Working With Small-Acreage Farmers To Meet Local Demands

By Jane Moorman

Trending nationally and here in New Mexico is an increasing desire to eat local food, including locally grown fruits and vegetables. The change in consumer purchasing could be a windfall for small-acreage farmers around the state.

New Mexico State University (NMSU) is working with small-acreage farmers to help meet the demand.

"In the Albuquerque metropolitan area, 80 percent of the fresh fruits and vegetables eaten come from outside of New Mexico," said Michael Patrick, economic development specialist with NMSU's College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences.

Currently, the primary source of locally grown produce is farmers markets, according to research Patrick conducted with a New Mexico Department of Agriculture Specialty Crop Grant.

"The number of growers markets and vendors has steadily increased since 2006. In the Albuquerque area, an estimated $2.2 million in sales was generated last year," Patrick said.

Statewide in 2013, there were more than 70 farmers markets with nearly 1,000 vendors and sales of more than $8 million, according to the New Mexico Farmers’ Marketing Association.

Another source of increasing demand is restaurants that desire locally grown vegetables and fruits. Chefs like to feature quality fresh ingredients, yet obtaining local produce consistently can be a challenge.

New Mexico school districts are also purchasing locally grown food. In an effort to help meet the new U.S. Department of Agriculture's school nutritional guidelines for fresh fruits and vegetables, the state legislature provides funding to districts to reach those guidelines while stimulating local economies.

"Los Lunas, Santa Fe and other school districts around the state are taking advantage of this program," said John Garlisch, Bernalillo County Cooperative Extension Service agricultural agent. "Districts are exploring the program's feasibility and connecting with their local farmers."

While the potential demand is huge, Patrick's research indicated a need to work with local growers to help meet the demand.

"There are several issues that need to be addressed, including land-use, labor, water and weather, as well as meeting the institutional buyer demands, volume, quality and distribution," Patrick said.

"The average age of a farmer is 65 years old," Garlisch said. "The opportunity for growth to help meet the demand for local produce lies with small-acreage farmers and beginning farmers."

NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service is addressing these production challenges through educational trainings statewide.

Recently, a vegetable-farming workshop was held in Albuquerque, teaching farmers about a variety of production topics. Of the attendees, 90 percent farmed 10 acres or less and 75 percent had farmed for less than 10 years.

"Many current growers see themselves as hobby gardeners, not as production agriculture," Garlisch said. "But they are farmers. They are contributing fresh produce into the food chain, whether it is just for themselves and their neighbors or selling into a market."

NMSU Extension is replicating these trainings across the state to help producers reach this new demand.

Ongoing programs available are hoop house construction to extend seasonal production, soil and cover crops, integrated pest management, growing fruits and vegetables, and value-added marketing. NMSU also offers production information through online resources at aces.nmsu.edu/pubs.

"New Mexico has a potential to invest in its local businesses by supporting local farmers and locally grown food," Garlisch said. "This is a good challenge and a great opportunity as well."

To locate a growers market near you visit farmersmarket-snm.org.