



THE FARM TO  
INSTITUTION CENTER™

# **SAN DIEGO FARM SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAM**

*Lessons from a Holistic Approach*



The Farm to Institution Center™ is an initiative of Community Health Improvement Partners™



**LOCAL.  
SUSTAINABLE.  
COMMUNITIES.**

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**Established in 1995, Community Health Improvement Partners (CHIP) has been a leader in innovative, collaborative solutions to address critical community health issues in the San Diego region.**

**CHIP brings together diverse partners to assess community health needs, educate, and advocate to create policy, systems and environmental change which reduce health disparities. CHIP provides backbone support to plan, coordinate, and support collaborative initiatives to solve our most complex health problems.**

# INTRODUCTION

The mission of the **Farm to Institution Center (F2I Center)**, an initiative of CHIP, is to promote healthy local communities and build a vibrant agricultural scene through facilitation, collaboration, and education.

**The goals of the F2I Center include:**

- ◆ Increase access to and consumption of healthy foods in collaboration with school districts, hospitals, and institutional partners
- ◆ Instill a passion for local healthy food through education, advocacy, and community engagement
- ◆ Support farmers in the creation of a vibrant, diverse, and growing local agricultural scene

**The San Diego Farm Sustainability Program (SDFSP) is a 20-month, no cost business development course designed for a small group of San Diego farmers and growers.**

SDFSP focuses on sustaining local specialty crop farm businesses through strategic agricultural expert guidance. This program utilizes a curriculum-based framework to provide technical assistance in areas of crop planning, business design, and farm law regulations to support the sustainability of farm-to-institution business relationships. These areas of technical assistance were identified as major areas of concern from growers according to the University of California Cooperative Extension's Growers Needs Assessment for Sustainable Food Production in San Diego County.





## **SAN DIEGO FARM SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAM**

**Program staff created and disseminated marketing materials to recruit eight Phase 1 farmer participants via social media, grower listservs, and partner organizations.**

**21 applications were received and evaluated based on years of experience, challenges, sales by market, current farm practices, amount and type of produce grown, and acreage utilized/available.**



# IMPLEMENTATION

**21** APPLICANTS  
SUBMITTED TO  
THE PROGRAM



**12** \* FARMERS WERE  
SELECTED AND  
ENROLLED INTO PHASE 1

\*IN CASE OF PARTICIPANT FALL OUT

## PHASE 1 SDFSP

### VIRTUAL ORIENTATION FORUM

Phase 1 participants were invited to virtually attend an orientation forum to:

- GET TO KNOW PROGRAM STAFF
- UNDERSTAND AREAS OF SUPPORT OFFERED BY SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS (SMES)
- DISCUSS PROGRAM COMPONENTS, COMMITMENTS, COMMONLY REPORTED CHALLENGES, AND NEXT STEPS.

### ASSESSMENT CALLS

Following orientation, individual assessment calls were scheduled between program staff, SMEs, and Phase 1 participants to further discuss their farm operation, immediate challenges, and areas of interest and growth.

### 1:1 SESSIONS

Each month, appointment scheduling links were distributed to participants to schedule 1:1 session(s) with SMEs or program staff. Following a 1:1 session, SMEs developed and submitted meeting reports to program staff which included

key discussion topics, current challenges, next steps and milestones. By customizing support for each participating farmer's needs, the program sought to improve overall business practices, with a goal for sustaining their business and growing profits. In addition to technical assistance received through 1:1 sessions, farmer forums were convened to deliver relevant and timely topics of interest.

### FORUM TOPICS INCLUDED:

- AGRICULTURE & FARMING IN SAN DIEGO
- HIGH DENSITY CROP PLANNING
- WATER SOURCING & MANAGEMENT ORGANIC CERTIFICATION
- TAX CONSIDERATIONS FOR FARMERS
- REGULATORY COMPLIANCE
- PROFIT & LOSS STATEMENTS.

## PHASE 2 SDFSP

In early 2021, SDFSP expanded its reach by recruiting, assessing and onboarding an additional 10 farmer participants to join Phase 2 of the program.



Participants received **support through educational forum gatherings.**



Participants received priority in 1:1 sessions **support from SMEs.**



## **SAN DIEGO FARM SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAM**

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**Through this program,  
it was evident that participating farmers faced  
evolving challenges specific to their operation.  
Furthermore, a common thread of support was  
identified and provided to participants by  
program staff and SMEs.**

# OUTCOMES

## REGULATIONS & COMPLIANCE:

Ensuring farm operators are within compliance on **labor, runoff, water**, as well as appropriate **liability** and **employee insurance**. Participants were directed and encouraged to utilize services and groups like the Avocado Commission for food safety trainings, the Irrigated Lands Group, Specialty Agriculture Water Rate, County Department of Agriculture for pesticide compliance and the National Resource Conservation Service.

## FINANCIALS & BUSINESS PLANNING:

Offering a range of **financial** and **business** support, including: separating personal and business bank accounts, structuring financial spreadsheets, farm deductions through IRS Schedule F, recategorizing profit & loss statements, crop costing, financial metrics, price points suggestions, and cost/benefit analysis of markets.

## OPERATIONS & CROP PLANNING:

Support in maintaining or expanding production areas, considerations for crops to grow, sourcing options, planting guides, maximizing current and future production, improved labor and facilities, new customers with higher return on sales, organic certification, application and benefits of fertilizer injector, and labeling compliances.

## FACILITATED SALES:

A major area of support provided through the SDFSP was its ability to introduce and facilitate **farm to buyer sales relationships** for those within and outside of the program.

## PEER TO PEER NETWORKING:

Despite an overall feeling of solitude in the agricultural word during the COVID-19 pandemic, SDFSP created a sense of camaraderie with participants through **fostering and facilitating peer-to-peer networking opportunities**. The vehicles used for this medium included hybrid-networking sessions, farm to buyer gatherings, and break out discussions. One significant outcome through these events was the realization that they were closer in proximity and more similar in business models than expected. **These invaluable connections made will support long-term success for future farming.**

## THROUGHOUT THE PROGRAM TERM:

**72** Total farm and buyer connections were made

**38** Successful sales (52.7% success rate), which ranged from one-time-purchases to long-term relationships

**2020**

**104,450**

Pounds of local food brokered

**\$162K+**

Spent on local food

**2021**

**146,924**

Pounds of local food brokered

**\$284K+**

Spent on local food

**GRANT PERIOD**

**251,374**

Pounds of local food brokered

**\$447K+**

Spent on local food during grant period



**STRATEGY.  
SUPPORT.  
GROWTH.**

# EVALUATION

There were 4 metrics that were utilized in evaluating the impact and success of the SDFSP. These metrics included:

**1 Farm Revenue (6-month and annual sales), 2 Best Practices (the adoption of best practices to support the sustainability of farm businesses), 3 Small Business & Agricultural Jobs (sustaining small agricultural businesses and creating part-time and full time jobs), and 4 Program Satisfaction.**

## 1 FARM REVENUE:

Collectively, participating farms increased their annual sales from **\$562,429** to **\$735,405** by program completion, a **\$172,976 (30.76%)** increase.

While approximately 2 years' worth of data was collected, it can be assumed that the financial benefit of participating will carry-over beyond program completion.

To showcase the impact of this growth in revenue due to program involvement, the year-to-year differences in fruit, nut, and vegetable sales from the County of San Diego's Annual Crop Statistics Report was analyzed to project the future revenue trends of non-participants. When comparing a four-year revenue forecast between participants and non-participants, a revenue increase of **\$1,056,380 (44.20%)** was found. Based on this forecast, participants can anticipate growth in revenue year-after-year.

**\$562,429**  **\$735,405** by program completion, a **\$172,976 (30.76%)** increase.



## 2 BEST PRACTICES:

Examples include:

- Keeping up to date on new and evolving laws and regulations (e.g., news, research, training)
- Implementing a budget-to-actual review process
- Crop planning for each plant growing (e.g., pest control, seeds to purchase, organic vs. non-organic methods)

A total of 34 best practices were adopted by participating farmers, a **41% increase** from the baseline reporting.

## 3 SMALL BUSINESSES & AGRICULTURAL JOBS:

While the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact the maintenance and growth of small agricultural businesses and jobs throughout SDFSP, 19 small agricultural businesses were maintained, 53 agricultural jobs were maintained, and 2 agricultural jobs were created.

## 4 PROGRAM SATISFACTION:

Ratings received from farmer participants following program completion. The average program satisfaction score from participating farmers: **4.74 out of 5**, which is a **95%** satisfaction rating.



**CONNECTING.  
EXPERT.  
KNOWLEDGE.**

# TESTIMONIALS



"This program is helping me take my farm to places I would have never imagined. This program has instilled in me the confidence to determine which distribution channels are most profitable for my farm and pursue them. It is also helping me look towards the future to research diversifying and determine how I might transition my farm in the future."

**- Debra Centrella, Guava Mama Farms  
Phase 1 Participant**



"I cannot say enough kind and generous words about the Farm to Institution Center, and the San Diego Farm Sustainability Program. I started my career within multiple Food Service Director roles, and always had trouble procuring local produce from farmers directly. When I moved to San Diego and first connected with this program through their events, I was thrilled to see an organization working so diligently to connect schools with local farmers in their areas."

**- Lynley Connor,  
COO of TopNotch Meals**



"The San Diego Farm Sustainability Program changed everything in and about our perspective of farming life. In this program I have transformed from a weak, confused, and unsure farmer into an optimistic, confident, and happy farmer-in-the-making. I was taught how to take what I have in terms of farm land and turn it into a world of possibilities. If it weren't for programs like this, I wouldn't be able to further my knowledge without a lot of frustration. I felt as if they all had one common goal, and that goal was to ultimately make us successful in every way possible."

**- Virginia Barnaba, The Grove  
Phase 2 Participant**



"I cannot speak highly enough of the San Diego Farm Sustainability Program. For years I felt that San Diego had completely abandoned its support of agriculture and growing food for San Diego's expanding urban environment. The support I received has renewed my enthusiasm and commitment to sustaining my farm."

**- Derek Davis, Davis Farms  
Phase 2 Participant**



"This farmer support program has turned out to be one of the best opportunities to support local and new farmers with the most challenging parts of farming. Working as a Subject Matter Expert for this program has been a wakeup call to me about how under-prepared the farmers of San Diego County are to be in the farming business. The real reward has been assisting farmers with a vexing problem and helping turn it into an opportunity to profit from their passion projects."

**- Scott A. Murray, Murray Farms Inc.  
Crop Planning Subject Matter Expert**



"CHIP and their San Diego Farm Sustainability Program has allowed us to redirect our spending to local produce to cook for our neighbors in need. Connecting institutions and organizations with purchasing power to small local farmers was the missing link to elevating our San Diego food system. I am now able to purchase approximately 20% of our produce locally, which is a number I am to grow in the coming months."

**- Ryan Rizzuto,  
Executive Chef at Kitchens for Good**



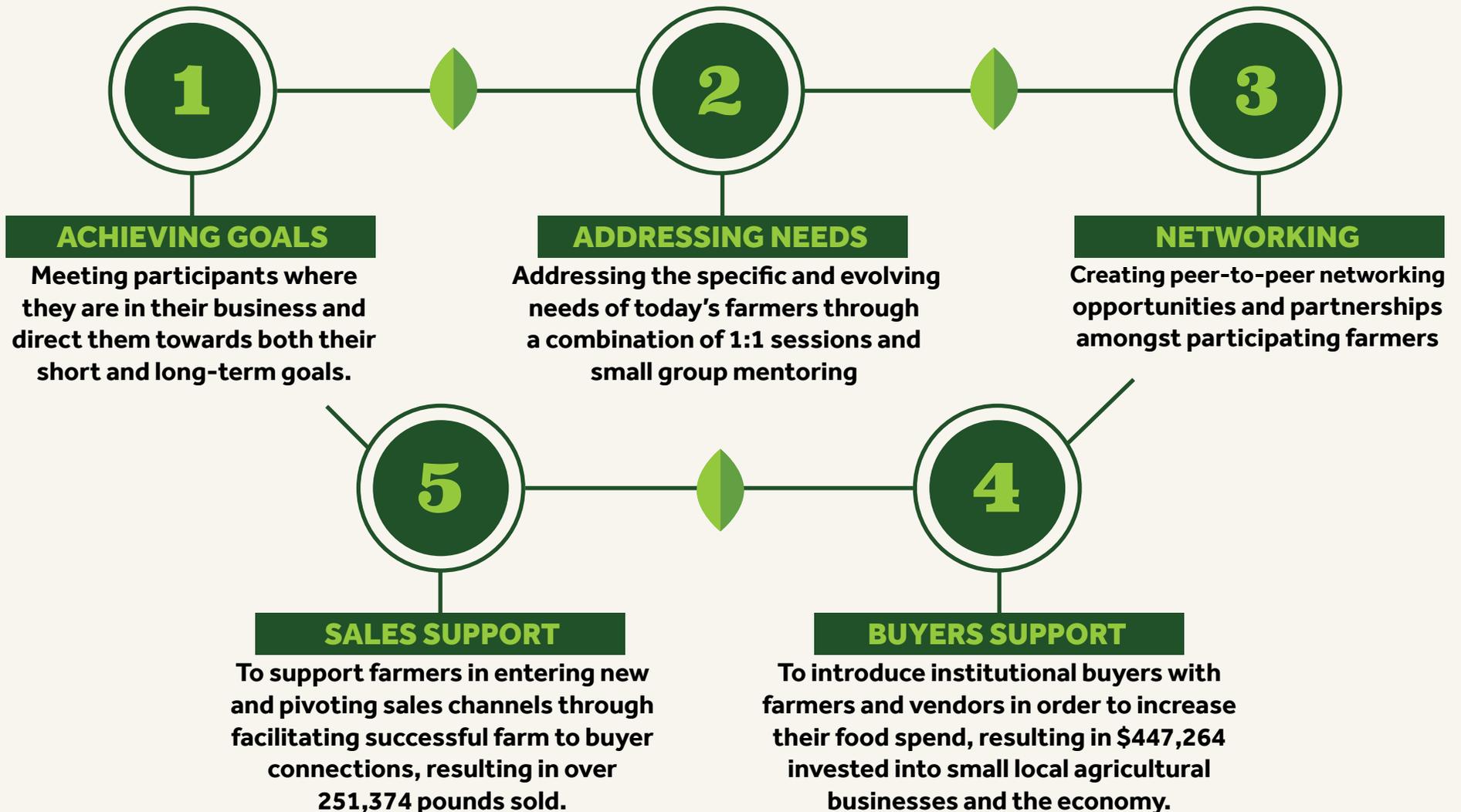
**EVOLVING.  
GOALS.  
TOGETHER.**

# VALUE

## The value of SDFSP lies within its ability:

To provide a small group of diverse farmers in-depth guidance on their most pressing challenges. While various technical assistance programs are available to San Diego County farmers, many are not able to provide the individualized wraparound support that is desperately needed in order to improve growing operations, financial planning, and business sustainability.

## KEY PROGRAM FEATURES INCLUDE



A top-down view of a variety of fresh vegetables. In the center, a green circle with a thin white border contains the text 'TARGETED. CUSTOMIZED. SUPPORT.' in white, bold, sans-serif font. The vegetables include two artichokes (one green, one purple), several green beans, a bunch of leafy greens, and a purple vegetable in the top right corner.

**TARGETED.  
CUSTOMIZED.  
SUPPORT.**

# LESSONS LEARNED



## UNDERSTANDING OUR AUDIENCE:

The goal of the program was to build sustainability through business relationships with institutions, however not all participants were positioned to work with institutions for various reasons (crops grown, size of operation, etc.). Many participants required foundational farm business support in order to sustain and grow their operation. Since there is a great need for support amongst aspiring farmers in San Diego, future technical assistance programs should be designed with flexibility to support producers regardless of where they are in establishing themselves in their farming career.



## ONE SIZE FARM DOES NOT FIT ALL:

The average size farm in San Diego County is 4 acres, which can often create complications when fulfilling an institution's weekly or even monthly produce order. SDFSP participants' acreage ranged from 0.01 - 70 acres, with a 10.5 acre (n=22) average, creating potential opportunities for successful farm-to-institution partnerships. Micro and urban operations were supported in maximizing production in order to meet the needs of buyers and joining already established Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs or direct-to-consumer markets.



## FORECASTING PRODUCTS OF INTEREST:

One strategy for programs providing brokering services between farmers and buyers is to recruit buyers based on the needs of the farmers. Often the demand of products initiates the search for the supply of product, the recruitment of a diverse pool of committed buyers can ease the forecasting process.



## SHIFTING SALES OPPORTUNITIES:

Throughout the pandemic, the institutional procurement of local specialty crops fluctuated according to the constantly pivoting serving models and guidelines. Both traditional and non-traditional access points (salad bars, self-service cafés, taste tests, special events, etc.), which previously created opportunities to feature local produce, were eliminated due to fear of contamination and/or labor shortages. Program staff sought out opportunities to incorporate local produce as it presented itself as school districts began to utilize whole fresh fruits and vegetables into their grab-n-go meal distribution. As inequities and gaps in our local food system became increasingly evident, local food procurement became appetizing and more important than ever. With many institutions time and labor deprived, their ability to work with local producers was severely restricted. Program staff broadened its reach to corporate institutional buyers and non-institutional buyers in order to facilitate sales during these challenging times.



## SEAMLESS CONTINUATION OF PROGRAM SUPPORT:

Technical assistance was designed to wean Phase 1 participants from 1:1 meetings during year 2 of the program. This was in order to prioritize the support needed by Phase 2 participants. While this design did serve as a method to manage the budget allocated for SMEs, it became apparent that the need was on the sought-after guidance received through these meetings. For future program design in growing participant phases, it is critical that all participants receive seamless support throughout the entirety of the program in order to maximize outcomes and project results. Realistically, the success of this program is in its longevity to educate and support farm operations as they lay their foundation for their future.



**TECHNICAL.  
ASSISTANCE.  
TOOLS.**

# IMPROVEMENTS & RECOMMENDATIONS



## CONTINUED 1:1 TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE OPPORTUNITIES

As mentioned in the “**Lessons Learned**” section, one of the major improvements that will be accounted for in future farmer technical assistance programs is continuing to offer Phase 1 participants 1:1 technical assistance opportunities throughout the entirety of the program. While both incremental and major improvements in farm operations can be accomplished within a 10-month period, a 20-month period would allow farmers to receive both guidance and sales facilitation support throughout multiple growing seasons. The sustainability of a farm depends on the health and natural fertility of the soil, and the process of turning a farm operation into a sustainable business takes planning, dedication, direction, passion and time.



## COMBINE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SUPPORT SESSIONS

Furthermore, in order to offer continual support throughout the program, the available hours of SMEs must be creatively and strategically utilized from the onset of the program. One strategy to consider in order to maximize this efficiency would be to combine technical assistance support sessions among farmers experiencing similar challenges, needs, or operations. Although, it has been found that the 1:1 support session structure allows for more transparent dialog and rapport building between participants, SMEs and staff. Additional considerations may include on-boarding all program participants simultaneously, or minimizing the total number of participants receiving T.A in order to maximize impact within all farm operations.



## TOOLS TO SUPPORT BEGINNING FARMERS

Finally, future farm business development courses would benefit from the creation and dissemination of both foundational and customized tools to support beginning farmers who are looking to organize and establish their operations quickly and efficiently. Tools and opportunities may include but are not limited to: profit and loss templates based on farm size and experience of farmer, farmer-to-farmer mentoring opportunities, and crop costing templates. In addition, if found successful those tools may be shared outside of the program in order to increase impact reach.



A close-up photograph of a woven basket filled with fresh, vibrant vegetables. The basket contains several artichokes, a bunch of bright red radishes, and various leafy greens like basil and spinach. A white circular graphic is overlaid on the center of the basket, containing the text 'PASSIONATE. EXPERIENCED. DEDICATION.' in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The background is a rustic wooden surface.

**PASSIONATE.  
EXPERIENCED.  
DEDICATION.**



## TONI KRAFT

### SENIOR PROGRAM MANAGER

Toni earned a B.S. in Hospitality and Restaurants from Madison University with an emphasis in Agribusiness and Culinary Destination Management. Toni has owned two successful restaurants in North County San Diego, one on 10 acres of farm, olives and vines, and one in the Poway Unified School District Offices, setting the Earth's table with farm to desk style scratch cooking. Proud past president of Slow Food San Diego North, Chopra trained Lifestyles and Functional Nutrition Instructor, cooking class teacher with over 7,000 students from around the globe and Amazon Best Seller cook book author. In her role, Toni manages and oversees the efforts and programs of the F2I Center, facilitates collaborative meetings, and fosters and maintains relationships with partners.



## DANE PETERSEN

### PROGRAM COORDINATOR

Dane earned a B.S. in Kinesiology and Health Promotion and a minor Psychology from California Polytechnic State University, Pomona. In his role with the Farm to Institution Center, Dane leads program coordination, logistics, and brokering of local farm-to-buyer sales. Prior to his coordinator position, Dane served as the department's program assistant from 2017 to 2019 and as an intern during the summer of 2017. Dane was born and raised in San Diego, and enjoys contributing to the local good food movement through supporting our essential food producers.



## NATALIE LAREAU

### PROGRAM ASSISTANT

Natalie earned a B.S. in Environmental Science and double minors in Biology and Food Studies from the University of Oregon. She previously served as an intern on a 2.5-acre non-profit garden in Eugene, Oregon where she grew and cooked food that was donated to local food banks, as well as educated garden volunteers on planting, ecology, maintenance, and harvesting, sparking her passion for local food. Natalie has a love for sustainability, food, gardening, and all things local. She began as an intern for the F2I Center, then became Program Assistant during the height of the pandemic. In her role, Natalie leads program curriculum development, direct education, communications, and administrative logistics. In her spare time, she enjoys gardening, trying out new recipes, and taking her dog on adventures.

## SPECIAL THANKS TO

Antoinette (Toni) Kraft, Dane Petersen, and Natalie Lareau from Community Health Improvement Partner's Farm to Institution Center for their contribution in authoring the Lessons from a Holistic Approach Report. Additionally, thank you to Eric Larson, Scott A. Murray, and Prem Durairaj for program support and report feedback. Lastly, thank you to all of the farmers who participated in the San Diego Farm Sustainability Program: J Davis Farms, Pixca Farms, Hukama Produce, SGG Farms, Hatfield Creek Aquaponics, Riley Ranch, Terra Madre Gardens, San Gabriel Ranch, Avohill Farms, Guava Mama Farms, Full Sail Farm, Canyon View Farms, Paradise Found Vermiponic Farm, The Grove, A La Vuelta Farm, Hillcrest Healthy Grove, Roadrunner Hill Farm, Bay Fruit and Herb Company, Davis Farms, and Willow Creek.

Funding for the San Diego Farm Sustainability Program was made possible by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agriculture Marketing Service through grant AM190100XXXXG008. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the USDA.



**GROW LOCAL AND GO LOCAL.**

