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Or the local Cooperative Extension Center

## News Release

### **WNC AgOptions announces 2010 funding cycle: Mountain farmers eligible for funds to diversify operations**

Grants totaling \$225,000 are available to western North Carolina farmers who are diversifying or expanding their operations in 2010. WNC Agricultural Options, which will award approximately 45 farmers in 17 counties and the Cherokee Reservation \$3,000, \$6,000 or \$9,000 each, released its 2010 applications today.

Managed by the N.C. Cooperative Extension County Centers in the West District, the WNC AgOptions program works with producers who demonstrate ways to increase farm income to other transitioning farmers, particularly tobacco growers. WNC AgOptions works in partnership with RAFI-USA's Tobacco Communities Reinvestment Fund, and the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission sponsors the program.

"The partnership we have with the WNC AgOptions program is very valuable to us," said William Upchurch, Executive Director of the Tobacco Trust Fund Commission. "Our experience has shown that participating farmers utilize these grants for innovative, resourceful and profitable enterprises that can make a huge impact on their farming operation."

Recent recipients are transitioning from commercial to direct markets, extending their growing seasons, or developing value-added processing systems so that they will have a product to sell year-round. With a grant they received in spring 2009, Tammie and Mike Edwards of Yancey County are building a germination chamber in a greenhouse they previously used in tobacco production to start plants for their potted flower operation. Saving them the cost of buying their own plugs, "...could make a difference if we stay in business," Tammie Edwards said.

Skipper Russell of Haywood County, a 2005 and 2009 recipient, and Kaleb Rathbone of Haywood County, a 2006 recipient, both have the infrastructure in place to open up markets with Ingles grocery stores this year, in large part due to the WNC AgOptions grants. Russell, who purchased a refrigeration truck, sells lettuce to Ingles, and Rathbone, who installed irrigation, sells strawberries.

Other WNC AgOptions recipients use the funds to offset the financial risk of trying untested, unique endeavors, such as hops production. “Just applying for the grant was about the best thing I could have done,” said Van Burnette of Buncombe County, who started “Hop N’ Blueberry” on his family’s seventh generation farm. “I learned so much about the cost, timeline and the activities, and narrowed down what I wanted to do with the farm.”

“This grant opportunity is an excellent resource to help offset the financial risk for farmers wanting to expand their operations or diversify into crops they may not be very familiar with,” said Ross Young, Madison County Cooperative Extension Director. “The success of small family farms is the focus of this project. By providing financial assistance, this project is enabling farms to create more sustainable farming enterprises, which will have a long-term effect on the economy as well as farm land preservation.”

Interested applicants should see the agricultural agents at their local Extension Centers by November 23, and can visit [www.wncagoptions.org](http://www.wncagoptions.org) to download an application. Projects should increase the sale of farm products and lead to the long-term sustainability of the farm business. The postmark deadline for applications is January 8.

Established in 2003, WNC AgOptions is entering its sixth funding cycle. Members of the WNC AgOptions steering committee include: representatives from N.C. Cooperative Extension program, N.C. Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services– Marketing Division, HandMade in America, Appalachian Sustainable Agricultural Project, former WNC AgOptions recipients and other leaders in agribusiness.

#### Project Partners:

**WNC Agricultural Options:** [www.wncagoptions.org](http://www.wncagoptions.org)

Operated by the NC Cooperative Extension Centers in the West District, WNC AgOptions builds sustainable farming communities in our mountain region by providing resources directly to farmers who are diversifying and expanding their operations. WNC AgOptions works with farmers in Avery, Buncombe, Cherokee, the Cherokee Reservation, Clay, Haywood, Henderson, Graham, Jackson, Macon, Madison, Mitchell, McDowell, Polk, Swain, Transylvania, Watauga, and Yancey.

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**N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission:** [www.tobaccotrustfund.org](http://www.tobaccotrustfund.org)

The Commission was established in 2000 by the NC General Assembly to manage funds that are part of the Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement. Grants target farm areas that have historically depended upon tobacco income through farming or tobacco-related businesses.

Contact: William Upchurch, Executive Director, (919) 733-2160

Jeff Jennings, Program Officer

**Rural Advancement Foundation International – USA:** [www.ncfarmgrants.org](http://www.ncfarmgrants.org)

RAFI-USA cultivates markets, policies and communities that support thriving, socially just and environmentally sound family farms. RAFI's Tobacco Communities Reinvestment Fund provides grants to farmers and collaborative farm groups throughout North Carolina for projects that show new ways to earn income on the farm.

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**N.C. Department of Agriculture & Consumer Sciences – Marketing:** [www.ncdamarkets.org](http://www.ncdamarkets.org)

The mission of the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services is to improve the state of agriculture in North Carolina by providing services to farmers and agribusinesses, and to serve the citizens of North Carolina by providing services and enforcing laws to protect consumers.

**Handmade in America:** [www.handmadeinamerica.org](http://www.handmadeinamerica.org)

The mission is to *celebrate* the hand and the handmade, to *nurture* the creation of traditional and contemporary craft, to *revere and protect* our resources, and to *preserve and enrich* the spiritual, cultural and community life of our region.