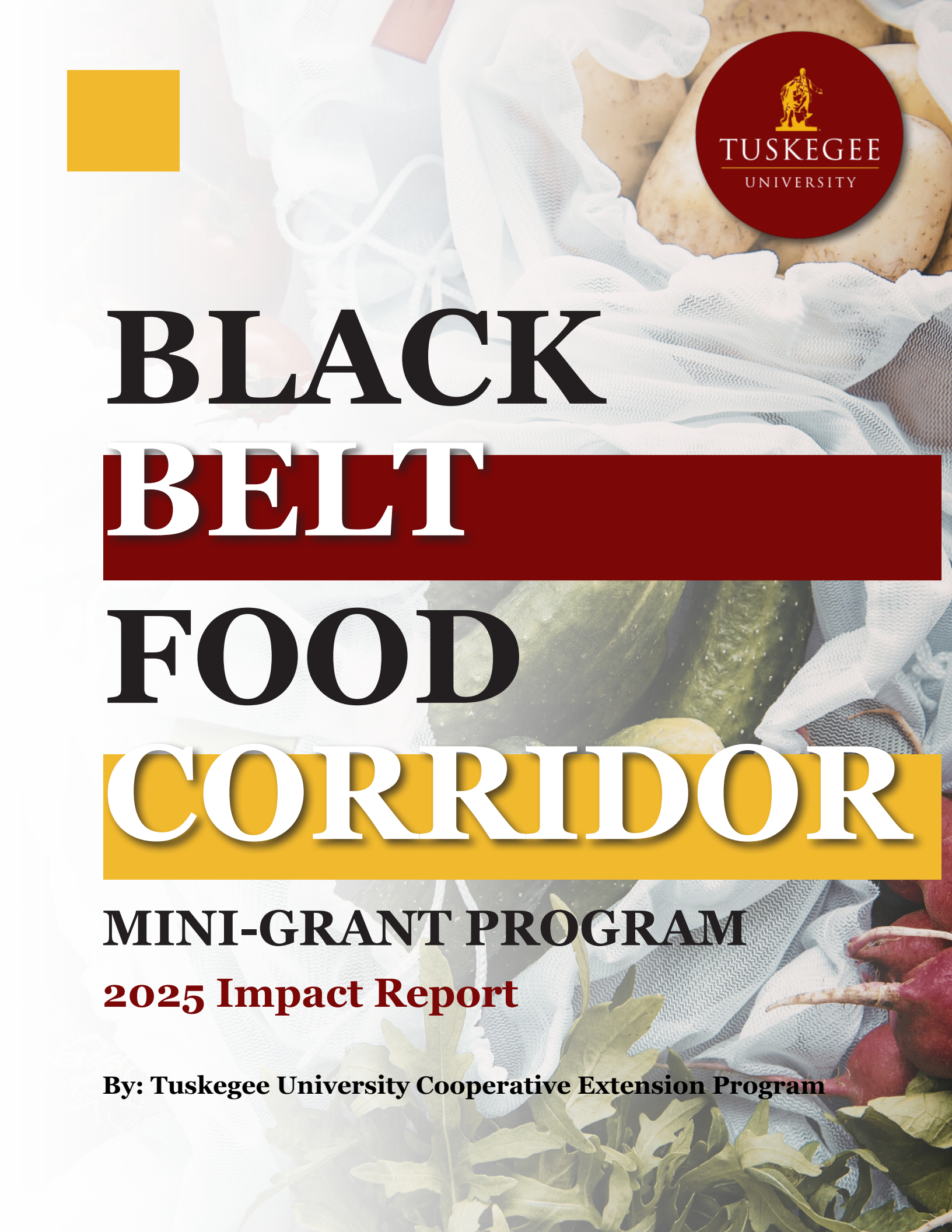


BLACK BELT FOOD CORRIDOR

MINI-GRANT PROGRAM

2025 Impact Report

By: Tuskegee University Cooperative Extension Program

Table of Contents

03 Summary

04 Acknowledgements

05 Background

06 2025 Mini-grant Impact Analysis

08 2025 Economic Impact Estimate

16 Critical Needs Remain

17 Notes

Summary

The Black Belt Food Corridor (BBFC) Mini-grant Program was created to address a critical barrier facing farmers, community gardens, and schools across Alabama's Black Belt: the lack of access to small, flexible capital needed to implement proven agricultural and food system practices. While technical assistance and training are widely available, many producers are unable to act on that knowledge without upfront investment. This program fills that gap by providing the funds necessary to catalyze BBFC progress.

Since the pilot year in 2024, the program has invested $150,000 across 46 projects funded over two cycles (2024-2025), reflecting strong demand for producer-driven, equity-focused investment. Survey results demonstrate strong alignment and effectiveness: 96% of respondents spent all awarded funds, 72% reported their project would not have been possible without the Mini-grant, 87% leveraged additional sources of funding to complete their projects, and 100% reported positive project-level impacts.

Mini-grant funds supported durable infrastructure, equipment, and perennial plantings that increase production capacity, improve efficiency, strengthen land stewardship, and expand access to locally produced food. Where production quantities were reported, conservative projections indicate multi-year economic and food access benefits, with several projects expected to generate five-year returns of five to ten times the initial investment.

Collectively, the BBFC Mini-grant Program demonstrates that small, targeted investments can generate substantial and lasting economic, social, and community-level impact across the Black Belt Food Corridor.

Sometimes the most basic infrastructure creates the most profound change.

Acknowledgements



The late John Brown transports greens at the Tuskegee University Black Belt Marketing and Innovation Center.

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.

Background

The BBFC Mini-grant Program was designed to address a critical barrier identified through ongoing needs assessments with Black Belt farmers, community food leaders, and educators: lack of access to small amounts of flexible capital needed to implement proven practices and infrastructure improvements. While the Tuskegee University Co-operative Extension Program (TUCEP) provides robust education and technical assistance, producers consistently reported being unable to act on this knowledge without upfront investment capital.

The Mini-grant program fills this gap by providing targeted investments that enable immediate implementation of practices that advance economic opportunity, increase production, improve land stewardship, reduce food waste, and expand food access across the Black Belt.

Application Development

The 2025 Black Belt Food Corridor Mini-grant Program continued to be shaped by direct input from producer stakeholders throughout the 2025 cycle. Partners solicited feedback from farmers and community food leaders on program priorities, application design, review procedures, fund distribution, and recipient reporting. Stakeholders strongly supported maintaining a focus on five priority areas: advancing economic opportunities for farmers, increasing production, improving land stewardship, reducing food waste, and increasing food access.

To reduce barriers to participation, producers emphasized the importance of a simple, accessible application process. In response, applications were offered in multiple formats, including Webform, PDF, handwritten submissions, and video responses, to accommodate applicants with varying levels of computer access and experience.

Review Process and Awards

In 2025, the program received 56 applications and awarded 27 Mini-grants ranging from $1,000 to $5,000. Applications were reviewed by a diverse panel of reviewers with experience working with farmers and limited resource producers. Each proposal was independently reviewed by three reviewers using a standardized rubric, followed by group discussion and ranking.

Collectively, applicant requests reflected a wide range of needs, with strong emphasis on produce production, fencing, irrigation, infrastructure, and emerging enterprises, highlighting both current challenges and future aspirations of Black Belt producers.

2025 Mini-grant Impact Analysis

Analysis of 2025 Mini-grant projects reveal strong program success with high fund utilization, significant production increases, and positive community impact across diverse agricultural operations.

Key Themes & Trends

Most Mini-grant recipients used funds to purchase equipment and implement infrastructure improvements that provide long-term benefits to their operations. The most common investments were in field equipment, with eight recipients acquiring items such as tillers, cultivators, mowers, row busters, and tractors to improve efficiency and increase production capacity. Processing and post-harvest infrastructure was supported for five recipients through investments in CoolBot systems, wash/pack stations, and enclosed trailers, strengthening food safety and market readiness.

Animal handling equipment was funded for three recipients, including corral panels, squeeze chutes, and feeders, improving animal welfare and labor safety. Season extension infrastructure, such as greenhouses and hoop houses, was implemented by three recipients to lengthen growing seasons and stabilize production. An additional five recipients invested in other critical infrastructure, including fencing, irrigation systems, and composting equipment, addressing land stewardship, crop protection, and soil health needs.



Darren Spencer implements a new composting method using PVC pipe for passive aeration, eliminating the need for labor-intensive repeated turning.

Mini-grants consistently functioned as catalytic investments rather than stand-alone funding. Most Mini-grant recipients (87.5%) leveraged other sources of funds to complete or expand their projects. This pattern demonstrates that the Mini-grant Program effectively unlocked additional resources, enabling recipients to maximize impact and accelerate implementation beyond what the grant alone could have achieved.

2025 Economic Impact Estimate

Grant Disbursements: **$100,000**

Administrative costs: **$5,000**

Total Program Cost: **$105,000**

87% of recipients leveraged additional funds

87.5% leveraged additional funds = $84,000 additional

Total Capital Mobilized: ~$184,000

Revenue Increase by Project Type

Category	Recipients	Estimated Annual Revenue Increase
Vegetable Production	10	$50,000 – $75,000
Poultry Processing	1	$3,000 – $5,000
Honey Production	1	$2,160 (180 lbs @ $12/lb)
Fencing/Crop Protection	1	$2,000 – $3,000
Equipment Efficiency	8	$15,000 – $25,000 (time savings)
School/Community Gardens	2	$5,000 – $8,000 (produce value)
Estimated Annual Revenue Increase:		**$77,160 – $121,000**

Community-Level Economic Impact (5-Year)

The Mini-grant program generated substantial direct, indirect, and community-wide benefits across the Black Belt. Direct impacts include an estimated $495,500 increase in farm revenue (496% ROI), along with the creation or enhancement of four to five primary jobs and additional seasonal employment over the next five years. The ROI calculation reflects projected gross revenue generated by projects funded in 2025 over five years relative to total program cost. Beyond farm operations, the program produced significant indirect benefits related to food access, including approximately $45,000 in fresh produce distributed to food banks and $25,000 in donations to senior centers and churches. The program's reach was further amplified, as grant recipients shared equipment with neighboring farms and improved access to fresh produce likely contributed to health and wellness benefits. Taken together, these community outcomes underscore the Mini-grant program's role as a catalyst for economic growth, food access, workforce development, and community health in the Black Belt.

5-Year Projected Impact: $495,500

5-Year Cumulative ROI: 496%

4 to 5 jobs + seasonal employment

Producer Spotlight Stories

Daryl Smith – Cultivating Acreage and Community

Darryl Smith's story demonstrates how a single Mini-grant can create ripple effects throughout a farming community. Mr. Smith purchased a cultivator which he used not just on his own operation but on neighboring farms as well.

The immediate impact on his farm was substantial: Mr. Smith increased production by approximately 50% this past year. The cultivator allowed him to turn his fields quicker and more effectively, dramatically reducing the time and physical labor required for soil preparation. But the real power of this investment extends beyond his property lines. "I am now able to help other farmers in my area till their plots," Mr. Smith explained. This equipment-sharing model multiplies the grant's impact exponentially. What served one farm now serves several, creating an informal cooperative system where neighbors support neighbors.



Daryl Smith and his new cultivator

Sam Yu - Building Alabama's First Black Commercial Beekeeping Operation

Sam Yu's beekeeping operation represents both tradition and innovation. With the Mini-grant, Mr. Yu reduced waste by 25% with the purchase of a capping spinner and professional bottling equipment. The new equipment streamlined extraction and bottling processes, reducing labor time while improving honey quality and yield.

Beyond production, Mr. Yu has transformed the operation into an educational hub, hosting workshops that teach community members about beekeeping's vital role in food systems. "This grant gave me the opportunity to turn my vision into reality," Mr. Yu shared. The equipment's durability means it will support production for decades, and Mr. Yu's ultimate goal is ambitious: becoming Alabama's first Black commercial beekeeper. With improved efficiency and reduced loss, that goal moves closer each season. The project demonstrates how targeted equipment investment can preserve cultural knowledge while building economically viable agricultural enterprises.



Sam Yu and Marche Johnson standing with Mr. Yu's honey extraction unit.

Alicia Jordan - Empowering Farmers Through Mobile Poultry Processing

Alicia Jordan's project addresses a critical gap in local food infrastructure. Before receiving the Mini-grant, she processed 100-125 birds annually using limited on-site equipment that required frequent setup and breakdown. The grant enabled her to purchase an enclosed trailer that now serves as both secure storage and mobile transport for processing equipment.

> *"Personally, this project has been empowering. It helped me grow my business capacity, provided tools to operate more independently, and opened new income opportunities."*
>
> **-Alicia Jordan, Triple J Farm, Greene County**

The impact has been transformative. Processing capacity doubled while setup and processing time decreased dramatically. More importantly, the mobile unit has become a teaching tool. Ms. Jordan now hosts workshops and demonstrations on pasture-poultry production, humane processing, food safety, and value-added product development.

"Personally, this project has been empowering," Ms. Jordan explained. "It helped me grow my business capacity, provided tools to operate more independently, and opened new income opportunities through custom poultry processing and educational workshops." The mobile model also means she can support other farmers by bringing processing capabilities directly to their farms, multiplying the grant's impact throughout the community.



Alicia Jordan holds a dual-purpose chicken that will provide eggs and then meat for Triple J Farm.

Dale Braxton Jr. - Overcoming Devastating Loss in Meat Goat Production

Dale Braxton Jr.'s first year in meat goat farming was heartbreaking. He lost more than 90% of his herd to parasites, lacking the equipment to safely administer preventative medications and vaccines to his animals. The Mini-grant provided a complete game changer: a Goat Master working chute that allows him to secure animals for health treatments, vaccinations, and hoof trimming.



Dale Braxton and his healthy goat herd.

"Prior to this project, we were only able to safely administer critical medications and vaccines to about 50% of our herd," Mr. Braxton explained. Now, he can ensure 100% of his animals receive proper care. The impact has been dramatic. Losses due to parasites have been minimized, and the farm produced significantly more kids this year than ever before.

As a new farmer who nearly lost everything, Mr. Braxton's recovery story demonstrates the program's ability to rescue struggling operations and set them on a path to success. The chute will serve the farm for decades, and Mr. Braxton's hard-won knowledge about parasite management is now being shared with other beginning meat goat farmers in the region.

Jacqueline McArthur - Growing a Vineyard



Jacqueline McArthur and her new muscadine vines and trellis.

Jacqueline McArthur at Tuskegee Honey LLC used her grant to establish a 48-vine muscadine U-pick operation with cattle panel arches, T-posts, landscape fabric, and fencing. Student volunteers assisted with planting, turning the project into hands-on agricultural education. Though first-year vines rarely produce, Jacqueline's harvest was "small but very promising." Most importantly, the infrastructure will produce for 20+ years, and students gained practical farming skills. "The support from the grant took a lot of financial pressure off and helped me move forward with something that will keep growing year after year," she noted.

Mashika Tempero Culliver – Growing the Next Generation of Agriculturalists

Mashika Tempero Culliver transformed a school with zero garden infrastructure into a thriving outdoor classroom. Students who previously had no exposure to food production have now planted, maintained, and harvested hundreds of crops. "It was empowering to lead and facilitate a garden project where students could exercise their own agency to create something to support the school and community," Ms. Tempero Culliver shared. Students take produce home to their families, and the entire school body now understands "we have what it takes to produce our own food on our own terms."



"It was empowering to lead and facilitate a garden project where students could exercise their own agency to create something to support the school and community."

- Mashika Tempero Culliver, R.B. Hudson STEAM Academy, Dallas County

Sheritta Fagbodun – Year Round Growing means Year Round Revenue

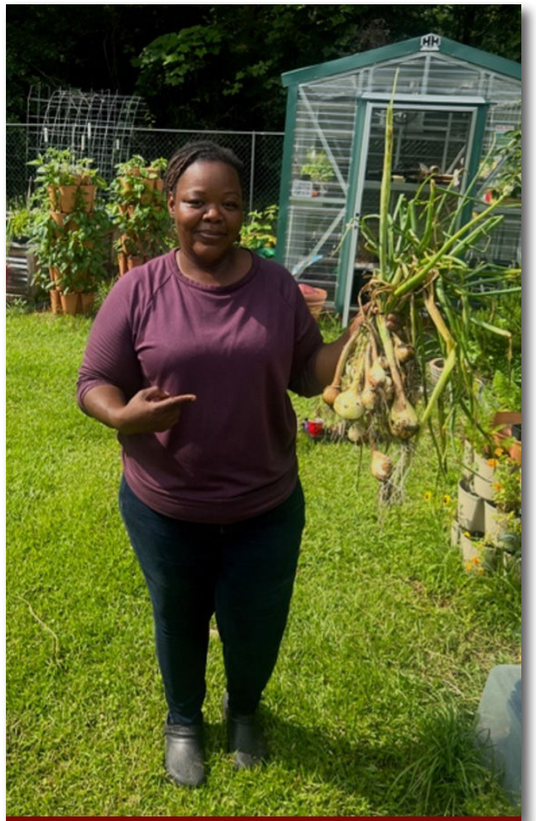
Sheritta Fagbodun's greenhouse project exemplifies how strategic infrastructure investment can transform a small farm's viability. Before the Mini-grant, her growing season was limited by Alabama's weather extremes, restricting both crop variety and production windows. The grant enabled her to purchase a prebuilt greenhouse, fundamentally changing her farm's capabilities.

"The mini grant has had a meaningful impact on me personally. It has allowed me to expand my farming operation and gain confidence in running a small farm business."

-Sheritta Fagbodun, Tuskegee Honey LLC, Macon County

The greenhouse has extended her growing season significantly, allowing her to start plants earlier in the year and protect crops from harsh weather. In its first year alone, she grew over 200 plants, including tomatoes, peppers, basil, and other high-value crops, and achieved nursery growers certification. “Having the greenhouse has made a significant difference on my farm,” Ms. Fagbodun explained. “I’m now able to start plants earlier in the year, which has strengthened my production capacity.”

Beyond personal production gains, Ms. Fagbodun believes the project has helped “build a stronger sense of community and inspired many small farmers—not just myself—to continue working to strengthen local food systems.” The greenhouse serves as a visible demonstration of what’s possible, showing neighboring farmers that season extension is achievable. With plans to add solar power for automated watering and climate control, her operation continues evolving toward year-round production.



Sheritta Fagbodun with her new greenhouse in the background.

Macarthur Parks – Capacity Building

Macarthur Parks exemplifies how multi-year Mini-grant support can systematically build a farm’s capacity. Working mostly alone, Mr. Parks has strategically used grants to assemble a complete equipment suite that transformed his operation from labor-intensive manual work to efficient mechanized production.

In his first year, Macarthur invested in a row buster, fertilizer spreader, and other soil preparation tools. The second year brought a 6-foot blade and cultivator. The impact has been cumulative. “The new equipment saved me a great deal of man hours and made my job much easier,” he explained. “I was able to plant approximately 2 more acres” of vegetables.



Macarthur Parks’ cabbage.

Beyond acreage expansion, the equipment allows Mr. Parks to work on his own schedule rather than depending on others or renting implements. He now supplies local farmers markets and donates produce to senior citizens in his community. Mr. Parks' progression shows how consecutive grants can methodically eliminate barriers, with each piece of equipment unlocking new possibilities. His next goal is irrigation infrastructure which would complete the transformation from subsistence gardening to full commercial operation.

Critical Needs Remain

Critical needs identified through partner and producer feedback highlight several consistent barriers to farm viability and year-round production in the Black Belt. Access to reliable irrigation and water systems emerged as the most frequently cited need, with multiple recipients identifying water access as a primary constraint on extending the growing season and stabilizing production. While this need is significant, it is actively being addressed by USDA NRCS in a wildlife fencing pilot program. Labor and workforce shortages were also commonly reported, particularly among small and limited-resource operations that struggle to secure consistent help during peak production periods. In addition, many producers emphasized the need for additional funding to support essential investments, including tractors, breeding stock, and renewable energy systems such as solar power. Finally, producers identified ongoing demand for technical assistance, particularly in areas such as whole-farm planning, integrated pest management, and composting and soil health practices. Together, these needs point to the importance of coordinated investments in infrastructure, workforce development, financial resources, and technical support as part of a sustainable regional food system strategy.

Why an Endowment?

The consistent demand for the Mini-grant Program, coupled with its demonstrated return on investment, underscores the need for long-term, stable funding. An endowed Mini-grant Program would ensure that small, catalytic investments remain available to Black Belt producers year after year, insulating the program from annual funding uncertainty and allowing partners to plan strategically for sustained impact.

Notes

Economic impact estimates presented in this report are based on conservative, transparent assumptions grounded in extension guidance and prevailing local market conditions. Where possible, reported production quantities from Mini-grant recipients were used directly. In cases where quantities were not reported, the estimated production increase from acreage or reductions in losses was used. Estimates do not account for labor, input costs, or market variability and are intended to illustrate order-of-magnitude impact rather than precise farm revenue. Job creation estimates include primary and seasonal positions directly supported by expanded farm operations and align with rural employment reporting conventions used by USDA Rural Development (the Value Added Producer Grant Program estimates 40 jobs per $1 million). Five-year projections assume continued use of durable infrastructure funded by the Mini-grants and do not assume additional grant support.

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