



Agriculture Working Group

Minutes of August 28, 2018

The GO Virginia Region One Agriculture Working Group met on August 28, 2018, at 1:00 PM at Heartwood, Abingdon, Virginia.

In attendance: David Eaton, Becki Joyce, Ernie McFadden, Jerry Moles, April Wilson, Will Culbertson, Steve Breeding, Amanda Parris, Chris Horton, John Blankenship, Dave Leonard, Doug Bowers, Andrew Barnes, Ramona Chapman, Kathlyn Terry, Katy Elsea, Robyn Lee, Moir Beamer, Jim Baldwin, Michelle Jenkins, Tyler Lester

By conference: John Kilgore, Jeff Mansour

David Eaton called the meeting to order.

Update on Agriculture Discussions in the Region & Meat Processing update:

Michelle Jenkins reported that she had facilitated a previous meeting with other delegates about other possible sources of funding for the project due to GO Virginia's job requirements. Congressman Griffith's office received Russell County's business plan, but hadn't received Carroll County's business plan yet. Ms. Jenkins was wondering whether it was a joint application and what the proceedings for that would be. She stressed that agriculture has always been a staple in the 9th district, that the business plan for Russell County looked very strong, and they're excited to see the fruition of this project. It was stated that the feasibility study and business plan from Carroll County would be sent to the congressman's office.

David Eaton stressed that for funding purposes, the group wants to explore every avenue to find what opportunities are out there to partner with other businesses and counties. He said this was because the project is operating in two different markets and that there is an opportunity to work cooperatively with other counties, businesses, and organizations. He stated that they were still interested in creating a letter of intent, but that they needed to merge the two business plans. Robyn Lee noted that the GO Virginia Region One Council will meet on October 2 to review the applications submitted by the September 3 deadline. If proposing to submit an application by the November 5 deadline, it is recommended that a letter of intent be submitted by October 5.

David also stated that this project is in an area that produces a lot of beef, goat, milk, and other products and that the more partners there are, the less risk involved and the more opportunity for growth for each partner. He mentioned that this project isn't designed to detract from already existing meat processing facilities, but to foster cooperation and growth among them.

April Wilson brought up the fact that an influential goat farmer, Terry Hankins, and owner of Goat Rancher magazine wanted to do a story about SWVA. She said Terry thought this project was a good way to expand goat production, not only in the area, but across the United States. Ernie McFadden wanted to stress the fact that the project needs to have an exit strategy, or in other words, who will we sell the product to. Normally that is where you start and then work backwards from there. He noted that Chris has been working on securing contracts along with David Moyer but just wanted to make sure to keep the focus on achieving those contracts.

Jeff Mansour wanted to know if the group had reached out to any of the community colleges for the workforce development side of the projects. Jerry Moles stated that he had been dealing directly with the meat lab at Virginia Tech and their assistant director who is very interested in the project. They have offered to assist the project with staff training. David also wanted to add that Russell County has put more funding toward high school agriculture programs and that the county will offer to pay for the first 2 years of community college through a community service scholarship.

Steve Breeding wanted to stress that the group needs to have the 2 plans pulled together and that a regional lens needed to be applied for it to work. The group needs to be clear as to who will do what, what products will be produced, and what opportunities for value added products there are. Kathlyn Terry asked exactly what about these 2 plans will make it different from the Allegheny plant or others that have failed.

Steve responded that their trip to Allegheny allowed them to see what didn't work and that those factors were considered, namely that the project needs good money packages so that they don't have a large fixed debt that will cause prices to go up.

Jerry Moles brought up the fact that it takes time to build up the market for the product because people are secure with current outcomes and will only switch to something new when the new concept is proven.

Fields of Gold, Lessons Learned:

Ramona Chapman of DHCD spoke about her work with the Fields of Gold agritourism program. This program, which involves over 6,000 farms, is designed to collectively advertise the Shenandoah Valley's agritourism sites and activities and to promote the start-up and growth of ag-related businesses by offering educational workshops and business tools to members. Ramona stressed that the marketing of a region is essential, and that inter-communication is critical for maintaining a strong message and a spirit of cooperation. She also noted that a strong understanding of farmer's needs and expansive partnerships with all aspects of agriculture and tourism were needed for the successful implementation of the program. Ramona recommended the group invite someone from Fields of Gold or VA Tourism at the next meeting to discuss agritourism.

Food Security & Leveraging SWVA:

Jerry Moles talked about food security and how the climate is predicted to change. Namely, the western states are depleting their aquifers while at the same time our climate in SWVA is expected to become wetter. Therefore, one of our greatest assets will be the easy access to clean water. He also noted that food safety and food quality, nutrient value, are becoming greater and greater concerns for conspicuous consumers. Many studies have been conducted to see whether the market was here for pasture raised beef and indeed there is a market and it is growing. He also stated that to get enough investment in the region there needs to be business plans developed for other projects, but that the cost of developing these plans is prohibitively expensive. Therefore, he thinks that there needs to be a vehicle for investment that allows locals to be secure to invest locally.

Agriculture Regional Action Plan:

Becki notified the group about GO Virginia's initiative to do an RFP to hire a consultant to look at the numerous studies, assets, and stakeholders to create a regional action plan. This action plan will include looking into the craft beverage cluster, non-timber forest products, livestock cluster, and value-added products in order to develop a portfolio of action items in at least 3 of those sectors.

Robyn Lee explained the funds are coming from GO Virginia Region One's Building Capacity funds and that this is something that the GO VA team believes will unlock a lot of projects in the region. She mentioned that the scope of work is still very much a draft but that it will include looking at all the strategic studies and plans from every county and organization and then drilling down to find similarities among them. Therefore, there will be an advisory group that will come out of the GO VA working group. Eventually the consultant will help the advisory group to identify actionable initiatives and then look at the funding needs, infrastructure needs, and partnership needs. Becki stated that not every project that the consultant and advisory committee come up with would necessarily be a GO VA project. She stated that there are many initiatives and organizations working towards similar goals that there needs to be a single driver to pull it all together. Becki also asked the group what they thought should come out of the consultant and action plan.

Kathlyn Terry suggested recommended leaders for whatever that project is and financial analysis for each project. Jerry added that there should be completed business plans for opportunities already here. Chris Horton and Ms. Terry suggested a market analysis and Ramona said there should be an effective communication plan for the stakeholders involved. Chris suggested that there needs to be a comparison between all funding sources to find where they are similar and different. Jeff Mansour suggested studying the feasibility to extending investment opportunities to social impact investors.

Kathlyn Terry volunteered to have someone from ASD to be involved on the advisory committee, Amanda said she would be the contact for members in Carroll County. David Eaton, James and April Wilson also volunteered for the committee.

The group began to review previous project ideas, and decided to review the ideas again and work on these in the next meeting

Action items for the next meeting are:

- A. Review the list of project ideas and be prepared to discuss in the next meeting.
 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 agriculture mal 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
- B. Bring additional new project ideas.
- C. Research agriculture incubators and their role in the community.

The next meeting will be held on September 25, at 1:00 PM at Heartwood, Abingdon, VA.

