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For the Love of Taste: Meet Bill & India Cox of Casselmonte Farm

VSU Agricultural Research Station

College of Agriculture Students and Alumni Success Stories

Connect with Virginia Cooperative Extension at VSU

Upcoming Events for Spring and Summer You Don’t Want to Miss!
The College of Agriculture is in the business of making positive impacts. Its staff and faculty are trained in a wide range of fields to make significant, lasting, positive effects here in Virginia, the nation and the world. We conduct our business through our three land-grant divisions: Teaching, Research and Outreach. Each one assists a different audience to reach its goals.

In this issue of Connection, you’ll see how over the last year we’ve made a positive impact on students like Ivi Mitchell and Keia Jones; in our outreach to business owners like Bill and India Cox; and even on public health through the research Dr. Yixiang Xu and Dr. Chyer Kim are conducting to reduce sodium in processed meats. Each story provides insight into the ways we work to improve lives and help people reach their goals.

The stories contained in this issue are just a peek at the work we’re doing. Many other initiatives undertaken in the past year are equally valuable and interesting. Take, for example, the work VSU’s Agricultural Research Station is conducting in grape pomace, commonly found as a by-product at wineries. It has been discovered to contain a naturally-occurring antimicrobial agent and biodegradable nanocrystals that can improve packaged food safety. This means, with continued research, the state’s wine industry may be able to realize increased profits from the ability to sell this pomace to food packaging manufacturers and to reduce current disposal costs for it. What’s more, consumers will potentially benefit from the reduced risk and concern about synthetic compounds used in food packaging.

We are also pleased by the inroads VSU Extension faculty are making in equipping small farmers to compete for lucrative berry markets in the Mid-Atlantic. Last year, they assisted 18 former tobacco growers to convert to berry production in Southside Virginia. This helped create 37 seasonal jobs (picker/packer) in the area. These jobs offered a minimum wage of $7.25 per hour for 29 hours per week for 12 weeks per year, totaling $93,351 in gross income for seasonal farm workers. Additionally, VSU provided production assistance to producers that resulted in their berries having a total wholesale value of $456,000 at Virginia farmers markets last year.

From business entrepreneurs like winery owners and farmers to the consumers who will use or benefit from their products, each year countless people benefit from VSU College of Agriculture’s initiatives. Our focus on making positive impacts on people’s lives begins with the student in our campus classrooms, but extends far beyond, affecting the health, well-being and bottom line of many.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jewel Bronaugh
Executive Director
Center for Agricultural Research, Engagement and Outreach

Dr. M. Ray McKinnie
Dean/1890 Extension Administrator
College of Agriculture

Dr. Wondi Mersie
Director
Agricultural Research Station

Virginia State University
College of Agriculture
One Hayden Drive • P.O. Box 9081
Virginia State University, VA 23806
(604) 524-5961

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University Faculty Collaborate to Improve Health and Business Development

In November 2017, the Center for Agricultural Research, Engagement and Outreach (CAREO) invited faculty from across VSU’s campus to apply for portions of a $1.1 million Seed Grant Program. With the goal of expanding the impact of the 1890 Land Grant Mission, the CAREO Seed Grant Program was established to increase university research and collaboration to support the national priorities of the United State Department of Agriculture’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture. The CAREO grant is designed to support university-based research for projects that can be completed within one year.

Four priority areas were identified that included a required emphasis on VSU Agricultural Research and/or a VSU Cooperative Extension program area such as 1) Food Security and Hunger/Urban Agriculture; 2) Human Health and Nutrition; 3) STEAM and Entrepreneurship Education; and 4) Agriculture-Based Business Development.

“The Seed Grants represent a wonderful opportunity to bring faculty across campus together to focus on critical land grant mission areas of VSU and USDA/NIFA, including Food Security, Human Health and Nutrition, STEAM Education and Agribusiness Development. Further, it creates a reason for faculty to collaborate in research, whereby they can share ideas and develop solutions, while honing their grant writing skills,” said Dr. Jewel Bronaugh, CAREO executive director.

Twenty-two proposals were submitted and 13 were funded. Funding for each award ranged from $50,000-$150,000. Faculty from five Virginia State University colleges, including the College of Engineering & Technology, the College of Natural & Health Sciences, the College of Education, the Reginald F. Lewis College of Business, and the College of Agriculture received research grant funds.

The project year will culminate with a VSU Seed Grant Research Symposium to share the results of the 13 grant projects, along with a student research competition that will provide awards to the top research projects.
Two weeks after Bill and India Cox said “I do” back in 2006, they bought Casselmonte Farm in Powhatan. After one BLT sandwich in mid-July 2008 that included what he calls “lousy tomatoes,” Bill Cox said he and his wife had an “Aha!” moment. They decreed they were going to improve the quality of the food they put in their bodies and vowed they wouldn’t eat another tasteless tomato again.

Their epiphany came just 18 months into owning the farm, just as the thinning of their pine trees was drawing to a close. “We were just going to have a garden for ourselves,” India Cox said. “We didn’t start off with the intention of having a market garden, just a plot for ourselves, but it was more successful than we envisioned, and we said, ‘Okay. How do we share this food?’ and that’s when we went to our first farmers market.”

**New Business Venture**

Prior to starting their venture, the Coxes had only a modest background in gardening and agriculture. Bill Cox had created food plots for hunt clubs, so he knew how to work a tractor and plant things. Before they began planting and cultivating they had the foresight to contact land-grant institutions like Virginia State University (VSU) in search of people with expertise in assorted produce.

“We immediately started reaching out, because of our lack of expertise, to the land-grant Extension world to fill in the voids that we had in terms of knowledge,” Bill Cox said.

“I have known about Extension since I was five years old when I first signed up for 4-H, and so it was natural to understand Extension was out there and the help it could provide,” said India Cox. Blueberries were the first thing they planted to sell. Over time they’ve added blackberries, forest-grown Shiitake mushrooms, heirloom tomatoes, asparagus, fingerling potatoes, Bradford watermelons and baby ginger (white, yellow and blue). Under the Coxes’ stewardship, Casselmonte Farm has blossomed into a thriving business.

The Coxes credit Cooperative Extension at VSU with being instrumental in their success. “You can’t step far on Casselmonte Farm without stepping on VSU,” Bill Cox said during a visit to his farm last October. “Without that leadership and help, we would’ve been floundering. VSU has been providing help in ways you can’t even see.”

India Cox explained how Dr. Theresa Nartea, Extension specialist in marketing and agribusiness, helped them with marketing strategies, branding and how to set up product displays at farmers markets to attract customers. “Theresa emphasized the value of brochures, handouts and a website that got us started in the right direction with very few speed bumps,” India Cox said.

One of Casselmonte’s principal crops, forest-grown Shiitake mushrooms, was suggested by the late Andy Hankins. “Our first encounter with VSU was a seminar given by [Extension Specialist] Andy Hankins. We thought, ‘Wow! This will be fun. We’ll grow some mushrooms for ourselves,’” Bill Cox said.

“Andy is legendary,” said Cox. “He provided seminars all across Virginia on growing Shiitake mushrooms in the forest, and showed us what to do. Think of it
“Don’t just order out of a catalog. Having confidence in how the produce tastes will help to sell it.”

At right, Bill Cox talks with Dean/1890 Extension Administrator M. Ray McKinnie during a recent visit by VSU Cooperative Extension staff to Casselmonte Farm in Powhatan, Va.

as hands-on, remote classroom teaching. Without those seminars, we would never have made those connections. We took those connections and ran with them, but the introductions were a result of Virginia State University programs.”

The Coxes have three high tunnels, which they use to grow ginger and other crops. Their knowledge of high tunnels, how they function and how to evaluate them came from Chris Mullins, VSU greenhouse Extension specialist.

Following a visit by VSU Horticulture Extension Specialist Dr. Reza Rafie to Casselmonte in the early days, Bill and India Cox shaped their vision of what they were trying to accomplish and itemized their assets and liabilities. After attending Cooperative Extension’s Ginger and Turmeric Field Day in 2010—an event organized by Dr. Rafie—the Coxes decided to grow ginger, which has since become a Casselmonte staple.

Before getting started, they determined they would grow the ginger in a high tunnel and identified buyers. Because cooking doesn’t require large quantities of the spice, chefs were not the logical choice. With that in mind, Bill Cox negotiated a deal with Hardywood Park Craft Brewery in Richmond to buy baby ginger to be used as an ingredient in its beer. That first year Hardywood bought 22 lbs. of ginger from Casselmonte Farm for its Gingerbread Stout, a beer that immediately developed a cult following. Annually, the Coxes harvest approximately 1,500 lbs. of ginger, a high-value crop that sells in excess of $10/lb. The alcohol industry has proven to be a key market with ginger sales to Hardywood Park Craft Brewery, five cidersies, two meaderies and a gin distillery in Charlottesville.

As Bill Cox explained, the genesis of VSU’s expertise and the opportunities they’ve provided are in every direction of the farm. Dr. Rafie showed them that ginger can be grown in Virginia; Andy Hankins educated them about mushrooms; Chris Mullins taught them about high tunnels; Dr. Nartea guided marketing and branding; and the Cooperative Extension seminars have given them the opportunity to meet other experts they wouldn’t have met otherwise.

Planning and Perseverance

The Coxes speak to aspiring farmers who are eager to start growing crops. It’s prudent, Bill Cox advises them, to think and plan carefully up front. Part of that planning includes reaching out to people, like other farmers and experts at Extension, for guidance.

“When we started this, the farm was a vertical learning curve that’s also called a wall,” Bill Cox said. “We had to get over that wall and create something that met our requirements over on the taste side but also would be practical.”

Since they began farming, they have spent an enormous amount of time looking for variety and taste, which has included consulting experts across the country and taste testing before selecting which varieties of crops to grow. Bill Cox saves the seeds of those produce that meet the taste test. Seasonal catalogs offer up hundreds of varieties of seeds and plants for sale, but India Cox cautioned, “Don’t just order out of a catalog. Having confidence in how the produce tastes will help to sell it.”

The Coxes are so committed to taste that “Bringing taste back to the table” is their marketing tagline. They also focus on quality, which Bill Cox said, is critical to survival in small-scale farming.

Their expertise is on the business side of farming, the Coxes said, and they share their knowledge at public events numerous times a year. They emphasize the importance of marketing and product knowledge—that is, producers should choose products that maximize flavor, develop a brand and understand who their customers are and are not.

“You don’t want to become a kernel of corn in a bag of corn that has no identity,” Bill Cox explained.

The Coxes advise new farmers not to romanticize farming—it’s hard work and they have to be able to sell their harvest for enough money, so it can be grown again the next year. Knowing what records to keep and having a strategy for the marketplace (i.e., where one’s going to sell) are key. For example, it’s hard to sell crops like yellow squash, which sell for $1/lb., because of the volume needed to turn a profit. “You have to know what you want, and how to ask the right questions,” Bill Cox said.

Strong business sense and a knack for asking the right questions have been integral to the Coxes’ success. That has entailed learning from mistakes, of which India Cox said, “We’ve made plenty,” and being adaptable.

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Herbert Brown Sr., owner and operator of Browntown Farms in Brunswick County, received the VSU Andy Hankins’ Small Farmer of the Year Award at the Small Farm Family Conference held in Charlottesville in November 2017.

“It was an honor to receive this award,” said Herbert Brown Sr. “I am even more motivated to achieve my goals of maximizing my yields on crops, increasing sales and promoting agritourism on the farm.”

Brown’s ancestors purchased a 348-acre farm in 1908. Browntown Farms, the 109-acre property Brown owns, was established in 1914 when his grandparents Sandy Brown and Collins Jackson began to divide the farm into five separate properties. Growing up, his parents raised tobacco, produce and livestock. He loved farming from an early age, so much so that when he retired in 2006 after a 27-year career in law enforcement, he became a farmer.

“Farming is in my blood,” he said. “It’s refreshing to me and a stress reliever. I also enjoy the camaraderie of talking to and sharing information with other farmers.”

He started off hobby farming on a 4x6-foot plot. He brought two tomatoes from his garden to a neighbor’s cookout. After being told he had “embarrassed” his neighbor because Brown’s tomatoes were so delicious, a friendly growing competition ensued.

“I decided to venture out and raise a larger garden. I first raised a whole acre of collard greens. I could raise the vegetables, but I couldn't market them,” he said.

Attending workshops, classes and conferences, as well as taking a bus tour with Virginia State University’s Small Farm Outreach Program (SFOP) has helped Brown immensely. He’s learned about everything from improving soil health to farm business management and marketing. He’s also benefited from the help provided by his county Extension office, his local SFOP agent and from other farmers.

Through these learning and networking opportunities, Brown said he’s met some fantastic people who’ve given him great ideas and sound advice. How to arrange produce and sell effectively at farmers market, and growing crops in high tunnels, are just a couple of examples.

“Luckily everything just fell into place,” Brown said.

Brown’s venture evolved into a family business when his son, Herbert Brown Jr., came home from college. While his son hadn’t envisioned becoming a farmer with his dad, he embraced his father’s vision and, like his dad, is determined to keep the farming tradition alive. This past fall Brown Jr. started a new venture and planted an acre of blueberries himself.

The Browns’ primary crops are strawberries, collards, sweet potatoes and red potatoes. Their secondary endeavors include other vegetables, fruit trees and raising honeybees. They sell directly off the farm, to wholesale markets, to community supported agriculture businesses and occasionally to Richmond restaurants and grocery stores.

Farming requires patience, Brown said, and a resolve not to give up when things go wrong, because they will.

“Farming is not an area that one sees financial profits quickly, because of the...

Volunteer has an Award-Winning Passion

A long-standing passion for agriculture is what brought Cheryl “Charley” Evans to VSU and to volunteer at Randolph Farm. When she learned that she was to be recognized as the 2017 Small Farm Outreach Program (SFOP) Volunteer of the Year, Evans said, “I was so excited. I felt like what I was doing was helping to produce and then was rewarded for volunteering.”

The now-retired Prince George resident was recognized by SFOP for her many hours volunteering at the small farm demonstration plot at VSU’s Randolph Farm that included planting and weeding, and harvesting farm produce for the Petersburg food bank. Evans also volunteers at Peabody Middle School and Vernon Johns Middle School in Petersburg. Previously, she volunteered at the Prince George County schools her children attended. This past summer Evans brought her grandchildren to the farm to help out. She said they were learning how to help themselves with or without being paid, and to “learn to feed their souls.”

At home, Evans has a hobby garden where she grows lavender and plans to grow mint. She’s currently enrolled in VSU’s Urban Agriculture Certificate Program and envisions becoming an urban farmer. “I like the self-sufficiency, being able to grow our own food,” she said.
need to buy equipment, which is often very expensive, and other variables such as weather that do not always work in the farmer’s favor,” he said. Farming is hard work and requires passion, he added.

He encourages new farmers to educate themselves by attending workshops and seminars, and learning from other farmers. Farmers should learn about farm water supply, he said, as it’s a key factor in determining yield, and also about soil quality, which is an important determinant of deciding which crops to plant. He also recommends that farmers make note of lessons learned, continually ask questions, learn how and when to advertise and how to build and sustain a solid customer base. Brown's ability to learn and adapt has helped him succeed. He's just completed his second hoop house and is excited about expanding into agritourism. He enjoys sharing his passion for farming with visitors and is happy to have his son by his side.

**SFOP Agent Cliff Somerville Recognized for Outstanding Service**

For the first time, the VSU Small Farm Outreach Program (SFOP) honored one of its own. Cliff Somerville, a Halifax County–based agent, received the inaugural Agent of the Year award.

“I was honored for my coworkers and for the organization [SFOP] to recognize the service I have provided over the years,” Somerville said.

Somerville participated in SFOP’s pilot program back in 1987 and has been an agent ever since. He’s been a farmer for even longer—beginning right out of college when he purchased a small tract of land. He had planned to go into vegetable production because he’d studied horticulture at North Carolina A&T State University. Upon being advised the soil on his land was best suited for forestry, he planted trees. As his tree farm grew, Somerville raised beef cattle, had feeder pigs and grew corn, soybeans and wheat. Due to market fluctuations for those animals and crops, Somerville decided to focus on tree farming, which he's been doing for almost 20 years.

As an agent, Somerville said the type of advice he provides to farmers has evolved over the decades. Compared to the early days, there’s more information available now and more opportunities to engage with farmers, researchers and other experts.

“Farming used to be a way of life. Now, farming is a business, and people who are beginner farmers have to look at it that way,” he said. “There isn’t time for trial and error anymore. Farmers have to plan and do research on what it takes to develop a good crop or business base. I think that is the future of farming.” Fortunately, there are numerous resources to use and learn from, he added.

Cultivating trust, being honest and listening carefully to farmers has helped Somerville be a successful agent. “If farmers believe in you, they’re more inclined to make a change or try something new,” he explained. Asking a farmer lots of questions is also key, he said, to ensure the farmer is thinking about every possible angle.

He has some pearls of wisdom that can help agents serve the farmers in their communities.

“If you are available to them at their time; recognize that farmers work from daylight to dark, not 8 to 5. I still have farmers who call me at 6 a.m.,” said Somerville. “Don’t give the impression that you have all the answers. Listen to find out what experience that farmer has already, and you'll find you learn useful things from that farmer that you can share with other farmers.”

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**Small Farm Outreach Program Establishes Advisory Council**

The Small Farm Outreach Program (SFOP) has created an advisory council to ensure the program is adequately serving small farmers across Virginia. The inaugural advisory council has eight members, including one College of Agriculture student intern. The seven council members each serve for a term of four years, while the student intern serves for one year.

“The advisory council members are the eyes and ears at the community level to cover 54 counties,” said SFOP Director William Crutchfield. “Members will advise SFOP on what farmers need and help ensure the program serves farmers in the best way possible.”

The council has already had an impact, Crutchfield said. As an example, members recommended hosting the annual Small Farm Family Conference over a weekend, rather than midweek, which SFOP implemented. Advisory council members have also made recommendations for workshop topics, speakers and ways to enhance the bus tours.

**Advisory Council members include:**

Angel Bolton, Prince Edward County
Mark Chandler, Halifax County
Charles Maloney, King and Queen County
Anita Roberson, Spotsylvania County
Clif Slade, Surry County
Glenn Slade, Surry County
Oliver Whitehead, Charles City County
Alston Hilliard, VSU Small Farm Outreach Program Student Intern
If you drive around rural Virginia, you will likely see farms with small herds of goats and sheep grazing in pastures. According to the 2017 State Agriculture Overview for Virginia published by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service, there were 46,500 goats and 75,000 sheep (including lambs) raised in Virginia. Goats and sheep present a unique opportunity for limited-resource farmers in the state. They can be raised on relatively small plots of land. Sheep and goat meat are dietary staples of many ethnic groups, and with the changing demographics in the United States, there is a growing demand for sheep and goat meat in major American cities, including metropolitan areas of Virginia.

Despite this market opportunity, small rural Virginia sheep and goat producers (i.e., those with herds of less than 100) face barriers to success—the nearest processing facilities are more than a two-hour drive away, and producers need access to a reliable and sustainable marketplace in which to sell their meat products.

“While having flocks of 100 animals or fewer enables us [Virginia’s small ruminant producers] to provide the kind of natural or organic care preferred by many consumers, it has not supported the kinds of high-throughput, commercial slaughter facilities that are encouraged by USDA,” said Marcia McDuffie, a dairy sheep farmer who owns Allen’s Creek Farm in southern Nelson County.

“Having been a pastured meat producer for many years, I personally can attest to the difficulty in finding quality, inspected slaughter facilities to process livestock and poultry. This is a necessary link in the farm–to–table food chain,” said Ann Wright, a Virginia farmer who created the Southern Virginia (SoVa) Food Hub in South Boston.

A Mobile Solution

Virginia small ruminant producers must either transport animals the long distances for processing or forego USDA inspections necessary for the sale of meat products to restaurants, at farmers markets and out of state. McDuffie said the long-distance travel for slaughter, “increases the stress on the animals, resulting in measurable decreases in meat quality. In addition, because of small flock sizes, most producers cannot guarantee the constant availability needed for many potential commercial purchasers, such as restaurants and butcher shops.”

Cooperative Extension at VSU plans to help address these barriers by developing a USDA-certified mobile meat processing unit housed in a 40-foot trailer with a goose neck attachment. Inside will feature two sections: a cooler at the front to hang up to 20 carcasses and the slaughter/processing facility at the back.

“This project is exciting because we’re filling an important need for local farmers. I think it will help to make sheep and goat production more sustainable in this area of Virginia,” said Dr. Dahlia O’Brien, Extension specialist and project leader. “There’s only so much money one can make from selling live animals. When you consider transportation—all the time and energy it takes to drop the animals off at a processing facility and go back again—it’s not as profitable.”

The mobile meat processing unit is currently under construction and is expected to arrive in spring 2018. The final design was developed by Dr. O’Brien and Dr. Stephen Wildeus, associate professors in agricultural research, with input from collaborators at Delaware State University and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. The unit is being equipped to process sheep and goats, but it could be modified in the future to process poultry and hogs.

Mobile meat processing units currently operate in different states around the country, but this would be the first one in Virginia. “It would be monumental to have an operational unit in the state,” O’Brien said. “Farmers don’t want to be limited by where they can sell, especially given the proximity to the North Carolina border. Including the USDA inspection also means the meat is more safe and wholesome.”
From Farm to Market

O’Brien has created community awareness through the many workshops she gives for small ruminant producers. She said excitement is building and producers are eager, especially in areas like Halifax where producers are in dire need.

“Once regular routes are established, the mobile unit could also facilitate cooperative marketing to help supply both restaurants and butcher shops with regular deliveries in the amounts necessary to allow these businesses to depend on good quality, locally produced meats,” McDuffie said.

Project co-leader Dr. Theresa Nartea, assistant professor and Extension specialist in agribusiness and marketing, said having a reliable marketplace is an important component of the mobile meat processing unit’s success. Nartea will work with producers to create robust networks of “market trust” between producer groups and local food hubs where producers can sell their meat products profitably.

It’s a win-win, Nartea said, “if producers are able to work together to organize use of the mobile meat processing unit, and also have places to sell their products.”

The SoVa Food Hub, one of 11 food hubs now operating in Virginia, plans to offer fully cooked, ready-to-eat meals as well as cooking classes featuring local products. Wright sees this as an excellent way to introduce sheep and goat meat to local consumers.

“Knowing the struggles of small-scale meat producers, I am excited to know there is some relief coming their way, making it more likely farmers will choose to produce lamb and goat,” Wright said. “This mobile meat processing unit will increase the variety of meats the SoVa Food Hub can offer to its customers.”

A Practical Tool for Production and Education

The mobile meat processing unit can be used for production, teaching and research. Producers will be educated on how to use and maintain the unit, including what supplies are needed, and how to ensure there’s sufficient funding and staffing to operate it. For example, a USDA inspector must be on site when the unit is operating and a butcher is needed.

“This project demonstrates a very practical benefit of academic and community partnerships,” McDuffie said. “It has the potential to solve two major problems facing small ruminant farmers and to serve as a fantastic demonstration project that can grow regionally.”

“Success will be based on our ability to fulfill the need whereby producers won’t have to travel so far, and can get their products out to consumers,” O’Brien said.

“Our hope is that limited-resource and beginning farmers can secure reliable market channels that are the ‘appropriate fit’ for small-scale production and will grow with them as they grow over time,” Nartea said. “I’m excited to see the end of the story, which is to see farmers benefiting from the USDA-funded grant research conducted by the scientists at Virginia State University. After all, we are a team focused on Virginia farm prosperity!”

Building Outreach to Virginia’s Hispanic Farmers

Hispanic-operated farms are growing across the country, and Virginia is no exception. According to the most recent Census of Agriculture, Hispanic farms grew nationally by 21 percent since 2007. In Virginia, that number grew by 39 percent, and many of those farms are in areas served by VSU’s Small Farm Outreach Program (SFOP).

“USDA National Agricultural Statistics Services State Statistician Herman Ellison helped us identify specific counties where we could begin offering outreach and technical assistance to the Hispanic men and women who are trying to earn a living farming, but who might not be aware of our services or how we can directly tailor programs to their needs,” said SFOP Director William Crutchfield.

Last year SFOP added two Spanish-speaking members to its staff. Mery Caldwell is the SFOP Spanish-language outreach coordinator. Her role is to build relationships within the Hispanic farming communities and to explain what free assistance is available to them. She also coordinates Spanish-speaking farm assistance programs. Leonel Castillo is a SFOP Hispanic agent. He provides one-on-one technical assistance in both English and Spanish, often at the farmer’s location. All services are provided free of charge and are available year-round.

PARA MÁS INFORMACIÓN EN ESPAÑOL SOBRE EL PROGRAMA PARA PEQUEÑOS AGRICULTORES LLAME Mery Caldwell at (804) 481-0425 or mcaldwell@vsu.edu or Leonel Castillo at (804) 731-0230 or lcastillo@vsu.edu.
From the outset, they committed to being the sole labor force for their endeavor, and to this day, they continue to plan, cultivate and harvest their crops, with only the addition of one extra set of hands. But that’s about to change, as the Coxes plan to almost double their market garden to 11 acres, which will result in hiring additional staff for the expansion in production.

Looking Ahead

It was on the drive back from Harrisonburg to Powhatan after attending a farm-to-table conference in December 2016, that Bill Cox decided it was time to seriously change how they were treating cover crops versus cash crops. “We’re going to expand our cover cropping operation to improve the soil fertility, and we want to change the way in which we were managing our crop rotations. All of that requires a significant increase in the amount of land that we’re using,” he said.

The fertility-driven expansion will allow the Coxes to expand their food production. “It becomes, if you will, a full circle where we always want to be improving the soil’s fertility. That means more cover cropping, more land, which means we have the opportunity to increase the amount of food that we’re producing, but we can do it on a timeframe that we want,” Bill Cox said. “As we get this additional land up to snuff on the fertility side using cover crops, then we have the opportunity over on the sales side to sell more, but then we already have the land ready to deliver on that promise.”

The Coxes—two unlikely farmers—are excited about the future. When asked if he wished they’d done anything differently, Bill Cox replied, “Yes, start 40 years ago.”

VSU Junior Reflects on Experiences at USDA Student Diversity Program Event

Keia Jones ’19 was invited to Arlington, Virginia, in February to participate in a weeklong program hosted by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Outlook Forum. Thirty students from across the U.S. were selected to participate in the program that included introductions to USDA and concluded with a two-day conference. To be considered, students were required to complete a short questionnaire, write an essay and submit a recommendation letter. Attendees were chosen from land-grant institutions, notably those focused on agriculture. She writes about her experiences here:

We arrived early on the first day at the Crystal Gateway Marriott in Arlington where we met with the student coordinator and had some time to get to know each other during breakfast before venturing to the USDA headquarters in Washington, D.C. There we met with the department head of the World Agricultural Outlook Board, which is within the Office of the Chief Economist. We spoke about agricultural issues and the projections of commodities in the coming years. Later we met with the USDA’s Office of Advocacy and Outreach and learned about student programs in the U.S. We experienced a National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) Lockup, when NASS projects the change in price for commodities. The results are always secure—until they are all released at once—to keep people from getting a leg up in the market. To finish the day, we visited the Secretary of Agriculture’s office. It was great spending time with Secretary Sonny Perdue and getting one-on-one pictures with him as he presented each of us a certificate of participation.

Wednesday, we interacted with representatives from Farm Credit, the Student Diversity Program’s largest sponsor. After speaking with the representatives, we took a tour of the monuments since most of the students were not from the D.C. area, and many had never been to the nation’s capital.

February 22–23, we attended the Agricultural Outlook Forum’s two-day research conference hosted by USDA. Nearly 1,600 professionals from across the country and around the world came to learn about the outlook projections for their industries. Undergraduate and graduate Student Diversity Program winners were formally recognized by Agriculture Deputy Secretary Steve Censky during the opening plenary.

The Secretary of Agriculture was the keynote speaker, while the distinguished speaker was Dr. Akinwumi Adesina, 2017 World Food Prize Laureate and president of the African Development Bank. In opening remarks, Dr. Adesina gave a different perspective on how commodities produced can be shared through trade and regulated through policy. The tone of Dr. Adesina’s message permeated the conference, including in sessions on finding new uses for crops, what to do with product surpluses, trade barriers and finding a space for specialty markets.

This was an excellent experience for any student, and I am grateful to have learned so much and to have been part of it.
Despite its modest exterior, the MT Carter building, which houses the Agricultural Research Station (ARS), is the hub of agricultural research at VSU. The ARS secures millions of dollars in grants annually to fund research that benefits growers and producers locally and abroad. Agriculture and forestry contribute $91 billion to Virginia’s economy. The ARS contributes to that economic impact using advanced scientific techniques and state-of-the-art facilities to investigate diverse issues in agriculture, food production and food safety.

“Agricultural research faculty and staff generate scientific information that helps part-time and small-scale farmers remain profitable,” said Dr. Wondi Mersie, associate dean and director of research. “Our scientists strive to increase the yield and quality of specialty crops, explore plants as sources of compounds that ameliorate chronic human diseases, improve the safety and shelf-life of fresh vegetables and fruits, and find solutions to challenges faced by Virginia goat and hair sheep producers.”

Currently, ARS research is focused on:
- Exploring dittmarite as a fertilizer for crop production;
- Transferring the gene that confers heat tolerance in the purslane plant to food crops such as corn, and using purslane to clean up soil contaminated with heavy metals so that urban dwellers can use the land for vegetable production;
- Exploring the production of “dual purpose” crops such as flax, whose seed has health benefits and stem is a source of quality fiber, and teff, whose seed is used for human consumption, while its foliage and stem are valuable feed for livestock during the dry season;
- Investigating the cultivation of industrial hemp in Virginia, a plant used in many products; and
- Developing soybean (edamame) as an alternative crop for Southside Virginia. A VSU breeder has patented three edamame varieties currently being promoted in area farms.

ARS Research Benefits Industry, Health and Community

ARS scientists have conducted research on other legume crops that fix nitrogen and improve soil quality; they also study plants such as hops in support of Virginia’s burgeoning craft beer industry.

In the U.S. alone, postharvest loss of fresh vegetables and fruits can reach 50 percent. ARS is researching the use of non-chemical methods to reduce this loss. And in response to growing consumer interest in food’s nutritional and other health benefits, ARS faculty are investigating green papaya as a potential source of antidiabetic and diabetic-wound healing therapy; and evaluating the efficacy of grape pomace to reduce the salt content in processed meat.

ARS is the go-to source of information for goat and hair sheep producers on reproduction, health, nutrition and pasture management. ARS faculty and staff participate in the annual Small Ruminant Field Day held at Randolph Farm to share information with attendees from across the state. To assist Virginia’s goat and hair sheep producers, faculty are conducting
VSU’s Hub of Agricultural Research, continued

research to develop a sustainable, forage-based system for small ruminant production to meet the demand of alternative and niche markets. They are working to improve the market for lamb and goat meat through direct marketing and striving to find alternative sources of goat feed to reduce production costs.

Internationally, VSU is the lead institution in implementing a USAID-funded project to develop an integrated management system to abate the spread of parthenium, an invasive weed prevalent in eastern and southern Africa. Parthenium reduces food crop yields, invades pasture lands thereby denying livestock desirable and valuable grasses, and is a health hazard to humans. In collaboration with Virginia Tech, VSU has tested and introduced two natural enemies to manage this invasive weed.

Undergraduate and Graduate Student Research Opportunities

VSU undergraduate and graduate students help carry out ARS’s mission as they receive valuable experiential learning in food, plant and animal sciences; and training in biotechnology, soil science, food processing, analytical procedures and microbiology in ARS laboratories. At Randolph Farm, students get practical training in agronomy, animal husbandry and field experimental techniques. At any given time, 30–40 undergraduate students work at ARS, most from the Department of Agriculture, along with several others from the biology and chemistry departments and the College of Engineering. ARS faculty advise graduate students, mainly from biology, on thesis proposal development; provide guidance for conducting experiments, collecting data, interpreting the results and thesis writing; and prepare them for their thesis defense. In 2017, 15 students earned their M.S. degree.

Extension and outreach initiatives are integral to ARS’s efforts to share knowledge gained through scientific research. In August 2017, ARS hosted a first-of-its-kind Industrial Hemp Field Day, providing a forum for 192 potential producers, researchers, marketing experts and processing industry professionals to discuss hemp production and its economic potential. VSU President Makola M. Abdullah, Virginia Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry Basil Gooden, two state senators and two state delegates spoke at the event.

Researchers Study Ways to Reduce Salt in Processed Meats

The deli isle at any local supermarket offers a variety of “cold cuts,” processed deli meats used in lunches across America. Meat products are high in sodium—as much as 350 milligrams (mg) per slice. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend consuming fewer than 2,300 mg of sodium daily, but many Americans consume more than 3,400 mg each day. A single slice of deli meat may contain more than 10 percent of the sodium recommended for daily consumption.

Dr. Yixiang Xu and Chyer Kim, researchers at VSU, are studying ways to reduce the sodium content in processed meats. They received a USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture capacity building grant worth $295,274 to explore using high-pressure processing (HPP) to reduce salt in processed meat products. HPP is a cold pasteurization technique whereby a product, already sealed in its final package, is introduced to high-level pressure to extend its shelf life. HPP reduces the need to use preservatives containing sodium, and doesn’t compromise a food’s quality and taste. Within 10 years, HPP is expected to become the most commercially important food processing technology worldwide, especially for the meat and poultry industry.

“Our project addresses the national need to identify solutions for improving human health, nutrition and food safety. Salt reduction in processed foods is a high priority for consumers, health professionals and the food industry,” Dr. Xu said. The grant money will extend VSU’s research capabilities in HPP research, and will be integrated with other research and Extension areas at VSU, including food safety, meat science, human nutrition and specialty crops. VSU will be the first 1890 land-grant institution to have research and training capacity in HPP technology.

Industrial Hemp Field Day at Randolph Farm, July 2018

A second Industrial Hemp Field Day, hosted by the Agricultural Research Station, is planned for July 26, 2018, at VSU’s Randolph Farm, an agricultural teaching, production and research facility. Participants will learn about industrial hemp production and its economic potential.

Hemp was once a cash crop in America because the plant produces strong fibers and its seed contains quality oil. Industrial hemp-made products have become popular in the U.S. All industrial hemp products currently sold in the U.S., including food, personal care products, clothing and even construction materials, are imported from Canada, China, Europe and other countries where the crop is legal.

VSU is one of three universities currently conducting industrial hemp research as part of an agreement with the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.
Researchers Investigate Potential for Edamame and Specialty Soybean Crops in Virginia

America’s population is becoming more diverse and at the same time more health conscious. The assortment of soy-based products in the produce section of the supermarket, and edamame in the frozen foods section, is evidence of the growing variation in the American diet.

Researchers at VSU are studying edamame and specialty soybeans. They have developed and are testing three varieties of soybeans suited for Virginia’s temperate climate. Dr. Guo-Liang Jiang and his colleagues Drs. Shuxin Ren, Yixiang Xu, Vitalis Temu and Maru Kering, received a USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture capacity building grant valued at $416,248 for their project that aims to enhance VSU’s research capacity in plant sciences, particularly in breeding, genetics, genomics and agronomical management of soybean and specialty crops. The grant will also help to increase collaboration with other VSU faculty, the USDA Agricultural Research Service and other land-grant universities.

Edamame and specialty soybeans are a high-value crop and an excellent option for small farmers in southern Virginia, especially as domestic market demand is expected to grow.

Currently, the U.S. market relies on imports from China and other Asian countries.

Horticulture Specialist Returns to Myanmar

Last October, Dr. Reza Rafie, VSU Extension specialist in horticulture, made a second trip to Myanmar to assist local ginger and turmeric farmers. The focus of his second visit was to evaluate the quality of production and improve postharvest practices.

“Many farmers followed our recommendations to grow ginger and turmeric under a sustainable production system, including a group of farmers who grew their crops without pesticides or herbicides,” Dr. Rafie said.

Ginger is disease prone. If bacterial wilt, for example, takes hold in the field where ginger is grown, the soil can no longer support ginger growth. Dr. Rafie has taught the farmers principles of sustainability—just as he has to farmers in Virginia—and how to design production systems that are “sustainable with regard to the quality of the seed production, creating shade for the plants, crop rotations and using natural fertilizer like compost and cover crops.”

Myanmar produces about 17,000 acres of ginger. Annually the country harvests nearly 70,000 tons of the root, with about 30,000 tons consumed locally. Most of the surplus is exported either dried or fresh. India and Bangladesh are the largest purchasers of Myanmar dried ginger.

Local Myanmar farmers have expressed interest in exporting to the U.S. market, and Dr. Rafie has worked closely with farmers who will export two containers of sustainable ginger to the U.S. early in 2018. “The farmers are hoping to create a special brand that is unique in terms of quality—ginger that is reflective of the country’s cultural heritage,” said Dr. Rafie.

Only larger-size ginger is suitable for export. The local Myanmar farmers have learned to use sustainable practices to grow larger-sized ginger that can be exported without compromising quality.

Dr. Rafie considers it a privilege to have traveled abroad to assist Myanmar farmers, to share his expertise in sustainable growing practices.

“I’m grateful to have had the opportunity to touch the lives of people and be touched by them,” he said.
Sixty-two former members of the New Farmers of America (NFA) and New Homemakers of America (NHA) were honored by then-Virginia Gov. Terry R. McAuliffe on Nov. 3, 2017, at a VSU agricultural alumni reception. The governor, via video, announced a formal proclamation that recognizes “the contributions and achievements of members of the New Farmers of America and New Homemakers of America in our Commonwealth of Virginia, and I call this observance to the attention of all our citizens.”

Dr. Basil Gooden, then-Virginia secretary of agriculture and forestry, read aloud the proclamation, which also acknowledged that “Virginia State University recognizes how the NFA and NHA organizations since their inception are deeply rooted in the rich history of Virginia, its land-grant institutions, and how their values and principles have been etched into the fabric of modern day vocational education programs across the Commonwealth.”

The proclamation also acknowledged, “The Agricultural Alumni Association of Virginia State University has maintained a steadfast commitment to preserving the history of these organizations and recognizing the accomplishments of its members.”

New Farmers of Virginia Takes Root at VSU

The NFA’s history is rooted at VSU and is a result of the vision of three men: George Washington Owens and J.R. Thomas, both teacher trainers at Virginia State College (now VSU); and Dr. H. O. Sargent, federal agent for agricultural education, U.S. Office of Education. In 1927, these three visionaries organized the New Farmers of Virginia, one of the first organizations in the country aimed at promoting the success of farm youth.

While Owens wrote the constitution for the New Farmers of Virginia and helped lay the foundation for what would later become a national organization (NFA), Sargent lobbied within the Department of Education to officially create an organization in segregated schools.

From the Commonwealth to the Nation

The national NFA organization was officially created in Tuskegee, Alabama, on August 4, 1935. Its objective was to promote agriculture education, leadership, character, thrift, scholarship, cooperation and citizenship among African-American youth, primarily in the southern states, where schools were segregated by law. Owens is today recognized as the “father of NFA” and has a building named after him on VSU’s campus, where the majority of agricultural classes are taught.

As Virginia played a leadership role in the development of a national organization for African-American boys interested in agriculture, so did it for white boys with a similar interest. In 1925, Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College and Polytechnic Institute (now Virginia Tech) organized the Future
Farmers of Virginia for white boys in agriculture classes. This Virginia organization became the model for the national Future Farmers of America (FFA), founded in 1928 to bring together white students, teachers and agribusinesses to solidify support for agricultural education.

In 1965, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement and the desegregation of public schools, the African-American NFA and the white FFA merged into one national organization under the FFA name. Today, the FFA remains committed to students of all colors and races, providing a path to achievement in leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education.

NHA Organization Created for Young Women

While girls were not permitted to join the NFA or the FFA in its early years, similar home economics organizations were established for them as early as 1920, but these clubs were not nationally organized until 1945. At that time the New Homemakers of America (NHA) for African-American girls and the Future Homemakers of America (FHA) for white girls were established as national segregated organizations. Like their counterparts, the two organizations merged in 1965 under the name FHA, and in 1999 the organization changed its name to the Family Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA).

Over several decades the NFA and NHA contributed extensively to organized instructional programs for African-American youth in public schools, who sought to develop their vocational skills, social lives and pursue careers in agricultural education and home economics. Virginia-chapter members have held leadership positions at local, state and national levels, and have been recognized and received awards for their achievements. Both organizations are rooted in VSU's rich history and have been instrumental in the development of today's vocational education programs.

Mitchell is VSU’s Newest USDA/1890 Scholar

Ivi Mitchell, a sophomore enrolled in the College of Agriculture, is VSU’s newest USDA/1890 Scholar. The Columbia, South Carolina, native is pursuing a bachelor's degree in agriculture with a concentration in plant sciences and a minor in Spanish.

Upon receiving the news, Mitchell said, “I felt ecstatic. Getting the scholarship means that I’m able to be more focused without having to worry about where my funding will come from. It was a burden lifted.” Having the scholarship will reduce Mitchell's student loan burden. The out-of-state tuition fees plus living expenses and other school-related costs, meant she would have had to borrow a lot of money to get her degree.

The USDA/1890 National Scholars Program was established in 1992 as part of a partnership between the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the 1890 historically black land-grant universities. USDA/1890 National Scholars receive full tuition, fees, books, and room and board each year for up to four years. Scholars also complete a paid summer internship with the sponsoring USDA agency.

“Ivi has earned this opportunity, and her scholarship and work ethic are emblematic of the depth and quality of students now studying agriculture,” said Dr. M. Ray McKinnie, dean/1890 Extension administrator, VSU College of Agriculture.

Katrina Johnson, USDA’s 1890 program liaison at VSU, said, “I have known Ivi for over a year now, and I am excited to watch her continue to grow and bring her many talents to USDA and the agricultural industry.”

Mitchell’s involvement with the National FFA Organization in high school sparked her interest in agriculture and her desire to pursue it in college. With a few years of study left before she will complete her bachelor’s degree, Mitchell already plans to pursue a master’s degree and a Ph.D. Ultimately, she would like to do research for the USDA. She’s excited about the internship, which she said will offer an opportunity to gain experience and figure out what path she wants to pursue within agriculture.

Now that she’s a USDA/1890 Scholar, Ivi no longer needs the loans she had applied for to cover tuition and related expenses for the current academic year. Ivi encourages other students interested in a career in agriculture to apply. It’s well worth the time and effort, and if accepted, the benefits are long-term.

The USDA/1890 National Scholars Program

The USDA/1890 scholarship covers full tuition, university fees, books, room and board for the term of the scholarship. Scholars must pursue a bachelor’s degree in any field of study in agriculture, food, natural resource sciences or related disciplines at an 1890 land-grant university. Applications are accepted annually.

For more information, visit usda.gov and search for “1890 Scholars Program.”
Brandon Allen ’11 is a man on a mission. “Ultimately, my goal down the line is to be a university president,” he said. This fall, Allen, a graduate student in Purdue University’s Department of Youth Development and Agricultural Education, will complete his Ph.D. “A lot of the work that I’ve been doing is social justice oriented,” Allen said. “It tends to focus heavily on diversity, inclusion and changing the narrative surrounding minority groups, especially in agriculture.”

He’s also a man with lots of heart. Last year Allen initiated a drive to collect food and clothing for victims of Hurricane Harvey and sent a semi-truck full of supplies to Houston, Texas. When Hurricane Irma struck Florida, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, he expanded his funding drive and raised an additional $3,000. During the Flint, Michigan water crisis in 2016, Allen and a fellow Purdue graduate student organized a water drive. They drove to Flint three times, delivering more than 1,000 cases and over 100 one-gallon jugs of water along with other supplies. “We literally had lines and lines of cars trying to get cases of water and other supplies from us. It spoke to how dire the situation was,” he said.

Allen’s humanitarianism has not gone unnoticed. In December 2017, Purdue University President Mitch Daniels presented him with the One Brick Higher award, Purdue’s most prestigious student honor. In 2016, he received the Humanitarian Award from Purdue’s Black Graduate Student Association.

His benevolence comes, in part, from having grown up in modest circumstances in Portsmouth, "Everybody has dreams, their bucket list. As many dreams as I can knock out, I’m willing to give a try."
Virginia. He and his siblings grew up with their father. They experienced hardships. “We had to do so much on so little, and I saw how much struggle can hurt people, how much it could damage their psyche,” he said. He also believes that, “As human beings we should be willing to help other people out. We should all be trying to make this world a better place for our people to live… I always try to make sure that I’m practicing everything that I’m preaching.”

Academically, he’s also in pursuit of excellence. In August 2017, he was one of two students to be named as the first-ever cohort of Barbara L. Jackson scholars at Purdue University, an award for minority students interested in becoming education administrators. And in May 2017, he received the Harlan and Dorothy Parr Memorial Scholarship for graduate students pursuing an advanced degree in youth development and agricultural education.

These academic achievements contrast starkly to the beginning of Allen’s post-secondary education when his focus was on athletics, not academics. He was recruited by VSU to run cross-country, but hadn’t given much thought to what he would study. “I figured I was going to be spending most of my time out at the track. I wasn’t going to be in class that much,” he said. During orientation at Owens Hall, he was asked what he planned to major in. On the list of options he saw animal science and chose it because back then he wanted to be on the TV show “Animal Planet.” He recalled how, as young boys, he and his brother used to play with animals, go crabbing and hunt for snakes in the woods, so animal science seemed like a natural fit.

He credits his mentor, Dr. Robert Corley III, then dean of the College of Agriculture, for guiding him. “He would always instill in me, ‘You need to really start thinking about your 5-, 10-year plan. What does that look like? How do you best prepare for that now?’” Allen said.

He switched from animal science to pre-veterinary medicine because the required organic chemistry, biochemistry and other science courses would improve his chances of being accepted into grad school. Allen graduated from VSU in 2011 and earned his master’s degree at Virginia Tech in 2013. Before attending Purdue, Allen worked with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) in Kentucky as an animal health technician. He also served as the African-American program manager for the USDA APHIS National Civil Rights and Diversity Advisory Committee for veterinary services.

Reflecting back on his time at VSU, Allen said, “Track was phenomenal. I had two CIAA cross country championships. So far, we are the only team in VSU’s history that won two rings for cross country, which is quite an accomplishment.” He also enjoyed his time studying in the College of Agriculture. “I found there were a lot of opportunities there, especially being a minority in that space,” he said.

After earning his doctorate, Allen’s goal is to work in higher education administration or to work for a public policy advocacy organization. He’s passionate about social justice, and educational access and equity. He has huge aspirations and the drive to achieve them. “Everybody has dreams, their bucket list. As many dreams as I can knock out, I’m willing to give a try,” he said. “I want to always make sure that I’m never stopping, that I’m always just continuing to accomplish whatever I set out to do.”

Neufville Finishes in Final Four at Young Farmers Discussion Meet

Senior Malik Neufville earned $250 at the Virginia Farm Bureau’s Young Farmers Discussion Meet. Neufville and fellow students Austin Hale, Alston Hilliard and Jacob Wells traveled to Virginia Tech for the competition in November 2017. They competed against students from Virginia Tech, Ferrum College and Wythe Community College. Neufville competed against Ferrum and Wythe students to win his way into the final four.

Students were asked to find solutions to several key agricultural issues, including helping first-generation farmers get started in agriculture; overcoming public skepticism for foreign trade that supports better markets for agriculture; encouraging the public to better understand family corporations and family farm ownership; and helping farmers deal with the increasing regulatory and legal obstacles they face today.

This event marked the 10-year anniversary of the annual Collegiate Discussion Meet. VSU has participated every year and previously hosted two events. At the event, students also networked for future involvement in agricultural programs, events and careers. Virginia Farm Bureau Young Farmers are 18 to 35 years of age and support agriculture through production (farming), education, promotion, advocacy and/or leadership.
VSU / COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SPECIALISTS & AGENTS

AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES
PROGRAM OFFICE (804) 524-5960

SMALL FRUITS & VEGETABLES
Chris Mullins (804) 524-5834 cmullins@vsu.edu
Reza Rafie (804) 524-5840 arafie@vsu.edu

SMALL RUMINANTS
Dahlia O’Brien (804) 524-6963 dobrien@vsu.edu

SUSTAINABLE & URBAN AGRICULTURE
Marcus Comer (804) 524-5467 mcomer@vsu.edu
Leonard Githinji (804) 524-5962 lgithinji@vsu.edu
Wanda Johnson (804) 524-5470 wjohnson@vsu.edu

FORESTRY & NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT
Joel Koci (804) 524-5758 jkoci@vsu.edu

AGROBUSINESS & MARKETING
Theresa Nartea (804) 524-5491 tnartea@vsu.edu

AQUACULTURE
PROGRAM OFFICE (804) 524-5496
David Crosby (804) 524-5620 dcrosby@vsu.edu
Louis Landesman (804) 524-6962 llandesman@vsu.edu
Brian Nerrie (804) 524-5903 bnerrie@vsu.edu

FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES
PROGRAM OFFICE (804) 524-5966
Larry Connatser (804) 524-5253 lconnatser@vsu.edu
Debra S. Jones (804) 524-5847 djones@vsu.edu
Novella Ruffin (804) 524-5257 nruffin@vsu.edu

4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT
PROGRAM OFFICE (804) 524-5964
Marcus Comer (804) 524-5467 mcomer@vsu.edu
Maurice Smith (804) 524-3084 msmith@vsu.edu

SMALL FARM OUTREACH
PROGRAM OFFICE (804) 524-3292 smallfarm@vsu.edu
William Crutchfield (804) 524-3295 wcrutchfield@vsu.edu
Michael Wooden (804) 691-3263 mwooden@vsu.edu
Fidelis Okpebholo (804) 691-1290 fokpebholo@vsu.edu

AGENTS
Mery Caldwell (At-large) (804) 481-0425 mcaldwell@vsu.edu
Michael Carter (804) 481-1163 mcarter@vsu.edu
Judy M. Connaty (804) 481-1163 lconnatser@vsu.edu

HISPANIC OUTREACH COORDINATOR
Mery Caldwell (At-large) (804) 481-0425 mcaldwell@vsu.edu

SERVING COUNTIES: Caroline, Culpeper, Louisa, Fairfax, Fauquier, Rappahannock, Stafford Warren

Leonel Castillo (At-large) (804) 731-0230 lcastillo@vsu.edu

HISPANIC OUTREACH AGENT

Susan Cheek (At-large) (804) 720-5539 scheek@vsu.edu

Derrick Cladd (804) 892-4489 dcladd@vsu.edu

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Marilyn Estes (804) 481-0485 mestes@vsu.edu
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Tammy Holler (At-large) (804) 524-5626 tholler@vsu.edu

Clifford Somervelle (804) 892-4581 csmervelle@vsu.edu

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Megan Harrison (804) 895-0227 mharrison@vsu.edu
James “Tony” Edwards (804) 586-8280 jtedwards@vsu.edu

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Tour the fields for information and demonstrations by researchers, Extension specialists, and Virginia state agency representatives to learn about new crops, production and innovative technologies in agriculture.

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Participants in the VSU Urban Agriculture Certification Program gathered with Cooperative Extension faculty and staff near the L. Douglas Wilder building on campus in March to begin the 12-week program for intensive learning in crop production and management, marketing and business practices related to urban farming. More information about the program can be found at ext.vsu.edu/urban-agriculture-certificate-program.