Specialty Crops in Hospital and University Meals

Project Summary

To increase specialty crop availability and consumption in health care and university settings, the Department of Natural Resources: Division of Agriculture began an investigative pilot mini-grant project. Due to rising interest from food service staff at hospitals and universities in Alaska, this project seeks to connect food service operations to Alaska Grown Specialty Crop producers. These institution settings typically have a numerically consistent consumer base, which will be helpful for specialty crop farmers, as they can plan according to the institution's purchasing needs. In addition to the economic benefits, the project will promote educational opportunities. Many food service operators are unaware of the bounty of Alaska specialty crops available to source. The educational component will further be expressed at the consumer level, who will benefit from locally sourced specialty crops in their food at these settings. Having specialty crops at the institution level will help build understanding of the bounty and potential of these crops.

Since July of 2014, seven different hospitals and university institutions reached out to the Division of Agriculture seeking information on how to source more local foods in their operation. Hearing this interest, follow-up phone calls were conducted to gauge needs and barriers to sourcing specialty crops. Two of the most frequent responses were the need for a coordinator and for sampling customer response to determine the priority of specialty crops to source. If there is evidence of positive interest and economic results from this project, the Division of Agriculture would hope to expand project reach into more institutional settings in the future. This project also serves as a test for the active interest in hospital and university settings to determine practicability of expansion of this program. A growing institution market will allow specialty crop farmers an avenue to increase production, the program will assess the possibilities and barriers of these market settings. If we see positive interest and economic results from this pilot, we hope to expand the project to reach more institutional settings in the future.

Project Approach

To accomplish increased Alaska Grown specialty crops in health care and university settings, project staff administered sub-grants to approved sites. From previous experience with certain institutional setting grant programs, the Division of Agriculture found it important to streamline the grant and reporting process to broaden reach of the program. The first year of the project in 2016 had unfortunately low return on mini-grant applications, with only one initiative being funded. Thus, in 2017, the project extended the scope of institutions, including education and health care related institutions. As a result, the second year had four new applicants and one returning applicant, making a total of five institutions being funded by the program. Funds could be utilized for the following categories: project supplies, marketing supplies, site coordinator fees, recipe development, and taste tests. For future Farm to Institution programs, there will need to be an increased amount of outreach to applicable universities and hospitals, as well as creating best practices to share along with program information. While interest may be apparent, it is recommended that there be better initial research in navigating the hurdles of supplying Alaskan specialty crops in such locations to propagate better response to the program.

To ensure the overall project scope benefitted only specialty crops and no other commodities, the sub-grantees' initiatives had to be strictly related to specialty crops. Based on applications, final reports from recipients and the agency's follow ups with sub-grant recipients, the funding for this program solely enhanced the competitiveness of specialty crops.

Project partners included Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Division of Agriculture, and Farm to Institution Program. The program was coordinated from the Division of Agriculture, which is a part of the Department of Natural Resources. Contributions included outreach to eligible sites for the program, managing the application process and finances, and program coordination. To determine eligible sites and create the outreach plan, the Division of Agriculture used the Farm to Institution Program as a resource.

Goals & Outcomes Achieved

While the original goal of building relationships between specialty crop farmers and hospitals and university foodservice operations was not feasible for this current program cycle to the level initially desired, the program goals to promote specialty crops at institutions remained but was expanded to include having them grow specialty crops for their operations. To achieve the promotion and use of specialty crops, sub-grant applicants had to develop a project that would work towards the goals. A Farm to Health Care or University Program coordinator discussed the project activities with applicants to ensure it would meet the specialty crop requirements and fit criteria. To educate food service operators about the availability of specialty crops, it was stated in the application and contract process that a food service staff had to be involved at some level in the project activities. The goal of increasing specialty crop availability and consumption in university and hospital settings was measured by how each site used their funds to initiate this and their results. Recipients were required to complete a final report and were contacted by a program coordinator to gather information and data on the projects supported through the Farm to Health Care and University Program. To ensure consistency between reports, a template via online survey was distributed to sites.

Progress toward long term outcome measures was accomplished primarily through customers and other people from the community that will benefit both from the economic stimulus of the activities and from the multiplier effect of information sharing in the general population. Approximately eight-hundred and fifty-three people were impacted, directly and indirectly by the projects during the funding period, and impact will grow out from this base.

Progress towards increasing food service knowledge of specialty crops and their availability was accomplished through sites utilizing local agriculture resources to support their specialty crop focused initiatives. As several of the locations used these resources to grow produce at their site or increase procurement for their site, food service staff became more aware of the seasonal growth of specialty crops in Alaska, as they witnessed the growing season first-hand. Several beneficiaries expressed that many of the specialty crops that were part of their initiatives were ingredients not typically utilized in food service and carried a slight learning curve for preparation. Overall, the food service operations and people involved gained access to specialty crops that they typically would not have access to, allowing for increased knowledge on availability, growing effort, and culinary uses.

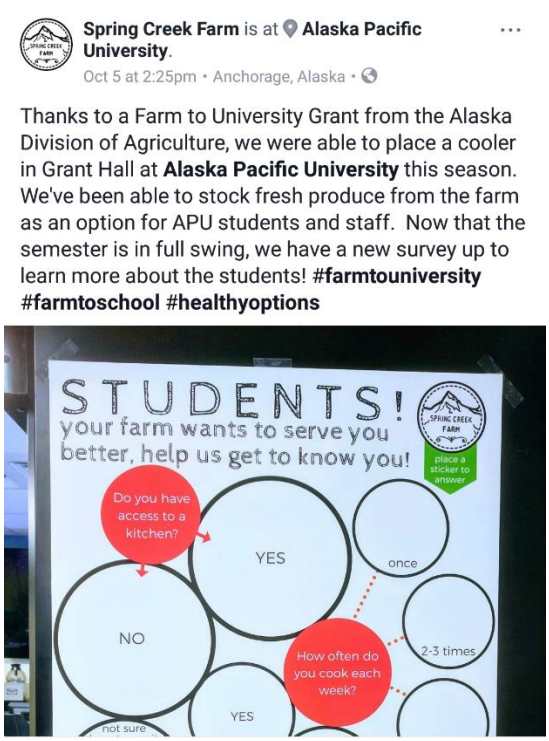
Progress in increasing the number of menu items and quantity of Alaska Grown Specialty Crops purchased was accomplished through the locations' increased sources of specialty crops, including both grown and procured. For the beneficiaries who utilized certain produce for the first time, it allowed for creation of new items in their food service. With the creations and successes using these products, the beneficiaries will increase their demand for specialty crop seedlings and Alaska specialty crops in the future growing seasons.

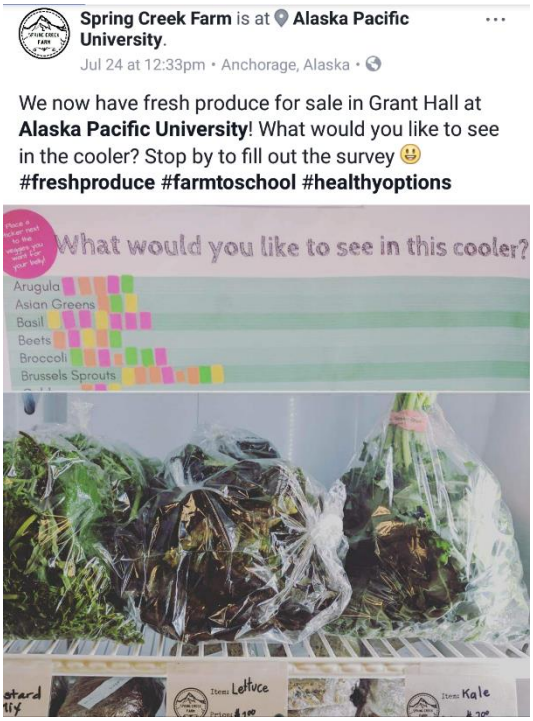
In regard to the goal of at least three University or Hospital Food Service Program sites will gain access to fresh local specialty crops, there were five education and health services institutions with sustainable specialty crop projects with the purpose of providing these crops to their consumers. To accomplish the goal of getting garden coordinators into the institutions, stipends were an allowable use of funds for recipients. Of the five recipients, three of the institutions had a paid coordinator or assistant role as part of their project. From interviews with recipients at the completion of the funding term, one-hundred percent of places plan to continue their initiatives in the future. The impact of the program was eight-hundred and fifty-three people and nine communities, including three initiatives in the Anchorage community. Approximately 1,150 pounds of produce was produced specifically for project initiatives and was available for consumers.

Beneficiaries

The major beneficiaries were the institutions awarded the sub-grants and the communities they have influence over. While four of the five funded projects did not focus on the foodservice operations at a hospital or university institution, all five projects funded an institution related to health care or education. In total, there were fourteen beneficiaries impacted, as described below:

- Alaska Pacific University was awarded a sub-grant in 2016 and 2017. Spring Creek Farm is an educational farm in Palmer and satellite site of the university. The funds went to Spring Creek Farm to support their operation and the university campus in Anchorage by increasing availability of specialty crops on the campus. As the university food service operation already purchases produce from Spring Creek, a goal of their initiative was to get specialty crops available to students. A refrigerated display case at the university was purchased for university students to purchase produce on campus. They conducted surveys among students through sticker voting at the cooler. Providing an avenue for increased economic revenue for Spring Creek Farm supports the specialty crop production operation, as well as increased awareness at the student level of the bounty and variety that producers can grow in Alaska. Examples of their promotional activities, which include partial views of their surveys and cooler, are pictured below.





- Maniilaq Association provides health and social services to about 8,000 residents living within the Northwest Arctic Borough and the village of Point Hope. Because of their relation to healthcare, they were eligible to apply and were awarded a sub-grant for their specialty crop initiative. For their project, there was a garden coordinator that traveled to seven different villages, taught local gardening and began specialty crop garden projects in each community as health improvement outreach. As each of the communities began gardening operations as result of the project, the seven communities are counted as beneficiaries.
- Anchorage School District is the largest school district in Alaska with a student population over 47,000. Because there was a low turnout of university applicants and they are an educational institution, they were determined to be eligible for a sub-grant and were awarded for their initiative to establish apple orchards across the school district by teaming up with a local orchard specialist. Once producing, the harvested apples will go into the classrooms and, once up to scale, in the foodservice operation for the school district.
- Providence Center for Child Development is a childcare site for health care workers at Providence Alaska Medical Center, community affiliates, and their families in Anchorage. Their relation to the hospital setting made them eligible to apply, and they were awarded a sub-grant for a garden project to grow specialty crops that would be utilized in the foodservice on site. The children benefit from the educational component of growing specialty crops and the nutritional benefit of the harvested produce.
- Rainforest Recovery Center at Bartlett Regional Hospital serves Southeast Alaska through residential and outpatient services for substance use and co-occurring metal disorders. Their specialty crop initiative was to build a garden for specialty crops and to use the garden in conjuncture with the recovery program, as well as utilize the crops in their foodservice. They purchased specialty crop seedlings from Glacier Gardens, a local nursery in Juneau, adding another beneficiary to the program and a relationship built to a specialty crop grower. Their garden is featured in a video about the program and can be watched with the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEEO6UKauA0.

Lessons Learned

The Farm to Health Care or University Program was an investigative pilot project, thus making the information gained from the completion of the project highly valuable. Overall, responses from those who received sub-grants were positive, and useful information was gathered on the successes and barriers of this type of program. Recipients expressed that funds were needed support to start initiatives that they can keep building upon and expressed achievement in results within the funding period.

After having several universities and hospitals reach out about sourcing specialty crops, it was surprising to have a low turnout from these institutions. It was determined that outreach focused to food service operators needs to be the priority. As well, it will be helpful to develop best practices for sourcing specialty crops from Alaskan producers for these large-scale food operations. As the original goals were altered to make the program more successful and increase reach, certain measurable outcomes were not able to be achieved. Measurements of food service knowledge of specialty crops through pre- and post- tests was not accomplished. As well, data on the number of menu items and quantity of Alaska Grown Specialty Crops purchased for food service was not collected through pre- and post- surveys, since it did not fit the reformed project purpose. For the future, the Division of Agriculture recommends having the foodservice operators more involved in the process compared to the project managers or grant managers at these institutions. Providing trainings or resources for pre- and post- tests to institutions would be useful for future efforts to gain evaluation data. Lastly, the beneficiaries of the project did not include a minimum of 5-10 farmers who will build new relationships with a hospital or university foodservice operation. Since four of the five projects focused on specialty crop growing at the institution and the fifth project built upon an already established farmer connection, this outcome was unable to be met. For future projects, outreach to both institutions and farmers could foster better response in the relationship building outcomes.

Although it did not fit the initial plans, there was a positive response from allowing institutions to use funds to grow specialty crops. The added educational aspect of growing food was valuable to the consumers at these institutions. While the program focused more on economic benefits of specialty crop sourcing, recipients were passionate about the health aspect of local specialty crops through their projects. This will reap economic benefits long-term, as it still is promoting the consumption of local specialty crops to consumers. Knowing the positive response of marketing Alaska specialty crops as a health strategy, outreaching to university and hospital settings as such could harness increased interest.