

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

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Research conducted under the auspices of an IFAFS project investigated the ways to overcome simultaneity problems that small vegetable producers encounter in securing markets for their production. Four states (GA, KY, NC, and TN) collaborated in developing a description of public-sector involvement in produce-market development, describing the types of marketing firms operating within each state, and identifying grower attitudes and perceptions of marketing opportunities. This research update describes results associated 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 county agents with horticultural responsibilities in each state. These interviews solicited information about produce-related programs, professional training and development activities, and the need for additional support. Extension agents were asked to indicate the relative importance of produce-related information and services being demanded by growers. Overall, there was a fair amount of agreement among the states with respect to the relative positions of the service areas. Pest control was most frequently requested in all three states. Soil tests, market development, and variety recommendations composed a group of information requests that had comparable overall scores after pest control.

The county agents in all four states indicated they

had offered programs in establishing or managing farmers' markets; pesticide certification; market pricing; and meetings, short courses, or conferences. North Carolina and Georgia had provided assistance in all the areas listed. Neither Kentucky nor Tennessee had developed programs in agritourism, direct sales to schools and restaurants, or marketing weather-damaged produce. Unlike their North Carolina and Georgia counterparts, Kentucky respondents had not provided information on packaging or vegetable field days, and Tennessee respondents had not conducted educational tours of other production regions.

All four states have implemented comparable staffing strategies. However, the divergence in the number and size of produce operations has resulted in quite different numbers of Extension agents with produce responsibilities. Counties with sufficient activity have horticultural Extension agents. Staffing levels in Kentucky and Tennessee were several times lower than in Georgia and North Carolina. The latter pair of states also had industry-oriented training programs for new hires that reflected demand in counties where produce production was high. North Carolina had horticultural agents in every county. The simultaneity encountered here was that fewer and smaller produce operations led to lower demand for Extension programs not only with respect to staffing but also in terms of production, post-harvest handling, and marketing support.

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