NEW JERSEY INCUBATOR GROWING FROM SEED

Agriculture and food products are a $64 billion business in New Jersey, making them the state’s second-largest consumer goods industry. But small farmers in that state, like many others across the United States, face stiff competition from cheap imported produce. At the same time, rising land prices often make their farms more valuable as family homes than as fertile fields.

Enter the Rutgers Food Innovation Center in Bridgeton, N.J., which since 2001 has helped more than 300 clients statewide find new markets and value-added uses for their food and agriculture products.

“We have a strong orientation to ensuring that these rural businesses stay profitable and helping them get into value-added products,” says center Director Lou Cooperhouse.

For example, the center helped a third-generation peach farmer develop and market peach cider made from fruit that otherwise would have been destroyed because it was too delicate to be shipped. Cider sales not only have helped the farmer’s revenue stream, but also have increased his fresh fruit sales.

Success stories like that are made more remarkable by the fact that the center does not yet have a physical incubation facility. Its staff provides assistance in business development, market research, product and process development, quality assurance and food safety from offices in downtown Bridgeton. The center also has woven extensive partnerships with state and federal agencies, industry consultants, and legal and financial service providers.

As a result, the center has a ready crop of clients for a planned 23,000-square-foot facility that will offer everything from test kitchens to small-scale food processing equipment.

“Our plan from the beginning was to demonstrate our success through service, knowing that we wouldn’t be able to fulfill our mission until we had a physical space,” Cooperhouse says.

The center already has raised about two-thirds of the $8.8 million it needs for construction, primarily from various state agencies. Cooperhouse hopes to gain the last third from private sources, possibly a corporation that would like to name the incubator.

If fund-raising proceeds as anticipated, the center will break ground on the new facility next spring, with an anticipated opening in early 2007.—CC