

Plan to attend the WV Small Farm Conference

It's got something for everybody

Tom McConnell, Director, West Virginia Small Farm Center of the WVU Extension Service

It's time to add the 2010 West Virginia Small Farm Conference to your calendar. Scheduled for March 1-4, at the Lakeview Resort and Conference Center in Morgantown, this year's event features six different learning tracks to accommodate the diverse mix of experience, age, crop enterprise and interests of the region's small farmers. The tracks include Fruit and Vegetable Production, Value-adding, Beginning Farmers, Agritourism, Energy and Animal Production and Marketing. And like last year, we are excited to host the West Virginia Farmers' Market Association Winter Blues Farmers' Market on Monday night. Last year the vendors grossed \$7,500!

To help farmers gain a larger share of the food dollar by becoming processors and value adders, the Conference starts off with the Better Process Control School. This two-day workshop will overlap with the first day of the Small Farm Conference. Remember, successful completion of this course coupled with an approved kitchen allows farmers the regulatory clearance to preserve and sell many of the crops grown in the market garden. This special workshop is open to 40 people. Many other case studies of value adders will be presented throughout the Conference.

In West Virginia and throughout much of the country, we have more opportunity for sales than we have product. Our industry needs more growers. To help those beginning and young farmers who have chosen to enter this enterprise, special workshops are scheduled to give them the skills they need to get started. These classes, which target both plant and animal farmers, will include training in soils, basic equipment, variety and crop selection, species selection, marketing, and beginner management and recordkeeping. This track will be attractive for high school aged farmers, too.

Production classes of all kinds will be emphasized at the Conference. Dr. Lewis Jett, WVU Extension Horticulturalist, has developed an extensive series of classes on advanced production and management topics. These classes will be offered all three days.

Most farmers in West Virginia raise livestock, but they represent only 15 percent of the locally produced food sold. The Conference is delivering a full animal curriculum to help farmers join in the locally grown marketing movement. The many classes de-

voted to animal production and marketing will include the development of a laying hen budget, growing a broiler and turkey enterprise, grass fed opportunities, adding value to animal products, nutrient cycling, and developing a multi-species operation.

The West Virginia Farmers' Market Association has joined hands with the Conference to help deliver a market issues and management track. This is so important, as we all look to our farmers markets as stepping off points for our direct marketing career. Nearly all of our direct marketers learned how to produce and market in a farmers' market setting. Those attending will learn from those doing it how to successfully manage, promote, and govern a farmers market. The better the market management, the better the market serves the farmer. The West Virginia Farmers' Market Association will hold its annual meeting Tuesday evening of the Conference.

It seems we never quite understand all the regulation and rules concerning food safety. Even more complicated is the fact that there are multiple agencies with food safety responsibilities. To address that issue, the Conferences will host the first ever WV Food Safety Taskforce roundtable discussion; which will include every agency that has some food safety oversight. Those attending will get to ask questions and will also receive the latest, most up-to-date copies of the regulations from each agency. The agency representatives have agreed to make themselves available for one-on-one consultations too.

Food security for all West Virginian's will be the topic of a special workshop held at the Conference. The role local production plays is more important than most of us believe. This will be the first time in West Virginia that producers and consumers have come together to discuss the security of "our" food supply as it relates to hunger. The success of our food system will be judged by how it serves our farmers and provides for each strata of the socio-economic profile (meaning rich, poor, young and old). This workshop is about the prospect of having food for all to eat.

It seems that farmers who could benefit greatly from an Agritourism enterprise never get to talk to and hear from those who have benefitted from it. Cindy Martel from the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) has designed a full curriculum on

tourism for farmers. Those attending will learn that Agritourism has many more faces and opportunities than it initially appears. It would be a good investment in a farmer's time to sit in on a session or two to see if some part of this could help fill in some revenue gaps and possibly match an enterprise with personality and schedule.

The energy portion of the previous conferences has always been very popular. This year might be the most important ever. The Marcellus Shale gas discovery will drastically change the lives of nearly every small farmer in West Virginia. Those attending the sessions on this topic will gain a workable understanding of the business and how to communicate with industry professionals and develop a personal support staff to protect you. Mr. Mark Ribas of the Internal Revenue Service will help those attending better understand income tax issues relating to income from gas leases and royalties.

New on-farm energy production and conservation strategies are emerging every day and will be stressed at this year's conference. Matching appropriate technology to small farm and rural living is challenging, as costs continue to climb. Financial breakdowns of current technologies will be explained. In another session tax professionals will discuss each of the many energy tax credits available for those who make energy conserving purchases.

The Conference will also include coupon training by the WVDA which allows farmers market vendors to accept food vouchers.

Like last year, all the food for the Conference will be grown locally. This is important, as we have further developed each of the food pathways we started last year. Many of the local food community who were introduced to locally grown products last year are still using them. We have learned a lot about menus that include locally grown food. The menu will reflect the development of the industry in West Virginia as it is has more crops in greater variety than ever. Like last year, the food is a vital part of the Conference. Please contact me if you would like to sell us some of your food. Last year, local vendors grossed greater than \$5,000 for conference food.

To learn more about the Conference, or to register, contact Tom McConnell at 304-293-6131 or visit the Conference website at smallfarmcenter.ext.wvu.edu/events/conference. We hope to see you in March!