

Sponsorship of the National Farm to  
Cafeteria Conference, Detroit

May 17-19, 2010

*Summary for USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant*

## **Sponsorship of the National Farm to Cafeteria Conference**

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### **Project Summary:**

Michigan served as a sponsor of the 5th National Farm to Cafeteria Conference, May 17-19, 2010, in Detroit, at the "Sower" level of \$1,500. The Specialty Crop Block Grant funds used for the conference sponsorship specifically covered sponsorship of a reception that featured locally grown and processed foods. The meal highlighted the diversity of Michigan's specialty crops and agricultural industry and the state's commitment to increasing market access and market share for Michigan specialty crop producers at institutional cafeterias across the state.

### **Project Approach**

The purpose of Michigan's farm to cafeteria effort is to increase the purchase and consumption of locally grown fruits and vegetables for food service programs at Michigan schools, hospitals and other institutions. Interest in farm to cafeteria programs in Michigan has grown substantially. This national conference hosted by Michigan helped connect farmers, school food service directors, processors and distributors to each other and to the resources they need to succeed in increasing the purchase and use of specialty crops in Michigan.

The 5th National Farm to Cafeteria Conference provided attendees with information on how to start and scale up programs in their communities, and included field trips to local farms, school lunchrooms, and processing facilities; short courses covering topics such as grant writing and research and evaluation; workshops on issues such as federal and state policy, experiential education, sustainability and economic development; and sessions geared toward youth, producers, and food service providers. Participants at the conference also had an opportunity to learn about farm to cafeteria success stories and best practices from other states and provinces.

### *Conference Highlights:*

- Thirty-two workshops on policy, best practices, experiential education, sustainability, economic development, and skill-building for farmers, food service and community activists involved in improving the quality of meals served at hospitals, colleges, daycares, schools and other institutions.
- The final competition of a nation-wide youth cooking contest.
- Exhibit hall for leading non-profit, academic, business and government organizations in the farm to cafeteria field.
- Meals featuring locally grown foods including a reception at The Henry Ford, hosted by local organizations.
- Five field trips to local farms, schools serving regionally grown foods, and food processing facilities.
- Welcoming address by Detroit and Michigan political leaders.
- Plenary by leaders in the farm to cafeteria field and a keynote address by a leading national speaker.

More than 700 farmers, food service staff, community food advocates, educators, students, and public health leaders from more than 40 states and various Canadian provinces attended the conference, with a majority from the Michigan/Great Lakes region. Attendees were trendsetters in their field and spokespersons for issues related to healthy eating and family farming. They came from leading nonprofit organizations,

universities, companies, and government agencies and have the potential to influence the decisions of food service operations nationally as well as the opinions of tens of thousands of their colleagues.

As the host state, Michigan had the opportunities to use a national organization to demonstrate the diversity of specialty crop production in our state and emphasize the importance of using locally produced specialty products in farm to cafeteria programs.

The conference was highly publicized with distribution of publicity materials to 15,000 individuals and organizations. Indirectly, an estimated 50,000 leaders in the sustainable food and school food service communities viewed the publicity materials or the conference website.

The Michigan Department of Agriculture sponsored the National Farm to Cafeteria Conference, with sponsorship dollars granted to the Community Food Security Coalition to plan and pay for the conference. As a sponsor at the \$1,500 'Sower' level, MDA's role in promoting and facilitating the increased purchase and consumption of Michigan specialty crops through farm to school and farm to institution programs was highlighted. The sponsorship also allowed a representative from MDA to attend the conference and covered a trade show table in the exhibit area during the conference.

The sponsorship was used specifically to sponsor a local foods reception on Wednesday, May 19, 2010, at The Henry Ford museum in Dearborn, Michigan. The reception menu highlighted Michigan's diversity and featured several Michigan specialty crops, including fresh asparagus, herbs, mushrooms, potatoes, salad greens, apples and cherries. The meal also demonstrated that it is possible to use extended season, local products that have been preserved or processed, in food service beyond the normal harvest season.

#### Michigan Reception Menu:

##### *Soup and Grilled Cheese Station*

Grass fed buffalo chili and Asparagus Soup, Avalon rye grilled cheese with farmstead cheddar, Avalon scallion dill grilled cheese with Detroit made cheddar

##### *Morel Polenta and Bean Ragout*

Seared morel mushroom polenta with bean ragout, and braised greens

##### *Midwest Station*

Amish buttermilk fried chicken and hand rolled egg noodles

Grass fed buffalo meatloaf carving with Detroit blue cheese chive mashed Michigan potatoes

##### *Frittata and Green Salad*

Ramp, asparagus, goat cheese frittata with dressed small green salad and baby radish

##### *Apple Dried Cherry Strudel*

Guernsey vanilla ice cream, beet sugar caramel

#### **Goals and Outcomes Achieved:**

Conference attendees were asked to complete a survey, prepared by the Community Food Security Coalition, at the end of the conference. As a measurable outcome, MDA has provided a copy of the summary report of the conference survey. Through the survey, we were able to measure the overall success of the conference and whether the conference increased the knowledge of or interest in farm to cafeteria initiatives that increase the use and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables. The survey included 31 questions that solicited a range of feedback on topics including: identity of participants; impact and value of the conference; overall perception of the conference

elements; ratings and thoughts on specific events, field trips, short courses and workshops; and general feedback in addition to suggestions for improvement of future conferences. Respondents also had the opportunity to provide email addresses for future information sharing.

The survey was completed by an anonymous, online evaluation. Participation included 242 responses out of 718 conference attendees (34 percent response rate). Overall, the conference evaluations were positive and demonstrated enthusiasm for the conference. Respondents cited making important connections with others and broadening their understanding of concepts and others' viewpoints, through workshops and field trips, as the most valued aspects and elements of the conference. "Information Sharing, in general" was also rated very favorably, as were the "Keynote Address" by Deputy Secretary of Agriculture for the U.S., Kathleen Merrigan, and the short courses. The most significant suggestions for improvement regarded requests for greater diversity and proposals for an alternative style of facility for the future. It is notable that the common element between these two concerns is socio-economic. Many participants indicated they would like to see lower income individuals represented at the conference; hosting the conference at a venue that demands fewer expenses could enable that change.

The complete survey results are attached.

**Beneficiaries:**

The beneficiaries of this project include Michigan residents, Michigan chefs and restaurants, urban and community farming programs, local food advocates, Michigan specialty crop producers, farm to school and farm to institution programs and those they serve, and start-up and expanding Michigan businesses with a food and agriculture focus.

**Lessons Learned:**

This project has demonstrated the growing interest and opportunities in local foods and farm to institution programs. The project has also shown the value of collaboration in creating, presenting and distributing useful information to help grow and support Michigan's specialty crop businesses and farm to institution programs. The project has led to other collaborative efforts and greater information sharing among the partnering organizations.

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