

Northwest California Local Food Distribution and Web-Based Marketing Project

UC Cooperative Extension applied for a UC SAREP grant to hire a coordinator/broker to facilitate connections between food buyers and producers. This new position increased the ability of local farmers to meet the produce needs of schools and other institutions while securing new markets for their crops. Educating the institutional buyers about the availability of local produce and appealing to their sense of community participation and support were crucial components of the program. For the farmers, the barriers to participation revolved around price and volume of produce required. Providing marketing and post-harvest assistance was also critical for increasing new relationships. The project hired Jack Surmani to work as the initial broker. During the next season, UCCE and the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (C.A.F.F.) partnered to continue the project with Melanie Patrick as the broker.

Project Impacts:

- A broker who focuses solely on one-on-one interactions with local growers was found to be integral to creating new sales relationships. The broker was able to persistently contact institutions in ways that farmers do not have the time or expertise to do.
- A meeting was convened where buyers and growers met to discuss critical barriers to collaborating. The group identified transportation and storage of produce as major issues for farmers wishing to sell to institutional buyers.
- The project educated local growers and school districts on the concept of contract growing. One “open invoice” relationship between a farmer and a school district was established where the farmer was able to pack and deliver whatever produce he has available at the time to the school. Approximately \$5,200 worth of produce was delivered this way.
- The CAFF broker tracked \$20,000 worth of local produce moving into local schools and other institutions during a two month period. Several vegetable growers started to sell to the CSU campus.
- The program was presented during a Rural Sociology annual meeting in Santa Clara along with three other Extension programs. Other outreach has been achieved through the Farm to School Workgroup Web site, CAFF’s newsletter and Web site, and an article written in a Humboldt County newsletter.



Further Developments:

To assist the formation of direct buyer and grower relationships, UC Cooperative Extension, Community Alliance with Family Farmers (C.A.F.F.), and the Farm Bureau joined together to develop a Web site listing farm products available from producers within Humboldt, Del Norte and Trinity Counties. Through the Web site (www.Redwoodag.com), fruit and vegetable buyers can easily find local products listed either by category or by farm. The Web site caters to buyers from institutions like schools, hospitals, universities, restaurants and independent grocers. To ensure that the site remains easily accessible to the farmers, the team readily consulted individual farmers to address their needs and concerns. Based on these conversations, the project decided to provide farmers with the option of receiving direct assistance in setting up their farm or product profile.

The project team encouraged farmers to register during meetings and through individual phone calls and emails. A newsletter article encouraging use of the Web site was included in the UC Cooperative Extension mailing list and the Farm Bureau newsletter sent out to farmers. The business section of the *Times Standard* and the *Capitol Press*, two local newspapers, also ran articles featuring the project. The team has also developed a brochure to hand out to producers and buyers, available for free download on the Web site. The brochure was handed out during farmers market events and farmers market meetings.

Web Site Impacts:

- The Web site is currently serving 44 farmers who have posted approximately 60 of their products online. More than 30 buyers have registered on the Web site.
- There are currently 19 product categories, ranging from canned goods, dried goods, fresh or dried fruits, vegetables, wines, ornamentals or specialty food products, listed on the Web site.

More Information:

View the Web site at www.redwoodag.com.

Contact Information:

Deborah Giraud
Plant Science & Community Development Advisor
University of California Cooperative Extension-Humboldt County
5630 South Broadway
Eureka, CA 95503
Telephone: 707-445-7351
Fax: 707-444-9334
ddgiraud@ucdavis.edu

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