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Final Report

Farm to School Bus Tour Evaluation
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Executive Summary

USDA/FDACS Specialty Crop Block Grant/Farm to School Bus Tour Evaluation

December 2014

Introduction

In November 2014, the Florida Specialty Crop Foundation, Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association, and the UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education hosted a bus tour of local farms in Plant City, Florida. The tour and corresponding research was funded by a USDA/FDACS Specialty Crop Block Grant. The PIE Center administered a short survey at the conclusion of the bus tour along with a reflective oral discussion to gain a better understanding of the participants experience on the tour, including what they had learned and their perceptions of the farm to school program. Researchers took additional observational notes throughout the tour.

Findings

The key findings from the survey, oral reflection, and observations consisted of information about what the participants had learned, opportunities, and suggestions they had identified regarding purchasing local specialty crops for their farm to school program.

- Knowledge — Participants indicated that the bus tour provided opportunities to gain knowledge about the production, harvest, and distribution processes of the farmers. They gained a much greater understanding of the challenges farmers face during production as well as how the producers needed to package and sell their products.
- Opportunities — Participants identified opportunities for the success of the farm to school program through effective communication and collaboration between school districts and producers. The participants also developed a better understanding for when to purchase the produce as well as how to get the products delivered to their district.
- Suggestions — The key suggestion from participants was that a liaison between the schools and producers was needed to keep communication channels open and to identify purchasing and distribution opportunities.

Recommendations

Recommendations for farm to school

- FDACS division of food nutrition and wellness should continue help facilitate relationships between school districts and producers in order to develop more effective collaboration.
- FDACS division of food nutrition and wellness should consider establishing a mechanism for farm to school liaisons to aid in the farm to school process, encourage collaboration, and help participants identify available resources.
- Extension should develop programming for food service directors that helps them understand the different food safety regulations and permits that farmers should have. In addition, programming should be developed to aid school districts in contracting directly with producers.
- Extension should connect producers with packaging or distribution houses to encourage collaboration with other growers in the area in order to more effectively distribute the food.
- Communication opportunities should continue between producers and school food service personnel to better facilitate collaboration. Both parties have a greater understanding of each other than in previous years, and open communication will allow for continued progress

Background

The Florida Specialty Crop Foundation, the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association, and the UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education collaborated to host a tour for participants at the Florida School Nutrition Association Conference on November 11, 2014. The purpose of this tour was to identify and examine the perceived barriers of purchasing specialty crops as part of the farm to school program in K-12 schools in Florida. The research and bus tour were funded by a USDA/FDACS Specialty Crop Block Grant.

Twenty-nine Florida school foodservice directors participated on the tour, representing Leon, Hamilton, Duval, Gadsden, Palm Beach, Pinellas, Miami-Dade, Collier, Indian River, Levy, Santa Rosa, and Monroe counties.

Once the bus departed for the first stop, a representative from Primus Labs talked about food safety and answered questions about food safety from participants. The first bus stop was in Plant City at Driscoll's of Florida Inc., and participants were able to see blueberry and strawberry fields and ask a farmer questions. The tour moved to Fancy Farms, a strawberry farm, then to the Wish Farms distribution facility. The participants were given a tour of the refrigerators used to store strawberries and other fruit distributed by the company. The bus tour concluded with a grower panel discussion at the office of the Florida Strawberry Growers Association (FSGA). The panel included the FSGA executive director, the FSGA marketing director, a strawberry grower, the director for Wish Farms retail sales, and the director for Wish Farms marketing. The food service directors were given the opportunity to ask specific questions and share experiences with the farm to school program in a question-and-answer session with the panel.

This report is a summary of the bus tour and an analysis of what participants have gained from the tour, as well as challenges and opportunities they identified.

Methods

Throughout the bus tour, three researchers took observational notes during the tour regarding the participants' challenges and conversations related to getting fresh local food in their school districts. The notes were analyzed for common themes.

After the bus tour concluded, a short evaluation and an oral reflection were conducted in order to collect school foodservice directors' opinions of the bus tour and the farm to school program. Foodservice directors were informed about the evaluation and oral reflection at the beginning of the trip, and informed consent forms were signed and collected. Participants were asked to complete a short survey about their experiences on the tour. Additionally, the group of participants all participated in a group oral reflection guided by one of the researchers.

The evaluation survey included questions about whether the foodservice directors learned something new or gained a better understanding of the operations, and concluded with open-ended questions to specify their understandings. The survey asked participants to compare their level of understanding regarding the food production relationships between distributors and growers before and after the tour on a five-point Likert-type scale. The scale ranged from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Lastly, foodservice directors were asked about their favorite part of the tour, ideas for improvement, and to provide additional comments and feedback.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze participant understanding regarding food production, food safety, and the relationship between producers and distributors. Analysis was completed using the statistical software IBM SPSS 22.

The oral reflection allowed participants to share what they learned or observed during the bus tour about food production, food safety, challenges and opportunities as well as provide recommendations for the farm to school program.

Both the oral reflections and open-ended questions in the survey were analyzed for common themes.

Results

Participant Observation Results

Primus labs food safety presentation

A representative from Primus Labs, a company used for food safety audits in the agricultural industry, spoke to the group of participants on the bus ride to the first tour stop. The representative talked about auditing procedures as well as standard food safety practices, and answered any questions the group had. Three researchers took observational notes of the participants' actions, questions, and conversations. The common themes that emerged from these observations were packaging, collaboration, and food safety regulations.

Packaging

- The Primus labs representative spoke about how packaging of strawberries occurs in the fields immediately after the fruit is picked. The majority of the participants appeared surprised by this information. Some expressed they had never realized the strawberries were picked and packaged in this manner.
- The topic of repacking came up, and the representative explained that after some commodities, like strawberries, are shipped, repacking can occur. Participants were surprised once again by this fact and asked questions to clarify the process. The representative went on to explain that the fruit is typically graded before the initial packaging, but the food service directors could request re-grading after the product was packaged. The participants were both surprised and happy about this fact. Many of them acted as though they would use this information in the future.

Collaboration

- During the conversation with the Primus Lab representative, the theme of collaboration emerged. Food service directors shared their experiences with the farm to school program and what steps they had taken to be successful. One director explained how she had partnered with a satsuma co-op to distribute fruit to her school district. The leader of the co-op had even built a packaging facility for satsuma growers to help contribute to the efficiency of the program. Another food service director spoke about how she utilized opportunity buys through a number of different avenues, including growers, packers, and brokers, in order to obtain produce for the program.

Food safety regulations

- Food safety was the most dominant theme during the discussion with the Primus Labs representative likely due to the nature of the conversation. The participants were interested in the auditing system at facilities and were surprised to learn that “second chances” were given if the company failed an audit for minor issues. The representative spoke about how some agricultural production facilities used newer procedures, which have not yet been standardized in the industry. Since these facilities do not have standard operating procedures (SOPs), they are exempt from being audited for food safety. Aquaponic facilities were discussed, and participants were surprised that there were no auditing procedures considering fish lived in the water the crops grew from. Many of the participants were especially concerned about the fecal contamination that could occur from the fish swimming in the water and then getting onto the fruit or vegetables.
- The regulations of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and organic foods also came up in the conversation. The participants asked about GMOs and were surprised to learn that GMOs could be grown with organic principles but could not be certified due the genetic modifications of the product. Similarly, the group was intrigued to learn organic crops could still use a number of different pesticides during production. A bag of

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organic rice was passed around the bus to allow the participants to see the organic seal used by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Some people glanced at the seal quickly, while others took more time to carefully observe the seal and packaging of the rice.

- The representative asked the participants if they had heard the term “SOP” and the majority reported they knew this term stood for “Standard Operating Procedures”. However, when asked what “SSOP” stands for, none of the participants responded and were told this term was used to describe “Sanitation Standard Operating Procedures.”

Driscoll’s of Florida Inc.

The first stop on the Bus Tour was at Driscoll’s of Florida Inc., where participants had the opportunity to visit both a blueberry and strawberry field. A farmer explained basic information about the crops and answered questions from the participants. Three researchers took observational notes of the participants’ actions, questions, and conversations. The common themes that emerged from these observations were production process, harvest, distribution, and production challenges.

Production process

- The participants asked a number of questions concerning the production process of blueberries and strawberries. In the blueberry field, they asked about how long it took the plants to produce fruit, blueberry season, optimal weather, different blueberry varieties, and tastes associated with the varieties. The participants were able to walk up to the plants and quite a few even took photographs of the buds that were growing. Some of the participants noticed a bee flying around the plants and asked how bees aided in the pollination of blueberries.
- The participants had similar production questions at the strawberry field. Additional questions were asked about the type of machinery used to make the strawberry rows and to lay down the tarps. The farmer also talked about the irrigation system used for the strawberries, and many participants were surprised to learn about the amount of water needed after the initial planting in order for the crop to grow. The strawberry plants were flowering and a couple even had small fruits. The participants were very excited to see the budding plants and eagerly took photographs.
- Participants walked by an area where the workers lived and many made comments about the cleanliness of the facilities. As the group passed a field filled with pickers, many stopped to take photographs of the workers.

Harvest

- A large majority of the questions asked in the fields were about harvest. The participants asked if the blueberries were hand picked and packaged in the field. Additionally, they asked what the annual yields for the blueberries were and learned that the farm produced about 10,000 lbs/acre.
- Similar questions were asked in the strawberry field. The participants were also interested about how many strawberries could be picked that were not yet ripe and learned that more green strawberries could be picked if the fruit was to be exported. Some of the participants were surprised to learn that the plant would yield more than one strawberry and that it produced throughout the entire season. They also asked what happened to the plants after the season was over and discovered the plants were all pulled up and tilled into the soil.

Distribution

- The participants were very interested in the distribution of the blueberries and strawberries. They asked where Driscoll’s sold their products and learned they were sold essentially everywhere. Additional questions asked if the fruit was sold as fresh or frozen, and the participants learned they were all sold fresh from the farm. Some asked

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what stores Driscoll's sold to specifically, and others asked about labeling and if the company included the location of origin. Many did not seem to realize that the growing location was required on the label and were excited to learn there was a phone App that could scan the clamshell's label to provide the farm/growing location.

Production challenges

- Many of the participants asked about the weather needed to grow strawberries and blueberries and the challenges associated with it. Protecting the plants from freeze was brought up along with the ideal weather required for sweeter fruit.
- Participants noticed that some of the blueberry leaves had dark spots on them and asked about diseases the farmer had encountered. Citrus greening was brought up and the farmer explained how that disease would not spread to strawberry and blueberries, but that they do have to deal with less severe diseases.

Fancy Farms Strawberries

The second stop of the tour was at Fancy Farms, and participants were able to ask more questions about strawberries to the owner of the farm. Three researchers took observational notes of the participants and identified the following themes: purchasing, production processes, harvest, and distribution.

Purchasing

- Participants asked the farmer a number of questions about how he would go about buying his strawberries for use in the farm to school program. Many of the food service directors expressed their desire to purchase locally grown food because it would be safer and cheaper. Participants also asked if there was a way to purchase the strawberries directly from the farmer, and the topic of a contract between the farmer and the school district was discussed. The farmer indicated this was a good idea, but a distributor would still be needed.

Production processes

- Similar to the Driscoll's of Florida Inc. stop, participants asked whether the sweetness of the strawberries was affected by weather. Also, in the distance was a large hoop house that participants were very curious about. They all appeared impressed that the farmer had tried to use the house for strawberries then switched to peppers after the strawberries were overheated. The group also asked for an explanation as to why the farmer had spread ryegrass seeds and were surprised to learn this process helped to keep the strawberries clean by hindering sand from coming loose and blowing onto the fruit.

Harvest

- Harvest was a focal point of the discussion at Fancy Farms. The food service directors asked questions about when harvest starts, how long it takes the plants to transition from bloom to harvest, and if the strawberries would be sweeter if they were picked earlier. Participants also asked how many strawberries could be picked in a day, and many were audibly surprised that around 10,000-12,000 flats could be harvested in one day with over 200 pickers.

Distribution

- Distribution questions were also asked, participants were curious as to where the strawberries were shipped to, and learned that some went all the way to Canada. Food service directors also asked about the delivery time to

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local stores and appeared to not realize it could take two days for strawberries to reach supermarkets after leaving the farm.

Wish Farms Distribution House

Participants were able to briefly visit and tour the Wish Farms distribution house. Wish Farms is known for strawberries and blueberries, but the distribution house handles a variety of crops from around both North and South America. Three researchers recorded notes of the participants' questions, actions, and conversations. Distribution, product origin, and labor were themes the researchers identified.

Distribution

- Participants were given a tour of the coolers used at the distribution house. Many of the food service directors were not prepared for how cold the coolers would be. A number of cucumber crates sat in the cooler and caught the attention of the participants. Quite a few inspected the crates and took photographs.

Product Origins

- The owner of Wish Farms explained to the group that their products came from all over the world, including Argentina. Some of the participants asked how the imported fruit would be labeled upon distribution. The food service directors were interested to hear that the products are labeled based on where they were grown as well as where they were packaged.

Labor

- Most of the conversation at the distribution facility centered on labor after the owner explained how a strike at the docks had slowed down their production. Participants asked how the company handled labor and discovered the workers were hired seasonally, but the size of the labor force was shrinking. A couple of the participants asked specifically about the H2A program, which helps bring guest workers into the United States. They asked what the workers pay was like as well as if housing was included. Most of the food service directors were not surprised the pay was over \$10/hour and housing was provided, but there were some expressions of intrigue when the owner mentioned that transportation costs were paid for as well. After all the talk about labor strikes and a shrinking workforce, participants were curious as to how the company was finding labor. The owner responded that were not necessarily finding workers, and they had to scale back some of their acres of berries to handle the labor shortage.

Grower discussion panel

The last stop on the tour included a grower panel discussion. The FSGA executive director, the FSGA marketing director, a strawberry grower, the director for Wish Farms retail sales, and the director for Wish Farms marketing participated on the panel. The participants conversed with the panel about farm to school. Three researchers took observational notes of the participants' actions, questions, and conversations. The common themes that emerged from these observations were collaboration, purchasing, and local food.

Collaboration

- Participants expressed a need for a “point of contact” to work between the farmers and the food service directors to facilitate better communication. Many of the participants also discussed the difficulty they have getting delivery of the produce to their schools. The farmers indicated that they would not be able to make deliveries to individual

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schools, but delivery to a distribution facility was definitely a possibility. The group then asked if they would have to hire their own shipper to deliver to the distribution house, and the panel said some of the farms had their own trucks, but others would require a shipper. The conversation indicated that the communication and collaboration between the food service directors and farmers was necessary for the efficient distribution of the produce.

Purchasing

- Many of the participants expressed an interest in developing a contract with the growers to purchase their produce. While the growers pointed out this could be a better solution to the bid process, it would still be difficult to sign a contract considering the fluctuating market prices of their products. The discussion led to questions about the minimum qualifications needed to purchase from the farms and the panel indicated that eliminating the bid system and paying market price would make for easier transactions. Some of the participants were also interested in how the strawberries would be sold in bulk. The group was pleased to hear the fruit would be delivered in flats, making it easier for the kitchens to serve than if they were delivered in clamshells. The farmers mentioned the flats would be more expensive, but the participants appeared to expect this and did not mind.

Local

- A local theme was present throughout the discussion with the panel members. Participants said that they wanted to purchase Florida products when they were affordable. Some wished to promote the local products in their schools by using specific farm names. The farmers said this might not be possible since they could not always guarantee sales to the schools due to market price among other factors. An alternative solution of promoting “Florida Grown” products in the cafeteria was proposed and widely appreciated by the group. Toward the end of the conversation, some of the participants encouraged the farmers to promote their products for “safety” in order to beat out the imported competition.

Evaluation Survey Results

Learned something new

All 29 participants indicated that they learned something new on the bus tour. The participants were asked to briefly explain what they had learned on the bus tour. Three themes were identified from their answers about what they have learned: production processes, distribution, and marketing.

Production processes

- Participants reflected on what they learned about strawberry and blueberry growth, one participant wrote, “[I learned] more about growth and processing of strawberries and blueberries.” Another participant reflected, “[I learned] how they plant and farm strawberries and blueberries.”
- One participant wrote, “I learned that blueberries need bee[s], and [learned] the difference of genetically modified [modification] and genetic selection.”
- Another participant reflected specifically on strawberry planting, “I learned about how the rows of strawberries were made.”

Distribution

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- Participants also indicated they learned about the produce distribution process. One participant wrote, “[I learned] about shippers and [the] distribution process.” Similarly, another participant wrote, “[I learned] the distribution process”
- One participant highlighted the farm to the school distribution process, “[I learned] the process in how the produce actually get[s] from the farm to the school.”
- Another participant wrote, “[I learned about] distribution and producers’ packaging issues.”

Local farm business

- One participant recognized the demand for local food among schools, “I learned there is a real demand from school district[s] to procure locally grown produce.”
- One participant realized a lot of local Florida produce was not consumed in Florida, “[I learned] that they [farmers] are doing more business outside of Florida.”
- Another participant expressed his/her feeling of the current local procurement situation, “[I felt that] getting Florida produce in Florida from Florida should not be this difficult.”

Understanding of day-to-day operations

All 29 participants reported that they had a better understanding of the day-to-day operations of the farms they visited. Participants indicated that they learned about the role weather and seasons play in farm operations. They reported leaning about the challenges faced by farmers and commented on the effort that farm work required.

- One participant reflected about the weather and wrote “ [I learned the] importance of weather and growth periods.”
- Another participant also recognized the role weather played in farm operations and wrote, “It [farming] is [a] hard job, especially because they [farmers] depend so much on the weather.”
- One participant learned about “the growing seasonality of selected crops.”
- Similarly, another participant learned about what farmers do between seasons, and wrote, “I was interested in the off season planting at one of the farms which re-nourish the ground between seasons.”
- Several participants learned about the effort farm work requires and the challenges farmers face. One participant wrote, “They have restrictions that limit their ability to meet district needs. Everyone has a different scenario and needs accommodations.”
- Another participant recognized the challenges in the farming operations, and wrote “The growers experience many obstacles in providing their hard work to us.”

Better understanding of market considerations

The participants were asked to indicate whether or not they had a better understanding of marketing considerations after visiting the farms and the panel discussion. Thirteen out of sixteen participants indicated that they had a better understanding of market considerations. Participants reflected that they learned about the distribution process and perishability of fresh produce.

- A couple of participants reflected on distribution when asked about market consideration. One participant wrote, “Now I know how distribution works”, and the other participant wrote, “ [I learned about] distribution from farm to table.”

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- Two participants reported on the reach of Florida produce and wrote, “[I learned] how they market [their] product throughout the eastern sea board”, another participant wrote, “there was a lot of discussion around [Florida] supplying the east coast throughout the winter months.”
- Another participant expressed his/her opinion about middlemen in the distribution process, “[We need to] get rid of the middlemen.”
- Two participants reflected the nature of challenges and associations with fresh produce. One participant wrote, “Perishability”; the other participant wrote, “need to ship quickly to the best market.”

Comparison of the knowledge level before and after the bus tour

The participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with four statements (regarding their knowledge of food production, food safety, relationship between growers and distributors, and distribution) on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). A knowledge increase was observed for each question. The largest gain in knowledge as a result of the bus tour was observed for the statement “I understand how food products get from the field to the distributor” ($\Delta M = 1.41$), followed by “I understand how growers work with distributors” ($\Delta M = 1.06$) (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of the knowledge level before and after the bus tour

Statement	Before the tour	After the tour	Mean Difference
	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	
I am knowledgeable about food production	3.62	4.21	0.59
I understand the food safety measures taken during food production	3.76	4.38	0.62
I understand how growers work with distributors	2.97	4.03	1.06
I understand how food products get from the field to the distributor	2.76	4.17	1.41

Favorite part of the bus tour

Most of the foodservice directors chose the visit to one of the farms as their favorite part of the tour. A few participants chose the grower panel discussion at the end of the tour.

Appreciation of the trip

- The participants expressed their appreciation of the bus tour. One participant wrote about the progress the program had made, “Great tour, so informative, think we have come a long way to making contact and getting products to us. Look forward to making it happen.”
- One participant, who also participated the bus tour last year, expressed satisfaction with the tour, and wrote, “Second year I have attended, I would recommend [it] to others.”
- Another participant wrote, “It was a great success. I felt people got to see both sides of the business.”

Bus tour improvements

The participants were also asked to give suggestions on what could be done to improve the next bus tour based on their experiences on this trip. A lot of participants asked for more time, while other participants expressed their wish to include some participatory activities such as picking and tasting the fruits for the next trip.

More time, more speakers

- More time: Many participants mentioned they would like to have more time for discussion throughout the bus tour. For example, one participant suggested, “Perhaps visiting farms close to each other and lengthening the time spent at farms/facilities.” Another participant wrote “Allow more time at the farms for further conversation,” and “[We] could have spent more time learning the whole process.” “More time [is needed] at panel discussion for discussion and problems” was another comment made by a participant.
- More speakers: A participant wrote “Add more stops with knowledgeable speakers.”

Participatory activities

- One participant reflected his/her wish to experience the production process, “It could be improved if we could have taken part in picking and tasting.”
- A couple of participants expressed their hope to have samples of the fresh produce, one participant wrote, “It would be nice to try some strawberries.” Other responses were similar in idea, “Have samples of the berries to give.”

Oral Reflection Results

During the oral reflection, participants were asked to discuss what they had learned about food production and food safety during the bus tour. They were also asked to discuss what opportunities and challenges they identified regarding the farm to school program as a result of the bus tour. Two of the researchers took notes of the participants’ answers.

Food production

During the discussion, participants indicated that they learned about blueberry and strawberry production. Participants reported they learned the following:

- Crops were rotated in the fields to replenish soil nutrients.
- Strawberries and blueberries were picked by hand.
- Ryegrass was planted in strawberry fields to help keep sand from blowing onto the plants.
- Strawberry growers had formed an association.
- Bees were not necessary for pollinating strawberry plants.
- Hoop houses could be used to grow crops in weather cooler than normal.

Challenges for the farmers

Participants were asked what challenges they learned farmers had to face when growing strawberries and blueberries. The following answers were recorded:

- Farmers’ yield and quality of product was heavily dependent on the weather.
- Farmers have to be innovative. The owner of Fancy Farms tried to use hoop houses to grow strawberries earlier in the season but was unsuccessful. Instead of taking down the tents, he decided to try and grow jalapeños.

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- Sometimes the farmers try to do something to help production, like plant ryegrass, just to have the weather ruin the effort. The owner of Fancy Farms had this issue when wind blew the ryegrass seeds all over the strawberry field and had to be spread again.
- One of the largest challenges discussed was labor. Farmers have to fill out paperwork for over 200 workers, while others have had to cut production size due to labor shortage.

Food Safety

The discussion leader asked the participants what the most important thing they learned about food safety was. Their answers were as follows:

- Fecal contamination was a major concern with food safety.
- Industry standards existed and were specific to the type of production.
- Food service directors could draft food safety requirements they have at their schools for the packers.
- Second chances could be given during the auditing process.

Participants were also asked what challenges were associated with food safety. They answered that misperceptions among themselves about the process as well as misperceptions among farmers about their requirements were the biggest challenge. Participants did not have an answer for what kinds of opportunities they identified with food safety.

Opportunities

The reflection moved on to ask the participants if they could identify any new opportunities in the farm to school program after the conclusion of the bus tour. Overall, the food service directors indicated that they had a much more positive feeling than they did after the previous year's bus tour.

- Participants felt like they were closer to having a point of contact for finding a distributor in their area.
- There was an overall feeling of happiness that farmers had a good understanding for how school business was conducted in regards to purchasing food.
- The food service directors learned that buying the produce toward the end of the season would be much cheaper and easier to purchase.

Suggestions for the farm to school program

Participants were asked to discuss suggestions they had for the continued progress of the farm to school program.

- Several participants indicated that a liaison between FDACS and farmers would be essential to the success of the program. This person would need to be well informed on how school systems work for more effective communication. The need for a constant point of communication between the school districts and farmers was agreed upon by the participants in order to keep up the progress made during the tour.
- Participants also suggested that food service directors demand their districts provide local food to the schools to increase the likeliness of purchasing Florida grown produce.
- The participants enjoyed the bus tour and many suggested the tour continue in the future to help educate the food service directors and keep communication channels open.

Additional information

The discussion concluded by asking the participants if there was anything else they would have liked to learn or if they had any final comments about the farm to school program.

- The participants expressed an interest in learning about which farms in their area collect and distribute produce, like the satsuma co-op in the panhandle. They were also curious to learn if distribution plants could handle crops other than what they were intended for. The food service directors suggested this could be one way to identify local distributors in their district.
- Students were also brought up in the discussion. Many of the participants mentioned how they would like to see educational videos used to teach students about the produce and where it comes from. Additionally, some food service directors talked about selling local produce, like strawberries, as both a fundraiser and an educational opportunity.

Findings

Throughout the survey evaluation, the oral reflection, and participant observations, the following key findings emerged:

- Participants gained a greater understanding of the processes associated with production, harvest and distribution.
- They asked many questions about the harvest and production processes. Many were engaged in discussion and excited to learn.
- Participants asked a number of questions about labor and gained a greater understanding for what farmers need to do to get workers.
- Participants reported learning and knowledge gain. Participants expressed learning not only about the production and distribution processes, but also food safety procedures.
- Even though participants were told strawberries were not in season, and physically saw the plants were fruitless, many were disappointed they did not get to sample any fruit. This shows a disconnect between what the participants reported they learned and their behavior.
- Overall, the participants indicated they had a positive attitude toward the farm to school program.
- Communication and collaboration were dominant topics of discussion in both the questions and reflections of the participants. They agreed that liaison, knowledgeable in the school system, needed to be utilized to open up communication channels between the school districts and farmers.
- Participants gained a better understanding of the best way to go about purchasing Florida produce for their schools. They also learned that use of a distribution facility was necessary for the success of the program.
- Purchasing local food was important to the participants. They felt that the local food was safer than imports, but many were frustrated with how difficult it was for them to buy locally.

Recommendations

Recommendations for farm to school

- FDACS division of food nutrition and wellness should continue to help facilitate relationships between school districts and producers in order to develop more effective collaboration.
- FDACS division of food nutrition and wellness should consider establishing a mechanism for farm to school liaisons to aid in the farm to school process, encourage collaboration, and help participants identify available resources.
- Extension should develop programming for food service directors that helps them understand the different food safety regulations and permits that farmers should have. In addition, programming should be developed to aid school districts in contracting directly with producers.
- Extension should connect producers with packaging or distribution houses to encourage collaboration with other growers in the area in order to more effectively distribute the food.

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- Communication opportunities should continue between producers and school food service personnel to better facilitate collaboration. Both parties have a greater understanding of each other than in previous years, and open communication will allow for continued progress.