Developing the Next Generation of Sustainable Farmers in Georgia: A Comprehensive Training Program

Across the United States and in Georgia, the number of small and medium-sized farms is declining and the average age of farmers is on the rise. Although we need new farmers, the barriers would-be farmers face when trying to grow new agricultural businesses from the ground up can be formidable.

UGA Extension has recently been awarded a Beginning Farmer Rancher Development Grant to provide a comprehensive training program for beginning farmers, including a Small Farm Business Course, a Small Fruit & Vegetable Course, a Small Ruminants Course, and a Hands-on Program. These programs will be piloted in north Georgia in the fall and winter of 2015-2016 and then will be rolled out to the rest of the state.

Interested farmers will first attend one of two different Small Farm Business Courses: either the AgAware program run by AgSouth or a series of facilitated webinars developed in partnership with the UGA Small Business Development Center and the Georgia Department of Agriculture. These programs will enable a farmer to develop a farm business plan. Once the farmer has successfully completed one of these courses, they will be eligible to enroll in either the Small Fruit & Vegetable Production course or the Small Ruminant Production Course. These courses will take place during the winter over four to six weeks.

Farmers that successfully complete one of these courses will be eligible for the Hands-On Program. The Hands-On Program for those interested in Small Fruit & Vegetable Production will be coordinated by Georgia Organics. For farmers with their own land, they will find a farmer mentor to help them improve their operations. Would-be farmers that do not have access to land will be placed in an internship or possibly on an incubator farm.

The Hands-On program for those interested in small ruminant production will be coordinated by Fort Valley State University. They will help farmers with land and an existing herd find a farmer mentor to help them improve their operation. They will also help find internship positions for would-be farmers without land or an existing herd.

More details will be forthcoming as we begin this exciting project. We will keep you updated here and on our Facebook page.

This project is supported by USDA NIFA Beginning Farmer Rancher Development Program. It is a partnership between UGA, Georgia Organics, Fort Valley State University, UGA Small Business Development Center, AgSouth, Georgia Department of Agriculture, and the Georgia Fruit & Vegetable Growers Association.