



DIVISION OF PLANNING
Office of Conservation and Farmland Preservation
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Donna M. Traylor, PP, AICP
Program Director

County of Sussex

August 25, 2011

Highlands Council of New Jersey
Attn: Herb August, Grants Manager
100 North Road
Chester, New Jersey 07930-2322

Subject: Phase 2 Commercial Kitchen project update

Dear Herb,

Enclosed you will find an update of the Sussex County Commercial Kitchen project, Phase 2, as funded by the NJ Highlands Council. It is a compilation of progress and accomplishments that have been made in both process and products being manufactured. I believe you will agree that this has been an excellent partnership between the NJ Highlands Council, the County of Sussex, the Sussex County Technical School and, of course, the agricultural community.

Now that we have developed an educational process, accreditation of farmers, purchase of much needed equipment and development of products, we hope that the NJ Highlands Council can continue to provide funding to keep this program available to our farmers.

Thank you again for all of your assistance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Donna M. Traylor".

Donna M. Traylor, Coordinator
Sussex County Office of Conservation and Farmland Preservation

CC: Eric K. Snyder, SC Planning Director



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Sussex County Commercial Kitchen Project Accomplishments

Highlands Grant – Phase 2 update

August 25, 2011

Better Process School:

The Better Process School was an intense two day course presented by Rutgers staff, Donald Schaffner, Ph.D. The topic was “Canned Foods: Principles of Thermal Process Control, Acidification and Container Closure Evaluation.” This course was also presented during Phase 1 after identifying it as a vital part of a farmers value added product education. Approximately 36 individuals participated and passed the six individual certification examinations required. Topics covered included: microbiology of thermally processed foods, principles of thermal processing, principles of food plant sanitation, food container handling, records and recordkeeping, and equipment, instrumentation, and operation for thermal processing systems. The course was overseen by a representative of the US Food and Drug Administration.

Partnerships:

The Commercial Kitchen project has fostered new partnerships both between the County of Sussex and the Sussex County Technical School, and the School and our farmers. Identifying this underutilized resource (the school’s certified commercial kitchen) and being able to create this partnership has produced a template that can be easily duplicated in other locations. The biggest challenge to farmers who want to make value added jams, jellies, salsas, etc. has been to locate a kitchen in which their products can be legally processed which would, in turn, allow for sale to the public. The cost of constructing such a certified kitchen on one’s own farm is prohibitive. Once the mechanics of use and employee coverage at the School were worked out, the farmers filled out the proper paperwork, produced both personal liability coverage and coverage through the Sussex County Board of Agriculture and were allowed to schedule time in the kitchen. The products produced allow the farmer to lengthen their selling season thereby increasing their potential profit margin. This model has already produced interest from other counties seeking to assist their agricultural community in similar ways.

Equipment:

Phase 2 funds permitted the purchase of a semi-automatic thick liquid piston filler with hopper and a compressor. This equipment is suited for a wide range of products that require high accuracy and reliability in filling. Bottles/containers are manually set up and then compressed air provides the power for filling. The piston filler will enable the farmers to process products at a higher rate of speed and create a more even product. It offers tool free strip down for easy cleaning with a quick release nozzle and feed pipe. It can be used for liquids, creams, gels and food products. The fill hose is FDA approved for hot products. Whereas farmers in the kitchen previously had to fill each jar/bottle individually which was time consuming and somewhat inefficient, this equipment will make that part of the process considerably faster. Therefore, the same time spent using the facility will result in greater quantity of products which are more professionally processed. Better looking product should equal more interest from the consumer and higher profits.

Survey of Participants:

A short (2-page) survey was prepared and sent to the participants of the Better Process School to ascertain whether they felt the course was beneficial. There was a 22% response to the survey; in all fairness, there was over a year lag time between the first class given and the second. The majority of the respondents cited that they are currently processing canned (preserved raw products), jellies and jams, processed (salsa, pesto, pickles) and some baked goods. If they hadn't already been processing, the intent was that they were now prepared to do so. The farmers that have taken this new certification and put it into practice with new products cited that they have seen increased profits and customers, have extended their selling season, reduced their loss of products (since they can now use seconds and turn them into a saleable product) and improved their farm diversity (more variety is being grown since they have now identified more extensive consumer needs). All respondents (farmer or farm employees alike) checked off increased understanding of food safety. A number of farmers cited immediate increased profits (in this very short term) of 10-20%; one respondent cited 50-75%. When asked to estimate the increased value obtained from making and selling a value added product vs. a raw product, the margin was in the 20-40% increase range. The majority of respondents stated that having access to a facility for processing was "extremely important". 100% of the responses stated they wanted to see programs like this continue in the future.

Suggestions and comments included: do more marketing of the course in the future to entice even more participants, good training for high end cooking and processing skills, educate even non-farmers who process in their home kitchens and then try to sell to the public, keep the partnership going in the future and allow for expanded hours to accommodate even more farmers.

Sussex Success Stories:

Although a number of farmers have utilized the Sussex County Technical School kitchen over the two phases of this project producing delicious jellies, vegetables and jams (including garlic jelly that people wrinkle their nose about until they sample it and realize that it's a great accompaniment to meats), the premier product thus far to come out of this project is Jersey Devil Salsa. A partnership between two farms (Liberty Farm and Oak Hill Farm) with a desire to bring the public a sinfully delicious product created this homegrown salsa. It started with a family recipe. The Commercial Kitchen Project taught the participants that they needed to have their recipe go through a scheduled process obtaining a letter of approval from an accredited entity – in this case, Cornell University, New York State Experimental Station. This accomplished, it was time to plant the vegetables needed...and wait for the harvest. Both farmers took the Better Process School class and passed the examinations. They started small using the Sussex County Technical School kitchen to work out the kinks of processing. They tested the legally canned product at various farmers market venues. Then it was time for the official product launch. One of the farmers had previous marketing experience and a plan was developed to bring the salsa to the public's attention. With serious, and continuous marketing, Jersey Devil Salsa was recently identified by a major supermarket retailer (Foodtown) to grace its' shelves. Therein lies the only problem. Kitchen facilities such as the one this grant utilizes are perfect for the producer who is mainly geared for farm stands, farmers markets and local venues. When success beckons with a major contract, facilities in New Jersey do not exist to allow a farmer to make this leap in production. This was recently cited in the NJ Farmer publication outlining how farmers finding success are being forced to take their products outside of New Jersey for manufacture. The farmers responsible for Jersey Devil Salsa cite that it was through the opportunity with the Commercial Kitchen project which gave them the skills and accreditations to make this product. So duplicating such a project in other NJ locations is certainly beneficial – especially to the majority of NJ farmers desiring to make a value added product that will be sold in a reasonably local market and net them increased profits.