

PRESS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release:

Western NC Receives USDA Support For Regional Farmer Training Program

Asheville, NC – *Farm Pathways: Access to Land, Livelihood, and Learning*, is a collaboration of three partners: Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, Organic Growers School, and WNC FarmLink. This team received a grant award from the Beginning Farmer Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) to develop capacity for creating the farm production, business, and land access curriculum and resources that beginning farmers in our region need to start successful farm enterprises.

The funds, to be used in 2015, will help the partners build the foundation for *Farm Pathways*, a comprehensive training and innovative land access program for new and aspiring farmers in Western North Carolina (WNC). The USDA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program provides grants to organizations for education, mentoring, and technical assistance initiatives for beginning farmers or ranchers. In order to support beginning farmers the groups must fill gaps in regional agricultural services for and plan to provide unique approaches that coalesce into a whole-farm training package called *Farm Pathways*.

Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy (SAHC), is one of the country's oldest and most respected land trusts. SAHC works to protect the world's oldest mountains for the benefit of present and future generations. With the help of this BFRDP grant, SAHC will develop capacity to build their Farmer Incubator Project into a comprehensive, robust program that includes hands-on production workshops, reduced land rental rates, farming infrastructure, and farm equipment training and leasing for beginning farmers to start their own businesses. Additionally, SAHC will create a strategic plan to expand the Farmland Access Service, which provides beginning farmers with access to affordable farmland in WNC. The strategic plan will lay the groundwork for acquiring viable farmland parcels, placing them under conservation easement and deed restriction, and then leasing them to beginning farmers and/or re-selling to farmers at agricultural value (Buy-Protect-Sell/Lease).

Organic Growers School (OGS), is the premier provider of practical organic education in the Southern Appalachians. With support from the BFRDP funds, OGS will design, build, and implement a Beginning Farmer Training Curriculum (BFTC) to provide practical, whole-farm business, financial, and marketing planning to beginning and expanding farmers. In addition, OGS will expand Apprentice Link (AL) and Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training (CRAFT) programs, which offers experiential, peer-to-

peer production & farm management training and mentoring. These programs will reinforce one another and be strategically aligned.

Western NC FarmLink (WNCFL) matches farm and forest land owners with new and experienced farmers eager to find land to farm in WNC. The program is a free service to WNC residents as part of the WNC Agriventures project until 2016. This BFRDP funding will expand programming to increase personalized one-on-one consultation, provide group workshops to help beginning farmers negotiate equitable leases and prepare logistically and financially for long-term land tenure and purchase, which is a major obstacle for beginning farmers.

In Western North Carolina the demand for locally grown food is at an all-time high. Yet, the retention and success rate of new farmers in our area has been low. Prospective farmers face many challenges, including access to land, capital, skills, support, and training. There is a strong need for assistance during the transition of new growers into owners of viable commercial operations. *Farm Pathways: Access to Land, Livelihood, and Learning* is designed to support beginning farmers in that critical period in five key ways:

- Membership in a peer network of beginning and established growers to provide group support and one-on-one assistance. Enable beginning farmers to find an experienced producer mentor to assist them.
- Access to apprenticeships on farms similar to the type of farming that the prospective farmer intends to pursue.
- Formal classroom and experiential agricultural education through a year-long Beginning Farmer Training Curriculum, leading to a journeyman farmer certificate as a regional alternative to a four-year agricultural degree.
- Coaching programs for prospective growers to develop viable business plans. Guidance in gaining access to start-up capital.
- Negotiate equitable leases or finding affordable farmland under conservation easements.

In order to achieve these goals and take the training to the next level, the Farm Pathways team will be applying to the USDA for further support in the form of a three-year grant as the project gets off the ground in 2016. According to the USDA “Ensuring there will be a “new generation” of beginning farmers and ranchers—regardless of age or production choice—is especially important to the continuation of agricultural production in the United States.”

Complex social problems are often solved through a collaborative approach across organizations. SAHC, OGS and WNCFL are poised to build a solid team for that collective impact. During this one-year development time frame, these three groups will work together to create a cohesive structure, trust-based professional relationship, and a cooperative workflow for implementing the *Farm Pathways* project. For all three organizations, the end goal is to meet the needs of beginning farmers in our region so that they may create viable farm businesses.