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High Tunnels for Socially Disadvantaged Producers: A Farm Bill Success Story

Lancaster, MA (September 17, 2010) –Our work on the 2008 Farm Bill advocating new benefits for socially disadvantaged producers is bearing fruit. One of the most successful new programs made possible through the Farm Bill is the approval of changes to the Environmental Quality Incentives Programs that allow funding of high tunnels, with much of the cost for socially disadvantaged producers covered through the Natural Resources and Conservation Service. The high tunnels are now up across the country, including in the communities of Rural Coalition members in Oklahoma, Mississippi, California and many other places.



Flats Mentor Farm Director Maria Moreira with the new owners of a new high tunnel at the Flats.

On September 17, 2010, the Flats Mentor Farm, with the Massachusetts Office of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and other USDA agencies held a training in the construction and use of high tunnels. 8 immigrant producers at Flats Mentor are constructing the high tunnels funded through the Natural Resources and Conservation Service Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) with a total value of \$85,936.

“This is a monumental achievement for these beginning farmers who worked very hard to learn how to grow crops from their native country and market them at the many farmers markets in Massachusetts,” said Maria

Moreira, Project Director of Flats Mentor Farm in Lancaster. “The high tunnels will address conservation issues, and also will truly make a difference in the income for these farmers and their families. But we are also very well aware that there without the unseen efforts of some very dedicated people who truly support our producers, this program would not have been available to the farmers at Flats Mentor Farm,” said Moreira, also a Board Member of the Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural.

USDA funding of high tunnels did not just happen - the long journey began with the persistent advocacy of the Farm and Food Policy Diversity Initiative, coordinated by the Rural Coalition, for the equitable participation of socially disadvantaged farmers in USDA programs in the 2008 Farm Bill. “Rural Coalition and its partners achieved some significant policy changes of real value to producers who deserve these benefits,” said Rural Coalition Chairperson, John Zippert, who is also Program Director of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives.

“Previously, for example, many socially disadvantaged producers were not able to take advantage of EQIP, because they could not afford a cost share of 30% to 50% of the cost of a new conservation practice, and they could not pay for the installation of the practice because they could not pay up front to be reimbursed later,” said Zippert.

The Diversity Initiative members worked with the House and Senate Agriculture Committees to secure language that allows NRCS to pay up to 90% of the cost of conservation practices for socially disadvantaged (and beginning) producers. The Senate added a provision to advance up to 30% of that amount so these producers could afford the costs for the improvements they wanted to make on their land. The DI team then worked to gain support from the House Agriculture Committee, and the provisions were included in the final version of the Farm Bill.

The journey did not end there. Rural Coalition and its members and partners were aware that the socially disadvantaged producers they served responded with great interest to the numerous organizations that had demonstrated the use of “hoop houses” or “high tunnels,” which are seasonal systems that are easy to construct, maintain and move. High tunnels allow producers to lengthen the growing season, protect their crops from pests without chemicals and use less energy than greenhouses. But NRCS had not approved these structures for funding as a conservation practice so producers could not receive federal benefits for one of the conservation practices they most desired.

In summer 2009, NRCS requested public input on a proposed federal rule on the seemingly esoteric subject “Conservation Technical Practices.” On August 11, 2009, the Rural Coalition, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, Atlanta, GA, the National Latino Farmers and Ranchers Trade Association, Washington, DC, the Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project, Oklahoma City, OK the Rural Advancement Fund, Orangeburg, SC, the New American Sustainable Agriculture Project, Lewiston, ME, and the Indian Nations Conservation Alliance, Twin Bridges, MT, took the opportunity to advocate for federal funding for High Tunnels in the comments they submitted

The group advocated that “*NRCS Should Allow Cost-Shares for Hoophouses and Greenhouses,*” as an important step for the sustainable participation of small and disadvantaged producers in agricultural production in order to “*allow for the contained and accurate applications to plants of fertilizers and pesticides, which help to preserve our land and water resources.*”

Rural Coalition also passed the comments directly on to leaders in the office of the Secretary of Agriculture and the Natural Resources and Conservation Service. These leaders proactively advocated for the initiation of a pilot project for High Tunnels that was approved and announced in November 2009. NRCS noted that there is anecdotal evidence of conservation benefits from High Tunnels, but that the pilot project was designed to assess these benefits.

Action then moved to the state level, with NRCS in Massachusetts and 38 other states requesting to participate in the High Tunnel pilot project. NRCS in Massachusetts (and in many other states) agreed to offer the pilot program to producers there.

Flats Mentor Farm, a seventy acre farm located in Lancaster, Massachusetts, assists and supports small farmers of diverse ethnic backgrounds with the land, farming infrastructure and marketing assistance needed to promote and sustain successful farming enterprises. Farmers at FMF come from agrarian backgrounds and they bring with them their rich cultural farming traditions, which they have had to adapt in order to be a successful farmer in the United States.



Maria Moreira with FSA County Executive Director Kip Graham and District Conservationist Walter

One of the unique features of Flats Mentor Farm training is the use of the mentoring training model where farmers reinforce the training received by training their fellow farmers at Flats Mentor Farm locations as well as other farms in the area and on the national level. In the words of the Maria Moreira, Project Director of Flats Mentor Farm, *“the mission of Flats Mentor Farm is to assist beginning farmers who want to become owners of successful commercial farming enterprises.”*

The farmers at Flats Mentor Farm have experienced remarkable success at selling their specialty produce at farmers’ markets throughout the Boston metropolitan area. Since 2005, farmers have gone from selling their produce in three farmers’ markets to over forty in 2009. Despite the success of the farmers in marketing their produce at local farmers’ markets the producers still experienced immense difficulty with accessing USDA programs, particularly, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) programs.

The High Tunnel Project also required cooperation with other USDA agencies, in this case, Farm Service Agency (FSA). When the high tunnel project was announced, Flats Mentor Farm worked with the local Farm Service Agency to help farmers understand the sign up process, and provided a valid lease for each specific plot of land. FSA and Flats Mentor Farm then worked to assure each farmer secured their own individual farming enterprise number on that land as required to

participate in farm programs. FMF then worked with the producers and NRCS to provide all necessary information for the high tunnel applications.

Farmers see the value of high tunnels and hoop houses to better manage production and to conserve natural resources. Farmers at Flats Mentor Farm were able to meet all eligibility requirements as a result of training and technical assistance received over the past ten years from various organizations and with USDA support, including Risk Management Agency, Heifer International, Massachusetts Society for the Promotion of Agriculture, Rural Coalition, Tufts University, Massachusetts Department of Agriculture, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

New benefits don't just happen. It took the policy accomplishments secured in the Farm Bill, including the availability of the 90% cost share and the advance payments, the approval of High Tunnels as a conservation practice, the efforts of state NRCS offices to offer the program, and the training and hard work of the staff and farmers at Flats Mentor Farm to deliver results.

High Tunnels are now in use for socially disadvantaged producers working with Mississippi Association of Cooperatives, Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project (in Oklahoma, the high tunnels were also repaired by NRCS after snow and ice damage), and by ALBA in California, among others. The program is bringing new producers through USDA's doors and expanding the use of conservation programs. At the same time, the producers in all these communities are utilizing the high tunnels to make high quality food available to low income and people of color communities to the mutual benefit of the communities and the producers.

"We are now celebrating that we have walked the long journey, taking all the steps necessary to assure that socially disadvantaged producers everywhere secure access to the benefits they need to prosper in agriculture. The Rural Coalition congratulates our member organization, Flats Mentor Farm, and our Board member, Maria Moreira, and other groups, for their successful efforts to submit applications, and we thank USDA leaders and NRCS for their proactive efforts to set this important program in place and see that it is used by the producers who need it most," said John Zippert. "We look forward to sharing this success story about a basic building block for local food systems of the future with our network of socially disadvantaged producers across the nation."

Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural has worked its diverse community based members for 32 years for justice and sustainability in agriculture. To join our Farm Bill E-Update Network, please send an email with your name, farm name or organization, and the request "Sign up for E-Updates," to lpicciano@ruralco.org. Sign up will also soon be possible at <http://ruralco.org/>.