

News

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Media Contact: Leah Chester-Davis, coordinator of communications and community outreach, N.C. MarketReady, 704-250-5406 or leah_chester-davis@ncsu.edu

Local Farmer Awarded Funding from N.C. Value-Added Cost Share Program

N.C. Dairyman Considers Shift from Organic Milk to Artisan Cheese

KANNAPOLIS, N.C. – Rick Parker of Mary L Farm in Mt. Ulla, N.C., was one of nine recipients of the N.C. Value-Added Cost Share (NCVACS) awards. Parker is the fourth generation to farm the rolling pastures in western Rowan County that make up the 365 acres of the Mary L Farm. He and his family live in the two-story farmhouse his great-grandfather built and they carry on the dairy farming way of life his father set into motion 73 years ago with just two cows and a bucket.

Having taken ownership of the dairy in 1998, Parker has experienced the volatility of the dairy industry and has worked to find more stability for his family farm. In 2006, the farm transitioned to certified organic and joined the Organic Valley Family of Farms, a dairy cooperative. While the shift to organic differentiated their product, the farm must still contend with fluctuating milk prices. Parker is pursuing a new venture by producing artisan cheeses. A cheese-making enterprise will offer the farm some degree of self-sufficiency that is difficult to obtain in the Grade A, fluid milk market.

In a joint venture with goat dairyman, Chuck Moore, Parker plans to launch a cheese processing business. They have attended cheese-making classes and have secured the assistance of Neville McNaughton, an international cheese consultant, as they continue planning for this new business. Parker's NCVACS award will help reduce the costs of applying for a USDA Value-Added Producer Grant (VAPG) which may provide additional funding to establish the business.

NCVACS is administered by N.C. MarketReady, a program of N.C. Cooperative Extension located at the N.C. Research Campus. The cost share program, funded by the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission, was launched in 2009 to encourage more North Carolina producers to apply for the VAPG federal funds and to generate more competitive applications. The first cycle of NCVACS was designed to provide supplemental funding for producers to work with professionals who provide grant writing services and perform feasibility assessments. Parker's award consists of a \$2,000 cost share for grant writing assistance for the VAPG-Working Capital grant and \$20,000 for a feasibility assessment, which is an application requirement for the Working Capital VAPG.

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The cheese-making facility, under construction on Moore's property, will also provide space for a retail shop and a windowed hallway to allow visitors to view the cheese-making process and goat milking. Parker and Moore will operate the facility under a shared arrangement, with each farm being responsible for the branded sales of the cheese produced from their milk. The capacity of the facility will allow for the annual production of approximately 36,000 pounds of goat cheese and 50,000 pounds of cow cheese. All milk used in the cheese-making process will be produced by the respective dairies.

A large space in the facility will be devoted to cheese storage. Aging is an important part of the cheese-making process and this storage ability is a unique quality among dairy products. McNaughton will help these farmers develop signature recipes that will help support their brand identity. Parker believes, "If you're going to put a new product on the market, it needs to be different from what's already on the shelf." Producing artisan cheeses will set them apart. The artisan label indicates no shortcuts have been taken in small-scale cheese production. "Many consumers don't realize that powders and imported milk protein concentrates (MPC) are used in the production of many commercial cheeses," says Parker. Artisan cheese typically commands a premium of 20 to 60 percent over commodity cheese prices.

In addition to the retail store front at the processing facility, Parker hopes to market his cheese in small, local stores, having identified several in the Salisbury, Davidson and Cornelius area. On a larger scale, he has discussed cheese placement at a local Earth Fare supermarket. Other areas of marketing might include Internet sales and gift boxes.

Parker admits that without cost share funding, it would be difficult to move forward with this vision for a new, value-added dairy product line. He looks forward to working with the professionals on the feasibility assessment to ensure they are moving in the right direction. At this point, it is not too late to choose a different route, so long as it moves the family farm toward self-sufficiency that will provide security for the next generation.

N.C. MarketReady, formerly known as the Program for Value-Added & Alternative Agriculture, is a program of N.C. Cooperative Extension, which is an educational outreach of N.C. State University and N.C. A&T State University. N.C. MarketReady's multidisciplinary team builds partnerships and educational resources to help North Carolina agriculture be more profitable. N.C. MarketReady is a partner of the Plants for Human Health Institute at the N.C. Research Campus in Kannapolis. Learn more at www.ncmarketready.org or www.ces.ncsu.edu.

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Writer: Megan Bame