

Project Report for Farm Credit

UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program

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Preparing small, beginning and immigrant producers to capitalize on values-based, wholesale marketing channels

Since 2012, UC SAREP has organized “Meet the Buyer” bus tours to connect small, beginning and underserved farmers with wholesale buyers. These tours provide a potent educational experience, offering an opportunity for farmers to meet face to face with wholesale buyers and learn first-hand and in person about standards for receiving, packaging, labeling, and other required procedures. Getting a grasp of these procedures can be daunting for many small farms, and presents a barrier to entry for selling into wholesale market channels. UC SAREP’s “Meet the Buyer” tours address this barrier directly by demystifying processes and regulations and giving farmers a chance to build relationships with buyers. To date, the tours have served 170 farmers and 22 food system partners.

In 2015, with generous funding from Farm Credit and the California Department of Agriculture, UC SAREP conducted tours for farmers in four regions of California: Fresno, North Bay, San Diego, and Los Angeles. These four tours visited wholesale and retail buyers in the Bay Area and Los Angeles and were attended by 142 participants. In addition to introducing farmers to buyers, the tours foster farmer-to-farmer networking, creating a space for farmers to build connections and learn from each other. Each of the tours organized by UC SAREP is carried out with coordination and support from UC Cooperative Extension (UCCE) farm advisors in the tour service area. This collaboration links university resources and capacity with practical, in-the-field support, creating a comprehensive strategy for assisting small and mid-scale farms with their marketing challenges. This report provides a summary of 2015 activities, with a focus on the Southern California tours in December.

2015 TOUR HIGHLIGHTS

- 88% of participants surveyed indicated they would follow up with a new contact
- Average score reported was a 4 on a confidence scale of 0-5 for finding new markets post tour
- 78% of participants surveyed said they were likely to pursue new wholesale business post tour
- 78% of farmers surveyed self-identified as “new/beginning”
- 77% of farmers were small according to USDA’s definition

Educational Experience

The Bay Area and Los Angeles are significant hubs for wholesale buyers and are both regions where there is continued and increasing consumer interest in local sourcing and “knowing your farmer”. For this



reason, the four tours organized in 2015 aimed to connect farmers in regions outside L.A. and the Bay Area with interested buyers within these two metro hubs. In February 2015, two tours served Fresno and North Bay farmers, and connected them with wholesale buyers in the Bay Area. In December 2015, the two tours served farmers in San Diego and Los Angeles, and connected them with wholesale buyers in the Los Angeles area.

The majority (over 75%) of the participants surveyed on the four tours were small farmers, reporting gross sales under \$250,000 (55% reported gross sales under \$25,000; 22% reported \$25,000-\$100,000, and 13% reported gross sales over \$500,000). The majority of the tour participants surveyed also self-identified as new/beginning farmers (78%). Several support organizations and agencies who work with small farmers also attended the tours. During our follow-up, we will be asking these groups about the number of farmers that they serve, but our assumption is that by having these representatives on the tour, the resources distributed and information gained will have an exponential impact by rippling out to the farmer constituencies supported by these various food system organizations.

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Snap Shot: Southern California Tours

The two tours of the Los Angeles wholesale markets included stops at some of the most prominent produce distributors in the country: Melissa’s World Variety Produce, specializing in unique and exotic produce in addition to the standards; Harvest Sensations, a buyer of premium conventional and organic products; Health & LeJeune, an exclusively organic distributor with an unrivaled commitment to sustainability and supporting small farms; and Whole Foods Market Distribution Center, hub for the leading organic food retailer.



In addition to these significant players in the produce distribution business, the tour also included two unique types of wholesale buyers: Space X Technologies and Heirloom LA Catering company at the Santa Monica Farmers' Market. The stop at Space X, a cutting edge space exploration company, gave participants unprecedented access to the chef at the company's large campus dining restaurant, serving over 5,000 meals per day. At the Santa Monica Farmers' Market, one of the largest and most diverse grower-only Certified Farmers Markets in the nation, participants learned about how to make their time at a farmers' market do "double duty" for their sales, by targeting chefs and wholesalers who shop at the market. They heard from the market manager, Laura Avery, on regulations that apply to farmers who wish to sell their products wholesale at the farmers' market and from Sarah Delevan, the buyer at Heirloom LA, on the importance and effectiveness of using social media to promote seasonal produce and farm products to chefs and buyers. Sarah shared that she will often determine what products she will buy and which farms she will source from based on Instagram posts she sees from the farmers. It was an important marketing tip for a somewhat tech-reluctant crowd and exactly the kind of practical, immediately applicable tidbit that these tours are intended to impart.

Evaluation and Learning Outcomes

Based on written evaluations conducted at the conclusion of each tour, participants each made an average of five new contacts; 88% of participants indicated that they were likely to follow up again with these

"I can't begin to tell you how **valuable the tour was for me**, on countless levels. It was everything that I hoped it would be and much more. It opened my eyes wide and gave me **a huge boost of confidence and a lot of direction**. When we moved to this property and all these apple trees I had no idea what to do with them, I **didn't know the first thing about marketing** then and I had very little confidence that I could succeed. But after the tour I feel completely different. And now with this follow up support you are offering **I feel even more confidence**. And I am excited. I **can't thank you and Farm Credit and CDFA and UC SAREP enough!**"

- North Bay tour participant

contacts after the tour and 78.2% of participants indicated they were somewhat or very likely to pursue new wholesale business channels as a result of the tour. Farmers indicated a confidence score of 4 on a 0 - 5 scale for finding new markets for their produce after the tour. Overall, tour participants expressed heightened levels of confidence in approaching buyers, learned about wholesale procedures, and gained an understanding of standard protocols.

Participant evaluations expressed pleasant surprise that each site included networking time with a diverse group of wholesale staff members. One-on-one face time

with “decision makers” was a key component in the overall success of the tour. Many participants indicated that buyer networking far exceeded their expectations and provided them with clarity in the sales process by answering questions about who to contact and how to build relationships with staff. It was beneficial for the group to hear from the buyers about their processes.

A farmer in the North Bay contacted us for advice in pricing her crop of persimmons and reported success in brokering a deal with Three Stone Hearth, a connection she made on the Bay Area tour.



Follow Up Outreach and Next Steps

Participants on all four “Meet the Buyer” tours were given post-tour evaluations/surveys in which they were asked to identify their top three marketing challenges. This question was designed to help UC SAREP provide follow up resources to the growers to further address their marketing hurdles and support them in increasing sales and accessing new market channels. Top responses were: food safety, buyer introductions, and pack and grade protocols. Based on this information, UC SAREP created a resource sheet with current standards and additional resources and made it available to all 2015 registered tour participants via personalized emails and on our website. Post-tour follow up emails sent to participants contained contact information for the buyer representatives from each tour stop and encouraged participants to pursue the relationships started on the tour. This outreach also served to promote an open channel of communication between growers, farm advisors at UCCE and UC SAREP.

We are currently conducting follow up with the participants on the two February Bay Area tours. The staff at UC SAREP has continued to be available to tour participants for technical assistance and to work with UCCE farm advisors in Fresno and San Diego, supporting education for farmers on food safety certification and group GAP programs and leading marketing workshops at these locations.