

News**North Carolina Research Campus, Kannapolis****March 17, 2009**

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N.C. State University Hosts State's Agricultural Leadership at N.C. Research Campus

KANNAPOLIS, N.C. – Think about a state-supported network of “local food systems” in which local farmers would partner to supply local markets and restaurants.

The farmers get the income they need, other businesses get the fresh food they need and consumers enjoy getting fresh produce grown near them, supporting local businesses and helping the environment by cutting transportation of products great distances.

That's one of the ideas the Agricultural Advancement Consortium is spearheading and may discuss March 26 when its members visit N.C. State University's Program for Value-Added & Alternative Agriculture, which is located at the new N.C. Research Campus in Kannapolis. Among its many efforts, the Value-Added team supports the development of a local foods system.

The Agricultural Advancement Consortium operates under the auspices of the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center and its 23-member board includes large and small farmers, representatives of other agribusinesses and leaders of state and local government and almost every major agricultural group in the state. The legislature agreed to create the consortium in 2000 and tasked it “to develop a shared vision for farming in North Carolina and to coordinate prudent actions to improve farming's long-term vitality.”

Billy Guillet, the consortium's director, said members are looking forward to hearing about research and initiatives supported by N.C. State's Program for Value-Added & Alternative Agriculture. The Valued-Added Program and N.C. State's Plants for Human Health Institute are part of the larger research venture between Dole Foods owner David Murdock, the University of North Carolina System, Duke University and a growing number of private companies.

Dr. Blake Brown, director of the Value-Added Program in Kannapolis, also serves on the Agricultural Advancement Consortium and invited the group to visit the Research Campus.

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Brown said he and other members of the Value Added team welcome the opportunity "to showcase our programs, to show what N.C. State is doing to help farmers."

Brown also credited the consortium with providing several important grants to N.C. State, including:

- \$12,000 to help start the Value-Added Program in Kannapolis.
- \$150,000 for research to strengthen production and breeding of strawberries and blueberries in North Carolina.
- \$24,000 to build prototype portable hand-washing facilities – a large one and small one. This initiative, led by Rod Gurganus of N.C. State's Value-Added Program, will support the efforts of the N.C. Fresh Produce Safety Task Force. Value-Added team member Diane Ducharme is one of the co-chairs of the task force. Read more about the Program for Value-Added & Alternative Agriculture at www.ncvalueadded.org.

Guillet credited Brown and his Value-Added team with "looking for and opening up opportunities" for new markets and new products to take the place of practices that don't work as well now. Guillet said the Value-Added program is "giving farmers alternatives."

While gathered in Kannapolis, consortium members will likely discuss critical issues facing farmers this year in the General Assembly. With last year's drought affecting all parts of the state, water will prompt much discussion this year at the General Assembly, Guillet said. He added that the consortium will be monitoring closely any legislation this session that would put further restrictions on farmers' access to needed water.

Proposals in the legislature would regulate the number of wells a farmer can drill and catch ponds they use to support irrigation. Another proposal would require farmers to measure and report how much water they use.

"Agriculture is the biggest industry in the state and provides a safe, affordable and nutritious source of food" Guillet said. "The value of this has to be taken into account when policy changes are being proposed. Any legislation that will increase the cost of production or the time farmers spend to comply with regulatory reporting requirements will affect their productivity, their ability to stay in business and ultimately the price consumers pay at the grocery store."

The consortium is already administering a cost-sharing initiative to help farmers statewide recover from the drought. The N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund provided most of the funding with a \$6 million grant, and the legislature contributed another \$1.5 million.

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As of late February, the consortium and local soil and water conservation districts together have signed contracts to renovate 5,663 acres of pasture and install or fix 172 wells, 47 water supply ponds and 1,616 feet of conservation irrigation. By September, officials expect to expand that program to cover 11,027 acres of pasture, 400 wells, 89 supply ponds and 3,430 feet of irrigation.

Guillet also is proud of the consortium's work on a strategic plan to support "local food systems across the state." He sees such a statewide network as another "value-added" opportunity for everyone involved in agriculture.

Note to media: For assistance in arranging interviews with Dr. Brown and other members of the N.C. State University Program for Value-Added & Alternative Agriculture, please contact Leah Chester-Davis, Coordinator of Communications and Community Outreach at (704) 617-0502.

To arrange an interview with Mr. Guillet, N.C. Rural Economic Development Center, call (919)250-4314, or email him at bguillet@ncruralcenter.org.

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