The Role of State Departments of Agriculture in Fresh Produce Marketing: The Situation in AL, AR, MS, MO, TN, and VA

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Market development is a complex process, dependent to a significant degree on the simultaneity of the interaction between buyers and sellers. Part of the difficulty confronting rural areas and smaller growers, including many current tobacco producers, directly relates to market access. Many of these producers are searching for alternative enterprises that may allow them to diversify their operations and increase their net returns. Successful transition will depend to a large extent on market development. Market development entails overcoming the simultaneity of generating enough production and having reliable outlets for the volumes grown.

Research is underway under the auspices of an IFAFS project investigating the ways to overcome simultaneity problems small vegetable producers encounter in securing markets for their production. Four states (GA, KY, NC, and TN) are collaborating to develop a description of public sector involvement in produce market development, describe the types of marketing firms operating within each state, and identify grower attitudes and perceptions of marketing opportunities. This research update reports on one part of the first objective outlined above.

Sales to independent wholesalers depend on access; to facilitate such access, publicly owned farmers’ markets have in many locations expanded into wholesaling activities. Development of these markets in some cases has evolved to include fruit and vegetable assembly/packing, fruit and vegetable wholesaling, and other food-distribution (e.g., meat, dairy, dry groceries) activities. In most cases these are publicly supported markets that benefit from coordinated efforts among all the participants.

Because of the seasonal nature of fruit and vegetable production, perishability of product, and the shifting supply of regions, facilitating the roles of key participants is more involved and crucial than with other crops or livestock. Several types of support have been given by state Departments of Agriculture. Notably, several southern states have provided coordinated development of marketing facilities and marketing activities. The results from in-person interviews with key department of agriculture personnel in AL, AR, MS, MO, TN, and VA were conducted to determine support policies and programs related to produce. Also, for the IFAFS four-state project, the situation in TN will be compared to that in GA, KY, and NC. AL, AR, MS, MO, and VA were added to provide a broader scope to this segment of the project.

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