

Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) Final Performance Report

The final performance report summarizes the outcome of your LFPP award objectives. As stated in the LFPP Terms and Conditions, you will not be eligible for future LFPP or Farmers Market Promotion Program grant funding unless all close-out procedures are completed, including satisfactory submission of this final performance report.

This final report will be made available to the public once it is approved by LFPP staff. Write the report in a way that promotes your project's accomplishments, as this document will serve as not only a learning tool, but a promotional tool to support local and regional food programs. Particularly, recipients are expected to provide both qualitative and quantitative results to convey the activities and accomplishments of the work.

The report is limited to 10 pages and is due **within 90 days** of the project's performance period end date, or sooner if the project is complete. Provide answers to each question, or answer "not applicable" where necessary. It is recommended that you email or fax your completed performance report to your assigned grant specialist to avoid delays:

LFPP Phone: 202-720-2731; Email: USDALFPPQuestions@ams.usda.gov; Fax: 202-720-0300

Should you need to mail your documents via hard copy, contact LFPP staff to obtain mailing instructions.

Report Date Range: <i>(e.g. September 30, 20XX-September 29, 20XX)</i>	9/29/2015-9/29/2017 (extension to 11/30/2017)
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Recipient Organization Name:	Topco Associates LLC
Project Title as Stated on Grant Agreement:	Connecting Local Farmers and Retailers: A GroupGAP Training and Certification Project
Grant Agreement Number: <i>(e.g. 14-LFPPX-XX-XXXX)</i>	15-LFPP-IL-0144
Year Grant was Awarded:	2015
Project City/State:	Utah
Total Awarded Budget:	120,415.00

LFPP staff may contact you to follow up for long-term success stories. Who may we contact?

- Same Authorized Representative listed above (check if applicable).
- Different individual: Name: _____; Email: _____; Phone: _____

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1. State the goals/objectives of your project as outlined in the grant narrative and/or approved by LFPP staff. If the goals/objectives from the narrative have changed from the grant narrative, please highlight those changes (e.g. “new objective”, “new contact”, “new consultant”, etc.). You may add additional goals/objectives if necessary. For each item below, qualitatively discuss the progress made and indicate the impact on the community, if any.

- i. Goal/Objective 1: *Growers receive GAP certification/Food safety practices improved*

- a. Progress Made:

The Topco TopGAP grower group achieved a USDA certification of our quality management system. Of the 15 Utah growers who were active members of the group in 2017, 13 achieved their GAP certifications through this process. The remaining two growers are prepared to receive their certifications by the beginning of the next growing season, after completing corrective actions associated with the management of the group and farm, per group policy.

Of the growers in the group, two had previously achieved a food safety certification, for the remaining growers, this was their first certification.

Through surveys with the growers, it was determined that all of the grower participants surveyed implemented new policies, procedures, or record-keeping practices to improve the implementation of on farm food safety practices. The logic of the GroupGAP model is also one of continuous improvement, where growers and the group as a whole are always identifying new ways to be more successful at food safety certification.

Specific activities leading to achieving objective include:

- *Group training on Farm Risk Assessment and writing Farm Food Safety Plans for 21 attendees representing 13 farms.*
- *Internal Auditor and QMS Manager trained on USDA Harmonized GAP and Auditing.*
- *Individualized support, in-person or over the phone, for all group members.*
- *Created and implemented a Quality Management System (QMS) that manages the overall group food safety system.*
- *Conducted at least one internal audit for every group member; often multiple audits were conducted.*
- *Worked with USDA to complete four external (USDA) audits on selected growers, per USDA policy.*
- *Successfully achieved certification for the TopGAP group and, by extension, 13 of the growers participating in the program.*

- b. Impact on Community:

The growers were able to begin or maintain business with retailers by achieving this certification, and will be able to continue to do so in the next local growing season.

Improved food safety practices benefits the grower by reducing risk associated with growing and harvesting fresh fruits and vegetables. By extension, the retailers and consumers of this local produce also benefit from fresh local produce grown and harvested in a manner that reduces the risk of foodborne illness.

- ii. Goal/Objective 2: *Improve local retailer-grower relationships.*

a. Progress Made:

- *The retailer in the program was able to recognize the importance of the training and practices associated with the GroupGAP program, paving the way to continue to allow GroupGAP as a viable food safety certification moving forward.*
- *Growers in the group were brought into the retailer for meetings or trainings twice during the program, allowing for additional connections between buyer and grower.*
- *Growers in the program have either implemented new or additional forward-planning with retailers or identified the need to do so moving forward.*

b. Impact on Community:

With the GroupGAP program as a recognized food safety certification within the local retail community, the local growers can continue certification in a group, which provides a support system that does not exist in other certification schemes. This helps growers maintain certification and buying relationships. Growers will also be able to use this certification to help expand their potential customer base.

By identifying the need for and implementing forward-planning between the buyer and grower, stakeholders are able make decisions that benefit their business and consumers of local produce by reducing grower risk and better meeting buyer/customer demand for local produce.

iii. Goal/Objective 3: *Increase locally sourced and merchandised produce.*

a. Progress Made:

- *Local produce purchased through the retailer's corporate stores in 2017 was approximately \$880,000. The local numbers were not separately tracked prior to the program, so we do not yet know about local sales growth.*
- *Additionally, the independent retailers (as opposed to the corporate stores) purchased approximately \$1.2million.*
- *Stores purchased nearly \$6000 in local merchandising materials for the 2017 local growing season.*

b. Impact on Community:

Retailers tracking local purchases is an important step to encourage a drive towards increasing these purchases moving forward. The benchmark is now set to be grown moving forward.

Prominent signage from merchandising materials, with grower stores, helps to draw customers to buy local produce.

2. Quantify the overall impact of the project on the intended beneficiaries, if applicable, from the baseline date (the start of the award performance period, September 30, 2015). Include further explanation if necessary.

i. Number of direct jobs created: n/a

There were no job creation goals associated with the program. Through our work with our internal auditor, we supported significant contracting work. With the training and experience gained through the program, the internal auditor is able to branch out and increase his business as an independent contractor moving forward, the planning of which is in process.

ii. Number of jobs retained: n/a

There were no specific job retention goals associated with the program. One grower out of the sixteen original participants retired at the end of the 2017 growing season. The other growers remain active.

- iii. Number of indirect jobs created: n/a

There were no job creation goals associated with the project, however two growers from the group expressed that they will be hiring more seasonal help next year to manage the future sales that they worked on through the direct planning process with the retailers.

- iv. Number of markets expanded: n/a
- v. Number of new markets established: n/a
- vi. Market sales increased by \$n/a and increased by n/a%.

There were no specific market sales goals for the program, however, based on survey results more growers maintained or increased their sales with retailers than those that decreased sales. In two cases weather had a significant impact on the decreased sales.

- vii. Number of farmers/producers that have benefited from the project: 18
 - a. Percent Increase: 100% increase since the beginning of the program.

15 growers were active participants at the time of achieving the USDA certification, but other growers attended trainings before choosing not to fully participate in the group.

- 3. Did you expand your customer base by reaching new populations such as new ethnic groups, additional low income/low access populations, new businesses, etc.? If so, how?

The customer base was not changed; growers primarily continued to sell to the retailers they had been doing business with.

- 4. Discuss your community partnerships.

- i. Who are your community partners?

Our internal auditor and trainer was our primary community partner. He was responsible for most direct contact with the growers for training and auditing purposes.

Additionally, although he was not originally intended as a community partner, we had one particular grower whose interest, engagement, and excitement helped serve as an important group participation driver. His connections in the community and interest in the group process made him an important community partner.

- ii. How have they contributed to the overall results of the LFPP project?

Without the internal auditor, the project would not have been possible. Survey feedback from growers about our auditor was overwhelmingly positive. In particular, his ability to communicate food safety concepts to farmers was critical to the success of the program. Throughout the program we tried to manage the group and QMS from a distance, but the auditing and training could not have been done by a non-local partner. It was critical that he was from the community and a farmer himself.

- iii. How will they continue to contribute to your project's future activities, beyond the performance period of this LFPP grant?

The internal auditor is still actively working with the group to plan activities for the 2018 growing season.

- 5. Did you use contractors to conduct the work? If so, how did their work contribute to the results of the LFPP project?

Two contractors were used during the project:

- *First, our internal auditor and trainer (also our primary community partner) performed most of the on-the-ground activities directly with growers. He played a critical role in the program not only because we could not have achieved certification without an auditor, but also because he had an excellent relationship with our grower group. Feedback from growers was overwhelmingly positive about him as both a trainer and auditor.*
- *Second, we used The Wallace Center to help introduce us to the GroupGAP community. The Wallace Center was very important to our program because it served as our connection to help resolve questions and issues around this program, which was entirely new to us. We used the Wallace Center to help guide our initial drafting of the Quality Management System (QMS), for identifying farmer training resources, and to support our group's internal QMS audit.*

6. Have you publicized any results yet?* (all responses below 6. iii.)

- i. If yes, how did you publicize the results?
- ii. To whom did you publicize the results?
- iii. How many stakeholders (i.e. people, entities) did you reach?

Different elements of our program results have been shared with stakeholders, partners, and potential other adopters of the program.

- *Participating growers and our retailer partner have been informed about the results of our audits through dissemination of grower certificates. This reached all of our grower participants (15), and three key personnel at our retail partner.*
- *We also presented a recap of the program to 17 of Topco's retail and wholesale members (approximately 40 individual participants), providing them with information to bring back to their organizations, which might want to pursue a GroupGAP program in the future. The recap will be provided with this report.*

7. Have you collected any feedback from your community and additional stakeholders about your work?

Yes.

- i. If so, how did you collect the information?

We conducted surveys with the growers in the program that touched on overall satisfaction with the program, decision-making about past and future program participation, training and auditing satisfaction, food safety practices, and more.

We also verbally received feedback from other stakeholders.

- ii. What feedback was relayed (specific comments)?

Growers had a wide range of experiences with the program depending on their growing seasons, their relationships with retailer partners, and if they had a USDA farm audit. The comments on our internal auditor and primary trainer were extremely positive, indicating that all growers surveyed would want to work with him again. Growers indicated that the biggest challenge for them is ensuring that the investments they have made in improved food safety systems and practices are met with buyers in the market.

The retailer expressed a positive opinion of the group in a large group meeting of other retailers; specifically saying that at least one grower decided not to sell the farm due to this program.

Ongoing feedback from the internal auditor included ideas for program improvement.

8. Budget Summary:

- i. As part of the LFPP closeout procedures, you are required to submit the SF-425 (Final Federal Financial Report). Check here if you have completed the SF-425 and are submitting it with this report:
- ii. Did the project generate any income?

Yes.

- a. If yes, how much was generated and how was it used to further the objectives of the award?

The income from the program from nominal grower fees was used to reduce the USDA's obligation from the grant, so all funds were used directly towards project activities listed in Section 1.i.

9. Lessons Learned:

- i. Summarize any lessons learned. Draw from positive experiences (e.g. good ideas that improved project efficiency or saved money) and negative experiences (e.g. what did not go well and what needs to be changed).
 - a. *Retailer and grower buy-in*

The biggest lesson learned from the program is to ensure that both the buyers and the growers are on the same page from the beginning of the program. There are two main elements that drove this learning.

First, we had intended to have groups in both Utah and Louisiana, but after our initial grower meeting and identification of an internal auditor, we heard from the growers in Louisiana that they preferred to pursue their own individual food safety certifications. There was not significant communication between buyers and growers before identifying Louisiana as a group location.

Second, the first year of the program started slower than expected because the expectations from retailers to growers about food safety requirements were frequently coming from the group's management rather than directly from the buyer. Without the relationship and the specific buyer request, grower buy-in was extremely limited. If the buyer-grower relationship is not the primary relationship, administering the group is made more difficult.

- b. *Distance is a challenge; meeting the growers was very helpful*

Part of the intended innovation of this particular program was to determine if a QMS could be managed centrally to cover different regions of the country. The Utah QMS and Group Management was conducted from Illinois. The distance can be a challenge (sometime with something as minor as not being as familiar with state geography) but it was not insurmountable. Having face-to-face time with growers at trainings and other visits helped bridge the divide, along with regular phone communication. Our internal auditor and trainer, who has the most contact with growers, was local and that was critical to the group. A strong recommendation for future groups would be to have a local internal auditor.

- c. *Not reinventing the wheel*

The TopGAP group was able to take advantage of an existing community that has engaged in different versions of GroupGAP programs. We did not seek to reinvent the concept of GroupGAP, but instead worked with existing implementers through a very successful Community of Practice (COP) organized by the Wallace Center. Although I do believe that truly understanding the implementation of the Quality

Management System requires actually implementing a Quality Management System, the existence of the COP allowed the group to hit the ground running faster, using lessons learned from prior groups.

- ii. If goals or outcome measures were not achieved, identify and share the lessons learned to help others expedite problem-solving:

Major goals related to food safety were achieved, but were slower to reach than expected. As mentioned above, starting to run with a group may be the best way to learn how to manage a group. Reading, engaging with the COP, modeling systems after existing ones are all extremely helpful to getting started, but there was no learning like beginning to use the QMS.

Better record-keeping on local purchases from buyers moving forward will help track local purchase growth better.

- iii. Describe any lessons learned in the administration of the project that might be helpful for others who would want to implement a similar project:

To structure the role of internal auditor as an internal employee makes the possibility of group expansion much easier. Attempting to budget for a group with a moving target on number of internal audits, and by extension internal auditor time, can be challenging. If it possible to structure the auditor as an employee, the group expansion and contraction can be more flexible. Another option, which is how the group is going to resolve this issue moving forward, is that the group will begin to use a fee-for-service type model where additional requirements for training, food safety plan support, or audits will require additional fees paid to the group.

Leaning on the buying community early and often in the process is another major way to expedite a lot of the issues that came up.

10. Future Work:

- i. How will you continue the work of this project beyond the performance period? In other words, how will you parlay the results of your project's work to benefit future community goals and initiatives? Include information about community impact and outreach, anticipated increases in markets and/or sales, estimated number of jobs retained/created, and any other information you'd like to share about the future of your project.

The group will continue next year and is expanding to include the potential for new growers in New Mexico. At least three new Utah growers are interested in joining the group so some expansion is expected. The group is planning for a group training in March 2018 that will engage growers on an area that was found to be a challenge in farm food safety policies: corrective actions. The plan moving forward is to conduct an all-grower training every year to work on any issues with current farm food safety plans and implementation, while allowing new members to engage in separate beginner training.

It was determined in the current model that Topco is not the best administrator of the program, because its primary relationship is with the retailer and not the grower group. Thus the group is working to pass administration of the QMS and group to La Montanita Co-op in New Mexico during the next growing season. This will involve training on the existing QMS and group management techniques and modifying the fee and payment model that was used while under USDA grant funding.

Additionally, results of our grower survey indicate that growers are making further changes to their food safety plans and they are engaging with buyers on planning new crops and planting timing.

- ii. Do you have any recommendations for future activities and, if applicable, an outline of next steps or additional research that might advance the project goals?

Using the GroupGAP model to manage the changes that are affecting local growers due to implementation of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) is a logical next step for the group. Before the program started, it was primarily the buying community that was requesting food safety certification as a prerequisite for doing business. Now growers are faced with regulations related to their farms. The GroupGAP model is perfect for communicating complex, difficult, and very bureaucratically written policies to local growers, who have less time and fewer resources to devote to changes in the law. For small farms where there is no capacity to hire someone whose only role is food safety, food safety certification and the recordkeeping requirements that come with it can be daunting. The GroupGAP program helps manage this and it can easily be extended to include any additional FSMA guidelines.

Additional research and engagement with the buyer community would help to advance this project and any future project. Further explanation of the realities of the food safety landscape to buyers whose primary focus is on availability and price may help bridge the gap between grower and buyer. FSMA compliance tends to be seen as solely the growers' responsibility, when a deeper understanding of what it is, how it applies, and how it can be implemented may help bring the two groups closer together.