

Agricultural Economic Vitality: Programs for the Economic Recovery of Agriculture

The continued economic survival and vitality of agriculture in local communities throughout our State is critical to the quality of life of our citizens, to the availability of safe, high quality local food, and to the environment. Some of this work can and should be done at the State level. Counties also need help, however, in providing economic development assistance to their local agriculture industries. At the state level, we need a program that provides small grants to local counties who seek to provide such assistance to their local agriculture communities. Such grants could include funding for the following activities:

1. Community-wide economic development strategic planning for the local agriculture industry:

Many, if not most of our Counties have Economic Development Councils that take on the task of economic development strategic planning. Farmers are seldom members and these plans almost never include agriculture. This is so despite the fact that agriculture is a leading industry. Our communities need the capacity to develop economic development strategic plans for their local agriculture to help identify and develop opportunities for local farm businesses.

2. Development of farm business plans consistent with community strategic plans:

Farm businesses should be supported and encouraged to develop professionally written individual business plans that are consistent with the agriculture industry strategic plans that have been written for their communities. The existence of such a business plan then provides a foundation for further financial support for investment in the implementation of such a plan and for lending by private agricultural lenders.

3. Local challenge grants for individual farm businesses or for local organizations and agencies to pay expenses for implementing programs in furtherance of adopted local economic development strategic plans:

Local farms that risk investments in entrepreneurship that furthers local economic development plans ought to be rewarded and supported in this effort. There should be grants and low interest loans available to help them in these community-spirited as well as business endeavors.

4. Education programs on farming, farm business operation or management, business planning, farm product branding and marketing, and other business related farm skills:

Agencies and organizations that provide worthwhile education for farmers to enhance the business, farming, marketing, and other skills needed by successful farmers ought to have access to local grants targeted to the needs of local farmers to support these efforts where they enhance the competitiveness of our local farm community. Programs that provide direct business, marketing, planning, or other business, tax, farm transition, or other such services to farmers ought to receive community support.

5. Cooperative joint marketing of local or regional identity “branding” for local farm products for sale both within and outside the local community:

Many communities would benefit from local branding of their products. Some of these would be “Buy Local” campaigns targeted for local consumers – such as the “Puget Sound Fresh” program. Some would be aimed at building a local identity for a broader marketplace – such as the “Walla Walla Sweet Onion” brand. Local communities need funds to help launch and sustain this kind of marketplace effort.

6. Identify new potentials for production of new or previously grown commodities. Identify the needs of institutions where locally grown commodities can be supplied. Help to bring back production lost to international sourcing:

Buy local ought to start with our large local institutions that may be purchasing product internationally when high quality local producers would be happy to supply. Accomplishing this requires local marketing effort and organizing and can be costly and time-consuming. Local communities should support these kinds of efforts both at the State and county level.

7. Business innovations in conservation stewardship that help make farming both more efficient and sustainable:

Conservation districts and the USDA/Natural Resources Conservation Service have a whole menu of conservation stewardship techniques that have evolved over time. But this list need not be the exclusive means of accomplishing good environmental stewardship on farmlands. Farmers, agencies, and organizations that are working to develop new innovations in conservation stewardship or to newly implement existing techniques ought to have support in these endeavors.

8. Assist counties establish and staff advisory committees to provide input to county staff and council/commission on agriculture business issues and perspectives:

County Councils/Commissions, planning departments, and other ag-relevant local government agencies need a broad-based and readily available source of advice about the needs and desires of the agriculture industry. Agriculture Advisory Commissions have

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been formed in a number of counties with representation from the local agriculture industry but these bodies need staff support, a budget for basic projects, and other assistance. There need to be resources to support these bodies in their important work.

9. Farmer marketing support designed to encourage local farmers to produce and to sell products locally and helping farmers with the local marketing of their products:

Even when local citizens are prepared to buy local, there may need to be support for farmers in getting into the local marketing of their products. This can be an important marketing and survival method for some urban-edge farmers.

10. Assistance to farm workers and to farm businesses seeking workers to help workers find employment and farm businesses find the workers they need:

Providing employment opportunities and job-finder/employee-finder services can be a big help for farmers and for farm workers. Agencies and organizations that provide these services ought to be encouraged and have a source of local support to help with their efforts.

11. Support for farmers markets in starting new markets or in expanding or improving the programs available at existing farmers markets:

Farmers markets have proved a lifesaver for many farmers throughout our state, wherever they may be located, and are very popular with local urban communities. These markets are difficult to start and need local support if they are to flourish. Local counties ought to be in a position to offer grant support for promising markets for expansion, start-up, and other serious business needs.

12. Harvest celebrations or other public events or processes designed to educate the public concerning food, farms, food safety and security, and the relationships between farms and farm products and urban consumers:

Many thousands of non-farmers become more educated about agriculture, more familiar with the issues and problems faced by farmers, and more willing to buy from local farmers where possible through the various harvest celebrations conducted around the State every year. These mostly volunteer efforts need more support and would benefit greatly from a source of grant or other county-level assistance.

13. Ag Tourism, CSA's, direct marketing, and other new ways to produce, market, and sell local farm products to local consumers:

Through "ag-tourism" direct marketing, farmstands, and other new and innovative techniques, many farmers are supplementing their businesses and helping provide important connections for local consumers who, otherwise, would have no contact with the agriculture community other than at the local Safeway store. These new direct market and other marketing techniques need support and efforts to help them grow and flourish need local support.

14. Diversification - vertical integration, on-farm packaging, in-house processing, value-added, and other techniques to enhance value, generate markets, and stabilize the farm business:

There are many ways to add value and improve the economic competitiveness of a farm business. There ought to be local funds available, where appropriate, to encourage these efforts either when they are done on a community basis, or when they are done as innovative efforts by individual producers. This could be done either with grants or through low-interest loans.

15. Capital expansion – adding to the size and efficiencies of a farm operation:

Capital investment in expansion of farming operations and in farm industry infrastructure (processing, support, packaging, etc.) is often difficult to find. Such investments that enhance competitiveness and stability of a local farm economy ought to be available from the local community.

16. Etc.:

There are a great many ideas for economic development for agriculture at the local level – each community will have its own. Whatever program develops at the state level needs to be sufficiently open to encourage and support new, creative local programs that provide promise for supporting a vibrant and enduring agriculture industry.

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(Originally written for American Farmland Trust at www.farmland.org. It has since been updated.)