



August 2, 2009

## Getting produce from home

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If you've purchased fresh fruits or vegetables at a local Wal-Mart this summer, chances are better than ever that you've bought produce that was grown within just a few miles of your home.

The two-year-old Panhandle Fresh Marketing Association has expanded its reach this season to 17 growers in the region, mainly in Santa Rosa County, but ranging from Baldwin County, Ala., to the west to Holmes County to the east. The produce is delivered to 13 regional Wal-Mart stores and to Santa Rosa Medical Center in Milton.

Now TEAM Santa Rosa is pursuing a grant to create a loan pool farmers can draw from to make an even deeper investment in Panhandle Fresh.

"Panhandle Fresh produce supports local markets and businesses," said Andrea Sutrick, marketing coordinator for the association. "Plus, it empowers citizens to play an active role in their community's food supply and security, and promotes their own economy. ... Also, keeping produce local limits the transportation of goods and reducing our carbon footprint."

Farmers are singing the praises of the program.

"Getting our produce into Wal-Mart is pretty big. That's always been something that we wanted to do. If it hadn't been for this, we probably would still not be there," said Bruce Holland, owner of Holland Farms near Jay. "This gets some of our products closer to the consumer."

## Successful concept

The Panhandle Fresh association began as a nonprofit organization in November 2007.

It provides producers with accounting services, matches orders with available produce, provides a Wal-Mart vendor number, provides the required \$2 million liability insurance and marketing of produce.

Cindy Anderson, executive director of TEAM Santa Rosa, said the Panhandle Fresh concept has been so successful that she and Sutrick have been invited to speak this summer on how the program works at the Florida Small Farmer Alternative Enterprises Conference and the state Young Farmer and Rancher Leadership Conference.

"Agriculture is a significant industry in Santa Rosa County. Granted, it's probably not the biggest draw of high-paying jobs, but it's still an important industry," Anderson said. "If we can help the farming industry retain more of the dollar locally, it's still a positive impact to the economy. ... If we don't help the farming community to be more profitable, they're going to have to sell out to the development community."

## Farmers grow

In 2008, a wide spectrum of Panhandle Fresh produce was available — including peppers, okra, cucumbers and tomatoes — but watermelons and peanuts made up more than 65 percent of sales, according to the association's annual report.

The program went from just six growers last year who sold about \$125,000 through the association to the 17 growers this year who have sold more than \$144,000 so far this year, despite weather problems that delayed and stunted some crops, Sutrick said.

James Dennis, owner of Double D Farms north of Milton, said the Panhandle Fresh effort has helped him sell produce that has gone unsold in the past.

"Wal-Mart will take big quantities of stuff," Dennis said. "They take so much at one time. It really helps."

Selling to Wal-Mart has brought changes to the farms' operations. For instances, all of the produce now has to display a sticker identifying its country of origin, among other information.

The farmers also put their name on the sticker.

"It helps. I've had a lot of feedback from it," Dennis said. "People have said, 'We've bought tomatoes at Wal-Mart, or watermelons at Wal-Mart, that had your name on it. We know we're getting local stuff.'

"They would come to the farm on account of that. A lot of them will still go to the store, and, as long as they know it's local, buy more, I believe."

Holland Farms has increased the number of watermelons it plants and the number of its smallest bag of peanuts — the five-pound bag — for Wal-Mart.

## Local produce popular

The program gives local farmers access to the biggest grocery store chain the country.

Jimmy Cross, general manager at the Wal-Mart in Pace, said his store, customers and farmers benefit from the program. The Pace store carries Panhandle Fresh corn, tomatoes, bell pepper, cantaloupe, squash, watermelon, jalapeno peppers, blueberries, peanuts and greens.

"At the peak of the season on each one of these items, we probably do 10 to 12 percent of our business with them. Of course, we'd like for it to be 100 percent," Cross said. "It's growing. The farmers didn't realize how much business we do.

"They've learned."

As an example of volume, Cross said his store can sell as many as 3,000 watermelons in a week.

The local produce is fresher and less expensive for customers, he said.

"We've got good response from the customers. They wish it was available year-round," Cross said. "It's always a better product. Usually, what we get is picked that morning. ... Also, it's less expensive. It's probably a minimum of 10 percent less. We're not paying an 18-wheeler to ship them in across the country."

## Hospital a customer

This year, Santa Rosa Medical Center became a Panhandle Fresh customer.

"We wanted to try to get healthier, serving better produce," said April Howell, the hospital's food service manager. "If we could help the local farmers in our area, that would be a double benefit."

The hospital uses a lot of new potatoes, okra, corn, collards, watermelon and cantaloupe, she said. Advertisements in the cafeteria tout the use of locally-grown produce. The hospital, which serves about 600 meals a day, uses Panhandle Fresh items for about 10 percent of its produce needs.

"Not only do we cook it and serve it, but we have our own farmers market every other Friday," Howell said. "We bring in the produce and our employees can buy locally-grown produce without having to leave and go to the store. It's awesome."

Pam Chesser, a Pensacola resident who works at Santa Rosa Medical Center, said she looks forward to the opportunity to buy locally produce at the hospital's farmers' market. She has also bought produce from Wal-Mart.

"It's very high-quality. I particularly like the fresh peas and the melons," she said. "I buy (at the farmers market) because it's just too convenient not to, and the prices are comparable to what you find out in the community."

## Seeking grant

TEAM Santa Rosa has applied for a \$175,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture that could create a loan pool for Panhandle Fresh growers.

"This grant can be used as a revolving loan fund to support (new) infrastructure," Sutrick said. "TEAM has established a group of local business people to oversee this revolving loan fund assuming the project is funded."

The loans would be used to allow growers to produce more and better coordinate, possibly funding improvements like walk-in coolers, a distribution center and new farming equipment.

Holland said he might be interested in using the loan pool to purchase equipment to help package peanuts.

"It's hard to buy everything you need," he said. "For packaging the small bag, we could use some type of bagger. We can handle big bags like we are, but going to a small bag we'd like to be able to be more correct on the weight. We overfill the bag — something I always called a good measure — but ended up making them price a little higher at Wal-Mart."

## Additional Facts

Panhandle Fresh

For more information about the Panhandle Fresh Marketing Association, visit [www.panhandlefresh.com](http://www.panhandlefresh.com).