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Regional Planning Council Awarded Grant to Promote Southwest Florida Agricultural Products

Fort Myers, FL – (August 10, 2018) – The Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council (SWFRPC) is pleased to announce that they have been awarded an Economic Adjustment Assistance grant in the amount of \$206,545.00 from the Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce. Senators Marco Rubio and Bill Nelson called Margaret Wuerstle, Executive Director of the Council, to congratulate Council staff.

The purpose of the grant is to increase resilience and sustainability for small and medium-sized farms in southwest Florida. The goal of the project is to develop new markets and increase revenues for the local farms in southwest Florida that suffered catastrophic losses as a result of Hurricane Irma, assisting with their economic recovery and increasing their ability to weather future disasters.

The proposal is the result of a recent study funded by the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity that evaluated methods to assist small farms in economically depressed areas of southwest Florida. The University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) was a project partner in the original study, and will be a partner in the project funded by the new grant. The project will educate residents of southwest Florida regarding the benefits of consuming fresh locally grown food, thereby increasing demand for local products among consumers, local supermarkets, chefs, restaurant managers, and other people within the food distribution system.

Background

The agricultural sector of Southwest Florida (SWFL) was devastated by Hurricane Irma. As noted in the application, a local agriculture expert from the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) estimated that SWFL may have suffered over \$2 billion of financial losses in agriculture from Hurricane Irma. Florida's Commissioner of Agriculture, Adam H. Putnam, estimated \$2.5 billion in agricultural damages for the State and added that we are likely to see even greater economic losses as we account for loss of future production and the cost to rebuild infrastructure.

Agriculture is one of the dominant industry sectors in SWFL, particularly in the rural areas such as Glades and Hendry Counties, Immokalee, and East Lee County. The data below from the most recent U.S. Census of Agriculture further illustrates the sector’s significance in the region as well as the region’s value to the State.

After the Hurricane, the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council began a \$30,000 agriculture sustainability study funded by the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO). The study aimed to gather small to mid-sized farmers in the SWFL Promise Zone area of Glades County, Hendry County, and the Immokalee community in Collier County along with other regional agricultural stakeholders, such as UF/IFAS and the Farm Bureau, to determine what can be done to help these farms become more resilient to future disasters. The study’s SWOT analysis identified several strategies to achieve sustainability including gaining access to new markets, the creation of a food safety plan template, the creation for a regional brand, and the need for a marketing strategy.

The project being proposed to EDA involves taking the next steps to implement the strategies developed by the DEO study and includes the entire six county region. These strategies were specifically developed by industry stakeholders as ways to help farmers gain much needed resiliency post-Hurricane Irma. Before the Hurricane, agriculture was identified as an industry severely lacking in resiliency due to due to the seasonal nature of crops, high cost of production, and long-term rate of return on investment. Those limitations made the impact of the Hurricane greater than that of other industries and made recovery even more difficult. The strategies outlined in this project will remove several barriers that keep small to mid-sized farmers from expanding into new markets and increasing their sales. The systems and partnerships created through this project will reduce these farm’s recovery time during the next economic shock. This increased productivity will give growers a higher margin-for-error when dealing with future disaster events.

Agriculture in Southwest Florida					
County / Area	Number of Farms	Land in Farms (Acres)	Percentage of Land in Farms	Market Value of Land and Buildings (\$1,000)	Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold (\$1,000)
Charlotte	284	217,222	49.9%	\$1,100,658	\$103,401
Collier	319	123,608	9.7%	\$554,016	\$202,751
Glades	331	442,750	85.8%	\$1,352,943	\$106,518
Hendry	406	495,734	67.2%	\$2,010,994	\$499,926
Lee	844	87,125	17.4%	\$826,412	\$105,903
Sarasota	283	80,143	22.5%	\$170,809	\$25,033
SWFL	2,467	1,446,582	37.8%	\$6,015,832	\$1,043,532

Florida	47,740	9,548,342	27.8%	\$49,661,974	\$7,701,532
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Source: U.S. Dept of Agriculture: 2012 Census of Agriculture