

# **Alabama Horticulture (Fruits and Vegetables)**

## **Strategic Plan**

<b>I. Identify measurable goals for horticulture that will contribute to Alabama's economy and employment.</b>
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1. Increase labor availability. Without labor we cannot harvest nor can we grow Alabama's economy.
2. Increase and improve the Farm to School Program to include more farmers, more crops, and more schools. Any transaction must include a premium wholesale price. Goal: Increase direct sales from fruit and vegetable growers to local and state school systems.
3. The Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries, the Alabama Agriculture Development Authority, and the Farmers Market Authority need to focus on commercial processing and cold storage facilities across the state. Need to construct value-added processing facilities for rent to fruit and vegetable growers. This could be very similar to the Chilton Food Innovation Center in Clanton. Goal: Increase the sales of value-added products of fruit and vegetable growers at retail markets.
4. Adopt an Alabama Certified Farmers Market program with statewide guidelines and rules for how a farmers market is to operate. The purpose is to decrease the number of nonfarmers who sell at farmers market but advertise themselves as producers. They do not grow what they sell. Goal: Increase sales for the bona fide fruit and vegetable growers at retail markets.
5. Increase funding of land grant universities and experiment stations.

<b>II. Develop and implement a strategy to remove barriers to your success and to foster success.</b>
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- Use AADA as a resource to finance low-interest loans for irrigation to producers. Finance processing facilities across the state. Producers need working capital to pay labor while waiting 30 to 60 days for payment of goods. AADA should be able to provide lower rates than bankers because AADA is a separate public corporation that was authorized by legislative action, but receives no public funding. Also, AADA is a separate authority and does not come under the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industry's oversight or funding. The board consists of seven members including the elected Alabama Ag Commissioner, the Alabama Banking Superintendent, and the Alabama Finance Director. Secure federal funds along with AADA's funds to promote irrigation, processing, and cold storage facilities across the state.
- Identify and create satellite locations across the state where producers can form a processing coop. Use AADA as a resource to finance, and use FMA to procure land as they have (or had) authority to buy and sell real estate. The Farmers Market on Federal Drive is a great central location to start by increasing the availability of Alabama's fruit and vegetables to order-buyers seeking to fill the California shortage. Fund these state agencies so they can better market and connect producers with produce buyers via websites and apps.
- Encourage the Department of Education to set aside for Alabama-grown products a portion of the \$27 million it receives annually from the Department of Defense for the school lunch programs. Take an in-depth and knowledgeable account of all programs offered to the citizens of Alabama and work to create a simplified and logical approach to administering the programs and services.
- Encourage the Department of Agriculture and Industries and the Farmers Market Authority to invest in flash-freeze and shelling equipment. Use this equipment to process peaches, peas, fruit, and veggies for Alabama's school lunches.

### **III. Identify public policy or regulatory changes needed to achieve your goals.**

- Immigration/Labor. We need a workforce.

- Sales tax relief on agricultural goods that encourage expansion into irrigation, cold storage facilities, processing, commercial production, and expansion.

#### **IV. Horticulture Research and Extension**

- Science is key to increasing production and efficiency. Horticulture must become more efficient and sustainable. We need to encourage Extension to focus research toward commercial horticulture production and move away from social programs.
- Horticulture does not have a check-off program. Research projects are very important to our producers. We must increase funding of our universities and Extension so that they maintain faculty fruit positions and refill positions as they are vacated.
- Increase public funding via line I item for the promotion of all things mentioned above.