



# Agriculture Working Group

Minutes of July 17, 2018

**The Go Virginia Region One Agriculture Working Group met on July 17, 2018, at 2:00 PM at Heartwood, Abingdon, Virginia.**

In attendance: David Eaton, Becki Joyce, Ernie McFadden, Penny Horton, Aaron Sizemore, Jerry Moles, Joe Gillespie, April Wilson, James Wilson, Will Culbertson, Steve Breeding, Amanda Parris, Chris Horton, Charlie Perkins, Kathy Cole, John Blankenship, Dave Leonard

By conference: Scott Jessee, Gil Patterson, Karen Jackson

## **Meat Processing Facility Project Update**

David Eaton reported that Region 1, 2 & 3 are poised to apply for a GO Virginia competitive state grant application, with Region One being the primary applicant. Utilizing the studies of Carroll and Grayson Counties and Virginia Tech, they have the data needed to support facilities in both Russell and Carroll County. David indicated the revenue sharing language is in the hands of their attorneys, but they are ready to move forward. Ernie McFadden requested next steps and Becki O'Quinn encouraged that they send their letter of intent in so that the support organization can begin to assist with the application procedures. David stated that there is a meeting with legislators Friday morning at Congressman Griffith's office to gain legislative support. April Wilson expressed her concern that the facilities process more than just cattle and emphasized the need for sheep and goat processing as well, and that the processing is done in an efficient and timely manner. At this time, Floyd, Carroll, Grayson, the City of Galax, Russell, Tazewell and Lee Counties are considering the state application. The Cumberland Regional IDA has passed a resolution to do revenue sharing throughout the state and along border states. David Eaton stated he felt this project placed the SWVA region in a strategic position to service North Carolina, West Virginia, Tennessee & Kentucky as well.

Amanda Parris emphasized that due diligence needed to be assured when working with VDAC and grant entities. She stated Seven Hills meat processing is struggling as well as Allegheny and it is important that the project show a strong plan and sustainability. Ernie indicated they would file a letter of intent in the coming days.

## **Agriculture and Technology**

Karen Jackson, Consultant and former VA Secretary of Technology presented on the agriculture/technology sector and how quickly the ag/tech industry is exploding, detailing how fast it has grown in just two years. Karen identified three areas of ag/tech that would be strong areas for the SWVA region to focus.

- 1) Data: Utilizing sensors and applications, gathering data on soil, water, crops, and cattle over the region could provide valuable information to farmers, producers and vendors as well. As an example, a "hoof to table" idea in which a sensor tracker could trace a calf from birth, to feeding, health, genetic, and ultimately a food product that could be marketed to a Whole Foods or farm to table restaurant to show the life cycle of what the customer is eating. SWVA has data centers, and this could be another type of data center we create to begin to track and store this kind of information.
- 2) Automony: Air and ground monitoring of crops
- 3) Research and Development: Karen informed the group that there are a lot of agriculture technology start-up companies and we are a prime place for those companies to locate and conduct research and development. Karen sees massive potential for pilot projects and start-ups.

Gil Patterson with LMU Veterinary School stated they would be very interested in participating and assisting with interns or pilot projects. John Blankenship asked if there was any individual assistance for funding. He knows of a small entrepreneur launching a drone business applying herbicide spray. He stated that the mission statement of the research states that Virginia Tech has worked with companies on these type of projects.

Chris Horton who worked with University of California's Davis & Berkeley locations mentioned the bio agri-tourism sector and utilizing technology to monitor and assess for crop destroying chemical attacks. Joe Gillespie recommended we explore with Jack Kennedy the Israeli connection and discuss agriculture and cyberspace and its transferability into a new market. He suggested we might want to partner with Fairfax on a cyber-initiative.

Chris Horton also recommended we explore Vista Clinical from Danville, VA and their technology in calf immunization systems. April Wilson is utilizing this company and highly respects their work.

## **Additional Agriculture Project Brainstorm**

Ernie introduced Chris Horton with Organa Brands. Organa Brands is working with Russell County to consider a hemp manufacturing facility and regional processing facilities. Chris spoke on the growing hemp and cannabis industry and its potential economic impact of the region. From vape stores and vape products, to the potential of Coke and Pepsi CBD infused drinks CBD is becoming more and more popular. Chris stated that using technology like Karen spoke of before to show the growth of a cannabis product from seed to harvest and its purity would be a huge selling point for SWVA hemp and cannabis. He said many CBD products currently on the market contain metals and impurities. He sees SWVA as a marketing point for a high end cannabis product. Chris stated that a product grown here, processed here and packaged here could have a huge market to help farmers diversify their crops. Chris worked with Cornell University on a cannabis project and will share a copy of those findings with the ag working group.

Becki shared results of a recent market survey that showed a large growth in the agriculture machinery market, with farm tractor sales and manufacturing leading the way. Becki asked with that knowledge in mind, who should we add to the ag working group that could speak to this and provide agriculture/manufacturing project ideas. David Eaton stated they have been speaking to small agriculture machine manufacturers and that they see a potential to recruit these to an agriculture industrial park.

Each member of the group was asked to note what additional ideas the group should be considering. The list of ideas were as follows:

1. Educating people on growing hemp and cannabis as a legal product.
2. The organic gap and certification of companies for food companies as organic. (Blue Ridge Plateau is currently working on this)
3. Researching and considering what Red Sun is doing in Dublin. Greenhouses are likely to be the future. We have water and we have to explore vegetables and fruit supplies to within 500 miles of VA Produce.
4. Look at outdoor growing and the year round flows.
5. Tazewell County – Agriculture Equipment Manufacturing. Utilizing displaced miners and machinery workers with the skills to work in this kind of manufacturing.
6. Ag Food Hubs where producers can drop off agricultural products and market them.
7. Land labs for demonstration and research
8. Soil studies on abandoned mine land and reclaimed sites to determine what they might grow best and determine what supplements are needed to make the soil useful.
9. Ag Equipment – BCS Tractors (uniquely suited to our terrain)
10. Drying facility for medicinal herbs and hemp (ASD has one in Duffield)
11. Explore hydroponics for organic vegetables
12. Identify our niche crops that are well-suited to our soil, climate and elevation and educate and promote and market
13. Establish VA Tech relationship as land grant partner
14. SWVA Farmers Market wholesale

**Action items for the next meeting are:**

1. A letter of intent will be sent for the meat processing project.
2. Chris Horton will send Becki Cornell University study to share with group.
3. Amanda will share Carroll County Ag Fair information to share with the group.

**The next meeting will be held on August 28, at 1:00 PM at Heartwood, Abingdon, VA.**

David adjourned the meeting.