**FARM INCUBATOR EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM FOR NEW AND BEGINNING FARMERS & RANCHERS**

The Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Development Program (BFRDP) at Alabama A&M University was initiated in 2012 to enhance and provide opportunities for beginning farmers to establish and sustain viable agricultural operations in Alabama’s underserved communities. Through the development and implementation of targeted educational training programs, services, and social networks, The Small Farms Research Center and its partners have been providing assistance to the target audience and is expected to train and assist at least 250 new producers and reach over 2,000 additional beginning farmers and ranchers by the end of the project in 2014 through general outreach information dissemination.

**NBFR PROGRAM OBJECTIVES**

- Equip new and beginning farmers and ranchers with knowledge, skills and abilities to operate viable and sustainable agricultural operations;
- Promote the availability of and accessibility to USDA programs and services by new and beginning farmers and ranchers and other underserved agricultural producers;
- Provide production and management strategies that enhance the farm financial viability of new and beginning farmers and ranchers, and
- Train new and beginning farmers and ranchers in whole farm planning, farm business management and overall risk management.

**OVERALL APPROACH**

The project is based on a farm incubator approach to deliver hands-on training and educational opportunities to assist new and aspiring farmers to establish their own successful and sustainable farming businesses. This project offers specific resources and services to assist aspiring producers succeed in their start-up agricultural businesses. This assistance includes outreach training and individualized technical assistance including farmer-to-farmer training. For instance, since the beginning of the

- AAMU and its partners have devoted over 160 hours to providing one-on-one mentoring sessions, education and assistance to producers in areas of business planning, recordkeeping, farm financial management, direct marketing, value-added enterprises, government programs and general technical assistance throughout Alabama;
- Our partners (Rosita’s and Tune’s Farm) are focusing their training on organic production and marketing. They have jointly enrolled 46 incubator participants and 90 additional farmers, providing them with ongoing education and hands-on training in areas of financial planning, marketing, business planning, and organic certification. Tune Farm is also working with 15 interns in various areas of need;
- Tri-State has enrolled 62 producers interested in meat goats, sheep, rabbits and pastured poultry. Tri-State provides hands-on training to aspiring producers in areas of animal healthcare, processing and marketing, and breeding of small ruminants and livestock.

**SUCCESS STORIES**

- Recruitment campaign: Outreach activities, including news articles, radio announcements, television media, town-hall meetings, and seminars, have been conducted and are ongoing.
- A needs assessment instrument has been developed and administered to identify priority training needs, and to assist with the development of a consistent educational curriculum.
- Over 135 participants have enrolled in various project courses.
- “First Thursday” monthly meetings are ongoing, and are supplemented by one-on-one farm/home visits and farmer-to-farmer mentoring sessions to strengthen understanding.
- The Center’s Facebook page shows producer traffic has increased by over 28% compared to previous years.
- Holistic approach to outreach training and to starting a farm is highly advocated in recognition of the fact that beginning farmers and ranchers have many needs or barriers to entering the farming business.

**OBSTACLES**

Many producers need capital and extended credit lines to purchase agricultural equipment, land, including livestock. For most aspiring producers, they are entering farming as business versus a hobby. They take advantage of this program’s services but due to problems of access to land and capital, they are often frustrated with the complicated procedures involved in getting assistance from the government or commercial lenders. In short, access to capital is a major problem.

**CONCLUSION**

The BFRDP Farm Incubator Project at AAMU continues to provide training and assist agricultural producers, landowners, and aspiring agribusinesses. The project’s long-term goals is to continue to grow the next generation of farmers, ranchers, and entrepreneurs who will use the experience, skills and land stewardship to improve and enhance sustainability and productive capacity of farms and ranches.