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WNC AgOptions Awards Funding to Local Farmers

Nearly 50 farmers in the mountain region recently received funding totaling \$225,000 from Western North Carolina Agricultural Options to demonstrate ways to enhance farm businesses. The \$3,000, \$6,000 and \$9,000 awards will help farm operations stay viable in the rapidly changing economy.

"It is exciting to see the wide variety of innovative ideas that have been awarded to farmers in Western North Carolina," said William Upchurch, executive director of the NC Tobacco Trust Fund Commission. "These great projects can meet the demand and desire for local products by consumers, and this program will continue to help these family farms stay in business."

Since 2003, N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission has supported WNC AgOptions, a N.C. Cooperative Extension program that provides resources to farmers diversifying or expanding their operations, particularly those transitioning from tobacco production. In partnership with RAPI-USA's Tobacco Communities Reinvestment Fund, WNC AgOptions will provide funding for exemplary farm projects through a competitive application process through 2011.

Former recipients report an increased income for their farm business and greater stability in on-farm employment because of their WNC AgOptions projects. They also demonstrate successful operations to other farmers in the region who are searching for a venture to sustain their family at the level that tobacco farming once did. Some awardees are reviving farms that have remained fallow or neglected since previous generations farmed. As agricultural communities are strengthened and farmer income is secured, land is more likely to remain farmland.

Douglas Harrell, who grows Christmas trees and raises cattle in Mitchell County, will use his WNC AgOptions award to expand his agri-tourism venture, which he hopes will ensure the longevity of his 220-year-old farm. "The times in the economy have changed so dramatically, especially with the demise of our primary cash crop, tobacco, that it's become critical for our farm to diversify and try other ventures," Harrell said.

Harrell plans to construct a building where school groups and 4-H members can participate in the production of molasses and apple butter. They'll also be involved with the planting and harvesting of crops, giving students first-hand knowledge of agricultural practices. "This project is fundamentally important for me and the farm, and also for the local schools in the community," Harrell said.

In Avery County, Ellis and Barbara Aycock will expand their organic fruit and vegetable operation by building an onsite greenhouse to start seedlings. They will sell seedlings not used on their farm at local tailgate markets, to restaurants and directly to consumers. In Watauga County, Ernie Dollar, a former tobacco and beef cattle farmer, will set up a cold frame to organically grow produce to sell locally.

Most of the WNC AgOptions recipients market their products at local farmers' markets, restaurants, grocers or at the farm directly to the consumer.

"Marketing is a vital component to having a successful business," said Adam Keener, extension agent in Avery County and member of the WNC AgOptions steering committee. "As part of the AgOptions program, recipients develop their marketing strategies, often selling to a diversified customer base. If one route fails, they have another to fall back on."

In addition to the funds, the farmers receive business planning training, marketing assistance and increased media exposure of their farms. The program introduces many farmers to the wide range of educational opportunities in the agricultural community for the first time.

"This year, a large percentage of the applications submitted were very well done and described projects involving farm transition and diversification with an emphasis on local markets," said Ross Young, Madison County extension director and leader of the WNC AgOptions steering committee. "That response is encouraging as it