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TIERRA MIGUEL LEADS EFFORT TO CONNECT LOCAL GROWERS WITH DIRECT MARKETS

Tierra Miguel Foundation (TMF) in Pauma Valley is leading an effort to develop a collaborative local food distribution business among with San Diego county growers. TMF kicked off the San Diego Growers' Project on Feb. 19 at its farm by bringing together growers, grower organizations, distributors, and public health advocates to get an introduction to cooperative development and learn about how Local Foods businesses in other parts of California are working.

Luis Sierra, a business development specialist from CA Center for Cooperative Development, began the meeting by reviewing the history of growers cooperatives in Ventura, San Luis Obispo, Monterey Bay, and Sacramento and their strategies to service regional restaurant and institutional food markets, which include universities, k-12 schools, corporate cafeterias, and hospitals. The highlighted model businesses have been developed by growers themselves as marketing cooperatives, or developed from public-private partnerships such as organizations like Community Alliance with Family Farmers and Growers Collaborative.

"The biggest challenge is figuring out who's currently growing the food that these markets want and how to encourage more growers to produce for this market" Sierra said. "This is a critical piece, since many growers currently produce just a few varieties of citrus, and avocado, or grow ornamentals, which limits their ability to sell to [local] markets."

The good news is that the markets that San Diego growers have within 150 miles are unparalleled in the US. Between San Diego, Orange, and Los Angeles counties, which have more than 6 million consumers, there are enough buyers looking for "Local" and "Direct-from-the-Farm" products to buy what growers can supply. Sierra is leading the task of completing a feasibility study, which will provide a picture of what buyers want, what growers are producing, and suggest strategies for developing a successful business model to meet grower and buyer needs.

The key to meeting the needs of local markets is to offer diverse and consistent supply, which requires growers to be coordinated. Karen Firestein, USDA Rural Development program director, also at the Feb. 19 meeting, led a session on defining growers' shared needs and explaining the steps to organizing a cooperative business.

Tierra Miguel has several partners contributing to the feasibility study and the effort to open these markets to local growers. Including the San Diego County Farm Bureau which has endorsed the initiative and Naomi Butler, a public Health Nutrition Manager County of San

Diego, is surveying public schools about their food service systems and promoting farm-to-school programs throughout the county's schools.

The Center for Food and Justice, a division of the Urban & Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College in Los Angeles is taking the lead along with TMF on these efforts, with support from The California Endowment. The Center for Food & Justice has been leading farm to institution efforts in Southern California since 1997. A report on local food distribution barriers released by CFJ in 2008 details the demonstrated need for the San Diego Growers' Project:

"From our research, CFJ has identified northern San Diego County as the area most ready to enter into a farmer collaborative selling arrangement, and the existence of Tierra Miguel Foundation Farm, which is committed to serving as a leader for small and medium sized growers, will significantly increase the chances of the model being successful. By developing capacity to collectively market, process and distribute their own foods through the farmer collaborative model, farmers will be better able to meet the local food and distribution needs of institutional clients in both San Diego and Los Angeles. Through farmer collaborative model we hope to minimize production and legal risks by spreading the risk among multiple farmers, while also expanding direct sales to large institutional clients."

One of the next activities that the group is organizing is a tour of potential buyers in March. To learn more about this opportunity, and about the project in general, please contact Beth Ann Levendoski at (720) 760-742-4213.

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