

SERA 45 Crop Diversification Opportunities to Enhance the Viability of Small Farms Annual Meeting

**Virtual Meeting
Friday, September 17th, 2021
10 a.m. to 2 p.m. EDT**

Participants and guests in attendance: Lesley Oliver (AA-University of Kentucky), J. Mike Phillips (AA-Auburn University), Melanie Stock (Chair, Utah State University), Rachel Rudolph (Vice-Chair, University of Kentucky), Ajay Nair (Iowa State University), Annette Wszelaki (University of Tennessee), Margarita Velandia (University of Tennessee), Troy Dugger (Center for Profitable Agriculture, Tennessee), Rob Holland (Center for Profitable Agriculture, Tennessee), Christy Cassady (University of Kentucky), Brett Wolff (University of Kentucky), Shawn Wright (University of Kentucky), Petrus Langenhoven (Purdue University), Wenjing Guan (Purdue University), Lewis Jett (West Virginia University), Matt Kleinhenz (Ohio State University), Daniel Becker (University of Kentucky), Savannah Columbia (University of Kentucky), Mathieu Ngouajio (National Institute of Food and Agriculture), John Erickson (National Institute of Food and Agriculture), and Ryan Burnette (Kentucky Department of Agriculture)

Agenda

- Melanie Stock (Utah) facilitated the meeting, which opened with introductions. Participants briefly discussed how activities are being conducted in their states in response to COVID-19. Participants noted that although in-person events were taking place, attendance was down significantly.
- Participants were given an update by representatives of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), and heard from a representative of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture (KDA) regarding a potential multi-state Specialty Crop Block Grant proposal.
- Participants discussed progress made toward the project objectives, crop diversification activities going on in the participating states, and opportunities for future collaboration. Written state reports were shared with the entire group by email prior to the meeting.

A. Mathieu Ngouajio (National Science Liaison) and John Erickson (National Program Leader) gave an update on NIFA.

1. Ngouajio said NIFA lost about 75 percent of its staff when it moved from Washington to Kansas City, Missouri. NIFA is currently hiring, and remote work is possible.
2. NIFA is seeking volunteers to serve as peer-review panelists for its programs.
3. NIFA is developing a new NIFA Reporting System (NRS).
4. Erickson does not anticipate any programs going away.
5. Budgets have been raised in most AFRI programs.
6. There has been a big increase in funding for the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI), going to \$50 million in the next funding cycle.

B. The group discussed progress made toward project objective 1 (developing research-based production information about crops, systems and production practices that have potential to be profitable for small farms).

1. Several participants have been collaborating on a squash hunger trials project. Annette Wszelaki (Tennessee) gave a PowerPoint presentation outlining the progress to date. The goal of the project is to evaluate crops that offer a long storage life, and which could supply people without access to fresh fruits and vegetables during the fall and winter with more access to nutrient dense foods for a longer time throughout the year. Wszelaki proposed this project at the 2019 SERA 45 annual meeting, and work began in 2020, with participants from SERA 45 and the Southeastern Vegetable Extension Workers Group (SEVEW). Eight states participated in 2020 (Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Ohio, Tennessee, Utah and West Virginia), when 10 varieties of kabocha squash were evaluated. Researchers are in the process of analyzing data for a journal article and an extension publication. A multistate extension publication published through the University of Kentucky Center for Crop Diversification (CCD) is a possibility. The project continued in 2021, with expanded participation from SERA 45 and SEVEW. Eleven states (with 12 locations) participated, including Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah and Virginia. Ten varieties of *Cucurbita maxima* squash (flat stackers types) were evaluated (Blue Delight, Fairytale, Flat White Boer, Jarrahdale, Marina Di Chioggia, Mint Prince, Porcelain Doll, Royal Blue, Speckled Hound and Triamble), and harvesting was underway at the time of our meeting. SERA 45 participants interested in joining the project in 2022 were invited to contact Wszelaki at annettew@utk.edu. The group might branch out into sweet potato trials at some point, and any crop that offers long storage will be considered. Winter melons, Chinese cabbage, daikon radish, dry beans and Irish potato were also mentioned as possibilities.

C. The group discussed objectives 2, 3 and 4, coordination of research and extension activities in the participating states, developing direct market information and decision aids that can be shared regionally, and continuing market research in the participating states on consumer preferences and marketing channels that are most effective and profitable for small farms.

1. Savannah Columbia, an extension associate in the University of Kentucky Department of Agricultural Economics, shared that UK has received KY Specialty Crop Block Grant funding to evaluate how the market has changed for cut flowers post-COVID. The project will support cut flower online education programs already happening in Kentucky. Three deliverables are planned, including a survey of cut flower growers regarding consumers' willingness to pay for their cut flowers and services, and to identify new cut flower buyers; a cut flower marketing school, a collaboration with the Kentucky Horticulture Council (KHC), Melanie Stock (Utah) and extension agents covering how growers can use social media, and how to market their flowers; and a cut flower promotion program, which will be offered quarterly, with a cut flower marketing webinar series. The project is built on KHC efforts to strengthen marketing skills for growers. Columbia said the number of cut flower growers in Kentucky has been increasing significantly, and 52 growers participated in Cut Flower Grower Month in July, which reached nearly 60,000 social media users.
2. Other participants shared research they have been conducting, including specialty melons (Ajay Nair, IA). There is a demand for small melons (1 to 3 pounds), but they don't store

well, and it's hard to determine the best harvest time. A Specialty Crop Block Grant will help with evaluation. Purdue (Petrus Langenhoven and Wenjing Guan) has looked at 20 melon varieties as part of a Specialty Crop Block Grant, and will share information with the group. Langenhoven said the plant population can be increased three times when growing melons in high tunnels versus the field.

D. Discussion of activities in the participating states

1. Participants gave brief (five-minute) summaries of the activities in their states. Activities involving collaboration among the group not previously mentioned included development of five additional co-branded publications by the CCD for the Center for Profitable Agriculture (CPA) in Tennessee since our 2020 annual meeting (<https://cpa.tennessee.edu/specialty-crop-profiles/>); development of a co-branded fact sheet written by Lewis Jett of West Virginia University (*Growing, Harvesting, Preserving Appalachian Heirloom Beans (CCD-WVU-FS-2, ANR-HORT-21-001)*) and published through the CCD; development of two additional publications as part of a Southern SARE Cover Crops Under Cover grant that includes SERA 45 participants from Kentucky (Krista Jacobsen and Rachel Rudolph) and Tennessee (Wszelaki), *Cool-Season Cover Crops for High Tunnels in the Southeast (CCD-SP-18)* and *Warm-Season Cover Crops for High Tunnels in the Southeast (CCD-SP-19)*, published through the CCD; and a series of five Getting Ready for Market webinars offered in March of 2021 by Rudolph (KY) and Wszelaki (TN) for growers in Kentucky and Tennessee. Please see the attached state reports for details of activities in the participating states.

E. Discussion of opportunities for collaboration

1. The group discussed the possibility of submitting a proposal for a multistate Specialty Crop Block Grant (SCBG). Project ideas included water management, IPM, and irrigation/sensor help for small farms, including development of a manual for small-scale irrigation. The group heard from Ryan Burnette of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture regarding a possible multistate SCBG proposal. The group's proposal to the KDA would be due in November, and the KDA's proposal to the USDA would be due in December, so there is a short turnaround time. The minimum award is \$250,000 and the maximum is \$1 million.

Election of officers:

Chair: Rachel Rudolph, University of Kentucky

Vice-Chair: Shawn Wright, University of Kentucky

2022 Annual Meeting

If the situation with COVID-19 allows the group to meet in person in 2022, the meeting will be held in the Nashville area and hosted by participants at Tennessee's Center for Profitable Agriculture, as was originally planned for 2020 and 2021.