



## Impact Statement

**Project Title:** The Black Belt Marketing Innovation Center: Building Sustainable & Collaborative Partnerships –One Brick at a Time

### **Issue:**

Small, limited resource farmers have been trying to penetrate commercial and non-traditional markets for decades. Regardless of their race or socioeconomic backgrounds; these farmers face the traditional on-farm and off-farm challenges that have plagued most small farmers. Individually, they have lacked the volume and consistent supply necessary to attract buyers from commercial, wholesale, and retail markets. These farmers have also had limited access to capital and facilities to store, process, and distribute their products. The lack of distribution infrastructure and services make it difficult for this group of farmers to take advantage of the growing demand for locally and regionally grown foods in larger volume markets such as grocery stores, universities, restaurants, military bases, and hospitals. The Black Belt Market Innovation Center is designed to provide small, limited resource farmers with the skills needed to be sustainable and profitable; as well as to provide the infrastructure to market their produce collaboratively.

### **What has been done?**

The BBMIC project initiated in 2002 when a small group of limited resource farmers requested assistance from Tuskegee University to build a processing/food hub in Dallas County, Alabama. Within the last seventeen years, significant progress has been made in transforming this idea from a dream to a realistic goal. Activities completed includes: (1) acquiring the necessary funds to build and purchase a building and land, (2) forming a new farmers cooperative, (3) working with an architect to design a 12,000 sq. feet facility, (4) abandoning the original plans to build and purchasing/renovating a larger existing building, (5) purchasing processing and farming equipment, (6) farmer recruitment, (7) training and outreach, (8) identifying potential markets and continuing to sell produce to existing markets, (9) maintaining food safety certifications, and (10) maintaining collaborative partnerships, presenting researching findings, and publishing research results.

### **Impacts/New Partnerships:**

As a result of this project numerous partnerships have been formed at the local, state, and federal levels. Funding for this project was initially provided by the State of Alabama and through a collaborative partnership with Auburn University, Alabama A & M University, and Tuskegee University (Lead Institution). The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund was also instrumental in asp Project. Walmart has also been one of biggest corporate partners.

**Outcome of Project (societal impact/ measure of increased quality of life):**

It should be noted that this project is on-going. Examples of planned outcomes for the center and for the farmers selling through center include: (1) applying sound business and economic principles to successfully manage a cooperative, (2) increasing profits by 25%, (3) developing new markets, and (4) forming new collaborative partnerships.

**How has your project been aided by your FSLI experience?**

My project has been significantly impacted by my FSLI experience, in particular residential session three. The third residential session focused on food systems and highlighted the importance of and sustaining a diverse network of collaborative partners. This session also placed emphasis on the university's role in cultivating and sustaining corporate partnerships. In addition, I also found the session on visioning to be extremely helpful.

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