Marin Organic's Cooperative Marketing Effort

Warren Weber (Farmer/Rancher Grant Program)

Project Number: FW03-107

Title: Marin Organic's Cooperative Marketing Effort

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Warren Weber, left, and Helge Hellberg, executive director of Marin Organic, converse at Weber's Star Route Farms in Bolinas.

Western SARE Grant: $13,500

Situation:

With the recent advent of "industrial organic" agriculture, small organic farmers are facing an increasingly bleak future. Unable to compete with the economics of scale that capitalized agriculture can achieve, smaller producers have trouble staying in business. Additionally, the rising costs of certification, advertising, promotion and labeling add an extra financial burden. This development threatens both the future of rural communities as well as the integrity of small-scale farming.

Margin Organic is an association of the majority of organic producers and processors in Marin County. Over the last six years, we have worked together to plan and implement strategies to address issues that are important to small agricultural producers such as a regional marketing strategy that promotes Marin County farms and products with sustainable and environmentally sound farming practices.

Marin Organic's delivery truck.

Objectives:

Our goal is to help ensure the survival of ranching and farming in the county and to protect the environment and the local landscape through education and the commercial promotion of the area's regionally produced food.

We also wish to promote organics in Marin County including increasing the number of organic farms and expanding outreach to farmers and ranchers who are interested in switching to organic produce.

Customers at Toby's in Pt. Reyes Station got to "know that hand that feeds them" through photos in the store.

Actions:

With this project, we encouraged and facilitated the purchase of locally produced organic food in schools, farmers markets and retail outlets. We built public awareness and understanding of the importance of supporting local sustainable agriculture by increasing media coverage, creating an informative and attractive website, hosting and attending public events, and educating growers about sustainable practices. We provided interested ranchers and farmers with tools and information for sustaining and enhancing their operations, increasing the viability of local agriculture.

Work goes on at Star Route Farms.

Results:

Specific benefits to the community and local growers include the following:

- We expanded the number of Marin Organic growers from 18 to 23, so that our membership now includes 90% of the row crop farms in Marin, three beef ranches and one dairy.
- We purchased a refrigerated distribution truck and began a gleaning/buying program from our farmers for an organic school lunch program in the Novato Unified School District.
- We brought a Marin Organic farm stand to the more heavily populated suburban part of the county and sold Marin Organic produce there once a week.
- We held a series of cooking classes called "Cooking West Marin" where celebrity chefs used local organic produce to feature their recipes. The money raised went to support the Pt. Reyes Farmers market.
- Metal farm signs were produced for use on farms and at farmers markets, Marin Organic signs for retail outlets and farmers markets were distributed free of charge, and 50,000 twist ties were distributed free to farmers.
- Janet Brown and Marty Jacobson expanded their organic operation by leasing 4 more acres of land where they grew heirloom tomatoes, melons, corn and peppers. In addition to selling to upscale restaurants, they also set up a successful roadside farm stand.
- Rancher Kevin Lunny certified 1,400 acres of pasture organic, expanded his beef operation to include 5 acres of organic artichokes, and he began working on becoming the first certified organic beef rancher in Marin County.
- Warren Weber signed a contract with a local private school to be the supplier of organic vegetables for the school's lunch program.

Identification signs were provided to farmers and retailers.

Marin Organic products were sold at Toby's in Pt. Reyes Station.

Potential Benefits:

As people become disconnected from the land and the culture that centered around it, namely, agriculture, this program and others like it reconnects people with the land and brings the field closer to the table.

We now want to increase the number of schoolchildren at farm tours where they learn real-world experience about where their food comes from. This will benefit Marin's organic farmers in the long term and the health and economy of the rising generation. With the expansion of consumer education, people will see how their choices directly affect open space, water quality, air quality, wildlife and the strength and balance of our community.