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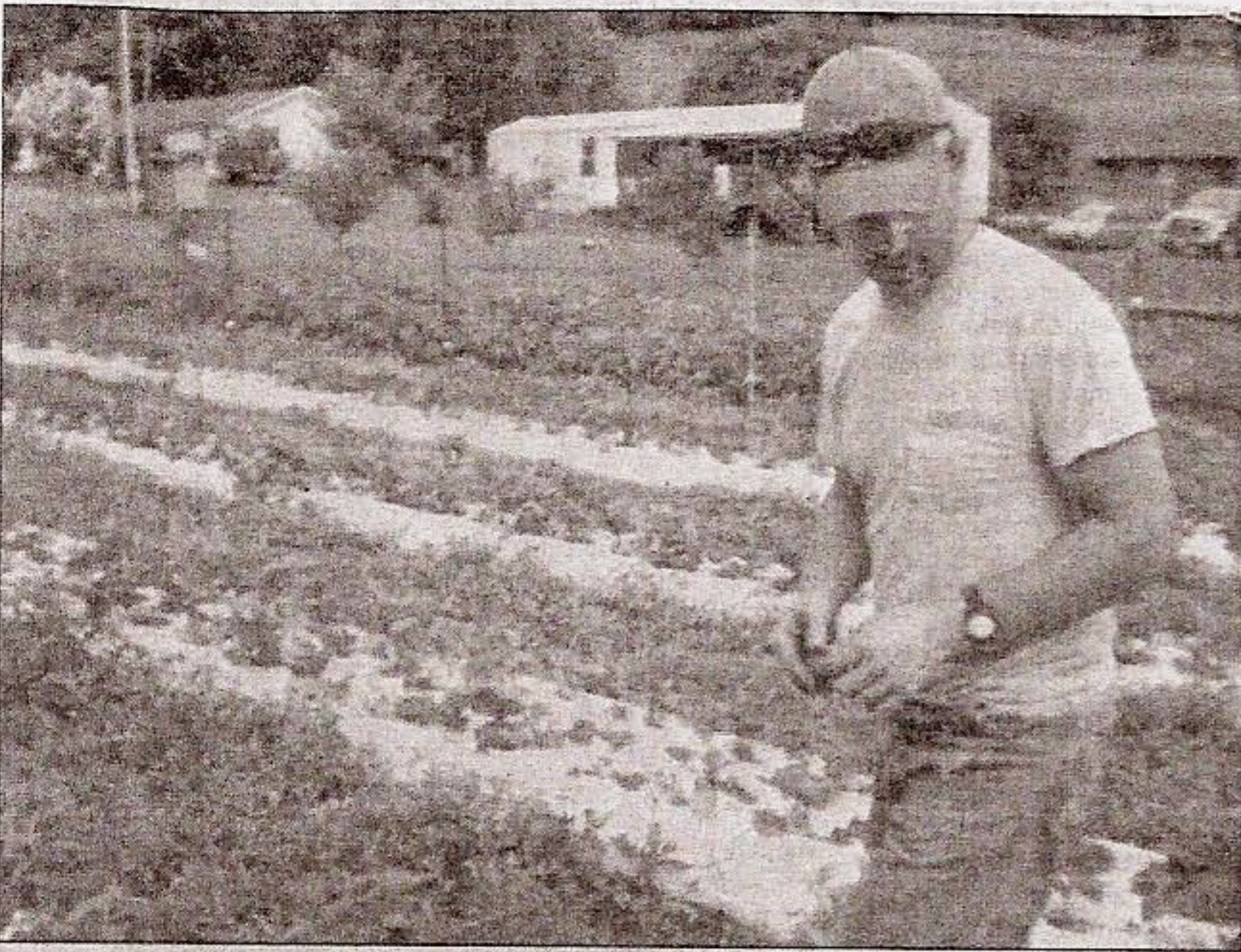
Yancey Common

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2009 recipient Jeremy McCurry (pictured above), is still working on his AgOptions project for which he received funding in February/March. Four Yancey grant recipients funded improvement to increase their production and profit this year. The new 2010 funding cycle is now underway for local farmers.

Diversifying farm operations with AgOptions grant funding

There is help for farmers who want to diversify their farms. Grants totaling \$225,000 are available to WNC farmers who are diversifying or expanding their operations in 2010.

WNC Agricultural Options, which will award approximately 45 farmers in 17 counties and the Cherokee Reservation \$3,000, \$6,000 or \$9,000 each, has released its 2010 applications.

With a WNC AgOptions award this year, Yancey farmer Jeremy McCurry purchased a drip irrigation system that will allow him to increase the yield and quality of his production, try new crops and niche markets, and lessen labor and input expenses.

Jeremy will sell to the high demand U-Pick customers, as well as to roadside stands and WNC Farmers Market vendors.

“Because of the grant, I was able to buy this irrigation system — I couldn’t get started without it. My plants died due to the late frost this year, and since I had the grant, I was able to replace the plants. Otherwise, I would have been in the hole,” said McCurry, whose land has been in family ownership for over 125 years, and he is the fourth generation to farm it.

He farmed tobacco from 1995 to 2006. He also diversified the farm with beef cattle and vegetables in 2001. Last year, he started growing Day Neutral strawberries to target the market after the June harvest and avoid a late frost.

With a grant they received in spring 2009, Tammie and Mike Edwards of Yancey County are building a germination chamber in a greenhouse they previously used in tobacco production to produce their own plugs for

their potted flower operation as well as vegetable plants for sale to a fast-growing customer base. They will market plants at their retail greenhouse as well as contract-grow for local farmers.

“The germination chamber will save us quite a bit of money with the cost of plugs, freight, and other expenses. It could make a difference as to whether we stay in business,” Tammie Edwards.

The Edwards grew burley tobacco from 1983 to 2006, have raised horses and produced vegetables, mums and flowers in recent years.

“This grant opportunity is an excellent resource to help offset the financial risk for farmers wanting to expand their operations or diversify into crops they may not be very familiar with,” said Denise Baker, Yancey

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sion Director. "The success of small family farms is the focus of this project. By providing financial assistance, this project is enabling farms to create more sustainable farming enterprises, which will have a long-term effect on the economy as well as farm land preservation."

Another Yancey award recipient, Ryan Wiebe, has produced a diversity of vegetables since 2003 on his 80-acre farm where he formerly leased a portion to tobacco. He is one of the few certified organic farms in Yancey County.

With his award, Wiebe will build a Solar Star greenhouse to hold 40,000 brassica plants at any time. He expects a savings for not purchasing transplants, and an increase in income from sales of organic plants. Ryan markets his vegetables directly to wholesale distributors and grocery stores, as well as to individuals at the Yancey County Farmers Market.



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Elke Spirakis is expanding her "hands-on classroom" at her farming operation that includes, sheep, llamas and angora rabbits, and sells honey, eggs and wool products.

Elke Spirakis owns a diversified farm with a variety of livestock, bees and fruit trees, which she's been developing since 1999. She breeds and markets heritage breed Jacob sheep, moorit corriedales, llamas and angora rabbits, and sells honey, eggs and wool products.

For her WNC AgOptions project, she will further open her farm up to the public, particularly promoting the farm as a "hands-on" classroom for school children through her Little School House on the Farm. Expenses include: improved parking and accessibility to the animals and marketing materials.

She expects to increase farm income with the fees for tours and workshops as well as the fiber supplies and goods sold to visitors. See wellspringfarm.com.

"The grant makes it possible for me to have a formal class-

room in a rustic setting. It helps complete a vision that I have for this farm," said Spirakis.

Managed by the N.C. Cooperative Extension County Centers in the West District, the WNC AgOptions program works with producers who demonstrate ways to increase farm income to other transitioning farmers, particularly tobacco growers. WNC AgOptions works in partnership with RAFI-USA's Tobacco Communities Reinvestment Fund, and the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission sponsors the program.

"The partnership we have with the WNC AgOptions program is very valuable to us," said William Upchurch, Executive Director of the Tobacco Trust Fund Commission. "Our experience has shown that participating farmers utilize these grants for innovative, resourceful and profitable enterprises that can make a huge impact on their farming operation."

Recent recipients are transitioning from commercial to direct markets, extending their growing seasons, or developing value-added processing systems so that they will have a product to sell year-round.

Skipper Russell of Haywood County, a 2005 and 2009 recipient, and Kaleb Rathbone of Haywood County, a 2006 recipient, both have the infrastructure in place to open up markets with Ingles grocery stores this year, in large part due to the WNC AgOptions grants. Russell, who purchased a refrigeration truck,

sells lettuce to Ingles, and Rathbone, who installed irrigation, sells strawberries.

Other WNC AgOptions recipients use the funds to offset the financial risk of trying untested, unique endeavors, such as hops production. "Just applying for the grant was about the best thing I could have done," said Van Burnette of Buncombe County, who started "Hop N' Blueberry" on his family's seventh generation farm. "I learned so much about the cost, timeline and the activities, and narrowed down what I wanted to do with the farm."

Interested applicants should see the agricultural agents at their local Extension Centers by November 23, and can visit wncagoptions.org to download an application. Projects should increase the sale of farm products and lead to the long-term sustainability of the farm business. The postmark deadline for applications is January 8.

Established in 2003, WNC AgOptions is entering its sixth funding cycle.

Operated by the NC Cooperative Extension Centers in the West District, WNC AgOptions builds sustainable farming communities in our mountain region by providing resources directly to farmers who are diversifying and expanding their operations.

For more information and to receive help with the application, contact Yancey Extension Center at 682-6186 or stop by the office on Orchard Street in Burnsville.