

Local Food Promotion Program Final Performance Report

The final performance report summarizes the outcome of your LFPP award objectives. As stated in the LFPP Terms and Conditions, you will not be eligible for future LFPP or Farmers Market Promotion Program grant funding unless all close-out procedures are completed, including satisfactory submission of this final performance report.

This final report will be made available to the public once it is approved by the LFPP staff. Write the report in a way that promotes your project's accomplishments, as this document will serve as not only a learning tool, but a promotional tool to support local and regional food programs. Particularly, recipients are expected to provide both qualitative and quantitative results to convey the activities and accomplishments of the work.

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Report Date Range: <i>(e.g. October 1-March 31, 20XX)</i>	7/01/2015-9/30/2017
Today's Date:	November 21, 2017
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Recipient Organization Name:	Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture
Project Title as Stated on Grant Agreement:	High Country Supported Agriculture
Grant Agreement Number: <i>(e.g. 14-LFPPX-XX-XXXX)</i>	14-LFPPX-NC-0108
Year Grant was Awarded:	2014
Project City/State:	Boone, NC
Total Awarded Budget:	\$100,000

LFPP staff may contact you to follow up for long-term success stories. Who may we contact?

- X Same Authorized Representative listed above (check if applicable).
Different individual: Name _____; Email _____; Phone _____
- Summarize the community need for the grant work:

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1. State the goals/objectives of your project as outlined in the grant narrative and/or approved by LFPP staff. If the goals/objectives from the narrative have changed from the grant narrative and have been approved by LFPP staff, please highlight those changes (e.g. "new objective", "new contact", "new consultant", etc.). You may add additional goals/objectives if necessary. For each item below, qualitatively discuss the progress made toward each one and indicate the impact on the community, if any.

The High Country is located in the western part of North Carolina, which is a mountainous region and the farms tend to be smaller generally 8-20 acres with about 1 to 2 acres flat enough to grow vegetables. The land is better suited to livestock production as the growing season is short due to the high elevations and cold weather. Recently the use of high tunnels has increased the growing season and the types of vegetables available longer into the season. The High Country is rural with the biggest town, Boone having about 25,000 people most of which are associated with Appalachian State University. The High Country is a big draw to second home owners who want to get out of the low country to cooler climates in the mountains and also because we have many outdoor activities. In addition, there is a significant low income population with about 23% at or below the poverty level.

Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture is a local non-profit dedicated to building a regional food system with a focus on developing markets with farmers and creating opportunities for our low resource families to have access to high quality, fresh local food. Our service area of 9 counties is very rural and presents a number of challenges to our farmers to find markets to sell their products

- i. **Goal/Objective 1: Increase High Country CSA Shares sold in Watauga County to at least 200 (from 100 to 200) by June 2016.**

a. Progress Made:

The High Country CSA is a multi-farm CSA focused on providing high quality, locally grown vegetables boxes to customers from June through October. During the grant period the HC CSA farmers have added a number of options to accommodate demanding schedules that mean families are not eating as many meals at home. In addition to the vegetable boxes the farmer group invited other producers to provide added items to the boxes on a by-weekly basis. Add-ons included eggs, honey, cheese, granola, bread, pasta, a variety of meats and cut flowers.

The High Country CSA provides a market for local farmers to get their products to consumers and a multi-farm CSA allows for a wider variety of vegetables and products to be included in the CSA boxes each week as well as reducing the risk from crop failure and weather issues. When one farmer has a failure then one of the other farmers can either fill the order or substitute items. Even though we make a very detailed production schedule in December detailing who is growing what items and in what quantity, over the three years of this project we always had to make substitutions because of too much rain, too dry or simple crop germination failures.

Year one was a transition year as this grant was originally awarded to WAMMY our local Community Action Organization and they were overwhelmed trying to work with the farmers. The grant was transferred to Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture in June 2015 and we got to work building the CSA. We had 120 CSA shares for the 2015 season including 36 subsidized shares, cost share boxes for low resource families who did not prepay but paid each week and could use their EBT card to pay.

Year two 2016 we increased the number of shares to 150 by offering a fall share that ran for 10 weeks. This worked well as the ASU staff and student were eager to buy the fall share when they returned to school in August. We continued the cost share but were reduced to 20 shares as we were

unable to raise enough money to cover the subsidy for more families. We also offered a payment option and folks could make 2 or 3 payment to reduce the upfront cost all at one time. A large share cost \$525 for the season and a regular share cost \$375 for the season.

In 2017 we reached 189 shares by offering more options. We offered a 10-week spring share, the full 22 week share, a fall share, the large box, regular box and the staples box which had more basic vegetables and not so many boutique vegetables. We continue to offer the cost share again for 20 families. Over the course of the project working with consultants we were able to make significant improvements. Anthony Flaccavenco spent several days working with the farmers on their production planning, adding more vegetables, a better rotation and improved quality of produce.

Barry Gupton a financial planning expert assisted with long range financial planning, determining real costs and adjusting pricing and setting the cost for delivery fees to offset those costs.

Jodi Rhoden from Mountain Biz Works assisted with a marketing plan to recruit more members using social media, more media outlets and visits to the large employers in the area.

All of the consulting work paid off in increased number of members and improved reviews by customers of the quality of the produce in the boxes, add on options, delivery and ease of pick-ups.

We are looking forward to 2018 and are looking at more options to accommodate folks that travel in the summer.

b. Impact on Community:

The LFPP Grant Funds have provided the resources to build a strong expanded market opportunity for our farmers and access to high quality locally grown vegetables and other products for consumers. This multi-farm CSA, included 5 farmers who are all full time farming and the income from the CSA is a significant part of their total farm income. We also had 11 additional farmers who offered add on products weekly or monthly. Income for the full time farmers grew each year increasing 127% over the three -year period of the grant. Prior to the grant the High Country CSA had many problems with quality of products and variety of products and would have ceased to exist without the grant funds. The grant allowed a core group of farmers to step up and take control of the CSA and work to make it a very high quality CSA.

ii. Goal/Objective 2: Establish a new multi-farm CSA in Avery County by the 2016 season.

a. Progress Made:

We have not been able to get the numbers of members in Avery County. This goal was from the original application and WAMMY has offices and contact in Avery that we do not. We were able to establish a small membership in Banner Elk in Avery County with about 22 shares. We will continue to try to expand our market into Avery but will either have to have enough shares to make the delivery to Avery or folks will have to be willing to drive to Boone for pickup which is about a 35 minute drive. We will continue to work toward expansion in Avery County as we work to increase the number of CSA members.

Impact on Community:

N/A

iii. Goal/Objective 3: Ability to provide discounted shares without reliance on grants by 2016

a. Progress Made :

Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture is committed to creating opportunities for low resource families to access high quality local fresh food. The Cost Share Program of the High Country CSA is just one of the strategies. We have been able to raise about \$2500 toward the cost share for the past two years which supports 20 families. The CSA shares are subsidized and families pay each week instead of up front. Families can use their EBT card to make the weekly payments. This strategy works for some families but not for all. To make good use of the CSA box a family has to be able to use lots of vegetables each week. We have other strategies for other families such as Double Bucks at the Farmers Markets and we work closely with the Food Pantries through our Community of Gardens Program. In 2018 we will begin a new Food Recovery Project to provide even more local fresh food to the Food Pantries. BRWIA also raises funds for the Double Bucks Program at the Watauga Farmers Market another strategy for making local quality vegetables available to low resource families.

The Cost Share Program provides opportunity for families who want access to lots of quality vegetables a way to participate in the CSA. We will continue to seek resources for this program and plan to expand when possible.

b. Impacts made:

The cost share program has provided low cost access to a high quality CSA for three years. 47 different families have participated over this time. BRWIA raises the funds each year to provide the subsidized boxes. Families are able to participate because they do not have to pay a large fee up front but are able to pick up their boxes each week and pay at that time. They can use their EBT card to pay. This program has also been a big challenge as low resource families do not always show up to pick up their box as they often face transportation, health and other issues. So we have to raise additional funds to cover the cost of the box when they do not pick up their box as the farmers still need to be paid. Unfortunately, this then reduces the number of families to be served. In 2017 we had the most consistent year for families actually picking up their box each week. We do offer several pick up sites to make it easier for them to get their box. All boxes not pick up in a given week are donated to a food pantry or the FARM Café.

We will continue to raise funds for the cost share program and look for ways to expand the project.

iv. Goal/Objective 4: The High Country CSA is self-sufficient by September 2016.

Progress Made:

We made great strides throughout the grant period toward self-sufficiency. The LFPP grant has allowed the High Country CSA farmers to put aside 10 percent of their invoices in 2015 and 20 percent in both 2016 and 2017 to use as operational funds moving forward. By increasing the number of members each year we have been able to get closer to the number of shares that are needed to be self-sufficient. Based on the work with the Financial Consultant we need to be at 200 shares to cover all the costs. We came close in 2017 with 189 shares. We are currently meeting to look at running the CSA memberships through the Food Hub which would allow for a more efficient and streamlined operation. All options are on the table. If we can stay at 189 or grow higher the CSA will be able to keep the CSA Coordinator position which is key to the success of the CSA and have funds for marketing and supplies.

A. Impacts made:

The CSA membership has continued to grow each year. It is very tough competition as there are 13 CSA's operating in Watauga and Ashe Counties. The High Country CSA is the only multi-farm CSA and is able to offer a greater variety of items. Having multiple farmers involved allows for greater substitution

options when a crop fails due to too much rain, not enough rain, deer, other pests or poor germination. The farmers involved in the CSA have seen increased oncome as the number of shares grow, including the farmers offering the add-ons which include eggs, cheese, pasta, bread, granola, honey, meat and flowers.

We are currently looking at the possibility of running the CSA through the Food Hub on-line store which has the possibility of being a more efficient. The software for administering the CSA has many management and reporting options. We are also looking at reducing administrative costs by combining the pick-up day for the CSA and Food Hub so that we do not need multiple people on site for the pick-up. We are working toward having the details worked and a decision made by early January. We believe this option we will make the CSA more efficient and we will continue to grow the CSA and the Food Hub on-line market through increased exposure.

Quantify the overall impact of the project on the intended beneficiaries, if applicable. Include further explanation if necessary.

- v. Number of direct jobs created: 3 new jobs were created by increasing staff to operate the CSA and one new job at the Food Hub
 - vi. Number of jobs retained: 14 Farmers producer jobs were retained through increased sales through the CSA and 9 seasonal jobs retained as seasonal workers on the farms.
 - vii. Number of indirect jobs created: 2 jobs created at the Food Hub as sales increased.
 - viii. Number of markets expanded: 1 Boone market expanded
 - ix. Number of new markets established: 4 added Ashe, Blowing Rock , Valle Crucis and Banner Elk
 - x. Market sales increased by 42,000 and increased by 37%.
 - xi. Number of farmers/producers that have benefited from the project: 13
- a. Percent Increase: 27%

3. Did you expand your customer base by reaching new populations such as new ethnic groups, additional low income/low access populations, new businesses, etc.? If so, how?

We increased our number of shares from 87 at the beginning of the grant period to 189 for the 2017 season. This was accomplished by reaching out to more businesses in both Watauga and Ashe Counties. We worked with the HR Department at Samaritans Purse where we established a drop site for their employees and look to expand our membership next year. We also added a drop site in Ashe County at Ashe Memorial Hospital for their employees as well as other community members, a drop site in Valle Crucis, and Banner Elk. We see a big opportunity to continue to expand the CSA in Ashe County. We continue to collect information from members about the boxes and any improvements we can make. We expanded the number of pick up sites and increase the amount of time to pick up. We will add another pick up day next year.

We continue to offer our cost share program which allows low resource families to use their EBT/ SNAP benefits to purchase a membership. The cost share families do not pay up front, they use their EBT cards to pay each week and their share is subsidized so they only pay half the cost. We have been able to raise enough funds each year to cover 20 families in the cost share program. We continue to look for additional funding to expand this program.

4. Discuss your community partnerships.

a. Who are your community partners?

- F.A.R.M. Café (Feeding All Regarless of Means) This is a pay as you can restaurant offering awesome meals.
- Appalachian State University Nutrition and Sustainable Development Departments

- WAMMY
- Heifer International
- Watauga Community Care Clinic
- Appalachian Health District
- Watauga Cooperative Extension
- Ashe Memorial Hospital
- Samaritans Purse

b. How have they contributed to the results you've already achieved?

Our partners are important in many ways. F.A.R.M. Café (Feeding All Regardless of Means) helps us connect to folks who could benefit from the cost share program as they serve a population of low resource folks as well as higher resource folks in the community. FARM also purchases shares from the CSA to use in their meals and advertises the menu with items noted from the CSA. The FARM Café allowed us to use their back room in 2015 to pack boxes and make deliveries and 2016 we moved to the Food Hub to pack boxes and FARM was a pick up site for folks who work in town.

- Appalachian State University is involved by sending interns from the Food and Nutrition, as well as the Non-Profit Management curricula.
- Heifer International has been an essential part of our program since the inception. They are contributing staff time to assist with planning and marketing development. They are also working with the Farmer Advisory Group to help them develop a structure and cohesive plan.
- WAMMY assist with the recruitment of low resource families for the cost share program.
- Watauga County Community Care Clinic and the Watauga County Health Department refer their patients to our program, encouraging them to live an active lifestyle including fresh produce.
- Blue Cross Blue Shield –grant for Cooking demonstrations and Recipe cards.
- Ashe Memorial Hospital will be the drop off site for all members in Ashe County. The CEO was very excited about being the drop off site. The hospital has just started a new food pantry for patients who are low resource. The dietitian creates food boxes for patients as they are released that will provide healthy food and are developed with the health issues the patient has to deal with.
- Samaritans Purse worked with the CSA to offer boxes to employees and to be a drop site for their employees.

Watauga Cooperative Extension assisted with the development of the Food Hub, work with farmers on best practices GAAP certification, organic certification and more.

c. How will they contribute to future results?

These same partners will work with us again next year in the same capacity.

5. Are you using contractors to conduct the work? If so, how has their work contributed to the results achieved thus far?

We have just contracted with Barry Gupton a CPA and Financial Consultant and Jodi Rhoden a Marketing Consultant who are working together to help us develop the next Business Plan for moving forward. It is the goal of the farmers to become a profitable multi-farm CSA who only relies on grant funds to help support their work with low resource families. Barry and Jodi come

highly recommended from Mountain Biz Works a reputable CDFI that does much work with entrepreneurs in Asheville, NC. They have met several times with the farmers thus far and have done much work via the internet. We are looking at models for the next 3 years that include geographic areas, season length, multiple seasons, new add on items and marketing. We also worked with Lon Cultler to develop the best routes and costs for the delivery of boxes to a variety of sites. Lon has a trucking company and offered many insights to cost effectiveness in making deliveries and how to count all the costs in the delivery service and how to market the delivery service. We delivered boxes to single sites in outlying areas.

6.

a. To whom did you publicize the results? We have not published this years results. We will be sending out a newsletter to all of the CSA folks who have ever been a member as well as the Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture website and monthly newsletter and Facebook.

b. How many stakeholders (i.e. people, entities) did you reach?

The CSA newsletter goes out to 647 people, the Blue Ridge Women in Ag newsletter goes out to 2765 email addresses and we have over 3000 followers on Facebook.

Have you collected any feedback thus far about your work?

c. If so, how did you collect the information?

We had an ongoing feedback system for folks who picked up their boxes at the food hub where the CSA Coordinator would ask folks about the previous week box. At the Food Hub we were able to have a swap box so that folks could exchange an item they did not want for something else and this seemed to make people very happy. It was used each week by a small number of people. All of the feedback about items has been compiled and will be used to develop the production schedule for next year.

Yes we did an end of season customer satisfaction survey. We had hard copies at each pick up site and we had the survey on the website and we e-mailed it to customers

7. What feedback have you collected thus far (specific comments)?

We found through our surveys that over 85% of members were happy with quality and quantity in their boxes. We also heard that we need to work on more options for folks who want some vacation time during the season so may a two week floating option. We also heard that folks would like more options for pick up, both longer hours and different days.

We are also looking at additional delivery points.

What is the main reason you joined the CSA this past season?

37 responses

To support local community agriculture
To support local farmers.
To try it / local grown/ time saver
Local food during work year
TO TRY IT OUT
Fresh produce
to support local ag and eat fresh local food!
to support local farmers
To eat more vegetables
Opportunity to have high quality fresh, locally grown, organic vegetables
support local farmers and enjoy fresh nutritious food
I like fresh veggies

8. Budget Summary:

- a. As part of the LFPP closeout procedures, you are required to submit the SF-425 (Final Federal Financial Report). Check here if you have completed the SF-425 and are submitting it with this report: X

Did the project generate income?

If yes how much was generated and how was it used to further the objectives of the award?

The project generated \$123,450 in income from the sale of shares and add-ons. \$103,450 went to farmers as payments for produce and add-ons, 20,000 has withheld from farmers to reinvest in the High Country CSA to continue building the program and expanding the number of shares sold. In addition we were able to leverage 189,000 in funds for the High Country Food Hub which happened because of the LFPP funding and the High Country CSA. See more information in lesson learned.

9. Lessons Learned

Summarize the lessons learned. Draw from positive experiences (i.g. good ideas that improved project efficiency or saved money) and negative experiences (e.g. what did not go well and what needs to be changed)

The High Country CSA is a multi-farm CSA and there are always challenges when you bring a group of people together to develop a product that generates income. There were two big challenges. First was that the group underestimated the competition. There are 13 CSA's operating in Watauga County. Watauga is a very rural area with a University. The University folks mostly make up the foodie population in Boone and they are very supportive of local food. New farmers on the scene all include a CSA in their plan. Many of them are small 15-20 members but they do take away potential members from the High Country CSA. The farmer group in the High Country CSA have been reluctant to bring in new farmers as that would dilute their income and the issue of quality. They have in the past contracted for certain items like corn and melons that none of them grow. They did increase the number of items a member could order as an add on.

The second challenge is that we develop a very detailed production schedule each winter and then all kinds of unanticipated issues occur especially around weather which directly impacts production. It has been too warm early and spring crops have bolted, it has been too wet and crops have not germinated, too dry and those farmers without irrigation have lost crops, crops just fail to germinate. We end up making many modifications to the production schedule and boxes. We have been able to work out a substitution protocol that addresses the farmer involved in the change to keep income as fair as possible and to keep the variety in the boxes diverse. In 2015 we had terrible weather and we had seven weeks of chard in the boxes. Folks felt this was too much even though part of the CSA philosophy is that you take the risk with the farmer. We never know what the next season will bring but having a multi-farm CSA with member farms at different elevations allow for a better variety of items available throughout the season.

An unexpected outcome of this project was the development of the High Country Food Hub. BRWIA was looking for a space to house the High Country CSA and also had funds from Heifer USA for a freezer and the LFPP grant had Funds for a cooler. BRWIA in collaboration with the Watauga County Cooperative Extension was able to secure 2500 sq. ft. of space in the basement of the AG. Center and located a 17'x13' walk-in freezer and an 9'x9' walk-in cooler. In 2016 we had a great space in which we had farmers deliver their products, boxes were packed and dispersed from the Food Hub. IN 2017 we added another walk-in freezer where farmers can rent shelf space to store their products especially meat. This allows farmers to bring more animals to be processed each trip and to have better inventory control making their operations more efficient and cost effective. Both freezers are full and we just received a grant from ARC for a third freezer and funds to make a root crop space compliant with FMSA.

In March 2017 the Food Hub opened an on-line store and we now have 42 farmers/producers selling their products with over 1000 items. New customers buy on-line each week and this new source of income for farmers has been significant for many. We are averaging \$1000 in sales per week and are working to increase sales. Check out www.foodhub.brwia.org The LFPP funding provided the initial resources to get the Food Hub off the ground and has leveraged other funds from Farm Credit, the Town of Boone, Cooperative Extension and Heifer USA.

If goals or outcomes were not achieved, identify and share lessons learned to help expedite problem solving.

Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture did not write the original grant application. The organization that did has lots more experience working with low resource families where we have more experience working with farmers and markets. WAMMY who wrote the original grant was more focused on getting shares for low resource families and has an office in Avery County. We have a great working relationship with WAMMY but we were unable to raise the cost share funds needed to expand the program into Avery County. We will continue to seek funding for the cost share program both to expand it in Watauga County and to bring it to Avery County. This was the one goal we did not achieve.

Describe any lessons learned in the administration of the project that might be helpful for others who would want to implement a similar project.

Operating a multi-farm CSA is no easy task. We did not find a software we liked or that was affordable to assist with managing the CSA, everything was done with spreadsheets. This process is labor intensive and we are looking at the Food Hub on-line market software as one possibility for the future. It does have the capacity to manage CSA shares and payments. See the section below for more information.

10. Future Work:

How will you continue this work beyond the performance period? In other words how will you parlay the results of your project's work to benefit future community goals and initiatives? Include information about community impacts and outreach, anticipated increase in markets and/or sales, estimated number of jobs retained /created and any other information you would like to share.

The Farmer group from the High Country CSA is planning to grow. We are in conversation with the High Country Food Hub to see if there could be savings by running the CSA through the Food Hub. We think there could be a more streamlined administrative process for managing payments through the Food Hub software. The Food Hub uses Local Food Marketplace software to operate the on-line market which has been very successful so far. The on-line market opened at the end of March and has grown to 42 farmer/producers with over 1000 items. We average about \$1000 per week with a high of \$1700 just before Thanksgiving. We continue to advertise and get new customers each week.

We will shoot for 200 plus shares in 2018 and will make a decision about the Food Hub by the end of January. Farmers in rural areas need all the market opportunities to get their product to the consumer. The Saturday Farmers market is not enough. We need to make getting local food as convenient as going to the grocery store.