The marketing of specialty fruits and vegetables continues to be a most challenging activity for the small farmer. Typical methods such as U-pick, roadside and farmers’ markets are important, but the amount of produce that can be sold at a given time is often limited.

There has been a need to explore larger markets in the produce industry, but small farmers have been reluctant. This is apparently due to the existing or perceived complexity of obtaining a vendor ID number and meeting other requirements of the large chain stores.

The Panhandle Fresh Marketing Association, Inc. (PFMA) began as a not-for-profit organization in November, 2007. The PFMA, a community-based food-system model, is a local effort to assist farmers in pooling their resources and gaining access to larger markets in the industry.

“Panhandle Fresh” operates through the Team Santa Rosa Economic Development Council’s Agri-business Committee. Committee members include representatives of the IFAS Santa Rosa County Extension office, IFAS West Florida Research and Education Center, and other farm related organizations and businesses.

PFMA currently operates in a regional area including the Florida counties of Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa and Walton, and the Alabama counties of Mobile and Baldwin. Andrea Sutrick is the marketing manager, helping to provide the following services: accounting services, matching of orders with available produce from members, Wal-Mart vendor ID number (requiring a $3,000,000 hold harmless liability), and marketing of produce items.

Ten local farmers signed up with PFMA in 2008 and six participated in the program. During this first year of operation, PFMA performed well above expectation, marketing over $124,655 in fruits and vegetables. Watermelons represented 45% of overall sales, with green peanuts
accounting for 26% of sales. The remaining 28% was comprised of a variety of vegetables. Over 20 farmers have currently signed up for the 2009 season.

Watermelons made up 45% of the overall sales through PFMA in 2008.

**UF Involvement**

Both the IFAS Santa Rosa County Extension office and the West Florida Research and Education Center have been involved in this program from the inception. Representatives from both IFAS organizations were involved in a series of planning meetings with the Agribusiness Committee beginning in 2006. This work resulted in the hiring of an Alternative Crops Manager, who helped market produce through PFMA during 2008, as well as establishing and maintaining specialty crop demonstrations at the IFAS West Florida Research and Education Center (WFREC).

Extension specialty crop demonstrations continue at the WFREC. Field, greenhouse and shade-house production is featured during field days and other activities. Extension also offers traditional programming which includes grower education, consultation, plant problem diagnosis and cultural recommendations.
Broccoli and turnips are cool season crops that are marketed through the PFMA.

More About the Panhandle Fresh Marketing Association

- Go to the web site: [http://www.panhandlefresh.com/](http://www.panhandlefresh.com/)

- Attend the Florida Small Farms & Alternative Enterprises Conference
  August 1 – 2, 2009 - Osceola Heritage Park, Kissimmee, Florida
  Cindy Anderson, Team Santa Rosa Executive Director is on the agenda with more details about PFMA.
  For more information go to: [http://www.smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu](http://www.smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu)
2009 Florida Young Farmer and Rancher Leadership Conference
July 18 – 19, 2009 - The Plantation Golf Resort and Spa - Crystal River Florida
Andrea Sutrick, PFMA Market Manager describes the program
http://www.floridafarmbureau.org/programs/young_farmers_ranchers