

## PASA Launches Initiative Aimed At 'Growing Markets, Adding Value, Sustaining Farms'

MILLHEIM (Centre Co.) — This spring the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) launched a five-year program to increase farm profitability and enhance rural economic development by increasing opportunities for adding value to farm goods produced on the farm or in the community.

Called the Community F.A.R.M. Initiative (Community Farm Alliance for Regional Markets), this community-based, sustainable farm marketing effort will address a serious need identified by sustainable producers and non-farming consumers alike.

"It was natural for PASA to initiate this effort," said PASA Executive Director Tim Bowser. "Sustainable agriculture seeks to increase farm financial viability. Without the security of assured markets and without the ability to turn a profit, no farm is sustainable. Without the involvement of the larger community, no markets are assured."

With this initiative, he said, PASA will be developing "innovative market-based strategies for increasing farm profitability while enhancing local economic development opportunities for rural and urban communities in the commonwealth."

The initial phase of the program is being funded by a \$343,000 grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation of Battle Creek, Mich. which was established in 1930 to "help people help themselves through the practical application of knowledge and resources."

The first phase will focus on Western and Central Pennsylvania. To coordinate the effort, PASA has hired Allen Matthews,

a third generation vegetable farmer from Washington County. According to Bowser, "Matthews brings an ideal set of skills to the task; he's a farmer who has done a wide variety of direct marketing and he has a great deal of experience in setting up collaborative partnerships, which is what this program is ultimately all about."

"This program is designed to promote strategies in Pennsylvania which will create outlets for locally produced goods, increase direct and retail sales, generate opportunities to add value through processing, engender cooperation between farmers, and strengthen the linkages between farmer, consumer, and community," Matthews said. "These marketing tools are out there, but they need to be developed within communities and integrated with sustainable production practices."

In addition to helping farmers increase profitability, significant efforts of the Community F.A.R.M. Initiative will focus on providing communities with the information they need to understand the economic and environmental benefits which local agriculture contributes. By increased understanding citizens will be better able to support their local farm community while gaining access to higher-quality foods.

"We feel that the demand is out there for sustainably and locally produced food. The problem is more one of market opportunity," said Bowser. "We are basically looking to develop strategies that can provide a new model for farm marketing and rural economic development while at the same time addressing issues of resource depletion, pollution, and social justice."

To do that, PASA will be looking to form broad partnerships between traditional farm concerns and less 'farm-traditional' sectors of the community. "We all need to work together," said Matthews, "and more and more people and their local officials are realizing exactly how much of a contribution agriculture makes to local and regional economies."

"Ag is still the number one sector of Pennsylvania's economy and it certainly is so in Washington County," Matthews said. "Farming and related businesses provide more jobs in Western Pennsylvania than high tech, but that's where we've typically thrown a lot of taxpayers' money chasing jobs."

Matthews cited several examples that the Initiative has already begun to draw interest. The Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Development Council has engaged PASA to develop recommendations on the feasibility of starting up a 'New Generation Cooperative' such as those cropping up in the upper Midwest. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture is providing matching funds for the development of a "Locally Grown and Sustainable" brochure that producers can use as a point of purchase educational material. PASA will also be working with the Pennsylvania Vegetable Growers Association on the development of a directory for the restaurant trade, of farmers and chefs looking to buy and sell locally, also funded by the state marketing matching grant program.

In addition the Community F.A.R.M. Initiative will be looking to develop regional marketing plans to support producer-only farmers markets, develop educational efforts to establish small-scale, value-added processing facilities on farms and within local communities, and to expand the concept of CSAs, or community supported agriculture operations, in the state.

In PASA's view, for agriculture to move forward in a positive fashion, it will be necessary to come full circle. According to Bowser, "For most of the history of our country, the food system was absolutely linked to community economic health, especially in rural areas. During the past 50

years, though, as agriculture has become increasingly industrialized, family farming has become increasingly unsustainable and so have communities.

"During the same time period, farm prices have remained the same or decreased while inputs, land, and equipment prices continued to increase. Farm profitability has dropped dramatically and along with it the number of farms — nationwide and in the state. We think that this Initiative can help turn this around by helping everyone to think more about how they produce, sell, buy, and consume food."

For more information about the Community F.A.R.M. Initiative, call Allen Matthews at (412) 632-3352.

## Farm Credit Loans Available

POTTSVILLE (Schuylkill Co.) — Farmers in Schuylkill County have been facing a series of events that have created financial difficulty.

Bad weather coupled with low prices has placed many farmers in a weakened financial condition. In many cases the farmer has a feasible plan to repay debt but needs additional capital to get the plan off the ground. Banks often refuse to lend money to farmers in this financial condition.

The United States Department of Agriculture has funding available for farmers for farm ownership, equipment purchases, and general operating expenses. Loans are made to farmers who are de-

nied credit from other commercial sources and generally carry lower interest than commercial loans. USDA has special funding targeted for beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged groups, general farm operations, and for farm purchases, and other farm improvements.

USDA also works with banks to guarantee loans when borrowers are unable to provide adequate security for the banking institution. This guarantee allows farmers to get needed credit from their normal lender.

Farmers looking for way to meet their credit needs should contact the Farm Service Agency located on the Gordon Nagle Trail at (717) 622-1555.



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