



256 ways to grow local food systems

This issue of *Common Ground* highlights just a few ways that innovative communities and individuals have used Southern Region SARE grants to support local food systems. Go to www.sare.org and type "local food" into the national project data base to get a list of all 256 grants SARE has awarded in this topic area.

The portfolio of imaginative ways grantees have used SARE funds is impressive. There's at least one experiment to compensate farmers for distributing surplus crops through a local food bank. Another project developed infrastructure for supplying college cafeterias with locally grown food. One community tackled the job of making it easier for recipients of food stamps and WIC dollars to purchase fresh produce from a farmers market. Another project supported marketing efforts aimed at preschool and after school programs.

The continuing and completed projects not only serve as a springboard of ideas for future applicants but also offer models for individuals and communities seeking to assert more control over their own food supply.

Making a bigger pie

Just the term *tailgate market* says a lot about the rural South. The pecan groves, vacant lots and school yards where pick up trucks unceremoniously park and drop their tailgates to reveal fresh-picked bounty on Saturday mornings is a far cry from the urban or state-owned farmers markets with colorful banners, shade tents, perhaps even permanent stalls. Those larger markets have regular publicity efforts and tighter coordination. Tailgate markets lean more toward a show-up and set-up style of doing business.

These small venues offer limited-resource farmers the highest profit potential of their marketing options, but rural communities lack the resources to promote them. The dispersed nature of small markets often dooms them to stagnant sales, and the struggle for customers can lead to bitter competitiveness among markets. However, the results of a recent SARE producer grant suggests that instead of squabbling over a piece of the pie, markets can work together and make a bigger pie.

In 2002, 10 small markets representing 150 small farms in Western North Carolina pooled their resources to form the Mountain Tailgate Market Association (MTMA) for group promotion and development. Each member market elects a representative who attends the meetings and casts their market's votes.

One of the association's first accomplishments was to win a Southern SARE producer grant led by **Charlie Jackson**, a farmer who is also on staff of the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP). The grant provided the resources to develop a logo for the association,



The handsome logo identifies this market as one of 10 members in Western North Carolina's Mountain Tailgate Market Association.

conduct a multi-media promotional campaign, survey shoppers and vendors at all 10 markets, and conduct an end-of-season workshop for the vendors.

According to Jackson, the SARE activities resulted in heightened visibility of the markets, brought many new customers, provided a strong base of information on customer and vendor perceptions of the markets and strengthened the cohesiveness of the group. He is using the **ASAP website** to share their success with other markets. Viewer's can obtain copies of the association's bylaws, surveys and other documents, which they can customize for other markets that would like to model after MTMA.

Evaluation through both short opinion polls and more extensive surveys was a key component of the project to measure the success of promotions. About 1600 customers and 60 vendors responded to the surveys in 2003. The rapid feedback guided future promotional decisions.

For example, the surveys indicated

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A bigger pie

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that most new customers found the markets through word of mouth, so the vendors capitalized on that by asking customers to bring a friend on a particular market day designated as Summer Celebration. That day was the season's high point for traffic and sales. When that success supported the survey results, vendors became convinced about the value of word-of-mouth advertising. Now the association is looking for other ways to take advantage of that casual communication pipeline.

In the category of paid advertisement the surveys indicated that a free arts and entertainment weekly was bringing in more customers than radio ads. So for the 2004 season when SARE funds were no longer cushioning the kitty, they decided to put all their advertising dollars into that paper.

The group has learned a lot about the differences between managing a market association and a single market. For example, brochures had been included in the proposal budget as the major outreach tool, but they were omitted as the project team realized they were too expensive and permanent for the changeable nature of a collection of small markets.

"There were just too many variables for the permanency of print," says Jackson. "Brochures would work for a single market but for an association we found that a web site was cheaper, could be customized for each market and updated weekly. I maintain the web site for our association as a volunteer, and I think most markets would have one or two people within their group who could provide a simple web page as their contribution."

(Editor's note: www.localharvest.org offers a free web page, complete with a user-friendly template, for individual farmers or farmers markets. Also www.asapconnections.org offers a similar site for free listings of Appalachian farms and markets)

The vendors have grown professionally from being part of the association, according to Jackson. "It's inspiring to see a group of farmers sitting down and planning together," says Jackson. "By the time we put on the workshop at the end of the season, the team spirit was evident in how we all worked together as a group."

The 2004 season brought more customers, vendors and new markets to the association. As more markets request to join the association, Jackson is finding out that the limiting factor is not member numbers as much as media territory.

"Group promotion is a major benefit of the association," says Jackson, "And if you have to start dividing your advertising spending to cover more than one media territory you have cut your effectiveness in half."

As for the future, MTMA will continue to keep tabs on customers and vendors through surveys. Not only will the data drive their own decision making, but it will also provide documentation about the importance of the markets to their communities, according to Jackson.

"As more markets join us and as we become more important to an increasing number of consumers, then we can have more voice in policymaking."

For more details about the project go to www.sare.org and search the data base for project **FS03-167**. Or contact the SARE office at (770) 412-4787.

Adding more than the numbers

It's mostly about the numbers for Paula Davis, grants coordinator for Santa Rosa County in Florida's panhandle. When she noticed that 74,459 acres (or 43.2%) of the county's non-forested landmass was in agricultural production, that seemed like a healthy percentage. But then she noticed that more than half the crops produced (53% to be exact) were commodity items: cotton and peanuts.

"That really limits the diversity and sustainability of our farm economy," she said. "Growing fruits and vegetables, cut flowers, forage-fed beef and emphasizing more organic production would diversify the county's agricultural base and provide a more sustainable local food system."

To further complicate their system, locally grown food is exported out of the county and is not available to Santa Rosa residents who are purchasing long-haul produce at the grocery stores.

The Santa Rosa Agribusiness Committee tackled the problem with a two-pronged approach to start developing a healthy local food system. They created the Riverwalk Market in downtown Milton in 2002 to help local producers and consumers find each other. They are also looking into how they can support larger volume sales to regional institutions, perhaps by building a food processing and distribution center.

Working on behalf of the county, Davis applied for and won a SSARE Sustainable Community Grant for outreach activities in connection with the market, particularly to promote brand recognition of the Santa Rosa Fresh label. Grant dollars were used to create a logo, develop a website, advertise on local radio stations, erect a billboard and produce flyers, signs and a newsletter.

All of that activity resulted in the market consistently selling out, indicating that demand was exceeding



Live-oaks draped in Spanish moss provide a picturesque venue for Santa Rosa County's **Riverwalk Market** in downtown Milton, Florida. A local landowner allows the market to use her property at a nominal fee, another example of the community support that has made the market a success.

supply, but Davis wants numbers by which to measure the success of all that promotion. Data collected through surveys in the 2003 season is being held as baseline measurements for comparison with surveys conducted during the 2004 season.

Davis is aiming for a 50% increase in name recognition for the Santa Rosa Fresh label, a 25% increase in sales of locally grown produce, and a 50% increase in local institutions using local produce. When the market season ends in November, the numbers will be crunched and analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the outreach. Details will be included in the project report in April 2005.

Some unexpected benefits of the project can't be measured by numbers.

"Every time a project is worked on jointly and it goes well, the organizations that collaborated are that much more likely to work together on other projects in the future," said Davis.

"For example, because of working relationships fostered through the SARE project, the county extension office and the University of Florida collaborated to use some coastal renourishment funds to plant seas oats and place educational kiosks along the beach."

Just about every government agency and non-profit group in the county is contributing to the project through staff time or goods and services. Working under the coordination of the Santa Rosa Agribusiness Council, they include TEAM Santa Rosa (the economic development arm of the county), the Santa Rosa County Board of Commissioners, Santa Rosa County Extension office, the city of Milton, Main Street Milton and the University of Florida IFAS.

For more information search the project data base at www.sare.org for project **CS03-010**, or for a hard copy of the annual report contact the SARE office at (770) 412-4787.

Growing Goodwill on Alabama's Gulf Coast

Farmers in Alabama's southernmost counties are feeling the squeeze— caught between Mobile's urban sprawl and the fragile coastal environment. The farm-gate value of the commodity crops they grow is not keeping pace with how much their farmland would be worth if converted to subdivisions, golf courses and schools. The rush toward development is also raising the antennae of environmental groups who keep tabs on the waters and wetlands of Mobile Bay. They are alert to any residential or agricultural pollution potential. It's no wonder that many families have sold their multi-generational farms.

Wendy Allen, project investigator on a new Sustainable Community Innovation project is concerned that farmers aren't aware of all their options. "Part of the issue here is that loss of farmland is perceived as an economic boom for farmers rather than a life quality issue for the community," she says. "The farmers seem to be accepting that they can't do anything about growth coming in so why not 'make hay while the sun shines'."

Working from the premise that growth is inevitable, the Healthy Coastal Communities Initiative (HCCI) is striving to make that *smart* growth by establishing working relationships among the different factions. HCCI created an initiative called Sustainable Agriculture for Future Economics (SAFE) to bring the farming community to the table with municipal, county and business interests to discuss farm preservation and sustainable farming practices.

"We decided that if we were to develop "smarter" in our region, we had to work with the farming community because they were the most at-risk group as far as development goes," Allen continued. "SAFE was started to begin the process of determining where our agricultural community was in relation to sustainable agriculture and what knowledge the farmers had of sustainable practices. We also wanted to find ways to connect the farming community with the non-farming community in order to strengthen the interdependence between the two, and to help open new opportunities to preserve the farms and open space surrounding cities."

The Sustainable Community Innovation grant is paying for workshops and meeting materials needed to bring the groups together. The project has already produced two workshops to launch the unwieldy process of relationship building. How do you get such dissimilar groups to come up with a working definition of smart growth? It's similar to how a parent settles a sharing dispute over the last piece of cake by having one child cut it and the second child choose the first piece.

"At the first workshop we had 150 people working to define what smart growth would look like for our coastal area," says project co-coordinator Charlene Lee. "Each peer group chose their top three initiatives and then we mixed the groups up so that everyone was now talking to people with other interests. The new groups discussed the topics defined by the peer groups, add to and refine them.

The groups found they shared many of the same goals for their community: a good quality of life, a living wage, clean



A new school building nestled up to a soybean field poses different problems for different populations. Farmers see it as a windfall to justify their loss of cropland. Environmentalists worry about pesticides being used so close to a school.

water and air, reasonable taxes and safe neighborhoods. Starting from that common ground they worked toward compromising their differences about environmental regulations, individual property rights and controlling growth.

According to Allen, the workshop provided an excellent foundation on which to build.

"We found out that farmers were most concerned about the financial situation of the farming community and saw incentives as a means to help out," she said.

"They also saw the need for the state to have a plan. When asked about the possibility of purchasing development rights, some of the farmers were against permanent rights being bought, yet they didn't equate the sale of farm land as a permanent loss of development rights. The farmers identified "public awareness" as the next step.

"Next we are conducting a survey of the farmers to determine their level of knowledge about sustainable farming practices. We are also collecting oral history from them to learn about how farming practices have changed over the years. We are also beginning to plan public forums for each county."

There's still plenty of information that needs to be collected, and analyzed before the groups can think about designing a smart growth plan, according to Lee and Allen, but at least they are working on it together.

For more details see report for **CS04-019**.

"Part of the issue is that loss of farmland is perceived as an economic boom for farmers rather than a life quality issue for the community" Wendy Allen, **Healthy Coastal Communities Initiative**, SSARE project CS04-019

Rio Grande inspires big vision

The Canutillo community in El Paso County, Texas, is economically disadvantaged, but don't call it poor. The clean air, big sky and vast tracks of rural land hold promises that residents hope to claim for future generations. And they plan to do it with school kids.

The Canutillo Independent School District is leading the predominantly Hispanic community toward building the Agronomics Center on the Rio Grande, where local students can learn the basics of many different careers in agriculture. Career pathways will guide students headed for post-secondary education through ag engineering, horticulture, animal science and environmental sciences. Classroom study will be enhanced through practical experience in the welding shop, metal fabrication shop, greenhouse, floral design lab, meat science lab, stables and show barn. A show arena will be used for local competitions and also rented out as income for the center.

The entire complex is estimated to cost more than \$4 million. Major donations so far include 75 acres of farmland, architectural services as well as construction of the show arena, laboratory and shop. With fund-raising underway for the center, the school district's board of trustees realized they needed to do some serious planning to make sure the community and the center enhanced each other. They established the Sustainable Texas Agricultural Research (STAR) Advisory Group to create a community development strategic plan. The STAR Advisory Group has a membership of about 35-40 active members with expertise ranging from extension, conventional farming and ranching, architecture, entrepreneurship, law, construction, advertising, horse racing, education, and grant providers.

Currently El Paso County's predominant crops are conventionally produced cotton, dairy products and pecans, but **Gayla Kessinger** and others in the STAR Advisory Group wanted to expose the community to more profitable, environmentally sound agricultural enterprises that would also stimulate economic growth. Kessinger is the school district's career and technology education coordinator. This is where SARE came in. Kessinger submitted a proposal and was awarded a Sustainable Community Innovation grant. The \$10,000 will cover materials and meeting expenses to develop the sustainable agriculture economic plan. Five workshops will be held to identify the elements of sustainability and how they can be applied to El Paso County's agricultural community. For more information see annual report for project **CS03-012** in the project data base or call the SARE office at (770) 412-4786 for a hard copy of the report.



Livestock projects are the most popular endeavor in the Canutillo FFA program, represented here by Alex Fraire and Pepe,



The annual goat jackpot is a popular fun raiser as well as a lucrative fund raiser.

Life lessons on the hoof

The 1250-student Canutillo High School is already known for its strong FFA program. In 2002 a Canutillo team won top honors at the Texas FFA Agriscience Fair with their goat feeding project. Patsy Gomez and Michelle Bolner were surprised at their first place win, which included \$1000 scholarships for each of them.

"There were all these high-tech experiments there, and then we show up with our goats," Bolner told the *El Paso Times*, after the announcement.

Perhaps it was the practicality of the project that appealed to the judges. Using four pet goats, the girls evaluated four feeding rations to determine which one would put the most muscle on a carcass in 60 days. That's right, carcass.

"It was a life and death lesson," Bolner continued. "From pet to butchered, it was definitely an eye-opening experience."

That first place win encouraged both girls to pursue college degrees in agricultural sciences, which is just what career and technology education coordinator Gayla Kessinger had in mind.

"This past school year, with the exception of one student, all of the FFA officers are attending a major university," she says. "We seem to have more students returning to their community to work, teach, and give back. I expect the Agronomics Center on the Rio Grande will generate new kinds of agriculture for the area."

And sometimes the answer is “No”

A few years ago the New North Florida Cooperative used a producer grant to explore the feasibility of providing fresh produce to the Department of Defense for distribution to military bases and schools. They quickly found out that it was not profitable.

“Because they needed small quantities every day, and we were dealing in fresh produce, rather than canned or frozen, it was not profitable to drive four hours one-way to deliver five cases of muscadines,” says Glyen Holms, executive director of NNFC. “Once we closed that door, we went back to concentrating on what we were good at—marketing local food to local schools”.

With assistance from Florida A & M University marketing specialist Vonda Richardson, they became so

skillful at it that farmers in other states began asking Holmes for advice in marketing to their own school systems. It wasn't long before the NNFC transitioned from just giving advice to offering technical assistance and business training. Eventually the cooperative expanded into Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi to become the Small Farmers Distribution Network. “Now more than a half million school students eat our fruits and vegetables every day,” says Holmes.

He is quick to point out that the network is not a true cooperative. “We are working with independent people who aren't accustomed to working in groups, and meetings can conflict with farming schedules.”

In this distribution system each farmer maintains ownership of his crop. Holmes or one of the other business-minded members actually does the marketing for the network. When a school system becomes a customer, local farmers supply the crops they grow best and then purchase supplementary produce from other members as needed. A family in Alabama specializes in green beans and peas. Sweet potatoes for all four states come from Mississippi. The original NNFC farms in Florida still supply greens and muscadines. A new member in Georgia is growing green beans and collards.

Holmes stays on the lookout for ways the network can improve production and marketing.

“For example, we found a family in Alabama that was growing 100 acres of peas but not making any money because hand-harvesting took so long. We leased them our bean picker which takes 45 minutes to harvest what had been taking them a week. Now they are our green bean and pea specialists.”

Current and future plans concentrate on improving leadership skills in the farmer leaders. As part of that effort, the network provides training in such practical things as map reading, maneuvering big trucks in tight places and scheduling so deliveries will be on time.

“Right now, the limiting factor in the network's growth is the time it takes to train farmer leaders,” Holmes says. “A big part of the challenge is convincing them that the effort to stretch themselves will pay off.”

Holmes is optimistic about the potential for local food systems.

“Hard times create opportunity,” he says. “There's never been a better time to be a farmer because it is so wide open for all kinds of local marketing. Look at how small stores closed in communities when big chain stores opened in a nearby city. Now look what's springing up in those empty buildings: Fred's Dollar Stores and similar businesses. They've found out that people will drive to the city for a shopping day, but prefer to shop locally when they need just a few things.”

As for the customers they are picking up during these hard times, the Small Farmers' Distribution Network is banking on keeping them with relationship marketing and the quality of their local produce.

For more information see the final report for [FS00-121](#).



The New North Florida Farmers Cooperative used a SARE grant to determine that a Department of Defense marketing opportunity would not be profitable, freeing their time for more lucrative marketing to local school systems.

In the photos, freshly picked greens are packed directly into a refrigerated truck; cleaned, chopped and bagged at the network's closest processing facility before being delivered directly to a school's walk-in cooler and served in the cafeteria.

Which SARE grant program for you?

Southern SARE administers seven separate grant programs, each with its own priorities and audiences. The process begins with the release of calls for proposals for each of the programs. The SSARE web site www.griffin.uga.edu/sare is the quickest way to receive the calls for proposals as soon as they are released. If you prefer a mailed copy of any of the calls for proposals, contact Paige Patton at (770) 412-4787 or sare@griffin.uga.edu

Research and Education Projects (including Planning Grants) generally are conducted by interdisciplinary, multi-institutional, and often, multi-state research teams coordinated by a principal investigator from a non-governmental organization, university or governmental agency. These projects include farmers as participants. Planning Grants do not require preproposals.

2004

March 1 Call for 2005 R&E preproposals and Planning Grant proposals released

June 1 R&E Preproposals due, Planning Grant proposals due

August Full R&E proposals requested, Administrative Council announces Planning Grant awards

Nov. 15 Full R&E proposals due

2005

February Administrative Council announces grant awards

Graduate Student Awards are intended for full-time graduate students (masters or Ph.D.) enrolled at accredited colleges and universities in the Southern Region. Up to \$10,000 will be awarded to each successful applicant for up to three years of project activities. The funds are paid directly to the university for use on the graduate student's project.

2004

March 1 Call for 2005 proposal released

November 19 Proposals due

2005

February Administrative Council announces grant awards

Professional Development Program Projects train agricultural information providers in sustainable agriculture techniques and concepts.

2004

March 1 Call for 2005 preproposals released

May 14 2004 Preproposals due

November 12 Full proposals due

2005

February Administrative Council announces grant awards

Producer Grant Projects are developed, coordinated and conducted by producers or producer organizations. These projects are generally located in one state, often on one farm. There is a \$10,000 limit for funding proposals submitted by an individual producer and a \$15,000-limit on proposals submitted by producer organizations.

2004

August 2 Call for 2005 proposals released

December 3 Proposals due

2005

February Administrative Council announces grant awards

On-Farm Research Projects are conducted by agricultural professionals such as extension agents, NRCS and/or NGO personnel who currently work with farmers and ranchers. Cooperators must include at least one producer at all stages of the project. Funded for a maximum of \$15,000 for up to two years of activities.

2004

August 2 Call for 2004 proposals released

December 3 Proposals due

2005

February Administrative Council announces grant awards

Sustainable Community Innovation Projects link sound farm and nonfarm economic development with agricultural and natural resource management. Applicants may be farmers, ranchers, researchers, community organizations, environmentalists, ag and community development professionals, entrepreneurs, governmental and non-governmental organizations. Funded for a project maximum of \$10,000 for up to two years of activities.

2004

July 1 Call for proposals released

September 7 Proposals due

November Administrative Council announces awards

Southern SARE debuts electronic CFP

The 30 successful preproposal applicants invited to submit full proposals for Research and Education grants in September 2004 will debut Southern SARE's online proposal submission and review system. If all goes well with that introductory run, then starting in March 2005, all of SSARE's grant programs **except producer grants** will have proposals submitted and reviewed online.

"The move to electronic submissions and review will save money and time," says Kathy Berryman, the Southern SARE staffer who catalogues proposal submissions and sends them out for review. "The old way cost thousands of dollars for shipping, and even though we used overnight delivery service there was about a three-week lag time between submission and review because of all the hard copies and cds that had to be made for each reviewer. Then we had to wait for the reviewers' scores and comments to come back to the office before proposals could be ranked."

With the new system, the time between submission and review technically could be shortened to the few seconds required for email notification to the reviewers, but time must be allowed for regional coordinator Jeff Jordan to assign reviewers to specific proposals, a chore that can't be done until all proposals have been submitted.

"Besides the increased efficiency, the system will allow reviewers to have the entire submission in front of them at all times, making their jobs easier," says Jordan. "And because of the way specific text boxes are set up, applicants will have to write more focused proposals. The new system should result in higher quality proposals tightly targeted to SARE guidelines."

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