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WNC AgOptions Awards 2010 Farm Diversification Projects

Three Watauga County Farms Receive Grants

The WNC Agricultural Options Program awarded 42 farmers seed grants totaling \$225,000 last month 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.

Three of the awardees received \$9,000 grants, 27 received \$6,000 and 12 received \$3,000. These projects ensure the economic sustainability of farm businesses as well as provide demonstration to other transitioning farmers. The ultimate goal of WNC AgOptions is to protect mountain farmland by assisting the longevity of farm enterprises.

"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, 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. In partnership with RAFI-USA's Tobacco Communities Reinvestment Fund, WNC AgOptions provides funding for exemplary farm projects through a selective application process.

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, a Choose and Cut farm expansion project for Longview Farm located on Tater Hill and an on-farm produce stand for Springhouse Farms off Silverstone Road.

Impacts from WNC AgOptions projects are often significant. 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.

Members of the WNC AgOptions steering committee include: representatives from N.C. Cooperative Extension, N.C. Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services— Marketing Division, HandMade in America, Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) and the Waynesville Farmers Co-Op.

Since 2004, WNC AgOptions has supported more than 250 farmer projects. Ross Young, extension director in Madison County and WNC AgOptions steering committee leader, reflected on the change in agriculture since that time.

"When Burley tobacco was 'King' in western North Carolina, it and other commodities defined mountain agriculture," Young said. "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."

For a full list of 2010 recipients, click to www.wncagoptions.org.

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