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TAKING ADVANTAGE OF NICHE MARKETS IN ARKANSAS

Harvey Williams
Williams Farms

Agriculture Outlook Forum

Taking Advantage of Niche Markets

Introduction

- **I was born and reared on the farm in rural Eastern Arkansas. I am married and have 4 sons. I am also a small second-generation farmer. After completely converting from traditional row corps several years ago, all of my farming activities are centered round growing produce.**

Farming Background

- **Parent**
  - **Many of us, small traditional row croppers, have always had to rely on niche markets to help sustain our families. For as long as I can remember, my dad and others like him raised cows, hogs, chickens, and grew large gardens to feed the family. He supplemented the household's income by growing okra and cucumbers.**

Farming Background continued

- **Self**
  - **After my dad retired in 1977, I took on the operation of the family farm. Whereas my dad's major crops were cotton and soybeans, I added a wheat crop; also, I continued to grow the large garden for the family's fresh produce.**

The Necessity to Change Farm Crops and Practices

- **In 1980 we suffered a devastating drought that had a major impact on farming. The next few years, the small farms were no longer profitable. Realizing that in order to continue farming, it was absolutely necessary to find alternatives crops to sustain my farming activities.**

Availability of Niche Markets

- **Farmer's Market**
  - **In 1986, the Cooperative Extension Services of the states of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee formed a joint effort to organize a Farmer's Market. In 1987, I planted 5 acres of produce, grew 16 varieties of vegetables, and became a participant in that established Farmer's Market in Memphis, Tennessee. Each year thereafter - until the late 1990's, I continued to convert row crop acres to vegetable crops. Now, all of my farm acres are in vegetable productions.**

Availability of Niche Markets continued

- Grocery Stores, Processors, and Brokers
  - Because of the profit margins and volume demands for some crops, it allowed me to cut back on the less profitable ones and focus on expanding other avenues for marketing. I asked many questions, attended workshops, did many farm tours in and out of state, and with God's blessings I decided upon three major crops; these crops are being marketed with area grocery stores, processors, and brokers. However, with today's market trends, small farmers cannot always meet the volume demands. Therefore, it was necessary that I, along with four other growers, form a LLC to meet those demands. Cooperatives can serve the same purpose. Although we have three major outlets, we are always looking for new market opportunities and ways to improve the ones that we have.

Farm Business and The Next Generation

Present and Future Challenges

- Changing Trends
- Food Safety Concerns
- Labor
- Land
- Transportation
- Production Cost
- Financing
- Handling and Packaging
- Cost Control
- Training The Next Generation of Farmers

Non-Farm Community Involvement

- Federal, state and the private sector should get involved and encourage small farm business ventures. In my opinion, it is good for the family, the tax base, and the stabilization of the entire community.