



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Projekat za konkurentnu privredu
Competitive Economy Project

Agro Belgrade – The ABCs of Agriculture in One Place

A major new chance for the exchange of knowledge, best practices and new business opportunities for the Western Balkans and Southeast Europe

Despite Serbia's numerous comparative advantages in fruit and vegetable (F&V) production and the significant investments made in the agricultural industry over recent years, the overall economic potential of the country's agricultural sector is still not at a sufficiently high level. One of the primary reasons is that the path of transforming a country from traditional producers to professional farmers requires sustained effort over a long period of time.



Leading experts and practitioners discussed the important issues of the food industry

In the agricultural sector, professionalization within the industry is generally led by companies, entrepreneurs, and young people who take risks and approach agricultural production as a for-profit business venture. These enterprising individuals primarily learn key issues related to market trends, food standards and new technologies through a combination of self-initiative, personal relationships and attendance at industry trade fairs and events. The main question, however, is how many people have similar opportunities? Given the prohibitively high costs associated with some of these undertakings, only a small segment of the industry has an opportunity to learn from similar experiences. As such, many traditional producers still lack in-depth

information and knowledge related to many important industry-wide issues and topics, such as: modern production practices; bank loans and financial products available on the market; demands and requirements of foreign countries; export opportunities; marketing strategies for entering new foreign markets, etc.

Agro Belgrade for accelerated development

This is why USAID's Competitive Economy Project supported the organization of Agro Belgrade, the first international specialized fruit, vegetable and wine fair in Serbia. The goal was to create a new industry-wide event where industry professionals and the broader public in Serbia and the region can learn about the latest trends in the food industry, new technologies and other key issues and topics. Additionally, it was important to create a long-term, sustainable platform for facilitating professional connections, where domestic producers have new opportunities to engage directly with local and international buyers, distributors and retail chains.

Agro Belgrade was successfully organized at the Belgrade Fair grounds from January 31 to February 2, 2020, in collaboration with the USAID's Competitive Economy Project, Ministry of Agriculture, the City of Belgrade and other local entities.

"The primary idea behind the event was to connect producers and industry experts to exchange ideas and accelerate the development of new technologies, skills and product offerings. During previous years, working with a large number of producers, farmers, equipment manufacturers, we realized that the agricultural scene in Serbia was rapidly changing to meet the standards and expectations of international markets. Through Agro Belgrade our aim was to prepare and educate F&V producers and smallholder farmers to increase exports of high-value processed fruit and vegetables products. We wanted to encourage participants to expand production in line with internationally recognized food standards, including organic, and ultimately increase exports of Serbian fruit and vegetables to global markets," said Vladimir Živanović, General Manager of Top Events Team, organizer of the event.

Exhibitors, conference and B2B networking

In total, more than 35,000 visitors and 500 exhibitors attended the three-day event, including producers and purchasers of fruit and vegetables, cooperatives and association members, agricultural equipment and machinery manufacturers, seed houses and nursery representatives, and industry experts in the field of plant protection and nutrition. The event's conference program and B2B networking meetings enabled SMEs and small-scale farmers to establish contact with leading retailers and manufacturers across the Balkan region.

The conference part of the program focused on pressing industry-wide issues and topics that attracted substantial crowds. Over the course of three days, leading industry experts and practitioners discussed important areas related to: latest trends in the food industry; Serbia's export perspectives and positioning on the global market; inspection procedures related to food safety and export procedures; future prospects of organic production; presently available and upcoming financing options for agribusinesses; the current state of the agrarian workforce; successful integrative business models for associations and cooperatives; and market opportunities for berry producers, among other topics.



"Agro Belgrade is a unique event format that encompasses the entire agricultural value chain", said the Minister Branislav Nedimović

Motivation for the young

"One of the key elements of this fair was its focus on education. We wanted to broaden the knowledge of industry representatives on how to prepare their businesses to enter new markets, as well as to provide information to up-and-coming entrepreneurs and to motivate young, educated people entering the agricultural industry for the first time. It was important to provide an industry-wide overview to a broad range of people all in one location. Furthermore, we wanted to draw the public's attention to the high potential of domestic production and the importance of integrating into both local and international markets. These are just some of the key reasons for supporting this initiative," stated Aleksandar Pavlović, Chief of Party of USAID's Competitive Economy Project.

In addition to showcasing new business ideas, highlighting featured products, and discussing diverse agricultural topics, Agro Belgrade also provided an ideal venue for establishing new business connections. By taking advantage of the numerous B2B networking opportunities provided at Agro Belgrade Fair, many producers managed to successfully negotiate new contracts with buyers and distributors.

Feedback received from producers of machinery, irrigation products, and anti-hail protection systems indicated they were satisfied with the business results achieved at the event. As these components are heavily used in primary production, the positive evaluations from exhibitors bodes well for agricultural production in the coming period. At the event, Smart Watering from Novi Sad sold 10 smart irrigations systems – a technology that monitors actual conditions on-site and adjusts the watering schedule – to domestic fruit and vegetable producers. The newly forged business deals at the event represent the company's average annual revenues.

"We will definitely come back next year"



Agro Belgrade is the first international specialized fruit, vegetable and wine fair in Serbia

Aleksandar Jalšić, owner of a strawberry and pear farm from Sremska Mitrovica, was also very pleased with the outcome of the trade fair. "This was a great event with excellent organization. We managed to meet a remarkable number of quality contacts, and we expect to establish fruitful cooperation in the near future. I was particularly interested to learn about technological innovations and new equipment, as protecting our orchards is a crucial part of our production process. I was pleasantly surprised by the variety of panel sessions and expert debates. In particular, information shared about bank loans and other financial sources for expanding my business. We will definitely come back next year."

The positive publicity leading up to and after the event generated extensive media coverage with over 80 media references in national, regional

and local media-level outlets. A frequently quoted statement by the Minister of Agriculture in the media captured the spirit and purpose of the event:

"Agro Belgrade is a unique event format that encompasses the entire agricultural value chain - from advances in production and new technologies to product placement and marketing. The focus is on advancing agriculture systems via modern production practices and processing systems, which are necessary for positioning the image of Serbia in foreign markets and to take a more decisive step away from traditional growing to professional production," stated Branislav Nedimović, the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management.

In conclusion, the Minister added: "Next year, Agro Belgrade 2021, is well on the way to becoming a leading industry trade fair in the fields of fruit cultivation, viticulture and vegetable growing. It also represents a major new venue for the exchange of knowledge, best practices and new business opportunities for the Western Balkans and Southeast Europe."