Farmers' Market Manager Turnover:
Challenges and opportunities for sustainable management

By the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI) and the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP)

In 2014 RAFI and ASAP partnered on Connect2Direct, a project funded by the USDA's Farmers Market Promotion Program to test direct marketing strategies, track outcomes, and share the resources necessary to build the capacity of farmers' markets and direct marketing farm enterprises. One strategy toward accomplishing this goal was the establishment of Learning Communities: farmers' markets which, with technical assistance from RAFI and ASAP, could serve as a testing ground from which other markets could learn. From this experience, we have produced four case studies to share insights on specific market topics.

This case study reviews issues and experiences involved with farmers' market manager turnover and captures lessons learned at four farmers' markets in North Carolina. The findings presented here are based on existing research, our surveys of past and current managers, and informal conversations with market stakeholders.

Research shows that markets across the country experience challenges with retaining market managers. A review of markets in Oregon indicated that between 1999 and 2006, on average 30% of markets each year had a new manager.[1] Conversations with various markets in the RAFI and ASAP service area confirm that manager turnover is a common and ongoing challenge for farmers' markets across our region. An extensive study of farmers' markets in Washington noted the role of market manager "appears to be a very demanding position associated with a range of challenges from juggling multiple competing demands to low pay to feeling underappreciated by vendors and market organizations." [2]

Market manager surveys

To gain a better understanding of market manager experiences and of their perceptions of the challenges of market management, we conducted a survey of past and current managers at the four participating markets in North Carolina. All the market manager positions in question were part-time, not full-time. This is a common situation for markets; in the Washington State summary report, 64% of market employees were part-time. Manager responses to the survey echo the challenges cited in other studies.

Survey Questions:

1. What were the most important considerations involved when you were deciding to seek (or accept) a position as market manager?

1 When Things Don't Work: Some Insights into Why Farmers' Markets Close, Garry Stephenson, Larry Lev, Linda Brewer, 2006, Oregon State University Extension Service.

2 Summary Report: Farmers Markets and the Experiences of Market Managers in Washington State, Marcia Ostrom and Colleen Donovan, 2013, Washington State University Small Farms Program

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2. Was your work and experience as a manager different from your expectations of the position before you were hired? / In what ways do your responsibilities as a market manager differ from what you had expected when you accepted the position?

3. Why did you leave the market manager position? / What job or market related issues, circumstances, or challenges would be most likely to influence a decision to resign as market manager?

4. What considerations, conditions, or circumstances are most important in terms of market manager retention?

5. What advice would you offer to someone considering a position as a farmers' market manager?

Findings

Several themes emerged from the interviews, including fair pay, challenging hours and seasonality of the work, workload, and unrealistic expectations.

Viability of employment as a market manager

Market survey results, together with other anecdotal reports, suggest that the viability of the market manager position is undermined by three factors: low pay, reduced hours (e.g. part-time and seasonal status), and unpaid hours worked. These limiting characteristics are typical for all but the larger, better funded markets. It is common for managers of smaller or limited-resource markets to be unable to earn enough to support themselves, but managers may not be comfortable asking farmers for an hourly rate or benefits when the farmers—also usually overworked and underpaid—may not receive benefits or a decent hourly wage themselves. When asked why they left the market manager position, one former manager stated: “I was ready to have a full time position with a consistent salary.” Another past manager reported having a difficult time finding a second job that could fit with the market schedule. The seasonality of the work also makes it a less viable employment option; a current manager said, “I will not have much income from Dec-April. And, it is 15-20 hours per week, so I have had to pick up various other jobs—so far I have had 4 other part-time jobs throughout the past 4 months!” For those who must patch together job opportunities, the stresses of juggling things like hours, responsibilities, and other jobs impact long-term sustainability. Under these circumstances, there is a limited pool of individuals for whom the manager position is a viable employment option.

Demanding mix of skill sets

While the diversity and variety of tasks given to a market manager can be exciting and keep things interesting for some, it also presents a challenge. As one manager indicated, “I have worked for several nonprofits, and am familiar with the division of labor among management, administration, marketing, fundraising, human resources, infrastructure repairs, and accounting. I wasn't fully prepared to be all of these various departments myself.” The market manager position can vary in terms of expectations, responsibilities, authority, etc., but typically the manager is (or comes to be) expected to address an array of market needs that require disparate skills and expertise.

High expectations and limited resources

It is common for market managers to have more on their plate than can be managed. In the words of one

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manager, "You'll likely face unrealistic expectations for the position in terms of attracting customers and promoting the market to increase sales." Another manager mentioned that "vendors tend not to know all that the last manager did and kept track of." Job satisfaction and performance suffers under circumstances of unrealistic expectations. "This is a bigger, more challenging position than I anticipated," one manager said. A past manager said that one reason they left the position was that most weeks they worked beyond the budgeted hours of their position. Manager burn-out, especially in light of the typical limits to compensation, contributes to the loss of market managers. Constrained by part-time hours and inadequate funds for staffing, the manager is left with limited options: prioritize responsibilities and leave lesser tasks undone, delegate to vendors or volunteers, or work extra unpaid hours. Each of these options can complicate or undermine effective management, and often decrease job satisfaction and sustainability for market managers.

Recommendations

The Oregon State study cited above identifies high manager turnover as one of five factors associated with markets that fail; however, many of the same factors that contribute to market manager turnover also make it more difficult for markets to take steps to improve the viability and sustainability of the manager position. With this in mind, we provide some recommendations below.

Explore opportunities for additional funding

In most cases, greater financial capacity for markets would do the most for creating a sustainable, viable market manager position and a stronger, more stable market; however, it is hard to devote staff time to finding additional revenue streams without the funding to do so. Funding sources for markets can include vendor fees (both stall fees and annual fees), sponsorships, individual fundraising, merchandise sales, grants, events,

financial and in-kind donations, and municipal/extension budgets. A typical small market generates modest levels of funding from vendor fees (given relatively low sales and fewer vendors) and has limited capacity to generate other forms of revenues through things like fundraising events or sponsorships. Grants, while valuable in the short-term, are not a source of sustainable funding over time; ideally, they can be used as "seed money" to give staff the ability to establish other, longer-term revenue streams. Technical assistance from nonprofits or other outside entities can play an important role in kick-starting the process. Comprehensive recommendations on funding farmers' markets are beyond the scope of this document; however, a collection of resources may be found in RAFI's case study, "Sustaining a Farmers' Market through Diverse Funding Strategies."

Reduce and clarify the workload of market managers

Frank conversations informed by on-the-job experience are needed to help managers and markets realistically align manager responsibilities with the amount of hours a market is capable of funding. One manager advised "evaluating what work can be covered in [the] budget, and reducing manager's tasks/workload to meet this." In addition to bringing their responsibilities and hours paid into closer balance, a common and thorough understanding of managers' responsibilities and workload should give vendors and market boards a greater awareness of what managers are doing for the market, and could help managers feel more appreciated and less isolated.

Identify alternative models for market management

If the traditional approach of sustaining a paid market manager is problematic and reducing the responsibilities of the manager fails to meet the needs of the market, alternative models may need to be considered.

• **Employment by supportive agency or nonprofit.** There are a number of markets whose management is supported by funds or staff provided by nonprofits, cooperative extension, local government, or downtown/community organizations. Opportunities for such support may be limited depending on location and often require a level of organizational involvement not typical for "independent" markets. However, where market structure and governance allow for it, and the will to assist the market exists, this kind of support can be a significant contributor to market stability.

• **Sharing management positions between markets.** Given the constraint on resources and hours, markets could explore an approach of shared management support (e.g. one manager hired by two markets, which could allow for one cumulatively full-time position). This option failed when tested locally when concerns over conflicts of interest and the distribution of hours were raised and could not be resolved. A strong basis of trust and communication between the markets involved, as well as compatible market hours, would be minimum requirements for this option to be viable.

• **Non-paid management support.** Individual volunteers (including vendors) are commonly "employed" in support of market operations and management. More structured "non-paid" support could be provided by service/volunteer organizations such as Americorps, or markets could collaborate with educational institutions to provide more structure and a stronger relationship with volunteer interns who are assisting with market tasks.

Conclusions

Markets vary in size, structure, and viability. While market manager turnover can affect even larger, well-established markets, the challenges are most dramatic for smaller, less resourced markets. Unfortunately, many markets do not have the capacity (financial or organizational) to effectively address the problem of turnover and retention. The difficulty is made greater as many markets struggle in isolation, without the benefit of shared experience and expertise.

Farmers' markets provide social, health, and economic benefits for the communities they are a part of, and for many small farmers, farmers' markets are a vital source of income. Strong markets help support strong communities, and investing in a market—and its ability to retain experienced staff—is an investment in community.

***About RAFI:** RAFI's mission is to cultivate markets, policies, and communities that sustain thriving, socially just, and environmentally sound family farms. To learn more about RAFI's work, visit rafiusa.org or call (919) 542-1396.*

***About ASAP:** ASAP's mission is to help local farms thrive, link farmers to markets and supporters, and build healthy communities through connections to local food. To learn more about ASAP's work, visit asapconnections.org, or call (828) 236-1282.*

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