



Funds Connect Growers to Burgeoning Industry

By Monica Abeita, Regional Development Corporation for Northern New Mexico Connect

Economic developers Robert Naranjo and Lucia Sanchez were pleased to see boutique wineries spring up along the high road to Taos. But when they discovered that grapes were being sourced from outside the immediate area, they jumped into action. With funding from Northern New Mexico Connect and the county of Rio Arriba, Naranjo and Sanchez helped organize local micro-growers – those with one quarter- to two-acre plots – into a grape growers association. Barely a year later, the group has received advice from multiple experts, pooled funds to order root stock in bulk and planted thousands of vines. In two years, when the vines reach maturity, the association plans to begin selling their combined harvest to local wineries.

Sanchez is president of the Greater Espanola Valley Community Development Corporation, where Naranjo works as network facilitator connecting businesses to one another to exchange ideas. The two have assisted the development of many businesses, but this time is different. “In the process of discussions, I decided to jump in and take my own advice,” said Naranjo. Both Sanchez and Naranjo joined the 17-member cooperative association and are growing grapes on their own small plots of land.

Naranjo cites many benefits of working cooperatively with other growers. Most Rio Arriba County land holdings are between one and five acres, giving individual growers little leverage when selling their produce. A pooled grape harvest of perhaps thousands of pounds will give micro-growers a larger presence in the market. Growers also learn from one another and from speakers hosted by the association. The association has sponsored representatives from the USDA and other organizations to educate growers on techniques such as trellis construction, pruning and irrigation. Education is important because Naranjo estimates 70 percent of the association’s growers had never grown grapes before.

Association leaders researched the market by talking with local producers and they shared what they learned with members. From these discussions, growers decided to focus on Riesling, Malbec and Petit Syrah, the grapes producers said they would buy. Northern New Mexico’s cool temperatures, which slow grape maturation, yield grapes with high sugar levels. “Sugar level here is bar none,” said Naranjo, and the North’s sweet grapes can be used in limited edition wines or blended with grapes from other parts of the state.

“Growing grapes gives us the opportunity to put small parcels of land back into production and to protect our water rights,” said Sanchez. Landowners who do not use their allotted water are at risk of losing it in the future. Evidence of historic usage is said to provide ironclad rights.

Much of the progress made by the association is due to the hard work and enthusiasm of association members, propelled by funding from Northern New Mexico Connect and matched by Rio Arriba County. Northern New Mexico Connect is the principal small-business outreach arm of Los Alamos National Security LLC, the company that runs Los Alamos National Laboratory.

“Northern New Mexico Connect has planted the seeds for an important model of local agricultural production,” said Association President Tim Martinez.

Northern New Mexico Connect is hosting a celebration of northern New Mexico’s expanding entrepreneurial community on November 10 in Santa Fe. Entrepreneurs will be introduced to the resources available to assist their business and will meet other entrepreneurs and business owners. For more information about the event or programs, go to www.nnmconnect.net. For more information about the Northern New Mexico Micro Grape Growers Association, visit www.grapecoop.com.

Finance New Mexico is an initiative of the New Mexico Small Business Investment Corporation (NMSBIC) and its partners to assist individuals and businesses with obtaining skills and funding-resources for their business or idea. To learn more, go to www.FinanceNewMexico.org.

