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Linking Agriculture and Tourism: Constraints and Opportunities with a Focus on Local Food Chains in the U.S. Virgin Islands

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ABSTRACT:

The linkage between tourism and agriculture in the US Virgin Islands is limited by production, marketing and institutional constraints. A study was conducted to identify and evaluate policy constraints and opportunities to improve this linkage. Focus group analyses of farmers, hospitality personnel, and policy decision-makers were conducted to develop a formal survey questionnaire. Each group was then surveyed in order to identify current and potential production/purchase constraints and opportunities for local food by restaurants in the islands. Seventy percent of restaurants' food purchases originate less than 10% of local food, 35% of restaurants make no purchases of local foods. However, 97% indicated willingness to purchase if available. In addition to availability constraints, quality, prices, consistency and other factors were determined to be constraints. Lack of producer knowledge of quality and product demand by farmers, and lack of knowledge of availability and outlets by chefs are key constraints. Development of educational exchange and information systems and a pilot project for production/market contracts for local foods are recommended and are being pursued.

KEYWORDS: Agritourism, local foods, constraints, community supported agriculture

INTRODUCTION

While tourism is the greatest contributor to the economy of the U.S. Virgin Islands, there is great concern about the decline in local agricultural production and the need to revitalize the agricultural industry. Agritourism is viewed as one of the ways to reinvigorate the agricultural economy of the U.S. Virgin Islands. The term "agritourism" has many meanings including farm visits, short and long-term farm stays, farm tours, farm bed and breakfasts, agricultural fairs and festivals, living history farms, and restaurants serving local cuisine using local produce. This study explores the constraints of this last meaning for the agricultural and tourist/hospitality sectors of the U.S. Virgin Islands. The objectives of this study include: assess of current food chain linkages between agriculture and tourism in the U.S. Virgin Islands, identify constraints on local food production and marketing, assess stakeholder (farmers, restaurant owners/chefs, and policy decision-makers) perspectives on constraints and barriers, assess stakeholder perspective on opportunities and finally develop recommendations to strengthen linkages of local food to the tourism/hospitality sector.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Three focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted in the U.S Virgin Islands between September and October, 2005 as part of data collection on the project “Trade, Tenure and Tourism in the U.S Virgin Islands: Understanding the Policy Frameworks that will increase Success for Sustainable and Organics Agriculture”. The project is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture SARE Southern Region (USDA/SSARE) for the creation of new opportunities within the Island’s agriculture sector and the creation of new opportunities to link producers with the tourism industry, which has become the leading economic sector of the Islands.

The current study employed the purposeful sampling method for recruiting participants (Patton, 1990). The participants for each group discussion were recruited to represent what could be explained as well-informed people with rich information and the ability to provide critical perspectives. For this reason the farmer group, hospitality group and policy makers group were purposefully selected and became the units of analysis. The primary criterion for selection for the farmers group was based on the participant engagement in the agricultural activities (farming or livestock) as a major activity. For the hospitality group the primary consideration was based on the provision of hotel or restaurant services to tourists. Selection criteria for the policy-makers group were based on current and previous involvement in policy making or analysis. Four questions were asked of all focus groups in the following sequence.

1. What are the pertinent issues that need to be addressed in order to develop a successful, sustainable agricultural industry in the US Virgin Islands?
2. What are the constraints or barriers that inhibit the development of a successful, sustainable agricultural industry in the US Virgin Islands?
3. What recommendations would you make to address the barriers identified in the previous question?
4. How would you prioritize these recommendations?

The focus group data analysis involved content analysis based on transcriptions from three videotapes of the recorded participants’ responses to the four questions. Analysis of the focus group discussions was done with computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) called NUD*IST version 6 (N6). This software has sophisticated tools for handling non-numerical and unstructured data collected through qualitative methods such as interviews or focus group discussions. The software enables the qualitative data analyst to index data and identify and merge codes that are closely related (Weitzman, 2000).

Based on content analysis of the focus group discussions, questionnaires were developed and administered to the three stakeholder groups. The three groups for which questionnaires were developed included: 1) local farmers/producers, 2) restaurant/hotel owners/chefs, and 3) policy decision-makers. The producer/farm questionnaire included questions about production and interest in production of specific products, concerns about production constraints, concerns about marketing constraints, marketing methods, participation or interest in participation in farmer associations and pilot projects with hotels/restaurants, methods to encourage local food/hospitality linkages, and the role of government policy. The hospitality sector questionnaire included questions about

purchasing and interest in purchasing locally produced foods by specific products, methods of purchase, methods of promoting use of local foods in the establishment's cuisine, concerns about ability to purchase local foods, interest in participating in a pilot project with local farmers, methods to encourage local food/hospitality linkages, and the role of government policy. The policy decision-maker questionnaire included questions about perceptions of local food production and marketing constraints, methods to encourage local food/hospitality linkages, and the role that government policy should have. The objective of questionnaires and surveys of study stake-holders was to collect in-depth information to be used as the basis for characterizing attitudes, perceptions and interest in policy and technical constraints and solutions to integrating a sustainable local agriculture with the hospitality sector.

The questionnaires were pre-tested and after final revision were administered spring 2007 to random samples of complete population lists of all relevant stakeholder groups. Analysis was conducted using SPSS statistical software to test congruence of responses to same questions across stakeholder groups. The study results were presented at stakeholder meetings to report the survey findings and to engage stakeholders in a discussion of recommendations to improve linkages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Seventy percent of U.S. Virgin Islands restaurants' purchase less than 10% of their food products from local sources and 35% of restaurants make no purchases of local foods. However, 97% of the island restaurants indicated their willingness to purchase local foods if available. Less than one-third of the restaurants purchase local foods at farmers markets or directly from farmers on a weekly basis. Although given a choice of suppliers among wholesalers, grocery stores, farmers markets, and direct purchase from farmers, restaurants indicated the most preferred method (over 70%) would be directly from farmers. The constraints perceived by the restaurant owners/chefs in developing the local farm to tourist restaurant linkage by importance included: lack of sufficient and consistent quantities of local foods, lack of market outlets and linkage to farmers, lack of local product quality and market information including availability and price. Farmers tended to agree as they listed by importance the lack of sufficient and consistent supply. However they believed that the price of imported products places them at a disadvantage and that there is a general lack of interest by restaurant owners/chefs in local food products. This study found that lack of producer knowledge about food product quality and product demand is an important constraint. Similarly, the lack of knowledge of availability and outlets by restaurant owners/chefs are also key constraints.

To address the constraint of adequate and consistent supplies, farmers and policy-decision makers were asked to rank the most important production constraints. Both groups agreed that lack of irrigation water infrastructure was most important. That was followed by lack of local government support, labor availability and land allocation.

With respect to identifying ways to improve linkages, farmers indicated that improving water and land resources and extension education were most important. The restaurant sector indicated that improving market information on local food was most important along with developing improved market infrastructure and farmer-chef exchanges. Policy decision-makers indicated that the most important way to improve linkages was to teach agricultural science in the school curriculum but that was followed

with improving market information on local foods, improving land and water resources and facilitating farmer-chef exchanges.

Recommendations to improve the agriculture – tourism linkage that were based on study findings included 1) the U.S. Virgin Island government should develop fiscal policies to improve land, water and labor availability, 2) a market information service should be developed by the U.S. Virgin Island Department of Agriculture, and 3) the Department of Agriculture should initiate a pilot project between farmers and restaurant owners/chefs to provide for educational exchange and to develop food supply chains for local foods that will meet the quantity and quality interests of the island restaurants.

Actions being taken by stakeholders as a result of this project include: a pilot project has been initiated to strengthen business and personal relationships between farmers and restaurant owners/chefs; a directory that identifies suppliers and purchasers of local foods is developed and planned activities include farm visits for chefs and food demonstrations by chefs for farmers using local foods.

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