

Three area farmers receive grants from Agricultural Options Program for WNC

BY SCOTT NICHOLSON

nicholson@wataugademocrat.com

Three local farmers were among the latest grant recipients in the WNC Agricultural Options Program

"The program itself is designed to keep farmers in active production and viable in a more sustainable future," said N.C. Cooperative Extension Service agent Meghan Baker. "Watauga has a good track record with the program."

The three local recipients were Danny Miller of Longview Farm, Amy Johnston of Springhouse Farm and David Tucker of Dark Mountain Choose and Cut.

They were among 42 regional farmers receiving grants totaling \$225,000 to assist them in completing farm diversification projects.

This year's grantees are selling Appalachian grown meats at the WNC Farmers Market at Asheville; creating alternative markets for established strawberry, trout and edible landscaping enterprises; and introducing innovative crops to the region, such as milkweed for sale to butterfly farmers and mosses for landscapers.

"It's really made a difference," Baker said. "It serves a broad range. We've had several tree growers that have gone the agritourism route. We've had some beekeepers get grants to keep up the local bee supply."

Three of the awardees received \$9,000 grants, 27 received \$6,000 and 12 received \$3,000.

The projects ensure the economic sustainability of farm businesses, as well as provide demonstration to other transitioning farmers, according to Baker.

The ultimate goal of WNC AgOptions is to protect mountain farmland by assisting the longevity of farm enterprises.

Johnston said she received a grant to run a produce stand on her Zionville farm. She'd operated it last year on a temporary basis, with a table and a tent, and it was successful enough for her to take it on full time.

"I was just surprised it was so easy," she said. "People would come by and I wouldn't have to leave the farm. People I know had mentioned that you just don't see roadside stands anymore. I use the honor system, so it's open seven days a week."

Johnston received \$3,000 to construct her stand, and she plans to use locally produced materials. The farm is located on Silverstone Road.

Other Watauga County projects awarded in 2010 include: the development of a

corn maze and agritourism project for Dark Mountain Choose & Cut, located

in Deep Gap, and a choose-and-cut farm expansion project for Longview Farm

located on Tater Hill.

"We continue to be encouraged and amazed by everyone's innovative ideas and the variety of projects that are produced by our WNC AgOptions grantees these past few years," said William Upchurch, executive director of the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission. "Our board members are very supportive of the program for one key reason - we're able to keep farmers in business by reducing their costs and increasing their income."

Since 2003, the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission has supported WNC AgOptions, a N.C. Cooperative Extension program that provides resources directly to farmers diversifying or expanding their operations, particularly those transitioning from tobacco production.

Recipients typically double the size of the grant with the new income that the

projects bring in the first year alone. Profits usually continue to increase in the years to follow.

Last year, the 46 WNC AgOptions recipients reached approximately 10,000 people during the completion of their projects, including customers, workshop participants and readers of newspapers, magazines and online media.

Since 2004, WNC AgOptions has supported more than 250 farmer projects.

"When burley tobacco was king in Western North Carolina, it and other commodities defined mountain agriculture," said WNC AgOptions steering committee leader Ross Young. "Many farmers are realizing that it is becoming increasingly more difficult to farm by raising crops destined for a commodity market."

"The WNC AgOptions Program has been very instrumental in assisting farmers as they transition to direct markets and local sales. Instead of selling to warehouses, packing sheds and stockyards, many farmers are selling directly to local groceries, restaurants, cafeterias, and other consumers of the products."

Baker said that agritourism and farm expansion were the main thrusts of the program, but since the tobacco settlement funds continue, the program should be available to farmers of the future. "Beyond that, the sky is the limit," she said.

More information and grant applications are at www.wncagoptions.org.