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Farm economy getting a lift

The growing success — pun intended — of the Panhandle Fresh Marketing Association is the kind of homegrown economic development news we need more of.

It's also another success story for TEAM Santa Rosa, which continues to set the regional pace for economic development. But what we particularly like about Panhandle Fresh is that it is building on what should have long been a major strength for this area: agriculture.

For too long agriculture has been a quiet after-thought here. While other areas of the country, such as Western North Carolina, were building strong local farm economies and putting good local food on their tables, this area was missing out on the trend.

And on the jobs.

In and around Asheville, N.C., restaurants, grocery stores, farms and numerous farmers' markets proudly advertise and sell an abundance of local food, including vegetables, fruit, pork, beef, chicken, lamb, herbs, cheese, eggs and other products.

They have made a name for themselves by providing their residents with high-quality local food. In the process they created jobs and helped preserve family farms by helping make them economically viable — without government subsidies.

It has become both a tourist draw as well as an economic development asset that helps market the area to employers focusing on a good quality of life for themselves and their employees.

Yet this area arguably has more advantages. We have a longer growing season that makes winter vegetables a viable crop, and thousands of acres of easily accessible farmland with good soil. We also have large, nearby communities on either side of the two-county area that could help absorb our products.

Panhandle Fresh serves primarily to help create and coordinate the markets that local farmers can serve. And they are responding. Farmers are beginning to plant crops specifically because of the markets the program has opened. In the last year the program has gone from six participating farmers to 17, and now hopes to expand to offer low-cost loans to farmers needing capital.

A major market has opened through Panhandle Fresh's approach to Wal-Mart, which is featuring local produce in 13 regional stores. That gives farmers a big retailer that will take large amounts of their products. That creates efficiencies that allow farmers to also capitalize on smaller markets, especially direct-sale farmers' markets that allow them to sell at retail, with its higher profit margins.

Meanwhile, both private and government-sponsored farmers' markets in Pensacola, Milton and elsewhere, such as at Santa Rosa Medical Center, are providing new outlets for producers, and convenient locations for consumers.

What's most exciting about the success of Panhandle Fresh is that it is clearly gaining momentum. Done right, we believe it has an unlimited future.
