

Improving Extension Capacity to Assist Southern Region Small Fruit Growers with Marketing Progress Report December 2020

Kristin Woods, Auburn University WOODSKL@aces.edu
Laurel Dunn, University of Georgia
Kevin Burkett, Clemson University

Objective:

A web-based training on market requirements consisting of six modules will be developed to improve the effectiveness of extension educators in supporting growers marketing small fruits in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.

Project Summary

Small fruit producers are inundated with requests from buyers, consumers, regulators, auditors, and suppliers. Growers must decipher a myriad of market requirements related to food safety from many different types of programs, including USDA Good Agricultural Practices (GAPS), Primus, National Organic Program (NOP), Certified Naturally Grown, and the regulatory requirements of the Produce Safety Rule (PSR). Confused small fruit producers frequently seek assistance from local cooperative extension agents when clarification is needed. Extension educators across the southern region have a working knowledge of a multitude of agriculture related topics, and frequently enter their assigned counties or territories with backgrounds in animal science, horticulture, ag business, plant pathology, and others. Historically, very few educators have formal training in regulatory and market requirements. This knowledge is critical as a farm's ability to compete in certain markets hinges on their ability to comply with their buyers' requirements, which are becoming increasingly stringent throughout the industry. To address this educational deficiency, comprehensive trainings and resources targeted towards extension educators are paramount to improve the productivity and competitiveness of the small fruit industry in the southern United States. The purpose of this project is to develop web-based training for extension educators in order to support small fruit producers in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.

Progress Toward Project Milestones:

- Surveying of extension educators in the south and nationwide regarding the length, features, and key components to be included in the web-based training was completed in April 2020.
 - 258 responses were received from 258 extension educators:
 - 76 % of respondents were Agents
 - Most respondents were early career and 12% had 1 year or less of experience.
 - Length: of the choices (1 hour, 2 hours, 4 hours, or 8 hours), 2 hours was preferred.
 - Content: respondents indicated that information on USDA GAP, NOP, and PSR were most frequently requested, followed by Primus and CNG.
 - 2 people wrote in “harmonized GAP” under “other”.

Because of this the PDs made sure that we clearly defined USDA GAP as including, Basic GAP, hGAP and Group GAP in the USDA GAP training module.

- Online learning module content including short videos and information related to USDA GAP audits, the Food Safety Modernization Act Produce Safety Rule, National Organic Program, Primus audits, and the Certified Naturally Grown program was developed and submitted for peer review in August 2020.
- Peer review from educators in the small fruit consortium was completed in September 2020.
- The Auburn University communications staff was to begin formatting the training on the Canvas online course platform in September 2020. Due to pandemic related staffing issues, the communications staff was challenged with the timeline. When this became apparent, a request for additional time was submitted and granted. The communications staff are currently working with the content and we are expecting to pilot the modules early 2021. Subsequently the modules will be made widely available to educators in the region.

Modified Project Timeline

Green indicates complete

	2020												2021								
	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept		
Needs assessment survey	Green	Green																			
Develop content			Green	Green	Green	Green															
Capture video			Green	Green	Green	Green															
Format web-based training									Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue							
Peer review						Green	Green	Green	Green												
Pilot web-based training													Blue	Blue	Blue						
Promote web-based training																Blue	Blue	Blue			
Statistical analysis and reports																				Blue	

Potential Impact

Marketing is one of the biggest challenges a farm can face, especially if they have difficulty navigating the myriad of certifications available and regulations with which they must comply. A 2014 survey of direct market growers in Alabama revealed assistance with marketing to be the most frequent request for assistance (Woods & Nelson, 2015). As a result of this agent training, producers will receive accurate and high-quality information on how certifications can be leveraged to improve marketing decisions and how to successfully navigate the options. For the smallest growers, understanding different requirements can better prepare them for buyer requests when they decide to scale up. To date, 181 extension agents, agricultural producers, and other members of the agricultural community have completed the farming basics training through Alabama Extension. This online training has potential to reach hundreds of agents and thereby improve the opportunities of thousands of growers throughout the region.