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COMMUNICATION PRODUCTION RISKS TO NON-TRADITIONAL AGRICULTURE PRODUCERS AND VALUE ADDED PRODUCERS

Sub theme: Entrepreneurship

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Abstract:

In recent decades, community-supported agriculture (CSA) has become increasingly popular in the United States as an alternative farming system. CSA farms invert the traditional agricultural model so farmers collect revenue at the start of the season in the form of membership payments rather than waiting until harvest to recuperate costs.

Members then receive a weekly share of the farm product for the length of the season. Some CSA farms exchange produce for volunteer labor, but this project focuses on monetary CSAs only. This poster highlights the results of several related Maryland projects that sought to understand, teach, and evaluate CSA risk management methods. This poster will highlight how educating producers on legal risks can work to limit additional regulations on a developing agricultural value-added industry.

In 2014, Maryland Department of Agriculture conducted a study after receiving complaints from unhappy CSA farm members. The surveys found that 70 percent of all farmers reported having a conversation in some form about the risks of joining a CSA farm. However, just over half of the member respondents reported signing a membership agreement before joining. Upon closer study of the membership agreements and contracts available on CSA farm websites it was found that most agreements discuss risk in vague terms. While farmers in Maryland did mention risk to members, it was not explained clearly in written agreements. Using these findings, University of Maryland developed educational programming to provide clearer risk communication methods, including a model membership agreement. These results also lead government officials to choose not to create new regulations for CSA business. Rather, the Maryland Department of Agriculture chose to rely on education as a way to reduce tensions between farmers and CSA members. An evaluative survey was sent to CSA farmers who participated in the workshops to determine if the model contract was useful. Farmers reported using the ideas from the contract, if not the contract in full. In conclusion, development of clear, usable contracts could be important in increasing transparency and strengthening the relationship between CSA farm operators and members.

Keywords: community supported agriculture; agricultural law; local food movement; contract law; risk management education; Entrepreneurship