

FINLAND

Strengthening research and innovation links in agriculture and forestry

Location

South-West Finland

Programming period

2014 - 2020

Priority

P1 - Fostering knowledge transfer in agriculture, forestry and rural areas

Measure

M16.2 - Developing new products and methods

Funding (EUR)

Total budget 899 625

EAFRD 302 274

National/Regional 417 426

Private 179 925

Project duration

2016 – 2018

Project promoter

University of Turku, Brahea Centre

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A Finnish University used EAFRD funding to organise information days, pilot projects and professional tours to enable food processing companies to develop their local sales.

Summary

Food processing companies are increasingly looking to develop their local supply chains to respond to consumer demand. Skills and knowledge are vital. A network of five Finnish counties, comprising a third of all the country's food producers, was looking to expand its expertise and increase sales.



Finland's Turku University designed a range of activities to improve the skills and know-how of food processing companies in five counties including information days, knowledge building tours at home and abroad and pilot projects. The cooperation between five counties enabled greater innovation and creative thinking.

Results

Enabled five Finnish counties with the highest numbers of food processors to cooperate and innovate together.

Improved knowledge and skills in food processing to target local consumers.

New investment projects were developed by participating food companies.

10% of food producers and farms selling straight to consumers within the target area (140 companies in total) taking an active part in the project's activities.

Lessons & Recommendations

- ❑ The project could be easily transferred to other regions.
- ❑ Food companies were willing to build partnerships across county borders.
- ❑ When building a project across such a big geographical area (five counties), it is crucial to choose trustworthy partners in each county.

Context

Local food and short supply chains are increasingly popular within the food-processing industry and on the market. Consumers are becoming more and more interested in the origin and quality of the food they eat.

New business models are creating sales opportunities and improving the design of products, but meeting demand can be difficult, while some products have not embraced the trend. New ideas and investments are needed in local food to maintain its popularity and its continued growth.

Food companies consistently mention evolving know-how, collaboration skills and an ability to respond to customers' needs as key factors in business growth. Safe production of raw materials, processing that is sustainable and customer-oriented, branding and marketing all require increasing knowledge, especially for SMEs. For most businesses, resources are tight and their development is held back by a lack of time, expertise or other factors.

Objectives

The aim of the project is for entrepreneurs in the food-processing sector to develop their know-how and collaboration skills. They should become more able and willing to apply the latest research and innovations as a result. The goal is to develop their knowledge and practical skills, conduct surveys and pilot projects based on a company's specific needs and organise professional trips to expand their expertise.

Previously, networks of food-processing companies were formed at the level of single counties, but now the target area covers five specific counties in the South-West of Finland (Varsinais-Suomi, Satakunta, Kanta-Häme, Päijät-Häme and Pirkanmaa), which have the best quality of agricultural soils and climatic conditions of the country.

Activities

The project had nine main activities aiming at 1 100 food producers and 400 farms selling directly to the consumer in the target area of the five counties in South-West Finland (these companies represent a third of all food producers in Finland).

1. Organising information days on topical issues e.g. food legislation, entrepreneurship, customer orientation, business know-how, new processing techniques and raw materials, quality management, micro-biology, hygiene, automated production, resource efficiency, special diets and market access.



2. Publishing information on the internet on the most topical and important issues and using digital learning platforms to disseminate it.
3. Organising theme days to improve processing know-how. These one or two-day events are based on specific company needs in fields such as fruit processing, preservation or meat product design and are tailored to smaller groups of companies.
4. Carrying out surveys and pilot projects based on company needs. Topics are dealt with in small groups and may include problem solving, experimental actions, cooperation in marketing and production, exporting activities etc.
5. Offering a frequently asked questions (FAQ) service on food legislation, packaging, self-evaluation, logistics, marketing etc.
6. Organising a large-scale food-processing development seminar including retail and restaurant stakeholders as well as national and regional authorities.
7. Knowledge building tours in Finland, which also promote networking among food producers.
8. Knowledge building tours abroad, especially in the EU to focus particularly on food-related practices, new processing techniques, resource efficiency, new raw materials and other food innovations.
9. Using social and traditional media in its internal and external communication.

The project is founded and run by one of the biggest universities in Finland, but its previous projects relating to local food only targeted Varsinais-Suomi county, partly due to county-based funding mechanisms.

Cooperating with four other counties and their food organisations has enabled more innovation and creative thinking. Allowing participating companies freedom in the process can ensure the innovative results that are often the most viable in commercial terms too.

Main Results

Despite the project running for less than a year, it was already apparent that breaking down boundaries would bring the biggest results – both in terms of crossing the geographic frontiers of counties to get a bigger target group and the sectoral divide of restaurants and farmers.

The most encouraging result is the new investment plans already being made by a few food producers that have gained new know-how and ideas through the project – and more will follow.

The ambitious goal is for ten per cent food producers and farms selling straight to consumers within the target area (140 companies in total) to take an active part in the project's activities. This now seems very achievable.

Key lessons

The project could easily be transferred to other regions. The most surprising element has been food companies' ability and willingness to build networks and partnerships crossing county borders. This has been the main source of innovation in the project.

When building a project consortium across such a big geographical area (five counties), it is crucial to choose the right trustworthy partners in each county.

“Best motivator for me as a Project Manager are the creative surprises that the food producers also produce when they come together and learn from each other. One concrete example are the berry farmers who decided to develop and brand their own lemonade – and the project supported their idea by organising a theme day about it.”

Sanna Vähämiko, Project Manager

Additional sources of information

<http://vs-lähiruoka.fi/>