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South Carolina Certified Grown means big business for growers

By

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The Certified South Carolina program, launched in 2006, is the state's primary branding program for South Carolina. This is a cooperative effort with farmers, processors, wholesalers and retailers to brand and promote South Carolina products.

"We find that when consumers can easily identify, find, and buy South Carolina products, they take home fresher, tastier foods and support local farmers," said Eva Moore, communications director for the South Carolina Department of Agriculture. "Members of the Certified South Carolina program can use the logo on their products and in their marketing. We promote Certified South Carolina as a whole through a variety of means: social media, advertising, events, sponsorships and more."



A recent study proved that South Carolinians are eating more local food thanks to the continued success of the Certified South Carolina program. According to the study, conducted by Joseph C. Von Nessen, a research economist at the University of South Carolina's Darla Moore School of Business, South Carolinians purchased \$176.3 million more from South Carolina farmers than they did 10 years earlier across all Certified South Carolina food categories.

That accounts for an additional \$273.5 million in economic activity, 1,615 jobs and \$51.2 million in labor income for South Carolinians each year.

The study also found that the Certified South Carolina brand has an 80 percent recognition rate statewide.

"We love working with Certified South Carolina growers to get their product into the hands of consumers, and we love working with produce industry professionals to sell more of it," Moore said. "2021 is going to be a year of transformation and growth for Certified South Carolina."

After a later-than-usual start due to cool weather, strawberries and blueberries are starting to come in, and Moore noted it's shaping up to be a big-volume year.

"Producers are gearing up for spring vegetables like green onions, sweet onions and cabbage. Peach trees are in full bloom, heralding a big year for this well-loved South Carolina crop," she said. "Looking ahead to summer, we're excited for watermelons, sweet corn, peppers and much more. As we emerge from the pandemic, we think fresh local produce is really going to resonate with consumers."

The South Carolina Department of Agriculture has several new exciting efforts relevant to Certified South Carolina for the year.

"We recently created the Market Development team to unite our retail merchandising and specialty

crop outreach efforts,” Moore said. “The team’s goal is to help match up producers with appropriate markets — retail, wholesalers, food hubs, and others — as well as to help them identify resources to build their capacity and reach new markets. Retailers should consider this good news because it will help fill the pipeline of growers to ensure an even more stable, diverse supply of great produce coming out of South Carolina.”

One of the new team’s early initiatives is the Market Development Trade Show and Educational Conference Cost Share Program, which is using Specialty Crop Block Grant funds to offer partial funding for producers to attend certain trade shows and conferences.

“Trade shows are a great way for producers to explore new markets and foster relationships with regional retailers, wholesalers, and foodservice buyers,” Moore said. “This cost share program will open doors for specialty crop growers who are ready to expand and diversify their market outlets. We hope it translates to new faces at trade shows and more great product coming out of South Carolina.”

Moore added that 2021 has really been a story of challenges overcome.

“This time last year many farmers, specifically our small to mid-size growers, were dealing with restaurant orders coming to a halt overnight, farmers markets closing, and an overall unknown feeling of what was to come,” she said. “Farmers quickly pivoted by revamping or installing a farm stand and switching to a direct to consumer model such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA).”

The department promoted these efforts through a new section on its website connecting consumers to direct product sales. Fast forward a year and many of these farmers are still selling out their CSAs or weekly produce boxes and with consumers itching to get out, are seeing a rise in visitors to the farm.

“Our department also addressed pandemic market disruptions with a program we called Farmers to Food Banks, in which we awarded donated funds to nine local distributors to buy produce from South Carolina producers and donate it to people in need through Feeding America food banks,” Moore said. “Overall, we were able to provide 20,959 boxes and 355,201 pounds of fruit and vegetables.”

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