Urban Agriculture

For the past 10 years, Cleveland’s grass roots urban agriculture movement has grown steadily. Today, urban agriculture contributes to meeting the nutritional needs of residents, improving neighborhoods, and increasing employment opportunities in the city.

Cleveland is now recognized as having the second most active and successful urban agriculture movement in the country.

The Cleveland Foundation, food-centric non-profits, city and county government, the Cleveland Clinic, and Case Western University are just a few of the partners working to improve the health of Cleveland city dwellers and the environment within the city.

Laying the Foundation
In 2010, the City of Cleveland acted to encourage urban agriculture by:

• Modifying the zoning code to permit agricultural production in single-family residential districts.

• Modifying the zoning code to allow farm stand sales, signage, limited animal agriculture (chickens, bees), and agricultural structures.

• Reducing city water rates for urban agriculture.

Why High Tunnels?
The Cleveland High Tunnel Initiative grew from discussions between the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Congresswoman Marcia Fudge (House Agriculture Committee) about the need for USDA assistance to help Cleveland residents grow fresh food in an environmentally friendly manner for all but the coldest months.

Many residents in the greater Cleveland area live in “food deserts,” areas with limited access to food close to their homes. USDA created a map of food desert areas within Cleveland to show where to target assistance in providing nutritious food. To address the critical needs of these residents, high tunnel applicants from these areas receive higher priority for funding.

High Tunnel Benefits
“High tunnels make it possible to grow food locally in an environmentally beneficial manner. Many urban farmers grow food for local farmer markets, which stimulates the local economy and improves air quality by reducing air emissions from transportation.”

State Conservationist Terry Cosby

2012 Pilot Project
In 2012, NRCS State Conservationist (STC) Terry Cosby allocated a portion of Ohio's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds to pilot a high tunnel project in the Greater Cleveland area. STC Cosby also hired a full-time urban conservationist to lay the groundwork for the project. NRCS leadership at the national level amended an agreement with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives to assist with project development and local outreach.
Pilot Project Results
The 2012 Cleveland High Tunnel Pilot Project EQIP application period took place from May-June 2012. All 23 applications received the 90 percent payment rate allowable for beginning or historically underserved farmers.

The majority of applicants had not worked with USDA before, which required them to obtain farm numbers from the Farm Service Agency (FSA). The FSA office in neighboring Medina County services Cuyahoga County, so applicants completed the FSA application process via mail.

Environmental justice, or the inequitable distribution of environmental burden, came into play during this project. The potential for hazardous substances on the abandoned lots leased from the City of Cleveland for urban agriculture necessitated soil testing to make sure the soil would not pose a threat to the health of people consuming produce grown in this soil. The city notified those leasees of the lead content on their site and provided them with soil tests to make them aware of the lead threshold. Those participants with soil lead levels above the EPA threshold for safety used raised beds as a precautionary measure.

A press conference highlighted Cleveland urban farmer Avon Standard and his high tunnel, the first funded through the pilot project. Congresswoman Marcia Fudge, NRCS Chief Dave White, State Conservationist Terry Cosby, attended.

Cleveland High Tunnel Initiative - Year Two
State Conservationist Cosby decided to continue the Cleveland High Tunnel Initiative after seeing the success and benefits provided to Cleveland residents from the project.

In 2013, NRCS funded 26 high tunnel applications. All applicants received the 90 percent payment rate.

The NRCS Urban Conservationist, the Southern Federation of Cooperatives employee, and an employee of the Fair Food Network attended community meetings or held their own meetings to spread the word about the high tunnel initiative. Mr. Standard also tells visitors to his urban farm plot about high tunnels. The Minority Landowner magazine, local newspapers, and other media feature Mr. Standard and the Cleveland High Tunnel Initiative as an example of Cleveland’s active and growing urban agriculture movement.

Cleveland High Tunnel Initiative - Year Three
The Cleveland High Tunnel Initiative continues in 2014, with 43 applications received to date. The increased demand for high tunnels reflects increased community outreach efforts as well as word-of-mouth communication by satisfied NRCS customers.

More High Tunnel Benefits
“Local agriculture conserves resources by shortening the commodity chain, saving on fuel demanding transportation and packaging.”

“Urban agriculture is 3-5 times more productive per acre than traditional large-scale farming.”

The Green Institute

In March 2013, NRCS Regional Conservationist Rich Sims (left) visited Mr. Standard’s high tunnel to learn about this unique initiative and the Cleveland community.

For more information, visit www.oh.nrcs.usda.gov