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Rutgers Food Innovation Center Study Identifies Opportunities for Community Farmers’ Markets

Study Results Presented at Regional Forums

New Brunswick, NJ -- Nearly 100 New Jersey food processors, farmers and Community Farmers’ Market managers gathered at forums held last week to hear results of a recent study undertaken to examine potential opportunities at Community Farmers’ Markets (CFMs) in the Garden State. The study’s sponsor—the Rutgers Food Innovation Center (FIC)—told participants that the numbers of CFMs grew 158 percent, or three times the national rate, since the year 2000: from 40 in 2000 to 103 by the end of the 2007 growing season.

“We believe that the number of Community Farmers’ Markets will continue to increase,” said Lou Cooperhouse, director of the Rutgers Food Innovation Center in Bridgeton, New Jersey. “Consumers are seeking local foods for purchase and value an interaction with New Jersey farmers. Communities are increasingly seeing farmers markets as a vehicle for local economic development, and farmers have found this to be an opportunity in which they can earn considerably greater income.”

Forum presenters noted that CFMs operate in every county of the state and offer farmers and food producers opportunities to sell freshly grown and prepared foods directly to consumers seeking to purchase local foods.

“For some New Jersey farmers, CFMs have become an important distribution channel,” said Diane Holtaway, associate director of the FIC. “Our research indicates that some farmers are beginning to rely on direct sales CFMs and other channels for more and more of their income. They are adapting to new demands and finding ways to earn more by selling directly to consumers.”

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“We have worked hard to link farmers with community farmers markets, and the resulting rapid growth of these markets distinguishes the Garden State,” said New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Charles Kuperus, who spoke at a forum held in Paterson on April 2. “New Jersey farmers markets play an important role in community and economic development, bolster local farm businesses and provide an additional marketplace for Jersey Fresh produce and New Jersey-prepared specialty foods. In some urban areas underserved by food retailers, these markets may be the only opportunity, or one of just a few, for residents to access the healthy, nutritious and delicious foods that come direct from our state’s farms.”

The research entailed the following:

- mailing surveys to 170 farmers identified as participants in Community Farmers’ Markets in 2007
- interviewing 52 Community Farmers Market Managers
- conducting two focus groups of NJ Farmers that sell at Community Farmers’ Markets
- interviewing 15 NJ farmers that exhibited a broad range of experience as vendors.

Key findings discussed at the Forums include:

1. The appeal of Farmers Markets is great and growing in every type of community, for every type of consumer. These markets attract both low income and affluent customers and provide access to people who want to buy high quality, local, fresh produce.

2. Farmers realize significant economic benefits from their participation in the markets.
   - Reliable Cash flow and higher margins (One farmer was noted as reporting that a box of lettuce that cost $7.20 to grow earned $6 wholesale and $24 at a Community Farmers’ Market)
   - Market diversification that supports risk management
   - Positive attention for farms and market farmers

3. Markets play a variety of constructive roles for communities.
   - Serving as a temporary town common
   - Offering residents easy access to fresh, farm grown foods
   - Highlighting the relevance of having nearby farms for New Jersey’s food supply
   - Showcasing New Jersey agriculture producers
   - Promoting healthier eating and better nutrition, particularly for senior citizens and women with infants and children
   - Providing opportunities for people eligible for WIC and Senior Agriculture Produce Vouchers to use them to buy foods otherwise unavailable to them
The 10-month study was conducted by a team of business development specialists from the Rutgers Food Innovation Center, researchers from the Rutgers Food Policy Institute, agriculture and resource management agents from Cooperative Extension at the Rutgers New Jersey Agriculture Experiment Station, and economic development specialists at the New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA).

The United States Department of Agriculture Rural Business Enterprise Grant Program provided funding for this project, through a grant awarded to the NJDA for Agricultural Development Initiatives to bolster the marketing and development of the state’s food and agricultural industry. “The Grant Funds provided by USDA Rural Development were approved for the purpose of exposing our farmers to the opportunities of direct sales of their fruits, vegetables, and other value added products produced in our Garden State,” commented Andrew Law, state director, USDA Rural Development. “The establishment of farmers’ markets in our urban centers is one more way to improve the farmer’s bottom line. Our farmers are successful because they are adapting to the changing markets and demands placed upon them for fresh product, including organics. The professional relationships such as this developed through the Department of Agriculture, Rutgers University Food Innovation Center and our farm families are critical in the support of an economically sustainable agriculture industry and critical in preserving our fragile rural landscape.”

The forums were held in Bordentown, Paterson, and Bridgeton. In addition to Cooperhouse, Holtaway and Secretary Kuperus, other forum presenters included NJDA Assistant Secretary Albert Murray, Logan Brown, economic development specialist for the NJDA, Carol Coren, business association mentor at the FIC; and William Manley, food safety specialist, New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services.

Materials presented in the forums will be included in online web-based courses being produced for farmers and farmer market managers which will be available this summer. Information about the Food Innovation Center can be found at www.foodinnovation.rutgers.edu.

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