

Fund helps wean farmers off tobacco

\$3.2 million given to 25 projects

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Purple sweet potatoes, watermelon and grits are some of the products being churned out by N.C. farmers who can no longer make a profit in the tobacco industry.

The N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission, created to distribute money the state received from the federal tobacco settlement, gave \$3.2 million in grants last week to 25 projects.

"We focus on tobacco-dependent individuals and help them with the rapid changes that are happening within the tobacco industry," said William Upchurch, executive director of the fund.

To be considered for a grant, a project must go through a three-month application process and then be judged by the fund's 18-member board.

One such project is the Purple Sweet Potato Products Project, which received \$26,179 to help replace tobacco farms with others that grow purple sweet potatoes.

The project helps farmers puree the potatoes and create and market products such as purple sweet potato cheesecake and pie.

This year farmers have harvested 200,000 pounds of purple sweet potatoes, said Carol Coulter of Creative Food Ventures, one of the groups involved with the project.

She said that Mike Sizemore, of Walnut Cove, was the first to start growing purple sweet potatoes. He began cultivating the crop six years ago, and after perfecting the strain with N.C. State scientists, he contracted with 10 farmers in Stokes County who now grow the crop.

"This is the first year they've gone into big production, and we expect it to do very well," Coulter said. "We went to a food fair in Asheville, and everybody liked the sweet potato pie."

The purple sweet potato is more than just a gourmet treat - it is being developed as a food for cancer patients because of its high level of antioxidants.

The small farmers of North Carolina must try something new and untested to remain profitable when competing with large agricultural producers, said Jason Roehrig, director of the Tobacco Communities Reinvestment Project.

The project, whose purpose is to help tobacco farmers stay in agriculture, earned a grant of \$300,000 from the trust fund.

"Farmers come to us with ideas, and we give cost-share awards to help them put the ideas to work," Roehrig said.

For example, some tobacco farmers on the N.C. coast, inspired by their grandfathers' past success with nontraditional crops, have expanded into watermelon farming.

"People thought they tasted better than other watermelons," Roehrig said. "Some testing showed that they have higher sugar content than other watermelon."

Another farmer who was helped by the project now grows off-season strawberries with the greenhouses he formerly used for tobacco farming.

And a Columbus County corn farmer who also used to grow tobacco used a cost-share initiative to build a mill on his land to produce grits, increasing the profit he used to make on the raw corn product.

"He now makes \$80 a bushel in the form of grits instead of two per bushel," Roehrig said.

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