

UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SAREP)  
Community Food Access Planning in East Salinas

Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA)

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In its project, ALBA maintained and expanded partnerships and dialogue around access to fresh foods in farm worker communities. Through early 2012, ALBA has continued its involvement in the Building Healthy Communities activities in East Salinas, including weekly farmers' markets at the WIC office and Natividad Medical Center continue to be served by farmers from ALBA.

Project results as per the grant work plan include the following:

Goal 1: Market channels for locally grown and culturally valued fresh foods will expand in East Salinas as a result of increased planning and direct marketing by beginning Latina/o farmers.

Objective 1.a. ALBA staff will learn more about community needs and opportunities for collaboration resulting from continued participation in the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) process.

It was vital for staff to continue attending meetings of the East Salinas BHC process, and occasionally comparing notes with collaborators involved in Sacramento BHC groups. In May 2011 an ALBA staff member applied, who has been a lifelong Salinas resident, was interviewed for a position on the BHC steering committee. However, she was not chosen and the committee did not indicate a reason. There have been numerous indications in the process that food issues were not seen as a top priority in the priority-setting process. The top priorities included: 1) keeping children safe from violence, 2) focusing on prevention strategies, and 3) creating health homes to expand access to health care among low-income families. There was little or no dialogue about access to health foods, nor was there significant discussion of better jobs or entrepreneurial opportunities in the community. The community planning clearly reflected Maslow's hierarchy of needs in a community too often impacted by gang violence.

Objective 1.b. In cooperation with ALBA staff, beginning farmers will participate in market assessment interviews with at least four (4) retailers, two (2) farmers' markets and one (1) large food service operation to explore access to markets for locally grown foods.

The retailer interviews were disappointing, as only Arteagas and La Esperanza markets ultimately participated, and their opinions about demand for locally grown, which are also organic, products were quite negative. Their perception is that most consumption of fruits and vegetables is limited by price and an overwhelming number of less formal channels for obtaining fresh foods. These alternative channels include taking produce home from field work, buying from mobile- and truck-based vendors and buying from small fruit stands.

The farmers' markets were more hopeful, but indicated that it takes a years to realize significant sales growth. Both the WIC office and Natividad Medical Center markets are seasonal. While the WIC-based market has grown since its inception nearly 15 years ago, the Natividad-based market has had fairly low

vendor sales since its inception two years ago. Through 2012 and likely 2013, the market is stable and may experience growth in the future.

Without additional food safety certifications, the farmers at ALBA have largely saturated the primary food service markets in the region. Current customers UC Santa Cruz and Stanford are essentially self-managing their food services and have not adopted the most rigorous food safety requirements. However, most local food services are operated by national companies that now require formal food safety certification of the distributor and all of its vendors. Currently ALBA Organics has more than 60 farmer-vendors annually and is planning for ways to realize a \$30,000+ annual investment in food safety certification fees.

Objective 1.c. Farmers will act upon at least three (3) of the market channels noted above to establish regular sales relationships resulting in low-income families' greater access to local foods.

The primary markets accessed have been farmers markets. Farmers have responded to new markets, which are often easiest for them to access (and may be more marginal than long-established markets, of course) with great enthusiasm. During 2011 and 2012, at least eight (8) beginning farmers received "Producer Certificates" for direct marketing, including farmers serving low-income communities such as Natividad Medical Center (East Salinas), East Palo Alto (in collaboration with Stanford students and a local community group), and other locations in Oakland and the South Bay region. In addition, while ALBA staff members did not make significant progress with small-scale retailers, one woman-farmer, Sofia Colin, has established small-scale grocers as a key "backdoor delivery" markets for her Mexican varieties of zucchini/squash and other products. Her retail customers are not in Salinas; rather, she made progress in communities such as Gonzales, Soledad and Greenfield which have fewer distributor options. Reportedly Sofia's customers are thrilled with her products, which are not sold as organic in the small groceries – and they are very popular among shoppers.

Goal 2: Fresh local foods will become a greater focus of inspiring diet-related health prevention strategies to enhance community health in East Salinas.

Objective 2.a. ALBA staff will interview at least six (6) health-related agencies in the community to determine how we can most effectively utilize fresh foods purchasing incentives to expand direct markets for fresh fruits and vegetables.

Interviews were conducted with five organizations, including the Food Bank for Monterey County, MC-Choice, Healthy Eating Lifestyle Principles, Building Health Communities and Everyone's Harvest Farmers' Markets. There were two primary themes that arose from the discussions: 1) the importance of tangible materials such as flyers and inserts that consistently repeat the promotional message, and 2) the importance of capturing the clients' attention early on. For example, the county offices that process applications for SNAP benefits have agreed to hang "Fundamentally Fresh" and "Market Match" posters in their offices and include the program's brochure in their program packets. In 2012, the Food Bank will receive hundreds of brochures as inserts for food distribution bags.

One key SNAP-match market incentive partner is the Natividad-based market. It continues to build its CalFresh redemptions along with ALBA's FUNDamentally Fresh (FF) incentives – currently about 35 customers use more than \$600/month in CalFresh benefits as well as \$150/month in FF incentives for \$750 monthly. This is a 54% increase over the average total \$488/month in 2010 and a benchmark for

sales growth in 2012. Through the 10 markets that ALBA now assists with matching funds for SNAP purchases of fruits and vegetables, those SNAP sales have grown as such:

2009	\$3,862
2010	\$12,860
2011	\$17,631
2012	\$24,000 (projected goal)

Objective 2.b. In cooperation with *Clinica de Salud del Valle de Salinas* (Health Clinic of the Salinas Valley), ALBA will conduct program planning for a three-year “veggie prescription program” that offers farm worker families a voucher as an incentive for the purchase of fruits and vegetables from local farmers.

ALBA made two presentations to staff at the *Clinica de Salud del Valle de Salinas* regarding a veggie prescription program. After some weeks of consideration by *Clinica*, they determined that the organization did have the bandwidth to engage this type of collaboration. In response, ALBA leveraged the Natividad market by proposing a pilot program involving fruit and vegetable prescriptions for diabetic patients served at the hospital. ALBA held two meetings with officials at Natividad Medical Center to discuss their interest in piloting the prescription idea. In the process, ALBA learned that the diabetes unit is not part of the medical center, but related to the Monterey County Health Department. One introductory meeting was held, and ALBA had the impression that they had committed a framework for patient follow-up to track results of the targeted dietary changes, including basic measures such as body-mass-index and blood pressure. However, again it was determined that resources would be too thin. At the same time, in early 2012, ALBA’s commitment to the Market Match SNAP incentive concept was under review and scrutiny by its board of directors. They determined that fundraising efforts would likely not be invested in a broader prescription-oriented incentive program.

Objective 2.c. Test the incentive with 100 pilot vouchers worth \$20 each, and plan for securing the resources necessary to sustain fresh foods incentive programs for at least a three-year period. The pilot vouchers include monitoring their utilization over time, including net additions of local foods accessed by local low-income families.

Given the narrowing scope of ALBA’s program in 2012, it was determined that it won’t be possible for the organization to continue developing the veggie prescription idea. However, ALBA continued to partner with Roots of Change and local farmers’ markets to maintain the Market Match program. In order to amplify the Market Match launch in 2012, ALBA invited Chef Michel Nischan of Wholesome Wave Foundation to meet with local partners, elected officials and ALBA board members. (see photo below) Also in attendance was Nell Newman, chairwoman of Wholesome Wave Foundation and founder of Newman’s Own Organics. Along with Michel, she was excited to experience the ALBA partners and hear firsthand about the impacts made possible in partnership with Roots of Change to being monetary incentives for use of SNAP benefits at farmers’ markets.

Looking ahead, ALBA is considering ways to build a stronger foundation for both Market Match and the possible prescription-based incentive by recruiting more local organizations into the program collaboration. One key possibility is Everyone’s Harvest Farmers’ Markets, which has long based its approach on helping to advance community food security.

## Conclusion

The SAREP grant's timing was crucial for helping to ascertain the viability of bringing issues of food access to community health planning processes in Salinas. As a result, ALBA learned much about local residents' priorities, the scopes and interests of health-related agencies, and the considerable risk avoidance among small-scale retailers. The dialogue around these ideas will continue as long as ALBA generates new beginning farmers seeking diverse direct market venues and other channels. The basic drive to establish market options will continue to generate a dynamic small-farm economy which, very slowly, is making inroads toward expanding good food options for all residents in the region.

Market Match Launch Celebration with Chef Michel Nischan and Nell Newman

ALBA, Salinas, CA

May 17, 2012

