

Increasing Farmer Success Compelling Stories

The *Increasing Farmer Success in the Deep South* project is building historically disadvantaged and limited resource farmers' capability to meet the burgeoning demand for local, healthy, sustainably-produced produce in the South, with a special focus on Mississippi and Alabama. With generous support from the Walmart Foundation, the Wallace Center is working directly with farmers, farmer groups and intermediary organizations to address the barriers they face in meeting demand from institutional and wholesale buyers. *Increasing Farmer Success* is facilitating local market linkages with a variety of retail and institutional buyers and building farmer capacity through direct technical assistance, group training, and by making direct investments into supply chain infrastructure and activities. Between fall 2012 and spring 2013, a **total of 544,976 pounds of product for a value of \$446,277** was sold by the New North Florida Cooperative, the Food Bank of North Alabama and the Deep South Food Alliance.

A Few of the Project Grantees & Partners

The [New North Florida Cooperative](#) (NNFC) didn't just expand access to fresh healthy food for the 24,000 vulnerable children in Holmes County, Mississippi—they saw the opportunity to support local farmers while providing children in six rural and urban districts across three states with farm fresh food, and built the infrastructure to serve them, from the bottom up. From September 2012 to March 2013, NNFC opened up the farm to school market in these school districts, starting with the development of a crucial food hub in Holmes County, Mississippi, the poorest county in the state. They've now served 243,115 students in 274 schools in Holmes County (MS), Vicksburg and Warren School Districts (MS), Hattiesburg School District (MS), West Memphis and Forrest City (AR), and Memphis City Schools (TN). The result: for the first time, students in these districts have access to fresh local produce like squash, turnips, collard greens, and sweet potatoes in school lunches. From fall 2012 to spring 2013, through the *Increasing Farmer Success* project efforts, New North Florida Cooperative has sold a total of **168,121 pounds** of collard greens, turnips, sweet potatoes and squash to schools in Holmes County, West Memphis, Forrest City Arkansas and Memphis City in addition to Belle Foods (via C&S) for **\$323,066**.



Through the infrastructure and training NNFC has helped develop, the food hub has provided much needed jobs in Holmes County, and secured food purchase commitments from the Mississippi Department of Education and Memphis City Schools. And for Holmes County Child Nutrition Director Rena Pritchard, the partnership has been transformative for her district as she works to meet students' nutrition needs and USDA requirements: "Our children deserve the best we can offer and NNFC affords me the flexibility to do so, especially when fresh collards, turnips, butternut squash and sweet potatoes are on the menu. Working with NNFC has been very successful in helping to meet the new criteria set by USDA."

In the Black Belt of Alabama, the **Deep South Food Alliance (DSFA)** increases farmer success by providing direct market farmers unprecedented access to proven production techniques and market development, preparing them to expand to wholesale markets. As a result of their training in field production and hoop house high tunnel production, from fall 2012 to spring 2013, these farmers have produced 67,000 pounds of collards, turnips, kale, snap beans, sweet potatoes, and a variety of other root vegetables, and DSFA has **sold 60,173 pounds for \$27,276**. Importantly, they've begun to realize that with consistent use of these new methods, they can provide higher quality produce and expand their economic opportunities from road side stands to restaurants, distribution centers, and larger farmers markets throughout Alabama and Mississippi.



Built on the principles of partnership and respect, DSFA has gained the trust and commitment of farmers whose past challenges and disappointments have left them suspicious of new partnerships. Overcoming this barrier has been central to the success of DSFA and their fifteen producer partners. By focusing on building strong relationships, DSFA has helped ensure farmers' commitment to implementing the range of new techniques they've learned through training, including new techniques for seed bed preparation, nutrient application, irrigation, and weed control. Working together, DSFA and its small-scale farmer partners in Alabama and Mississippi have begun to build the technical

foundation that will support their long term economic growth through success at the wholesale level.

The [Food Bank of North Alabama](#) understands what it takes to increase farmer success: a combination of education, infrastructure, and access to markets. With all this in mind, they've begun by establishing the Farm Food Collaborative (FFC) food hub, which will connect twenty-seven farmers and farmer groups to hospitals, schools, restaurants, corporations, and local grocery stores. To ensure the success of these burgeoning partnerships, they're also providing training, starting with Good Agricultural Practices. And the farmers are listening: "I will begin talking and working with my staff now...and I'm looking forward to working with the Farm Food Collaborative on commercial sales." said one farmer who recently attended a working meeting of FFC. From these beginnings, FFC is already seeing success; from fall 2012 through spring 2013, they've facilitated the **sale of 316,682 pounds** of tomatoes, lettuce, zucchini, sweet potatoes, squash and peppers for nearly **\$96,000** to wholesale buyers.



The collaborative effort has had some unexpected successes as well. As new members of the Farm Food Collaborative, a group of local farmers donated over 60,000 pounds of delicious, nutritious sweet potatoes to the food bank where the Collaborative is housed—seconds that would have otherwise been plowed over. For the first time in many years, low income and vulnerable families in northern Alabama had access to fresh local food through the Food Bank of North Alabama. Along with increasing the success of local farmers, this community-based partnership is increasing the community's access to fresh healthy food.



Since 1881, [Tuskegee University](#) has been working closely with small, limited-resource farmers. In 1905, Thomas Campbell was appointed the first Extension (demonstration) agent in the United States. George Washington Carver's research pioneered sustainable agriculture and added value to agriculture crops in the United States and the world. Tuskegee University is a land-grant university and has delivered USDA Research and Extension programs that support small and socially disadvantaged farmers in Alabama, the southern Black Belt, and persistent poverty counties for decades.

In 2010, the Secretary of Agriculture established the Carver Integrative Sustainability Center at Tuskegee University as an USDA -1890 Land-Grant "Center of Excellence" with the purpose of leveraging eleven USDA agencies. The overall goal was to serve small, socially disadvantaged, women, underserved and veteran farmers. In keeping with Tuskegee University's long history of service and outreach to small, limited resource farmers, Tuskegee has partnered with 15 farmers to assist them in forming the Small Farmers Agricultural Cooperative.



The Small Farmers Agricultural Cooperative, Inc. was legally formed on Feb. 5, 2013. The Small Farmers Agricultural Cooperative, Inc. consists of 15 farmers who are collaboratively selling quality fruits and vegetables to commercial markets. The goal for 2013-2015 is to expand the cooperative to include 40 to 80 small farmers across 12 to 18 counties; who will initially employ 80 to 120 workers plus seasonal workers;. In 2013 a processing/packaging plant manager will be hired and also part-time staff hired as needed. Construction of the processing/packaging plant 3.5 miles east of Selma will be done in 2013; the \$2 million dollar packaging facility will create 100 construction jobs; location of the plant will facilitate and catalyze collective packing and marketing of high valued crops by small farmers. Exponential growth and related job opportunities are possible as product volume increases and added value products are developed based on market opportunities and university input to assure food quality, food safety and optimum production efficiency. The initial focus has been on watermelons, peas and greens since markets for these crops are available from Walmart and other commercial partners. In 2011, 25 truckloads of watermelon were shipped, 40 in 2012, with an opportunity for 300 in 2013.

The partnership with Winrock/Wallace Center will allow members of the Small Farmers Agricultural Cooperative to expand their markets and increase their success in local food sales by procuring six cold storage units. These units will enhance the cold chain capacity required for marketing fruits and vegetables by limited resource, historically disadvantaged farmers in the Alabama Black Belt and adjacent counties.



The [Mississippi Sustainable Agriculture Network's \(MSAN\)](#) launch this year may have been its biggest success—but not its only one. Building on several years of planning amongst farmers and sustainable agriculture advocates throughout the state, MSAN's mission is to “make sustainable farming and local food production thriving enterprises in Mississippi.” Stewardship of the environment, along with the financial viability of farmers and the health of communities and local economies, is at the core of MSAN's definition of sustainability; and after just a few months, meeting these ambitious goals is becoming a reality.

With the development of resources and opportunities for historically disadvantaged Mississippi farmers central to its mission, MSAN's next big success will be its Sustainable Agriculture Comprehensive Training Course summer series: a six month program on essential sustainable agricultural practices, business planning, and marketing, along with opportunities for farm site visits in Mississippi and Alabama, and individualized technical assistance for farmers. In just its first summer, MSAN will provide formal educational opportunities and resources to 25-50 beginning, transitional, and veteran farmers committed to farming practices that are both socially and environmentally responsible, as well as the more informal guidance and support necessary for their financial success, and the holistic sustainability of their communities.



To complement their work with farmers, they also have several other projects underway: a state-wide database of sustainable and organic producers, consumer education research, and a localized crop planning tool. Building the organizational, financial and communications infrastructure that will keep them moving forward and connecting with its partners has also been a priority. As a network-based organization, MSAN sees its partners and farmers as the foundation of its sustainability and success, reflected in a series of listening sessions they held across the state. They're continuing to strengthen these connections—with researchers, farmers, nonprofits, businesses, and policymakers—by participating in events like the [Farmer Fly-In](#) in Washington, DC, and by organizing their own first major learning and networking event in March 2013, the Mississippi Food Summit.

