Executive Summary

The coastal communities of SC relying on traditional commercial fishing enterprises and food sector businesses are finding it difficult to adapt to changing circumstances punctuated by global competition and an increasingly digital economy. Though many would like to modernize their businesses, many lack the finances, knowledge and technical expertise to do so. Commercial fishermen and farmers often rely on direct product sales to commodity markets or wholesale buyers. The wholesale buyer or distributor then moves their product up the supply chain to the final consumer through retail outlets. This business model leads to low profits for fishermen and farmers and higher profits for others in the supply chain. Many of these businesses are exploring direct marketing of their products to non-traditional markets, such as roadside stands, farmers markets, restaurant delivery, and community supported agriculture/fishery models. The success of these alternative marketing strategies has led to consumer demand for easily-accessible information about food businesses and has led more fishermen and farmers to search for ways to inform buyers about their product availability. To continue developing new marketing strategies, establish effective buyer-seller relationships, and remain competitive in the marketplace, it is important that they develop web presence and e-commerce strategies. Thriving commercial fishing and farming businesses are integral components of small town and coastal tourism development and thriving local communities are essential to the success of local fishing and farming businesses. Many are mutually dependent and deeply intertwined with related industries like nature-based tourism and charter fishing operations. Other local small businesses, civic organizations, and local governments in small-town SC must develop capacity to effectively participate in the digital economy. With growing consumer reliance on the Internet and substantially increasing interest in culinary tourism and local foods, a unique opportunity exists to assist commercial fishermen and farmers, their local communities and small businesses thereby accomplishing the objectives of sustainable broadband adoption. In addition to coastal communities, we include two current projects in the Catawba, Santee-Lynches, and Pee Dee COG regions focused on agritourism and food sector business and e-marketing development. Both of these projects focus on developing multi-county regional clusters of agritourism businesses and providing web presence through innovative adaptation of the MarketMaker website. The end result will be a set of regional agritourism portals designed to facilitate the involvement of both farmers and customers. We will focus on six communities, one selected from each COG region, all with significant historical, cultural and economic ties to farming or coastal/marine resources. Besides commercial fishermen and farmers, we will identify other food sector businesses and organizations (e.g. farmers markets, CSAs, wineries) in the ‘foodshed’ of these communities. The purpose of working with
these entities is to help them create new or enhance existing web presence, develop an e-marketing strategy, and to make them more informed users of web design and other related business services. Successful adoption of e-business strategies will result in sustained adoption of broadband services. We plan to help defray the costs of website development through a direct subsidy to 20 businesses per COG region in order to provide incentive for them to design and fully integrate e-commerce strategies into their business operations. To receive the e-marketing and website development subsidy, businesses will be required to participate in the FastTrac 10-session entrepreneurship program and to develop a formal business plan that incorporates e-marketing. In addition, we will encourage the use of on-line business and marketing planning tools like AGPLAN at the University of Minnesota and the Business Planner from Purdue University. Business plans will be reviewed by a panel of business development experts who will provide individual feedback to each business. For the community dimension of our proposal, we will enhance existing or foster the development of new foodshed portals, complementing and extending the current capabilities of MarketMaker, providing order processing and e-commerce transaction functionality. We will also facilitate the development of an IT master plan that complements and enables other economic development planning efforts, as well as the local foodshed. We are seeking funding for foodshed portal design, development, launching, and hosting. External consultants will be contracted to provide key input during the IT master plan development process but regional Extension CD Agents will serve as local coordinators, and the Program Director will also be directly involved. We will focus on assessment, strategic visioning, and action planning for enhanced broadband access and effective use. The involvement of the regional Councils of Government will help to insure that community-level planning is articulated with other regional planning efforts. We seek funding for six community plans. We will manage a selection process that will favor those communities that indicate need as well as a willingness to invest their own resources. A twice-annual meeting will be held to bring all stakeholders from both the small business and community dimensions together to discuss the current program status, to share successes and challenges, and to help guide forthcoming activities. We are seeking funding to help defray the costs of these meetings including space, materials, participant travel, external speaker travel and fees, and meals. This project will directly impact businesses and communities in a 24-county area, with a combined 2000 Population of 1,706,993. These counties are among the poorest counties in the state while others are more prosperous. Averages mask the truth that the farming and commercial seafood sectors within all of these communities are severely challenged to transition through meaningful adoption of e-commerce strategies and often have much lower incomes than the county average. Involvement of the more prosperous counties will provide very useful market linkages for poorer counties interested in selling in these markets. Funding this proposal will generate up to 120 business and 6 foodshed examples to be emulated within a region notoriously slow to adopt Internet solutions. Without successful adoption of e-commerce strategies, we expect half of these businesses would survive. If each of these businesses employ 7 people on average, the direct jobs saved amounts to 420. If 2 other businesses emulate their example, then an additional 240 businesses will be created or saved, resulting in an additional 1,680 jobs for a total of 2,100 jobs created or saved. Clemson Institute for Economic and Community Development is highly qualified to deliver this program. Dr. Lamie has 21 years of professional experience in community and economic development and has been working with e-commerce training and local knowledge economy strategies for the past decade. He also serves as the chair of the national MarketMaker evaluation committee and is PI on a
USDA-funded grant to develop an evaluation framework for MarketMaker. Dr. Lamie also is responsible for the SC MarketMaker portal (www.scmarketmaker.com). Dr. Lamie maintains strong relationships with the South Carolina Department of Agriculture, USDA-NRCS, SC Sea Grant Consortium, and a host of others involved in local foodshed development projects. Clemson’s network of Community and Economic Development Agents are highly qualified professionals who are both educators and change agents. They are involved in strategic planning, leadership, and technical assistance projects, all focused on improving the quality of life for South Carolina’s communities. All have cultivated strong networks of local volunteers, elected and appointed officials, and other collaborators. Beyond technical and professional competence and our state-wide network of collaborators, our team is uniquely positioned within the Clemson Institute for Economic and Community Development, facilitating strong linkages to campus resources and to state agency relationships. Dr. Lamie’s academic standing also provides opportunities to disseminate the lessons learned throughout South Carolina and through his regional and national networks of contacts. The total amount requested is $2,396,256 which will be matched by $621,655 of in-kind resources.