at least double meat and egg production, and increase vegetable production from 2 acres to 5 - and to present this on the retail market.

Beef – increase production from 20 head at \$1300/head whole sale (\$26,000) to 40 head at \$1500/head retail (\$60,000) annually.

Broilers – increase production from 1000 head wholesale (\$12,375) to 2000 head retail (\$30,150) annually.

Eggs – increase flock size from 400 (\$10,367 wholesale egg sales annually) to 800 (\$23,155 retail egg sales annually)

Vegetable/fruit/herb – increase production from 2 acres wholesale (\$6,645) to 5 acres retail (\$32,250 retail – includes adding season extending hoop houses)

PROCESS

Describe the steps involved in conducting the project and the logic behind the choices you made. Please be specific so that other farmers and ranchers can consider what would apply to their operations and gain from your experiences.

The first step was to determine the exact size requirements to contain the necessary equipment and still function within known space constraints – such as those at farmer’s markets. To meet state and county accessibility requirements, the center aisle would need to be at least 36 inches wide, and the rear ramp would need to have anti-skid features. The steel cables that operate the large, heavy ramp would need to be made more visible – we used inch PVC pipe with a slit cut lengthwise to slip over the cable. Several discussions may be necessary with the appropriate agencies to make sure all accessibility and safety requirements are met.

The interior layout was designed and electrical requirements determined so specs could be written for the manufacturer. We determined the location of lights and outlets, wire size, and the number of circuit breakers needed for 120AC operation. DC lights were also included as a backup.

Other considerations were a twelve inch extension on the tongue (to accommodate a generator), a side crank jack-stand (so the crank won’t hit the generator), stabilizers (don’t want shoppers to get seasick), a finished white interior with overhead lighting, and a powered ceiling vent to keep the interior cool in summer. An eight by sixteen foot retractable awning was a finishing touch.

With specs in hand we obtained 3 bids and selected what we felt was the best bid from the best dealer who would stand behind the equipment. The trailer arrived four weeks later, looking great but wired entirely wrong – all outlets on one circuit with hopelessly too small wire. Unsafe and non-functional. The dealer called the manufacturer (MTI) and with a week 3 servicemen came from Michigan and rewired the trailer at our farm. No additional expense and no hassles. **BUY FROM A DEALER AND A COMPANY THAT STANDS BEHIND THEIR WORK.** And be

sure to state clearly in writing exactly what you expect to get.

We installed the refrigeration equipment and engaged a good friend who also happened to be a skilled carpenter to construct and secure cedar shelving. With the addition of a diesel generator welded to the tongue and signage the project was complete. The generator provides power on the road or in emergencies, but otherwise an extension cord (properly sized) provides service at the market or on the farm.

A final consideration; the addition of a 6000 watt generator adds significant weight to the tongue. I doubt a standard half ton pickup would handle this set-up without additional leaf springs. A three quarter ton pickup does fine.

PEOPLE

List other farmers, ranchers, or businessmen who assisted with the project and explain how they were involved. List any personnel from a public agency, such as the Extension Service, Natural Resources Conservation Services, or Soil and Water Conservation Districts who may have assisted with this project.

Input was sought and received from countless people as this project was conceived and built. I would like to especially thank Deborah Cavanaugh Grant, U of I Extension, for her encouragement and assistance with the grant process. Lindsay Record, Illinois Stewardship Alliance, and Mercy Davison, Town of Normal, provided guidance and ideas – and letters of recommendation. My good friend, Wendell Hamlin, designed and built the shelving. My children, Hans and Katie, Kristin, and Graham all contributed to the success of this project.

RESULTS

What results did you achieve and how were they measured? For production projects, include yields, field analysis, and related data. How do these compare with conventional systems used previously? For education projects, include outcomes achieved and how you measured them through surveys, attendance, or other methods (if appropriate). Were these results what you expected? If not, why? What would you do differently next time? (Use as much space as necessary to answer the questions. You are not restricted to the space on this form.)

Measurable results were not long in coming. Sales at the first farmer's market with the new store more than doubled. Publicity generated by news articles in the Bloomington Pantagraph and the Lincoln Courier increased our exposure tremendously and contributed to an overall 300% increase in total farm sales during the last quarter of 2010.

The mobile food store was part of \$120,000 in capital improvements made to the farm operation during 2010. We believe strongly that the time is right to become part of the local food movement sweeping the country; the right time for creative solutions made possible through grants such as this one. Thank you,



Our store meets all county and city requirements for accessibility and for food safety. Shown are two freezer units and two refrigeration units (front) with shelving on left.



Maybe we should have got a bigger one ! At the 2010 Bloomington Farmer's Market customers shopped inside and outside – under the awning.

DISCUSSION

What did you learn from this grant? How has this affected your farm or ranch operation? Did you overcome your identified barrier, and if so, how? What are the advantages and disadvantages of implementing a project such as yours? If asked for more information or a recommendation concerning what you examined in this project, what would you tell other farmers or ranchers?

I would encourage other producers to participate in the system – if you have an idea to try, don't let lack of funds destroy it. Grants also allow ideas and information to be shared, and everyone benefits.

OUTREACH

What methods did you use for telling others about: Your project, project events or activities, and project results?

How and to whom did you communicate this information? Be sure to include details on how many people attended field days or demonstrations, and how information was further disseminated by media covering any events. What plans do you have for further communicating your results? Include copies of press releases, news clippings, flyers, brochures, or publications developed during this project. Also enclose any photos or slides which might be helpful in telling your story to others.

Information about the Mobile Store was provided on the social media network of our website www.prairierthfarm.com , and articles in the ISU student newspaper – The Vidette - (hard copy only), and Lincoln Courier
http://www.prairierthfarm.com/PrairiErth_Farm/Press_files/Courier%20CSA%20Story.pdf