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MDA Specialty Crop Block Grant Program – Farm Bill Final Grant Report to Michigan Department of Agriculture

Project Title: Spotlight on Blueberries – Training in Best Practices in Labor Management and Social Compliance for Growers

Department Name: MDA, Ag Development Division
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Grant Information: **Grant Number** 791N1300087, **Index** 10206,
Inventory Number 2010-31

Funding Amount: \$17,500.00

Contract Period: October 1, 2010 through December 31, 2011

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Date Submitted: September 6, 2011

PROJECT SUMMARY:

As a result of an ABC News Segment titled “The Blueberry Children” that aired on “Good Morning America”, “World News Tonight”, and “Nightline” October 30, 2009, Michigan’s entire blueberry industry was indicted on charges of child labor violations. Videos of young children picking berries and carrying full buckets were broadcast across the nation as evidence of abusive labor practices in our industry. The damage to the state’s industry image and reputation was instantaneous with large global retailers being called on to immediately stop doing business with some of Michigan’s oldest and largest growers and grower groups. Overnight, suppliers of blueberries grown in Michigan were called and told contracts were canceled or customer relationships were on the verge of ruin. The Michigan blueberry industry needed to respond...and quickly!

PROJECT APPROACH:

An ad hoc consortium of partners quickly engaged: MBG Marketing, Michigan Farm Bureau, Varnum (attorneys), and The Michigan Blueberry Advisory Committee. The result of this planning was the initial seminar “Spotlight on Blueberries – Blueberry Grower Social Responsibility Seminar – A Look at Best Practices” held last February 3, 2010.

The objective was to get growers in the room, and let the discussion begin. Our group sent out over 450 invitations to the state’s growers and ended up hosting about 250 people on program day. We received 92 program evaluations back with an average score of 4.2 out of 5.0 - a very positive outcome and a sound response rate from folks generally trying to keep a low profile. We had an active Q & A with our retailer participants and opened a lot of eyes that day – both on the retailer side (they were overwhelmed by the turnout and interest) and by growers new to understanding the global complexities of marketing their locally grown Michigan products. Everybody finally understood “we are only as strong as our weakest link” – and they were all there to become strong links.

GOALS AND OUTCOMES ACHIEVED:

Our goal was to host at least four (4) blueberry grower education and training sessions within the next year under this grant, and attract up to 200 blueberry grower participants per session, with appropriate counts and evaluations recorded for each meeting.

Although our intent was to attract up to 200 blueberry grower participants per session, this number fell short for Sessions Two and Three. This can be attributed to seminar timings as they coincided with seasonal grower responsibilities, such as field maintenance and harvesting. Our participant goal would have been met had the meetings taken place after the growing season, but our education objectives needed to be met pre-harvest, and we had a short window of opportunity to present our programs.

Training Session One (two units)

Spotlight on Blueberries-Training in Best Practices in Labor Management and Social Compliance for Growers

- This two-unit session was held on February 15, 2011, beginning at 9:00 a.m. through 4:30 p.m. at the DoubleTree Conference Center in Holland, MI.
- This was a follow-up program to the 2010 Spotlight on Blueberries.
- Program offered at no cost to participants, lunch included.
- Objective was to expand educational outreach and training opportunities for Michigan blueberry growers.
- Key topics presented: USDOL Update (extended Q & A with DOL acting district director), Farm Safety, Migrant Housing Do's and Don'ts, Basic Good Agricultural Practices, MI Department of Civil Rights Report on Ag Workers, Codes of Conduct and Compliance, Ag Law Employment Overview, What To Do When the Inspector Calls, and A No-Nonsense Guide to I-9's.
- Program handbook included over 200 slides.
- We hosted 210 registered participants and received 150 session evaluations back.
- The average program topic and individual speaker scored 4.4 out of 5.0.

Participant Comments:

- *“I thought the Blueberry Labor Management & Social Compliance Training Seminar was a great opportunity for growers to have their questions regarding legal standards and consumer expectations answered. It was good to have such a wide variety of experienced presenters available to provide an overview of federal and state laws. I especially thought that the extensive question and answer sessions were helpful as they allowed growers to receive clarification on specific concerns.”* Kara Moberg - Farmworker Legal Services
- *“Extremely well put together. Thank you for doing so much. Great Job!”*
- *“The session could have been two days. Very good and lots of information.”*

Training Session Two

Blueberry Best Practices: Media, Modernization & Immigration

- This one-unit session was held on May 17, 2011, beginning at 8:00 a.m. through 12:30 p.m. at the DoubleTree Conference Center in Holland, MI.
- Optional individual media training opportunities and mock interviews were offered from 1:30 to 5:00 p.m. The session on “How to Handle the Media” was underwritten by the United States Highbush Blueberry Council (USHBC).
- Program offered at no cost to participants.
- Key topics presented: Food Safety Modernization Act of 2010, Immigration Policy Update, and Developing and Communicating Your Media Policy.

- We hosted 103 registered participants and received 53 session evaluations back.
- The average program topic and individual speaker scored 4.7 out of 5.0.

Participant Comments:

- *“Important for all to see issues. Lots of good information presented. Good information and direction. Helpful information and thanks for the tools.”*
- *“The more informed we are as growers, the more education we can put forth throughout our communities regarding the importance of agriculture in the U.S. – thank you!”*
- *“Overall good presentations and very informative. Hope to have another meeting like this one with the same topics next year.”*

Training Session Three

Bi-lingual Farm Manager, Crew Leader, and Farm Labor Contractor Training

- The final, one-unit session was held on July 1, 2011, beginning at 8:00 a.m. through 12:00 p.m. at the DoubleTree Conference Center in Holland, MI.
- The meeting invitation was extended to all farm managers, crew leaders, and farm labor contractors, in addition to farm owners.
- Program offered at no cost to participants.
- Key topics presented: An Introduction to Social Responsibility, Farm Worker Training Employment & Good Agricultural Practices, Health Services & Labor Camp Health Issues, Educational Opportunities & Resources for Migrant Families, Migrant Employment Services, and Harvest Labor & Supervisor Responsibilities.
- Information was presented in English and simultaneously translated to Spanish.
- Handout material was provided in English and Spanish.
- We hosted 77 registered participants and received 49 session evaluations back, 38 of those in English and 11 of those in Spanish.
- The average program topic and individual speaker scored 4.5 out of 5.0.

Participant Comments:

- *“Tremendously informative and great training for those that are unaware of laws and policies, also, of agencies offering free services to our farm working individuals.”*
- *“This meeting could have gone on and on. So much to learn and know. Good to know about agencies and their willingness to help legal workers. Good job on this meeting and getting the grant money.”*
- *“This training was informative and cleared up a lot of questions I was having trouble understanding. It provided many benefits.”*

All participant comments noted on the evaluation forms were anonymous, except Kara Moberg agreed to comment for the record.

BENEFICIARIES:

Blueberry growers, farm managers, crew leaders, and other farm employees benefitted from the training seminars. All sessions addressed critical topics directly related to grower education and social responsibility, but Session Three specifically focused on supervisor responsibilities, farm worker training, and health and educational services available for migrant workers and their families.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Our growers are faced with a constantly changing landscape as they find themselves dealing with increased regulatory pressure and frequent media scrutiny while attempting to comply with stricter customer standards. The majority of farm owners want to comply with all laws and standards, but without continuing education programs and industry updates, growers have to fend for themselves and attempt to become experts in a multitude of arenas. As stated by a grower who attended our February 15th meeting: *“It seems that we are not just farming anymore, but we are trying to be lawyers, DOL, ICE and insurance agents.”*

The Michigan blueberry industry leadership is committed to ensuring that growers remain compliant on all fronts by relaying vital training information to them via email, mailings, meetings and educational seminars.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO PARTICIPANTS

Two web-sites with useful information related to our seminars is listed below:

[HTTP://WEBAPPS.DOL.GOV/LIBRARYFORMS/](http://WEBAPPS.DOL.GOV/LIBRARYFORMS/)

This site holds the most frequently requested DOL forms

[HTTP://WWW.DOL.GOV/ELAWS/ESA/FLSA](http://WWW.DOL.GOV/ELAWS/ESA/FLSA)

This site provides step-by-step guidance in understanding the requirements of the Fair Labor Standards Act