

WNC AgOptions awardees announced

Farmers diversify, try local markets to remain viable

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 RAFT-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 addition to Harrell, six Mitchell County farmers received 2009 WNC AgOptions awards:

Brandon Birchfield will transition from tobacco to potatoes to keep alive his family's multi-generational farm.

Roger Frye and John Slayton of Grassy Creek Blueberry Patch will revamp his family's existing blueberry patch, first started by Frye's grandfather.

Rick Harty will expand his mushroom, honey, rabbit and vegetable operations by purchasing additional livestock and equipment, making value-added products such as candles, and upgrading preparation areas.

Tim Hughes, who manages a "U-Pick" berry, greasy bean and corn farm, will improve his production techniques and the customer parking area to substantially increase his yields and customer base.

Nick Sagan of High Mountain Nursery will transition his nursery to a state-of-the-art "Pot-in-Pot" system, growing a mix of screening material and Japanese Maples.

Sam Silver will buy a potato washing and grading line to improve his potatoes' appearance and sort for size, increasing their marketability.

Most of the WNC AgOptions recipients market

their products at local farmers markets, restaurants, grocers or on-farm directly to the consumer.

"The hard work and commitment that the recipients of these grants have put into their projects and planning has been amazing," said Jeremy DeLisle, Mitchell County Extension Agent and AgOptions steering committee member.

"This goes to show what a commitment these growers have to the land and what a vision they have for the future of agriculture in western North Carolina."

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.

Members of the WNC AgOptions steering committee include representatives from N.C. Cooperative Extension, N.C. Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services - Marketing Division, and Hand-Made in America, as well as a former WNC AgOptions recipient and the manager of the Waynesville Farmers Co-Op.

The program funds farmers' projects in 17 counties and the Cherokee Reservation. For more information,

visit www.wncagoptions.org.