

Executive Summary

The Capay Valley Grown (CVG) partnership is one of 15 regional agricultural branding initiatives active in California. It was born out of a community visioning process and action plan that aimed to address two major forces driving change in the Capay Valley of northwestern Yolo County: the rapid development of the region, and the market pressures that make it difficult for local agriculture to remain viable. CVG is in its third year of offering marketing assistance and materials to farmers and ranchers in the Capay Valley Region. As CVG continues its efforts to raise consumer awareness of the valley's agricultural products, and increase the profitability of the region's agriculture, it is important to take stock of how well the partnership is meeting its goals and objectives. In spring of 2006, both a producer and a consumer survey were carried out as part of an evaluation of CVG's strategies. Some of the key findings include the following:

Producer Partner Marketing Venues

The CVG partnership is made up of a diverse mix of farmers and ranchers that vary widely in terms of their products and scales of operation. Partners also utilize a large number of marketing methods, but wholesale is the most important; 70 percent of respondents generate some portion of their revenues through wholesale, and 41 percent rely on wholesale for the majority of their income. Only 37 percent of respondents make over half their sales to buyers in Yolo County, but almost 90 percent of respondents would like to increase sales in Yolo. The most common barriers to doing so are competition and a lack of regional processing/distribution infrastructure.

CVG Partnership Benefits

Over 50 percent of respondents believe that the CVG partnership has raised the visibility of their farm or business, but few partners agree that the CVG partnership has helped raise their sales, prices, access to markets, or how secure they feel about their farm income. On the other hand, over 80 percent believe that the CVG partnership has raised community awareness of locally grown food, and respondents were very positive about their experience in the partnership. The most common successes and benefits include unifying the valley, strengthening relationships among producers, increasing information sharing among partners, working together towards a common goal, and building community.

Consumer Awareness

A baseline consumer survey shows higher CVG label recognition among farmers market customers in Esparto (82.4 percent) than in Davis (36.2 percent). The label is frequently associated with regional, local, or homegrown agricultural products, but many consumers also connect the CVG label with organic food and farming. T-shirts/hats/bags, farmers market signs, and farm signs are the most visible CVG marketing materials.

Future ideas for CVG

The following recommendations summarize the suggestions made by respondents about how CVG could have more economic and community development impacts.

Immediate actions:

- Pursue inexpensive and creative approaches to advertise and attract food writers/media.
- Organize opportunities for partners to visit other farms and to talk with other growers.

- Strengthen connection and communication between CVG and the Esparto Farmers Market.
- Organize more opportunities for producers to spend time together, perhaps around a meal.

Long-Term actions:

- Tie into established events more, such as the Almond Festival and Hoes Down.
- Discuss ideas for additional regional events, workshops, and tours.
- Piggyback off of Casino marketing efforts and target Casino visitors with advertising.
- Look into a CVG mobile market, open-air market, or an Esparto storefront.
- Work on projects in sub-groups arranged by crop.
- Incorporate more agricultural education and CVG products into the local schools.
- Build more awareness and support among retail stores.
- Develop more collaborations to enhance CVG's educational outreach.
- Start a dialogue within the partnership and the wider community about land use issues.
- Consider partnering with Yolo Ag Land Trust to help farmers write conservation easements.
- Design a system to share farm equipment.
- Start a composting facility to handle local waste and provide a local source of compost.
- Start a bio-diesel operation to help farmers reduce fuel costs.
- Start a school for small farm management and/or agricultural education.

Conclusions

It is not surprising that this point in CVG's development, the social benefits of the partnership are most important to its partners. According to the directors and members of other regional labeling and marketing programs, at least five years are required for members to start feeling the economic benefits of a branding initiative. In addition, the CVG marketing materials that are currently available are underused, both in terms of type and frequency, preventing the partnership to reach its full marketing potential. Still, one of CVG's goals is to increase the profitability of farming, and most partners expect to receive economic benefits from the marketing efforts.

Towards this end, the producer survey helped illuminate several ideas and areas of improvement. For example, while there was a positive response to expanding CVG's advertising and outreach activities, it could be more cost-effective to maximize the use of what is already offered, both in terms of the type and consistency of use. This may require simple steps such as verifying that everyone knows what tools are available to them, and how to use them. Overall, it seems important to re-emphasize the need for everyone to get the brand and message out, regardless of whether it seems to be making an immediate or direct impact on their business.