

Leveraging Partnerships to Access School Markets: Part II

Alma Maquitico, Anthony Youth Farm, Anthony, New Mexico

You met Alma Maquitico, farmer and director at the Anthony Youth Farm, in Part I of this case study series. In Part II, below, we learn about Alma's experience with the state's Approved Supplier Program.

New Mexico Grown Approved Supplier Program

During the 2018-19 school year, New Mexico's Public Education Department (NMPED) piloted a cooperative of school districts to streamline procurement and vendor



Lettuce growing in hoop house. Credit: Anthony Youth Farm

requirements and support small growers of color in building the necessary capacity to sell to schools. The bid received 20 vendor responses from state-based distributors, food hubs, farmer cooperatives, and individual small-scale farmers interested in selling to schools—including Alma and the Anthony Youth Farm. The bid was set up as a yearly contract between the 20 vendors and 10 school districts, with an option to renew annually for up to four years.

The inception of the New Mexico Grown Approved Supplier Program came from what Kendal Chavez, Farm to School Specialist at NMPED, learned through facilitating the purchasing cooperative bid process: farmers can meet Request for Proposal (RFP) requirements easily without a lot of pushback around food safety. With 20 vendors and 10 school districts participating in the purchasing cooperative, NMPED decided to give the Approved Supplier Program a go.

In action, Kendal describes the program as having two major components:

- Incentivizing school districts to buy local by only using appropriated funds to reimburse purchases from approved vendors.
- Standardizing food safety-related requirements for participating vendors.



Washing radishes. Credit: Anthony Youth Farm

The driving goal of the program was to provide options for small farmers who may not have the capacity, resources, or even the need to be Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certified. Currently, 3 to 4% of producers in New Mexico are GAP certified and it is yet to be a market requirement in the state. "The procurement piece isn't solving the capacity issue [for small farmers] so we're looking at it from a different angle," Kendal explained.

Development of the food safety training component was a collaborative process between farmers like Alma, NMPED, New Mexico Farmers Market Association, New Mexico State University, La Montañita Co-op Food Market, and other entities across the state to simultaneously reduce the food safety certification barrier

for small farmers and meet school district needs. “We’ve taken a systems approach in which agricultural entities and school districts are working together to create conditions and remove the barriers for farmers that might not have access [to food safety certification],” Alma says.

Kendal worked closely with farmers and School Nutrition Directors over the years to get input and feedback about RFP requirements, barriers, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. And, due to Kendal’s relationship with School Nutrition Directors across the state, NMPED did not receive a lot of pushback once the formal requirement of purchasing from approved suppliers went into effect in July 2020. “It started as a pilot program in different regions across the state, allowing for farmers to not only get training, but they could provide input on how to best create a standardized and harmonized food safety process and procedure for selling to schools,” Alma explains.

And, while the target audience for the Approved Supplier Program was the original vendors selling through the purchasing cooperative, Kendal wanted to make clear to small farmers across the state: “It doesn’t matter how small you are, you can participate in this program and become an ‘approved supplier’ that NMPED will support.” Now, as of November 2020, NMPED has a total of 69 vendors on board—including food hubs, distributors, cooperatives, and individuals—either selling through the state purchasing cooperative or other procurement mechanisms.

Opening Doors for Small Farmers

Both the purchasing cooperative and approved supplier program have had significant positive impacts on small producers like Alma. “It’s been amazing – it created a system that allows us to sell to grocery stores like Whole Foods. It provided a structured program on how to meet food safety, traceability and labeling and packaging needs [for a variety of buyers]. It opens markets. Ultimately, it has allowed us to be more economically self-sufficient.”

To listen to the full podcast conversation with Alma, visit this page: <http://www.farmtoschool.org/bringingf2s-casestudies>



Youth farmer. Credit: Anthony Youth Farm