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Chad Eachern, president and CEO of Edmundite Missions, far left, poses after presenting chec

Chad Eachern, president and CEO of Edmundite Missions, far left, poses after presenting checks Feb. 27, 2026, to people participating in the Selma, Ala.-based Catholic social services agency's farming initiative that helps support small farmers in the South's impoverished Black Belt region. (OSV News photo/courtesy Edmundite Missions)



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Some small farmers in the country's impoverished Black Belt are poised to see significant returns after getting help from a fledgling Catholic farming aid and grant program in central Alabama.

The money the 19 farmers received March 1 that was distributed from a $78,000 gift has gone toward farming supplies including seeds, piping for irrigation and cold storage, according to Olandous Curry, senior agriculture director at the Edmundite

Missions.

The Raskob Foundation for Catholic Activities, Walmart and other donors pitched in for the $78,000 Rural Farmers Initiative donation to the Edmundite Missions, a 90-year old Catholic social services agency, which is run by the Society of St. Edmund.

The society, its website notes, is in its "age of completion" and is no longer accepting new vocations, but is keeping its identity in its lay-led entities and mission which has "endeavored to engage the alienated and estranged and bring them back into communion with God and the Catholic Church."

Through the Selma, Alabama-based Edmundite Missions, Curry said, the farmers also participate in training programs -- partnering with local universities such as Auburn University and Tuskegee University -- and are given much needed guidance.

"If I go out there and if they have records saying that they have minimum yields based upon what the state of Alabama says you're supposed to have, they kind of qualify for services to enhance their farm," Curry told OSV News. "We do a full farm assessment. So it's not one of those things that we're just saying, 'OK, here's $3,000. Here's $3,500.' We do a thorough field assessment to see where their need is."

Chad Eachern, president and CEO of Edmundite Missions, presents a check to Eloise Ravioree

Chad Eachern, president and CEO of Edmundite Missions, presents a check to Eloise Ravioree Feb. 27, 2026, who is participating in the Selma, Ala.-based Catholic social services agency's farming initiative that helps support small farmers in the South's impoverished Black Belt region. Smiling in back is Olandous Curry, senior agriculture director for the Edmundite Missions' Rural Economic Development Center. (OSV News photo/courtesy Edmundite Missions)

Curry, an agriscientist, said only two of the 19 small farmers had business plans when his team first did the assessments about seven months ago, which "puts them in a low rating" to receive assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's various programs.

Today, Curry said, most of the participating farmers have business plans in place and others are working on them.

Sandra Brown of Burkville, east of Selma, said she was looking forward to completing her business plan. She comes from generations of farmers. A nurse by training, she does contractual work from home in medical records during the off season, "to help sustain the unpredictables."

Brown, 62, and her 13 siblings helped pick corn on their grandfather's farm starting in early childhood. She now lives on the family-owned farm, which has a garden that yields beets, carrots, ochre and other produce. But with her $3,200 grant she said she will be able to farm her family's main crop, corn.

"I'm thankful and grateful for the Edmundite Missions because I received startup capital for irrigation equipment and seeds," Brown told OSV News. She said she was using the word "startup" to finally be able to do bigger volume farming.

Altogether the family farm consists of 30 acres, including some other land for livestock pens. "My heart is and always will be in farming. It's who I am," she said.

Chad Eachern, president and CEO of Edmundite Missions, said during the beta testing phases of the agriculture program, farmers saw a 300% increase in income and a 600% increase in their crop yields.

Mary Olds said in the last year her and her husband's 1.5 acre farm on the outer edges of Selma earned just $6,500, which was better than the previous two years but not enough to pay utility bills and other needs. They received help for the bills from the Edmundites also. They had just taken delivery of a "brand new" commercial refrigeration unit, on the day they talked to OSV News, thanks to $5,200 from the farmers' initiative grant.

She described three years of struggling, including consistently falling short of qualifications for USDA help, trying to farm greens and squash with inadequate equipment, on land that was only partially well-irrigated because of lacking funds for piping, or crops taking long to harvest because of not having enough to pay for farm help.

Through it all, she described that the couple had developed a steady client base of customers who bought regularly. But they took a major hit last year when 7,500 pounds of turnip greens went bad because Olds had nowhere to store them while they harvested other crops.

She said she noticed the Edmundite Missions was "feeding homeless people" and helping others in need, and she learned about Curry's business planning workshops.

"Our resources are very limited. So now we're with these guys and they say, 'Hey, we can help you guys.' And I was like, 'Huh?' This is the first time anybody said they can really help us," exclaimed Olds.

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Olds, who is Baptist, said she believes "100% and then some" they would not have survived without faith in God "because it was nothing but God's grace that led us to the Edmundites."

The produce of the farmers is mainly bought by the Edmundites to stock their food pantry in Selma, which resembles a market or any other grocery store, except everything is free.

Selma, a deeply impoverished town, is best known for its pivotal voter rights role at the height of the violence of the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

The city sits at the center of what the Alabama Legislature labels an "18 core counties" stretch, or "Black Belt" across central Alabama, originally known for the black soil in this area, which became synonymous with a mostly Black American impoverished population.

According to 2024 U.S. Census American Community Survey figures, the average median income across these 18 counties was $42,600, while for the state of Alabama it was $66,600. The average nationwide was $83,700. The poverty level for these counties averaged 25.3% with the highest poverty level at 40.1% in Greene County, just northeast of Selma, and lowest at 16.5% in Choctaw County, well below the national poverty level of 10.6%.

Edmundite Missions' Curry said some of the farmers are also getting their produce into grocery chains such as Piggly Wiggly and Walmart. Officials with the Edmundite Missions said vegetables and fresh fruit are in great demand in the area and are some of the fastest-selling goods at local stores, and they go quickly at the pantry.

President and CEO McEachern said the farmer program started when the Edmundite Missions set up a mobile food pantry at a parking lot and a farmer pulled up near the end of the day with produce that he donated because he couldn't sell all of it. When he came back again, the Edmundites decided to pay for it and started buying from local farmers, whom they decided to support more fully. Curry said he was brought in seven months ago, to bring the technical support and scientific knowhow needed to help boost the farmers' productivity.

McEachern said the grant initiative has been a significant help to the local farmers.

But, "the real farmer initiative, really, I believe, is living out our Catholic faith by putting into action our Catholic social teachings," he said. "And I believe that the dignity of the person, the dignity of work, the dignity of quality of life, all of those things play right into who we are as Catholics and who we are as a Catholic organization. ... We are called to accompany one another and that this is a shared mission."