Mini-grant Impacts for Success



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Background

The Black Belt Food Corridor Mini-grant Program was developed to empower producers to implement practices and technologies that will benefit the economic and environmental sustainability of their farms. The prosperity of these farms is a foundational layer building, the Black Belt Food Corridor, our regional food system. The Tuskegee University Cooperative Extension Program (TUCEP) has a robust training program for farmers to improve awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to transform farms into financially sustainable businesses, however internal needs assessments identified that farmers were unable to implement new practices and technologies because they lacked investment capital. The Mini-grant program meets that need by providing the funds necessary to implement current best practices for sustainable agricultural production.

Acknowledgments

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the producers, food systems practitioners, grant reviewers, and educators whose invaluable insights were instrumental in developing this program. We also deeply appreciate our partners at the Heart of Alabama Food Bank for their enthusiastic collaboration as part of the Feeding America Equity Impact Project. Above all, we are profoundly grateful to the mini-grant recipients, whose exceptional efforts have surpassed our expectations in implementing impactful projects throughout the Alabama Black Belt.



PHOTO 1: MR. CORNELIUS JOE DEMONSTRATING HIS MINI-GRANT FUNDED SQUEEZE SHOOT TO TUCEP SUMMER INTERNS.

Mini-grant Program Development

Partners in the project solicited feedback from producer stakeholders in the development of priorities, the application process, the review process, fund distribution, and mini-grant recipient reporting. There was strong support to solicit proposals that fit withing 5 key areas:

- Advancing economic opportunities for farmers
- Increasing production
- Improving land stewardship
- Reducing food waste
- Increasing food access

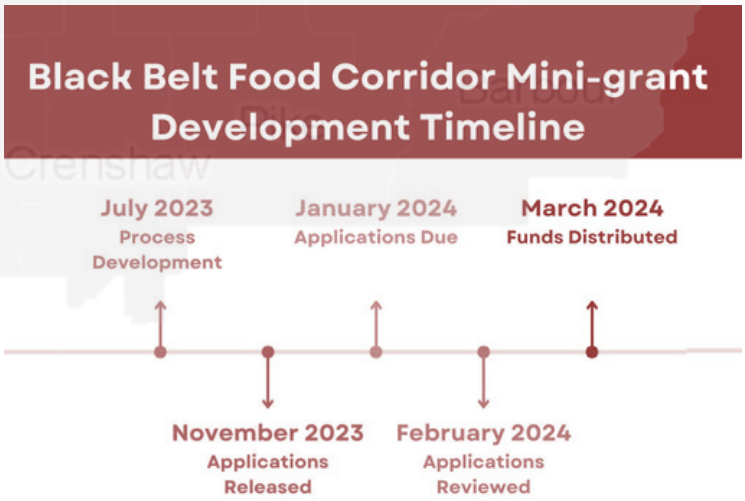
Application Development

Producer stakeholders felt strongly that applications should be simple, short, and accepted in multiple formats for producers who are less computer savvy. The applications were developed in PDF form format but were also accepted via video and handwritten.

A simple factsheet was developed to advertise the program across the Black Belt. Producers were provided with application instructions outlining the process and asked to respond to prompts to allow them to demonstrate the need for the funds and describe the project. Each narrative prompt was limited to 1000 characters and the budget section was limited to 500 characters per line item.

Application sections:

- What problem will these funds help solve?
- Project goals
- Project impact
- Project activities and timeline
- Budget



Review Process & Funds Dispersal

Applications were reviewed by 10 individuals from diverse backgrounds. Most reviewers were from outside of Alabama, were Black farmers, or were known for their work with Black farmers. Each application was assigned to 2 reviewers who were given 2 weeks to complete their individual reviews and input the information into a secure Qualtrics database. Reviews were conducted using a rubric aligned with the Mini-grant application sections where each of the 5 sections contributed to 20% of a total score.

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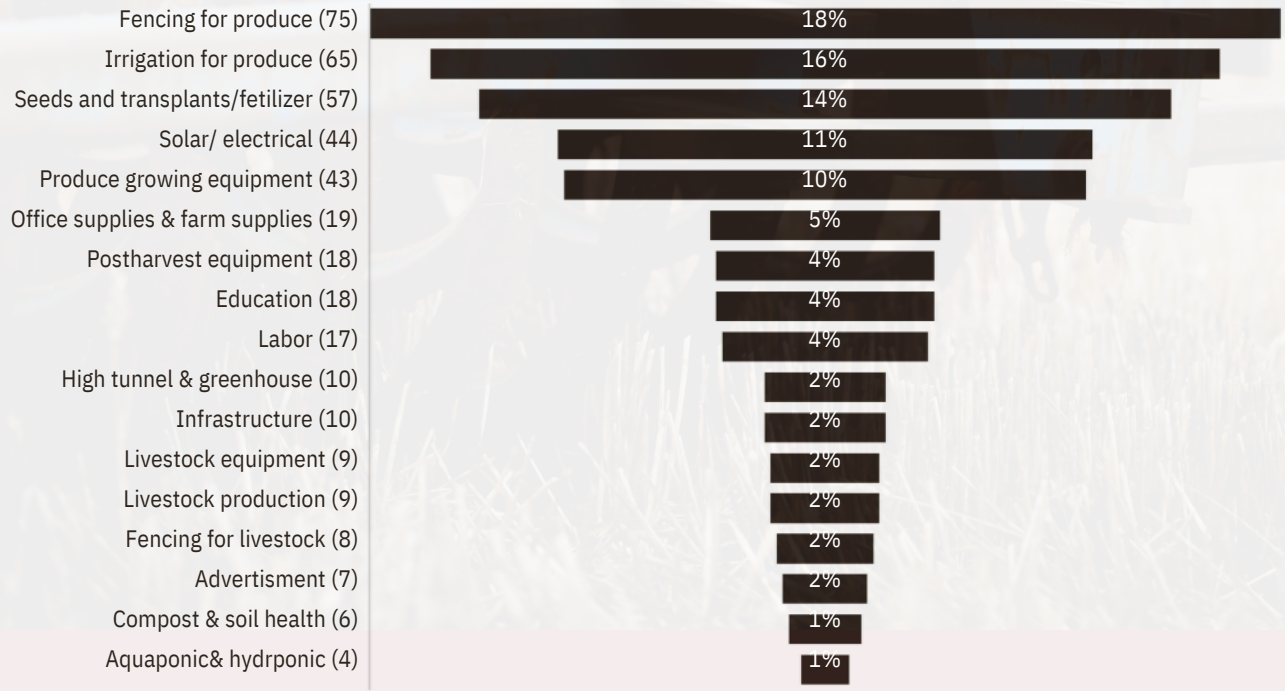
(See Figure 1: Timeline)

BLACK BELT FOOD CORRIDOR MINI-GRANT PILOT

Figure 2: Producer Requests, 2023-2024 Black Belt Food Corridor Mini-grant Pilot



Requests

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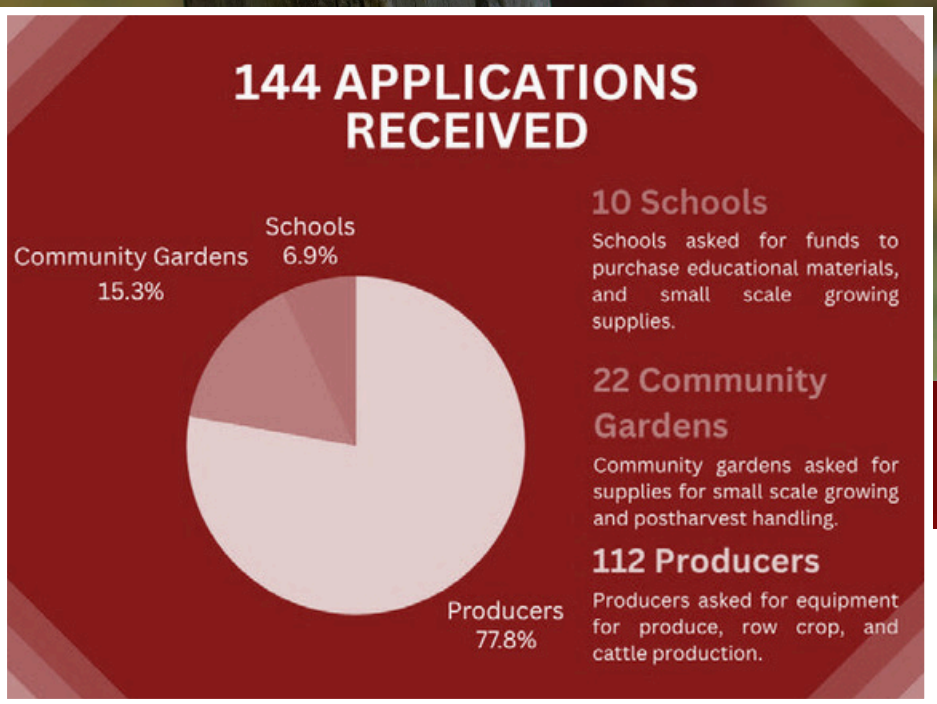
Awards

Nineteen mini-grants were awarded to producers (12), community gardens (5), and schools (2) (see Figure 3: Applications Received). Grants ranged from $1,000 to $5,000 and totaled $50,149. Most applications related to more than one priority area. Nearly all the awards (17 out of 19) related to increasing food access (89%), followed by increasing food production (79%), advancing economic opportunities for farmers (47%), land stewardship (53%), and reducing food waste (21%).



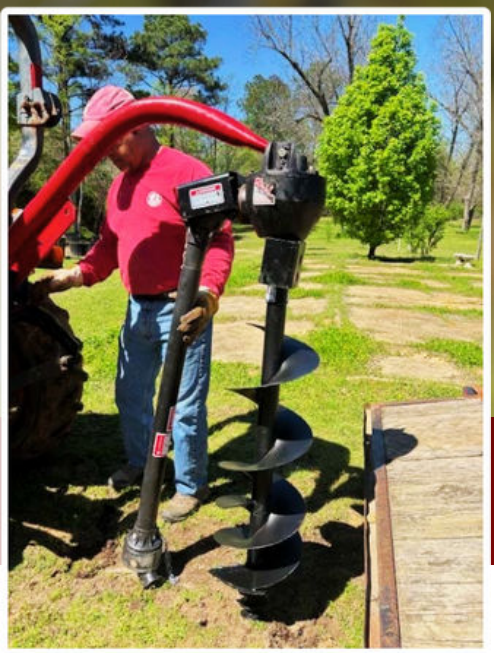


PHOTO 2: MACK PARKS "COULD NOT HAVE DONE IT [BUILT SEVERAL ACRES OF FENCE] WITHOUT THIS HOLE DIGGER."

Financial and Social Impacts

Increasing production: Fencing for produce production was the top request funded. Growers cited up to 100% production losses due to deer, wild hogs, raccoons, and coyotes which will feed on and destroy produce crops around the time it is ready for harvest. The financial impacts of losing a crop in the days before harvest are enormous because all the inputs and labor for crop growth have already been expended and it is likely too late to plant another crop. Five of the 19 projects funded involved fencing produce production areas. Collectively, about 30 acres will be fenced. Using fresh market peas as an example, there is the potential to produce 19,200 pounds or 76,800 servings peas going to local schools and families. Using local pricing at $10 per pound in the fresh market, there is a direct economic impact of $192,000.

Land and animal stewardship: Two projects were specifically funded to implement climate smart irrigation on produce farms. The acres irrigated will see a 25% to 100% (depending on the year) increase in production. Implementing drip irrigation is a climate smart practice that conserves water while allowing the farmer to make the most of other inputs (e.g. seeds, transplants, and fertilizer). Another farmer purchased a mower bagger to use grass clippings in an environmentally sustainable farm mulching system. This practice allows them to conserve water, use less fertilizer, and use fewer chemicals while maintaining their produce yield. Another farmer has purchased a cattle squeeze shoot which allows them to provide vaccinations and periodic health checkups for cattle which will improve growth efficiency and the farm's bottom line.

Farm business development: Five projects were funded to support infrastructure for new farm development. One farmer built a road where he had previously been walking in the property about 1/5 of a mile. The road will allow him to bring in equipment and facilitate future development which includes a high tunnel for produce production and agri-tourism. Another farmer will implement a grain storage system that will allow them to expand their own grain production and purchase locally produced grains for long-term storage on the farm. This project facilitates community independence from commodity pricing and improves local producer financial sustainability. A third farmer plans to start a micro-green business. Other farmers used funds for cost-share on the purchase of a high tunnel, or to purchase the equipment to run a high tunnel. Using tomatoes as an example, each high tunnel has the potential to produce 2,000 pounds. Collectively, producers will be able to provide 6,000 lbs. or more of fresh and locally grown tomatoes to families and schools.



PHOTO 3: ASAUD FRAZIER STANDING IN THE NEW ROAD AT ELLA BEA'S FARM.

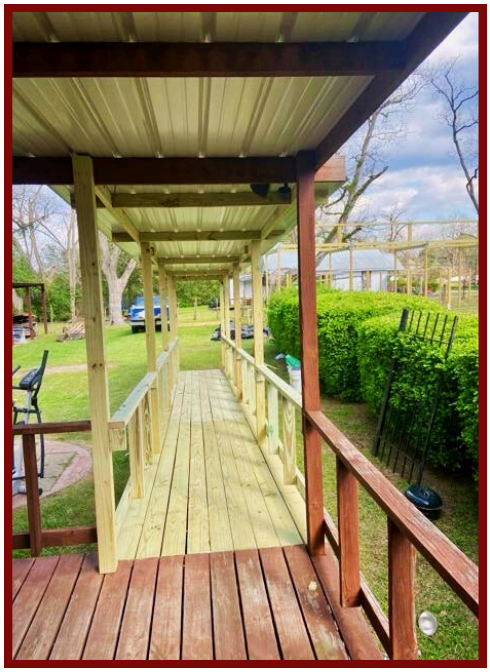


PHOTO 4: MICHAEL LIGHTNER'S COMMUNITY GARDEN WHEELCHAIR RAMP.

Community and youth: One community garden project focused on building a wheelchair ramp on site so that less mobile community members could have greater access to fresh and locally grown produce. Another community garden grantee commented that the community still relies heavily emergency food supplies from the Food Bank, however, they no longer rely on the Food Bank for fresh produce. Two school projects integrate the community benefits of greater access to fresh and locally grown produce with the need to train the next generation of agriculture professionals who will feed the future. The school projects expose youth to production methods, nutrition, and food access policy issues. Students learn the mechanics of land stewardship and production practices along with the leadership skills involved with planning, organizing, and marketing the products. These community-based projects are prefect examples of how providing community leaders a small amount of money can have exponentially impactful results and improve quality of life for older adults, less mobile community members, and children.

Reducing financial stress and improving connectivity for farmers may also help save lives.

Reduced stress: Nearly all farmers commented on the reduced stress they have experienced as a direct result of this mini-grant program. Farmers are 3 ½ times more likely to die by suicide than the general population. Several farmers commented on not being able to access USDA funds in the past, which made this program especially beneficial for them. Studies report that farmers tend to internalize their troubles which compounds stress, anxiety, and depression. This program not only reduces financial stress, but the 144 applications received also raise awareness of the collective needs in the region. Reducing financial stress and improving connectivity for farmers may also help save lives by giving them hope.

Improved confidence: All the farmers interviewed reported feeling more confident in their ability to achieve their farm goals as a direct result of this program. Most funds went toward equipment that will have a lasting effect on farm viability for years to come by improving efficiencies and saving time, giving farmers every reason for optimism in their farming future. Most farmers were also quick to express their resiliency in farming without financial assistance along with their appreciation for this new mini-grant program.

Collective Impact

Greater access to fresh produce reduces the environmental barrier to healthy food access and will lead to greater food security and improved health outcomes.

The direct economic impact of the Black Belt Food Corridor Mini-grant program is conservatively estimated at least $300,000, with a return on investment of 6:1. Most recipients combined mini-grant funds with personal or USDA funds to complete their projects. Fencing for produce production was the top-funded request, addressing up to 100% crop losses due to wildlife. Climate-smart projects will prepare Black Belt farmers for an uncertain future and increase production by 25-100%. Farm business development projects support infrastructure, such as roads, grain storage, and high tunnels, enhancing local food production and financial sustainability. Community and youth projects improve access to fresh produce and train future agriculture professionals. Overall, the mini-grant program has significantly reduced farmer stress and improved community quality of life. Most importantly, the communities served are now more self-reliant and have greater access to fresh, locally produced food. This increased access reduces environmental barriers to healthy food and will lead to greater food security and improved health outcomes over time.

ACCOMPANYING MEDIA

BLACK BELT FOOD CORRIDOR
MINI-GRANT AWARDEE PRESS

AWARDEE FEATURE: CLAYHILL FARMS

AWARDEE FEATURE: CARTER FARMS

EQUITY IMPACT SUMIT PRESENTATION,
SEPTEMBER 25, 2024, DETROIT, MI

IMPACT VIDEO



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