

Four Yancey farmers get grants to diversify farms, expand local markets

Four Yancey farmers are \$225,000 from Western North Carolina Agricultural Options \$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."

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

The four Yancey County recipients received 2009 WNC AgOptions awards:

• **Michael and Tammie Edwards**, who grew tobacco until 2006, will build a germination chamber inside one of their greenhouses to produce flower and vegetable plugs for their operation as well as for their fast-growing customer base of growers.

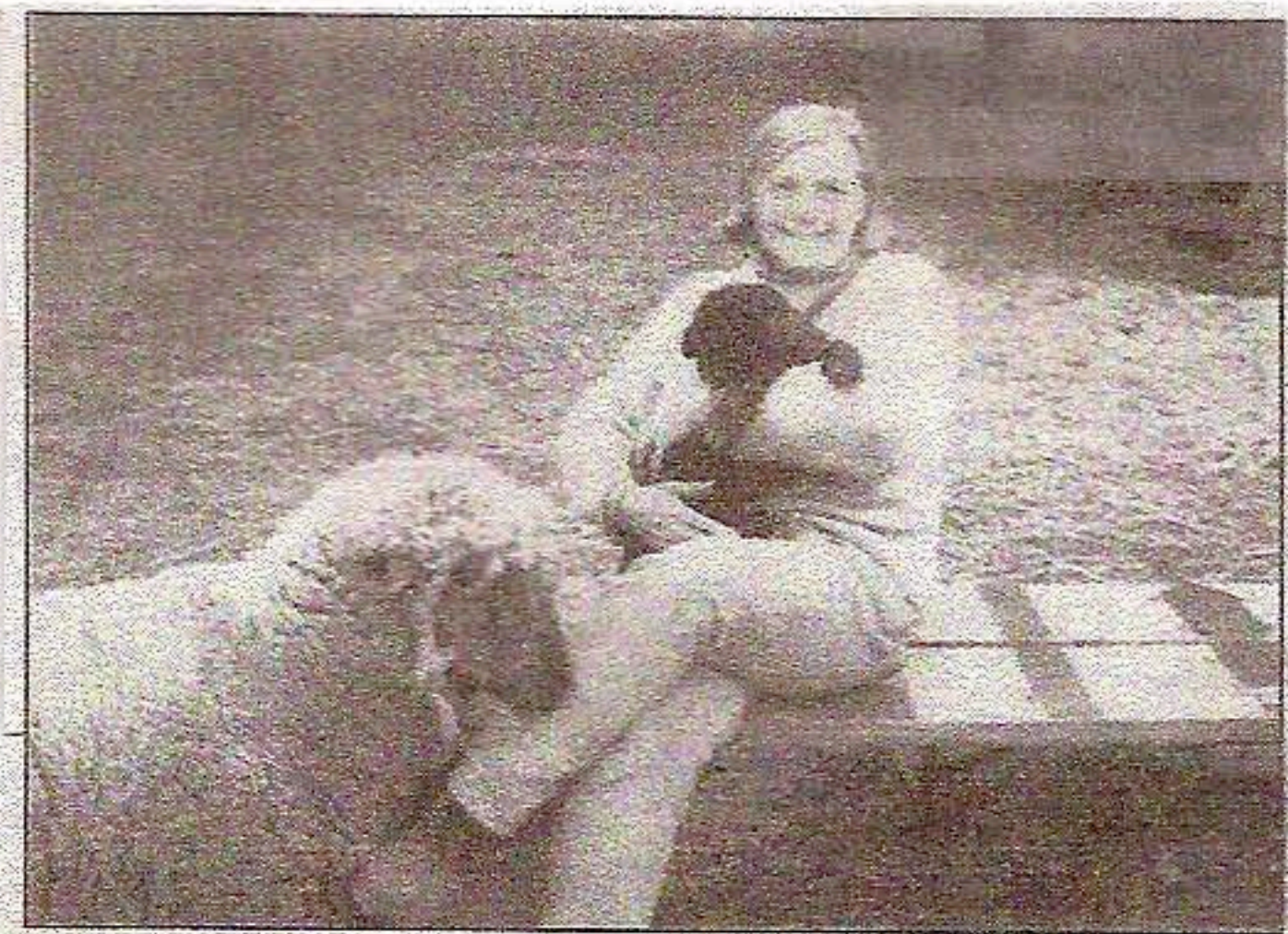
• **Jeremy McCurry**, who also grew tobacco until 2006, will purchase a drip irrigation system for his Day Neutral strawberries, increasing yield and quality.

• **Elke Spirakis** of Wellspring Farm will further open up her farm as an agri-tourism destination. She breeds and markets llamas, heritage breed sheep, and angora rabbits and sells honey, eggs and wool products.

• **Ryan Wiebe** will build a greenhouse to improve his certified organic operation, expecting a substantial savings as a result of no longer purchasing transplants.

"During these times of economic uncertainty, local farmers provide hope for the community that we can grow a new local sustainable economy," said Stanley Holloway, Extension Agent, Yancey County and member of the WNC AgOptions steering committee. "The WNC AgOptions program strives to support these farmers in growing their agricultural business for economic sustainability."

In addition to the funds, the farmers receive business planning training, marketing



Elke Spirakis of Wellspring Farm will further open up her farm as an agri-tourism destination. Other Yancey farmers receiving AgOptions grants were Michael and Tammie Edwards, Jeremy McCurry, and Ryan Wiebe.

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.

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 firsthand 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.

"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 shows that farmers are continuing to find creative ways for being successful. The best strategy for preserving farms and farmland is for farmers to economically successful."

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.

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 RAFI-USA's Tobacco Communities Reinvestment Fund, WNC AgOptions will provide funding for exemplary farm projects through a competitive application process through 2011.

For more information, visit www.wncagoptions.org.