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Removing Distribution Barriers Confronting Small-Volume Fruit and Vegetable Growers: Results of the Tennessee Extension Service Survey

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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 describes Tennessee's situation with the first objective outlined above.

To provide a description of public-sector involvement in produce-market development, primary data were collected through personal interviews conducted with Extension personnel in selected counties. Historically, Extension Service personnel have been actively involved in marketing fruits and vegetables; providing educational programs regarding market development, costs, and returns of producing, packing, and processing; market window identification; and descriptive competitive-position studies. According to results from the personal interviews, the most highly rated types

of information or technical assistance demanded by produce growers (as perceived by county agents) include pest-control recommendations, followed by soil-testing recommendations, varietal recommendations, and irrigation-systems recommendations.

The level of produce-marketing-related services provided by public-service agencies such as the Extension Service is directly correlated with the number of personnel with such responsibilities. Staffing for specialists and county agents providing horticultural production and marketing assistance has been remaining steady or decreasing in Tennessee.

The overwhelming area of support/resources that county agents indicated they need to better assist produce growers is marketing-related information (e.g., detailed guidelines for successful direct marketing, development of pricing strategies, negotiation skills, coordinated marketing arrangements, and identification and exploitation of niche markets), closely followed by production-related information regarding best management (cultural) practices in producing higher-quality fruits and vegetables.