Area farmers get grants for new ventures
2008 WNC AgOptions awards announced

Media Contact: Megan Riley, WNC AgOptions Coordinator (828) 250-4867
megan.riley@buncombecounty.org

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The Western North Carolina Agricultural Options Program recently awarded $5,000 to 23 area farmers and $2,500 to 14 farmers who are diversifying or expanding their operations.

The grants offer incentive for farmers to try new ventures - encouraging the sustainability of their operation, as well as demonstrating new methods to the larger agriculture community. A sampling of this year’s awarded projects include winter crop expansion, the addition of naturally grown livestock, the construction of a sugar cane processing facility, and cultivation of wine-grape vines to be sold to local growers.

“The goal of this program is to help farmers in Western North Carolina to diversify their operations, and to help agriculture continue to grow and thrive as a profitable, ecological, and market-driven industry in our new farming economy,” said Stanley Holloway, Yancey County Cooperative Extension Agent.

“Ensuring the economic sustainability of farms is one of the best ways to preserve our farms and the rural nature of our region.”

The N.C. Cooperative Extension Centers in the 15 western counties and Cherokee Reservation operate the AgOptions program, now in its fourth year. The agricultural extension agents work closely with the recipients, strengthening the educational relationship between Cooperative Extension and area farmers.

“We're providing AgOptions recipients agribusiness training in hopes to create a smarter farm, which in the long run, establishes sustainability,” said Jeff Vance, Mitchell County Cooperative Extension Director. “We encourage participants to seek marketing assistance from Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project and business planning advice from N.C. Small Business & Technology Development Center, which are partnering with AgOptions.”

The N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission funds the program through a grant with the Asheville-based non-profit organization Handmade in America.
The Tobacco Trust Fund Commission was established by the General Assembly in 2000 as farmers, former quota holders and tobacco workers began the transition from a stable, federally run price-support system to a free market of direct contracts with tobacco companies and a globally competitive price structure. The commission offers grants to help individuals and communities in North Carolina with this transition and to prepare them for the economic opportunities of the next generations.

“We're really pleased to be able to help these farmers pursue new opportunities,” said the Tobacco Trust Fund Commission's executive director, William Upchurch. “We feel the AgOptions program is extremely beneficial not only to the farming communities in the western counties but to the economy and culture of Western North Carolina as a whole.”

Of the 37 awarded projects across Western North Carolina, nine are fruit & vegetable or edibles diversification projects; nine, nursery or trees; eight, livestock; four, beekeeping; four, product processing; and three, agri-tourism.

2008 is the second year that Scott Paquin, owner of Firefly Farm in Yancey County, has received an AgOptions grant. In 2006 he broadly diversified his organic vegetable farm with the grant. This year, he will be adding natural grass-fed beef cattle to his operation, including raising a heritage breed of cattle, Devon, to promote agri-tourism on his farm.

“It's been nice to have something there to help us along as we have incrementally grown the farm,” Paquin said about the AgOptions grant. “We've been able to see tangible returns on the investment of the grant. It truly is seed money that allows us to see a project grow.”

In addition to the added income, cattle on his farm give Paquin a sense of nostalgia. “We had cattle when I was real young - 8-years-old,” he said. “I always appreciate the type of energy animals give to a farm.”

For Chad Calhoun in Mitchell County, the AgOptions grant is helping him keep the farming tradition alive in his family. “I have been involved in farming my entire life,” he said. “I grew up with my grandfather as a farmer. I would love to continue the tradition with my family.”

U-Pick strawberries, which he'll establish with help from the grant, are a crop his two daughters are interested in helping grow. He will be transitioning away from tobacco, which he has grown since 1993.

Along with Paquin and Calhoun, six other AgOptions recipients are in the High Country:

- In Avery County, Rebecca Daniels, a third-generation Fraser fir grower and sheep farmer, is working with her son, Logan Burleson, 16, to establish a greenhouse operation for wine grapevines. They will sell to wine grape growers across the region.
- In Mitchell County, Cynthia Sharpe and Dwain Swing, owners of OakMoon Creamery, will improve their creamery facilities so they can produce raw milk products.
- In Mitchell County, Ronnie Sparks, a lifetime farmer, will transition his burley tobacco farm into boxwood production.
- In Watauga County, Marshall Shipp and his son Carl will increase their bee hives, selling beekeeping supplies, honey, candles and skin-care products.
- In Yancey County, Nicole Del Coqlano and Gaelen Corozine of Green Toe Ground will offer a winter share to their Community Supported Agriculture members. They will store root crops for winter and construct high tunnels to grow tender crops in the cool weather.
- In Yancey County, Robin Smith, owner of Bee Log Berries & Produce, will install a greenhouse so she can increase the production of transplants to meet her growing demands.

Visit www.wncagoptions.org to learn more.