Farm bill offers good news for diversifying

By Matt Ernst, independent writer

The Agricultural Act of 2014 – the farm bill – was signed by President Obama on Feb. 7. The path to this farm bill was historically long and, at times, contentious. But now that there is finally a farm bill, what impact might it have for producers interested in crop diversification? Here are some highlights.

Higher Produce Crop Spending
“The 2014 farm bill is nothing less than a solid win for fresh produce on several fronts, including research, market promotion, pest and disease programs and nutrition initiatives,” said Tom Stenzel, president & CEO of United Fresh, the produce industry group. According to United Fresh, this farm bill increases funding for produce industry initiatives by 55 percent over the 2008 bill. The initiatives include:

State Block Grant Program
This program provides funds to state departments of agriculture to benefit the specialty crop industry. KDA received more than $240,000 through this program in 2013, including funds for GAP training and UK research on cucurbit pest control.

Specialty Crops Research Initiative (SCRI)
The farm bill allows more than $70 million annually for SCRI, a program funding university and government researchers focused on specialty crops. These projects tend to be very large and applicable to many different states, like a pollinator research program funded to Michigan State University researchers in 2012.
Pest and Disease Prevention Program
Funding was renewed for USDA/APHIS to monitor and prevent pests and diseases. The produce industry believes this program helps guard pest outbreaks, especially from imported produce. Annual funding starts at $62.5 million, including $5 million for the Clean Plant Program.

The 2014 farm bill also maintains funding for the Market Access Program, a trade promotion program supported by produce and other farm groups. The farm bill also continues funding for the Value Added Producer Grant program, which can help fund producers and groups involved in value-added projects.

Promoting Specialty Crop Consumption
While this farm bill saw negotiations that were drawn out and, at times, contentious, the end environment proved largely favorable for government programs promoting fruit and vegetable consumption. For example, the farm bill maintains the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program that promotes produce in school lunches.

The bill also adds a new grant program to promote fruit and vegetable consumption by SNAP (food stamp) recipients. The Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive program, modeled after farmers market programs for SNAP users, would provide bonus funds for SNAP recipients when they purchase produce. However, this program would not go into effect until USDA writes program regulations.

Expanding Crop Insurance Products
Final regulations will also be awaited for some crop insurance programs. Row crop producers are already weighing options from the farm bill, which shifts the safety net for crop producers from a system of government payments to now funding more government-subsidized crop insurance. Commodity crop farmers will, in the future, have the option of “layering” multiple crop insurance products on the same acreage.

The 2014 farm bill also calls for some expansion in crop insurance, including studies that may result in additional crop insurance policies for some specialty crops in some states. But it is important to note that the USDA’s Risk Management Agency (RMA) was already working to expand organic coverage. “RMA is committed to offering a modern and effective safety net to ensure organic farmers have what they need to put seed in the ground and food on our tables, even after a difficult production year,” said Brandon Willis, RMA Administrator, in February.

For 2014, RMA has added organic price elections for 2014 for eight additional crops – including oats - bringing the total number of crops with organic price elections to 16. Also starting in 2014, according to RMA, “the 5 percent surcharge for all crops insured under organic farming practices has been removed; a new contract price option will be available to organic producers who grow crops under guaranteed contracts and will be available for 62 different organic crops; and changes to organic transitional yields (t-yields) will be phased in so they will be more reflective of actual organic farming experience.”

NRCS EQIP cutoff is April 18th

By Christy Morgan, NRCS

Now is the time to apply for assistance through NRCS’ EQIP. Applications are accepted on a continuous basis, but those received prior to the ranking cut-off date of April 18, 2014, will be evaluated and considered for EQIP funding in 2014.

EQIP is a voluntary program, authorized by farm bill legislation, that promotes agricultural production, forest management, and environmental quality as compatible goals. Through EQIP, agriculture producers receive financial and technical assistance to implement structural and management conservation practices on productive agricultural land.

Some of the conservation measures that landowners may receive assistance on through EQIP include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Grazing management: fencing and livestock watering systems
• Nutrient management: manure storage structures, planned nutrient applications
• Erosion control: grade control structures, diversions, grassed waterways
• Wildlife habitat enhancement: stream buffers, early successional habitat management
• Forestland management: forest stand improvement, brush management
• Water quality improvement: field borders, livestock exclusion

By implementing these and other conservation measures, farmers and ranchers can improve the long-term productivity and sustainability of their agricultural operation, improve the condition of crops and forage for livestock, reduce the cost for fuel, labor, fertilizers and pesticides, and improve the energy efficiency of the overall operation.

In addition to general EQIP applications, agricultural producers can apply for specific initiatives. NRCS has several initiatives supported by EQIP that address specific kinds of agricultural activities, specific geographic locations, or agency approved initiatives. [Click here](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/about/) to review all the available initiatives.

For information about how to apply for assistance through EQIP and deadlines specific to the available application periods, visit your local NRCS office (http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app). There is also a step-by-step guide to explain the process of getting started with NRCS conservation assistance online at: [http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/about/](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/about/)

Meet UK’s Steve Diver

Steve Diver is the new Farm Superintendent at UK’s Horticulture Research Farm in Lexington. Prior to joining the Department of Horticulture, he was a horticultural and soils consultant in Central Texas. Steve is a graduate of Oklahoma State University, where he earned B.S. (1982) and M.S. (1984) degrees in Horticulture. He conducted research on container nursery production as an undergraduate before specializing in fruit and nut production in graduate school, where he studied seasonal changes in elemental concentration in pecan fruit and leaves as well as applied foliar nutrition in pecans.

From 1984-1988, he was the Extension Horticulture Agent in Muskogee County, OK, during which time he held dual assignments as the County Agriculture Agent for McIntosh County and then District Horticulturist for 21 counties in Northeast Oklahoma. He left the Extension Service to gain experience managing an organic blueberry farm in the Missouri Ozarks. Thereafter, for the next 18 years, he worked as an Agriculture Specialist with ATTRA, the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, a USDA-funded program managed by the National Center for Appropriate Technology.

In 2007, he moved to Texas to marry his college sweetheart and work as Research & Development Scientist with Sustainable Growth Texas, LLC, a soil biology services company with customers ranging from the Texas Department of Transportation to grassfed beef producers, landscape architects, and pecan growers. In 2010, he established an independent firm, Agri-Horticultural Consulting, which provided soil analysis and consultancy
services in eco-agriculture, organic and sustainable farming, and environmental sciences to pecan and vineyard growers, vegetable farmers, greenhouse and nursery operators, and government agencies involved in large-scale revegetation projects.

Steve started working at the Horticulture Research Farm in January. We’re happy to have him!

High tunnel program scheduled

The 2014 Vegetable Academy will host a growers meeting on March 20th in Lincoln County on High Tunnel Vegetable Production. The program will be from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Cedar Creek Sportsmans Club at Cedar Creek Lake on Cedar Creek Sims Highway in Stanford. It will feature UK Extension specialists covering a variety of high tunnel topics, including nutrient and irrigation management, weed management, insect management, disease control, economics and marketing, tomato varieties, and equipment considerations.

For meal reservations, call the Lincoln County Extension Office at (606) 365-2447. For more information, click here.

KY-SARE Food Systems Training

By Janet Mullins, UK Extension Specialist in Food & Nutrition

In February 2014, seven teams from Kentucky and one team from Virginia gathered to learn more about how to help their communities build stronger food systems. Each team sent an application to KY-Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program and was selected to attend a two-day conference with a team including Extension agents and community partners. The Kentucky counties included: Barren, Clark, Fayette, Franklin, Madison, Pendleton and Whitley. The first day of the Strengthening Community Food Systems Extension In-Service Professional Development training was held at the Kentucky State University farm. The second day started at the Fayette County Extension office, and ended at FoodChain and Smithtown Seafood for a tour and late lunch.

All teams will begin with an assessment of their community food assets and needs. Teams will work to increase consumer demand for local foods, expand or establish Farm-To-School programs, market Farmers Markets, foster the development of young farmers, and increase access to healthy foods for all people. Each team has a “coach” from the UK campus and has received information about resources from UK and KSU.

CCD webinar: Best Practices for Sampling at KY Farmers Markets

The Center for Crop Diversification hosted its third webinar on February 20, 2014. Forty-nine participants joined the webinar live and heard from Dr. Tim Woods, Extension Professor at the University of Kentucky; Miranda Hileman, a Senior Extension Associate with the Center for Crop Diversification; Sharon Spencer, the Farmers Market Marketing Specialist with the Kentucky Department of Agriculture; and Linda McMaine, a producer at McMaine’s Riverhaven Farm who samples her farm products at several farmers markets in Kentucky. We took some great questions and covered a lot of material during the 75-minute webinar. Our recording, as well as all the documents that we talked about during the webi-
Call for Kentucky Farmers Market Price Reporters

Are you a regular shopper at your farmers market? Do you attend a market almost every week? Do you shop at least once a week? The Center for Crop Diversification is looking for volunteers to record weekly prices at several farmers markets around the state. Our price reports are extremely useful for all of our farmers market vendors across the Commonwealth. Reporting weekly prices is a great way to help out your community farmers market, and it’s also a nice way to meet your farmers! To see the farmers market reports, visit this link: http://www.uky.edu/Ag/CCD/farmersmarket.html and, for more information about volunteering, please contact Miranda Hileman at miranda.hileman@uky.edu or 859-218-4384.

AEN-36, Low-Cost Cold Storage Room for Market Growers

Market growers typically can sell their fruits and vegetables for a more premium price within a few days of when they were picked. Cold storage can help preserve produce freshness and quality for a few additional days.

“The improved freshness and quality from cold storage can be especially beneficial with marketing venues like farmers markets and CSAs used by many market growers,” according to Biosystems and Agriculture Engineering Extension Specialist John Wilhoit. But conventional refrigeration used for cold storage may be too expensive for most market growers. “There are lower-cost cold storage options that can make cold storage much more affordable for market growers.”

For more information, please see Dr. Wilhoit’s publication “Low-Cost Cold Storage Room for Market Growers” at http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/aen/aen96/aen96.pdf

West Virginia Conference

By Miranda Hileman, Senior Extension Associate

The 2014 West Virginia Small Farm Conference was held February 27 – March 1 in Morgantown, WV. In its 10th year, this gathering of stakeholders in the future of local food and sustainable farming offered a varied range of trainings, production information and updates, as well as the opportunity to network and gather new ideas. The Future Farmers of America (FFA) groups from across West Virginia attended many of the sessions, and their enthusiasm for agriculture was contagious! Thursday evening featured the Winter Blues Farmers Market and Local Food Dine-Around. This popular annual event featured many farmer vendors and quite a few chefs and restaurants from across West Virginia.

Friday and Saturday schedules featured about one hundred 50-minute workshops on many topics designed to address the nearly endless opportunities and the associated challenges faced by farmers.

KY Organic conference a success

The 2014 Organic Association of Kentucky, also known as OAK, held their 4th Annual Organic Conference on March 7 – 8 in Berea. One hundred and seventy-eight people participated in the weekend events! This year’s conference boasted more than 25 sessions on topics of organic crops, pastured poultry, fuel and corn crops, and organic livestock. Pre-conference activities included tours of the Berea College Farm Greenhouses and Lazy Eight Stock Farm. Kiley Parker from the Kentucky Department of Agriculture spoke about the very
promising future of organics in Kentucky, and Friday’s keynote speaker, Melinda Hemmelgarn, better known as “The Food Sleuth,” spoke on the importance of organic food in our society today. She was inspiring and exciting to hear from.

Saturday’s keynote speakers, Klaas and Mary-Howell Martens, spoke of their experiences running a large organic grain operation and grain mill in New York state. Their crops include corn, soybeans, wheat, spelt, barley, oats, field peas and edamame. They mill their own grains and those of other organic farms in the area.

Homebased Processing and Microprocessing workshops

Interested in Homebased Processing or Home-based Microprocessing? The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, Kentucky Department of Agriculture and Kentucky Cabinet for Health Services are partnering to support you! House Bill 391 and Farmers Market Legislation allow Kentucky farmers who grow and harvest produce to process value-added products in their home kitchens for sale at designated farmers markets, certified roadside stands and the processor’s farm. There are two processing categories in HB 391, Homebased Processor and Homebased Microprocessor. To qualify under either program, the final product must contain a primary or predominant ingredient which is a fruit, vegetable, nut or herb that is grown by the farmer in Kentucky.

Homebased Processors may produce and sell low risk products such as jams, jellies, syrups, baked goods, and dried fruits, vegetables, nuts and herbs. There is no fee associated with becoming a Home-based Processor, but annual registration with the Cabinet for Health Services is required and labeling rules must be followed. Contact Shadrick Adams for more information and an application at 502-564-7181 or Shadrick.Adams@ky.gov.

Homebased Microprocessors may sell higher risk products such as canned tomatoes, pickled fruits and vegetables, salsa, barbecue sauce, pepper or herb jellies, herbal vinegars, low- and no-sugar jams and jellies, and pressure-canned vegetables. The first step to becoming a certified Homebased Microprocessor is to attend a Homebased Microprocessor (HBM) workshop presented by the University of Kentucky. More information about the program and the current listing of upcoming HBM workshops can be found at http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/micro/ or by contacting Debbie Clouthier at 859-257-1812 or debbie.clouthier@uky.edu.

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Thanks for reading, and please contact Miranda at miranda.hileman@uky.edu if you are interested in subscribing to our online newsletter.

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