



ncfarmschool.ces.ncsu.edu



Our Mission

NC Farm School (NCFS) is a program committed to helping farmers develop business skills that will have a real effect on their ability to successfully manage a farm and create economic stability. This focus comes from a desire to see growth in small communities throughout North Carolina by giving farmers training to help them succeed. NCFS connects business principles and production practices in order to create stable farm businesses that use land resources responsibly, farm inputs wisely, utilize local suppliers, and contribute to the local food economy. Our vision is to see new farm ventures start, help them grow, and provide them resources to succeed beyond 3 to 5 years. NCFS is creating a network of support that fosters success in addition to providing a training series with critical information to meet current needs.



Our Results are important to assessing our achievements:

- **\$500,000 total initial estimated impact on farmer incomes statewide**
- **\$7,000 income increase for each student**
- **31 jobs employed by farmers who graduate**
- **56% of students indicated they will move into new markets with new ventures**

Award Winning Roots

The NC Farm School is modeled after the successful awarding winning program "Piedmont Farm School" began in 2012 with a team of Extension Agents from six counties put together the core curriculum with the guidance of the late Mike Roberts. The initial success of the Piedmont Farm School has led to the creation of farm schools throughout North Carolina. In 2015 NCFS conducted 5 farm schools across the state with over 100 Farmers.



Our Method

The NCFS is offered in a cluster of four to six counties through extension agents with a proven track record of successful programming. Extension agents are asked to attend a four hour training on farm school goals, methods, support frame work, and data collection. The farm school training is conducted by extension agents who have implemented successful farm schools and have farm business expertise. This required training insures the integrity and sustainability of the NCFS program. NCFS also provides support to agents and farm professionals through curriculum we have refined and developed in our program. This curriculum integrates business principles and production practices through a series of case studies, business planning tools, and online resources for students.

Our Expectations

We expect each participant to have good attendance and have a functional business plan at the end of class sessions. In order to meet those standards a student must have attended 6 out of 8 of the business sessions, two of the field day sessions, and have their business plan written. Past farm school participants are integrated into the future schools as speakers, field day host and serve as mentors for new participants. We are creating a network of farmers that will inspire, educate and foster peer learning among small-scale growers - in particular, current growers who share a strong interest in producing products for local markets. 85% of 2015 farm school participants said they would be willing to continue to work with NCFS and help train future NC Farm School students.

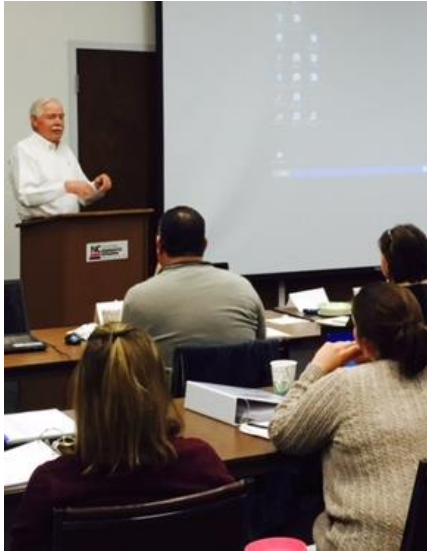


Our Students

We surveyed the participating NCFS students in the first class using live polling and Turning Point technology to asses why students attend. The following summarizes the results:

- **86% of participants need help understanding business practices**
- **83% of participants wanted to improve farm management skills**
- **69% of participants have land for farm sustaining income**
- **59% indicated they were currently in production**

Business Focused Classes



NCFS provides business skills through a eight-month educational program that targets beginning and transitioning farmers. Each month one three hour business planning session gives farmers the tools to create a new or revised business plan for an economically sustainable farm enterprise. Each session covers a new business topic such as: goal setting, farm evaluation, marketing fundamentals, finances and business planning. Educators and farmer mentors work directly with farmers outside of class through online business planning tools and one on one meetings. This allows farmers to work on their plan in between the monthly business sessions with support from experienced professionals. Our program also connects business principles with production practices with on farm visits.

Practical Farm Visits

The NC Farm Schools (NCFS) includes seven farm field trips led by successful and innovative experienced farmers and agricultural professionals. The farm visits are planned to reinforce the business sessions and the business planning sessions incorporate the lessons learned from the farm visits. Farmers who host field trip will be given a set of topics to cover in advance of the farm school visit. During the farm school visit the farms are asked to discuss:

- Why they choose the crops they grow?
- What markets channels they chose?
- Why they do not use other markets?
- What business structure they chose?
- How they keep financial records?



This interaction of connecting farmers to real working farms is an important part of NCFS Success.

A Few of Our Success Stories

Troy and Bevin Fink said, “It helped us cut out some of that trial and error and we learned so much as far as keeping us on the right track.” Bevin has estimated her income has more than doubled in the three years after attending the Piedmont NC Farm School in 2013. The visits with other farmers, the lessons in finding a market for what they produced, and tracking their actual costs were invaluable. She used that information to set a price for her eggs at \$4 a dozen. “I know what it costs me to produce a dozen eggs, so I can’t charge less than that,” she says. Fink sold out of her eggs every week and, soon, other vendors were raising the price of their eggs to match hers instead of lowering them to undercut her. NCFS has plugged the Finks into a network of other farmers whom they continue to call on with questions or to join forces with other farmers for volume discounts from local vendors. As a result, the Finks’ farm is enjoying slow but steady growth, a reflection of the Finks’ determination to be successful.



Duane and Cindy Digh said, “We have seen a 25% increase in profit margin.” They attended NC Farm School in the Piedmont during 2014 and started Clearview Farms in the years prior to attending the school. Based in Lincolnton they sell a variety of products ranging from Chicken to Lamb. Through NC Farm School they established a logo, identifiable t-shirts, better pricing, and a marketing plan that helped them find their identity. Duane previously owned an auto service station and now rely on their farm as their main source of income. He already understood much about business and identified that, “NC Farm School gave us contacts that were important to taking us to the next level.” Their farm success is a product of the marketing training and mentoring that NCFS has to offer. Duane and Cindy also found opportunities

to test new markets and expand their current operations. Since attending NCFS they added rabbit production as a test market and expanded their pig operations by adding new pens. When asked about the cost of the hog operation, Duane quickly recited the cost of his new expansion in dollars per pound of final product.



Mike Tate said, “When estimating the value of NC Farm School it is important to remember of the value of success vs. the cost of failure. The value for us has to be well in excess of the ten thousand dollar mark when we consider the time we saved, the expense not incurred, and the value of success we have had so far.” Mike incorporated Rebecca Knoll farm in February 2015 and has plans to sell several tons of produce in blackberries his first year. Mike developed a careful marketing strategy with a mix of wholesale and retail. This was a part of the two big lessons he learned from NC Farm School; “Don’t bet the farm and plan to succeed.” Mike extended much credit to Mary Jac Brennan, horticultural extension agent in Forsyth County, as an important part of the mentoring of NC Farm School and an important resource helping him to achieve his goals in year one of business. Mike spent much time

deliberating over his investment in black berry production and made specific choices as to how big he would start out. He understood this was an important factor to his success as a result of the lessons learned from NCFS.

Al and Linda Hutchison said “NC Farm School is a great way to take farming, a profession that we love, and have it be an, ongoing, financially stable journey.” They started Farmhaven in Tobaccoville, NC and incorporated in December of 2014. They entered business with their new business plan in 2015 and plan on having their first year of sales this year on their repurposed tobacco farm selling heirloom tomatoes and cut flowers. They conservatively estimate having over \$30,000 of income by their third year of business. They were in the middle of searching for land while they



attended farm school and purchased an old tobacco farm that had been out of use for more than five years. With their new contacts from NC Farm School, they were able to get connected to programs to participate in with the unused pasture portion of their farm while they grow their vegetable business, keeping other portion of their farms in use.

Patricia and Marshall Lyons

said “NC Farm School was important because we didn’t know anything about farming. We were able to get experience with many kinds of farms and make contacts that were invaluable.” They own Lyons and Wade Family Farm in Raeford, NC and they graduated



from the Sandhills NC Farm School in 2014. Currently their farm is producing eggs and they are looking to add vegetable crops soon. Patricia spoke about their determination to own a profitable farm and added, “NC Farm School made us aware of valuable resources that the extension and other state run programs have to offer to farmers.” Through NC Farm School they were able to get connected with the NC Cooperative extension. As a result, they applied for and were awarded a grant that provided them a high tunnel that will help them with their goal of diversifying to more profitable early and late season vegetable crops.