

APPALACHIAN FARM SCHOOL BRINGS TOGETHER NEW PARTNERS TO MEET AG NEEDS

SMALL BUSINESS & EXTENSION FIND COMMON GROUND IN SUPPORTING LOCAL AG

Rob Hawk, Extension Director for Jackson & Swain counties, and Tiffany Henry, Director of Southwestern Community College's Small Business Center, were both involved with the WNC Food Policy Council in 2014. WNCFPC was a group of volunteers across the seven western counties of North Carolina – Clay, Cherokee, Graham, Macon, Jackson, Swain, and Haywood – that brought together agricultural developers, farmers, and food security agencies to work towards stronger food systems in the rural and often economically challenged counties in the Southern Appalachian region.

The council saw a real need for entrepreneurship and business training that was specific to this region's unique farmers – small scale produce farms and mid-size animal farms – and Rob and Tiffany decided to tackle that problem together.

With the help of other Extension agents, the North Carolina Department of Agriculture, and Western Carolina University, and seed funding from the Western North Carolina Community Foundation, they designed and launched the first Appalachian Farm School in 2014.



The nine-week course was based on weekly three-hour courses on such topics as soil & pest management, crop selection, business planning, marketing, insurance and legal issues, and regulations specific to each type of agriculture. With the grant funding, farmers were able to attend for a minimal cost, and to have mileage reimbursed and local food dinner provided at no charge.

BRINGING RESOURCES WHERE THEY ARE NEEDED MOST

Both Rob & Tiffany are based partly in Jackson County, where the main campus for courses took place. However, the school served farmers from all seven western counties, which together have high poverty rates – averaging around 22% - and an unemployment rate that hovers around 9%. All seven are smaller mountain counties, supporting tourism industries based on the state and national parks and natural resources they offer, and many have little land available for farming due to conservation efforts for parkland and residential and second-home development.



*"I would just tell people that it can be done, and to go do it," says Tiffany.
"There's so much common ground between Cooperative Extension and the Small Business Centers. We're all working towards the same goals of supporting small businesses and working to make the region a better place to live and work."*

AFS met those needs, and its success was obvious from both participant feedback and the long waiting list for admission. With the help of their other partners, the Small Business Center made the course a permanent fixture of their offered programming.

The 2015 program was refined into two components. The first component took place in November, led by Cooperative Extension, and covered two on-farm demonstration days (with instructor-led and farmer-to-farmer learning) for topics such as soil and pest management; grazing techniques; inspection and regulations; harvesting and storage; GAP certification; and other technique-based topics. The second component, from January to March, was an eight-week business planning & management program created and delivered by the Small Business Center, which covered “the business side of farming” through skills like self and farm assessment; marketing; branding; pricing; financials; operations; insurance & regulations; and market channels.



Small grant support from the WNC Community Foundation again allowed farmers to attend with only a small payment for tuition. In the second year’s program, one instructor provided continuity across all courses, but guest instructors with specialties in particular areas were brought in each night to go over topics such as inspection & regulation, GAP certification, grazing techniques, harvesting and storage, and more.

FORGING NEW PARTNERSHIPS, FUTURE SUCCESSES

Traditionally, some counties see tension between their SBC and Extension offices, as they are often serving the same clients and working towards the same goals. For Tiffany & Rob, however, they found that common ground united them in providing services – and made those services better for the farmers who relied on them.

“It’s a win-win for all of us,” Rob said. “We’re serving mutual clients already, so there’s a benefit just in meeting new people and connecting them with our resources. Plus, it’s helped build trust between Extension and SBC, which builds a stronger personal bond for the future.”



Tiffany adds that she sees the need for a dynamic shift in the way that both organizations see themselves as resource providers. “Farmers are entrepreneurs and they are business owners, and sometimes we fail to see them that way. When we shift our mindset, we give our farmers a much broader scope of resources.” She adds that resource providers across the state are all seeing similar opportunities – as the landscape of local food changes and demand continues to grow, farmers are

innovatively addressing their needs, and programs like this help their resource providers to innovate, too.

“I’m not a farming expert, but I can help them with their business model and access to capital,” she points out. “When they need help with harvesting or pesticides, that’s where Extension comes in. We’ve got to stop thinking that each of our independent organizations has all the answers. It takes a team to help small farmers move forward and become sustainable businesses that can grow over time.”

The pair feels that their partnership also catalyzed other agribusiness training in the region, bringing attention to an often under-served area of the state that can lag behind other areas in getting the resources and support they need. They find that they now have more partners than ever before in the business of supporting small-scale agriculture in the mountains.

For course and curriculum information, visit www.southwesterncc.edu/sbc.

MORE INFORMATION

Southwestern Community College Small Business Center | www.southwesterncc.edu/sbc

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NC GROWING TOGETHER PROJECT: RESILIENT LOCAL FOOD ECONOMIES INITIATIVE

Local economies benefit in a number of ways from revitalizing small agriculture and food entrepreneurship in their communities. Local governments, regional councils, and planners and economic developers have a unique opportunity to support the recruitment, retention, and expansion of area businesses through local agriculture efforts, and to build stronger and more resilient communities. NCGT supports those efforts by providing resources, and tools for local governments and small business assistance providers across the state. For more information, contact Emily Edmonds, NCGT Extension & Outreach Program Manager, at Emily.Edmonds@ncsu.edu or 828.399.0297.

Note: LFE makes available wholesale market information that can be used at farm schools and farm training programs in conjunction with other curriculum.