Mentor program will spread the grow-how

Vern Switzer of Rural Hall is among the seven farmers from across the state selected as mentors for A&T Extension’s Farmer-to-Farmer Program.

and horticulture specialist Keith Baldwin, say prospects look excellent for continuing the program.

“It’s comfortable for some farmers to know that they’ll be speaking at the same level and the same language with people that can help them,” Baldwin says. “They can call a guy down the road or on the other side of the county who has some experience.

“The program is increasing our ability to do outreach by recruiting these farmers to do this short term work. It’s a long way from our offices in Greensboro, and it may be a long way for some of these farmers to their local Extension centers. This is a new and innovative way to help more farmers explore alternatives and increase farm income.”

The mentors have opened their farms up to the public, including other farmers, to showcase their successful crops and techniques—many of which Extension programs have helped them develop or improve.

In addition to the Jameses, Holt and Shaw, the mentors are:
- Charles Gupton, Franklin County.
- Vern Switzer, Forsyth County.
- Robert Thompson, Yancey County.
- Bill Moretz, Watauga County.

Think of it as a kind of Big Brothers Big Sisters program for farmers.

Pender County farm couple Mary and Nelson James showed a neighbor how to turn a profit on inherited farmland, instead of selling it. Chatham County farmer Matthew Holt sends out a newsletter to other farmers sharing his expertise and information. Duplin County farmer Larry Shaw teaches other farmers how to set up roadside stands, and then donates some of his own fresh produce to area elderly.

These farmers are in the first class of the Farmer to Farmer Mentor program, created this year through The Cooperative Extension Program at N.C. A&T State University. The program matches seasoned farmers across the state with some of their fledgling counterparts.

About 60 people statewide applied for the program, but the seven farmers who were chosen exhibit the best combination of experience, vision, and people skills. Representing agriculture from Watauga to Pender counties, the farm mentors share their expertise and techniques with other farmers who may not have the time or inclination to contact county Extension agents for assistance. Yet, the program also helps cultivate relationships between Extension and the people it strives to serve.

“Our goals are to strengthen bonds between Extension agents and farmers, to work hand in hand with other farmers in the community, and to share information,” says DeShon Cromartie an Extension associate and project coordinator.

Cromartie requires the selected seven to submit weekly written reports detailing who they’ve helped, what they’ve done, and to list their travel and expenses. The 20-week project has been so successful that Cromartie, and grant developer
NRCS inks landmark agreement with A&T

Bruce I. Knight (left), the NRCS’s top official, and Chancellor James C. Renick say it’s a deal. Greensboro is one of three NRCS Regional Technology Centers that will serve the country.

As part of its reorganization, NRCS selected Greensboro as the site for one of its three national technology centers to Greensboro.

“This is a wonderful opportunity for Greensboro and North Carolina A&T,” said Chancellor James C. Renick. “This allows the university, and this strengthens NRCS’s relationship to A&T.”

The National Technology Support Centers were established to strengthen scientific and technological support for NRCS’s conservation programs and activities. Each center is staffed with the following experts: agronomist, forestec, range-land management/pastureland specialist, soil scientist, biologist, agricultural engineer, environmental engineer, sociologist, economist, water management specialist, and global information systems (GIS) specialist.

The move will bring about 85-85 new employees to Greensboro, renting over 18,000 square feet of office space. A&T was in the running with dozens of other locations all vying for the chance to host one of the three NRCS sites. NRCS originally had six regional offices. Greensboro has the only site connected to a university, and this strengthens NRCS’s relationship to A&T.

“The faculty expertise combined with the expertise of the professionals in the local office and their network of national experts can only enhance our teaching, research, and extension functions,” said Thompson.

Dr. Ghasem Shahbazi, a bioenvironmental engineer whose research specialty is converting agricultural wastes into alternative energy sources, says the NRCS relocation is the opening of an important door for SAES.

“I think these facilities will have a comparable impact to the Department of Energy’s Oak Ridge (Tennessee) facilities and its National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Golden, Colorado,” said Shahbazi. “Scientists from across the U.S. — including myself and other members of the SAES faculty — go to great lengths to get access to the major equipment at these facilities. It’s going to be positive in many ways for us to have some of the most sophisticated labs and equipment in the country literally in our own back yard.”

Shahbazi also thinks the Regional Technology Center will give A&T soil and water quality researchers timely and critical access to NRCS scientists and administrators, and this relationship will work wonders for SAES funding proposals.

“It’s a partnership that’s going to grow in ways that we won’t expect,” says Shahbazi.

SAES to lead multi-state agromedicine alliance

SAES Dean Alton Thompson as a means to lead the acquisition and/or development team designed to lead the acquisition and/or development of new science and technologies to address prescribed special emphasis areas. The local emphasis will be on animal waste utilization technology, soil quality, and social sciences.

The emphasis of the special technology team complements existing A&T research, especially that taking place in the School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, said Alton Thompson, the school’s dean.

“Our faculty expertise combined with the expertise of the professionals in the local office and their network of national experts can only enhance our teaching, research, and extension functions,” said Thompson.

As campus coordinator for a new 1890 Universities Agromedicine Alliance, Dr. Mohamed Ahmedna will be spreading the word on the important connections between biotechnology and agromedicine.

Dr. Mohamed Ahmedna, assistant professor of food science, has been named the campus coordinator of a new 1890 Universities Agromedicine Alliance.

The alliance was spearheaded in 2003 by SAES Dean Alton Thompson as a means of pooling resources from agricultural and medical institutions to address the health and safety problems that rural populations fall victim to.

Ahmedna said the alliance will conduct region-wide research that will lead to public policy and Extension programs to benefit farmers, fisherman and forestry workers throughout the Southeast. At present, there is a lack of substantial, research-based knowledge about the health of rural workers in the Southern Black Belt. Some of the health problems these workers commonly encounter include skin cancer, heat stress, pesticide poisoning, hearing loss, and injuries from tractor roll-overs or machinery.

The alliance will be formalized just prior to the Agricultural Workers Conference, at Tuskegee University in Alabama Dec. 6-7. Ahmedna plans to organize an agromedicine conference at A&T in 2005.

The alliance already has succeeded in attracting funding, as evidenced by a $362,220 grant that the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health awarded to seven land grant universities to assess the health and safety of black farmers in the southern coastal region. Dean Thompson is the principal investigator. In addition, the SAES is serving as the lead investigator for 10 other agromedicine projects in the following areas, which are: biosecurity monitoring of food and agricultural threat agents; health and safety of rural minorities, and functional foods for health.

To find out more about the agromedicine alliance, contact Ahmedna at (336) 334-7963, or Ahmedna@ncat.edu.
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Mark Your Calendar

• Saturday, Oct. 30: University Day

• Nov. 7–10: American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences Accreditation Review Team Visit to HEFS


The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T’s 10th Annual Conference of Women In Agriculture is set for Oct. 25–27 at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Greensboro. The conference will offer participants several workshops, including sessions on sustainable agriculture, government programs and other resources, and the role of new technologies in agriculture. For registration information or additional details, contact Mary Mafuyai-Ekanem at mafuyai@ncat.edu, or (336) 334-7956.