

Farmers receive \$225,000 in grants

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Tambra and Will Buford started a goat farm in Edneyville six years ago, planning to sell goat meat, then switching to goat's milk. The Bufords sell soaps, lotions and cheeses made from the milk.

Their Vineyard's Edge farm was recently awarded a \$6,000 grant to help build a cheese factory.

"We have been working on this project for several years, so we are pretty far along," Tambra said. "We are planning to break ground as soon as the ground thaws."

The Bufords were among 42 farmers in Western North Carolina to receive grants from the North Carolina Tobacco Trust Fund Commission. In all, the panel awarded \$225,000 to help farms in the N.C. mountains transition out of tobacco farming.

WNC AgOptions administers the grants.

"When burley tobacco was 'king' in Western North Carolina, it and other commodities defined mountain agriculture," said Ross Young, WNC AgOptions steering committee leader. "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."

Gail Blate owns DeerHaven Hills Farm in Polk County. When she purchased the land, it had French wine grapes varieties growing on it.

"Those required too many chemicals, and we want to create an organic farm," Blate said.

She pulled out the grapes and planted muscadine grapes and blueberries. The grape variety grows well in the mountains. She sells the grapes and blueberries to wholesalers and retailers.

"I just grow them," Blate said. "I sell them to people who make them into things or sell them to retail stores as table grapes."

She won a \$6,000 grant to install drip irrigation for the blueberry plants. The 700 blueberry plants were put into the ground in 2000 and struggled through the extended drought in 2007 and 2008.

Blueberry farmers "usually use overhead irrigation, but the drip irrigation is better," Blate said.

Annie Martin, of Pisgah Forest, won a \$3,000 grant to help find a market for moss.

"I am going to explore a new crop option for mountain farmers," Martin said.

She plans to research 20 different moss crops through her company, Mountain Moss



Enterprises. The research will identify moss varieties that grow well in heavy sun conditions. Moss can be used for green roofs and other environmentally sustainable products, she said.

"There is a void in terms of mosses, as far as information," Martin said. "There are a lot of myths about them, like they only grow in the shade or a north-facing slope."

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