

Santa Rosa's Press Gazette

Panhandle Fresh gets seed money

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The USDA Rural Development has planted a seed in Santa Rosa County and many are hoping to watch many crops spring to life.

TEAM Santa Rosa's Economic Development Council received a \$175,000 grant to help set up a revolving loan fund to finance the needs of the Panhandle Fresh Marketing Association.

Richard A. Machek, the Florida State Director of the USDA Rural Development, was very complementary of what Panhandle Fresh and TEAM Santa Rosa has been able to accomplish in such a short

period of time.

"There are not many individual groups like Panhandle Fresh who can get inside a market like Wal-Mart or other stores," Machek said. "For small producers such as this it is something that is just unheard of in today's market.

"You deserve a lot of credit for obtaining a vendor number for something like this, it is very unique."

Machek also feels this grant will offer a unique funding opportunity from USDA Rural Development that will help the local community-based food system cultivate its business while stimulating the local economy.

The grant, which is a rural business enterprise grant, will set up a revolving loan fund to finance the needs of the Panhandle Fresh Marketing Association.

The association will borrow funds from TEAM Santa Rosa to help its member's transition to more profitable production enabling them to expand their markets, including local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA).

"We are excited about what this will help us offer those participating in the Panhandle Fresh Brand," said Cindy Anderson, TEAM Santa Rosa's Executive Director and developer of Panhandle Fresh. "When we started this brand it was Santa Rosa Fresh and we quickly saw how this could grow.

"Now we are ready and hope to take it to the next level and this grant should help us do that. We are in the process of developing a loan process for the farmers to participate in and help more locally grown produce to market along the Panhandle."

Machek noted that will what has happened along the gulf, agriculture has become the top industry in the state of Florida.

"We depend on tourism a great deal, but it is agriculture and the farmers in the state that keep the state strong when you are going through trends like we are now here along the gulf," Machek said. "Farming and agriculture is always at the top if not the top here in the state."

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