

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

**Virtual Meeting
Friday, September 16th, 2022
10 a.m. to 2:15 p.m. EDT**

Participants and guests in attendance: Rachel Rudolph (Chair, University of Kentucky), Shawn Wright (Vice-Chair, University of Kentucky), Melanie Stock (Utah State University), 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), Wenjing Guan (Purdue University), Liz Maynard (Purdue University), Miranda Purcell (Purdue University), Lewis Jett (West Virginia University), Mathieu Ngouajio (National Institute of Food and Agriculture)

Agenda

- Rachel Rudolph (Kentucky) facilitated the meeting, which opened with introductions.
- Participants were given an update by Mathieu Ngouajio of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA).
- 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, NIFA).

1. Ngouajio thanked SERA 45 participants who have submitted proposals to NIFA, and who have served as reviewers.
2. Although many employees left NIFA when the agency moved to Kansas City in 2019, NIFA is now close to being fully staffed.
3. All positions at NIFA have been approved to be fully remote.

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 an update on the project, which was started because some of the crops hadn't been looked at for a number of years and needed updated production and variety recommendations. The project was also started to evaluate crops that could be made available to food banks after the summer production season. Work on this project began in 2020, with participants from SERA 45 and the Southeastern Vegetable Extension Workers Group (SEVEW). Participation has grown each year, with 14 locations for acorn squash trials in 2022, including Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Utah. There is a great deal of variability across states. The project is also looking at storage of the crops. The group discussed other crops they might consider for the trials, including cabbage and short-day onions in high tunnels.

C. The group discussed objective 2, coordination of research and extension activities in the participating states.

1. The group discussed efforts to get a multistate Specialty Crop Block Grant since the 2021 SERA 45 annual meeting. Kentucky, Tennessee, and Purdue participants submitted a proposal in the fall of 2021 to study root knot nematode in high tunnels, but the proposal was not funded. The group discussed the situations in the participating states regarding Specialty Crop Block Grants. Several state departments of agriculture (Kentucky, Tennessee, and Indiana) had chosen not to be involved in the multistate Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, but the SERA 45 participants had submitted their proposal independently of a state department of agriculture.
2. Melanie Stock (UT) has worked as a consultant on a Kentucky Specialty Crop Block Grant (Tim Woods, PI) “Integrating Post-COVID Cut Flower Demand into Market Education.” Stock said the grant participants have met nearly every month via Zoom and have conducted webinars. Stock was a speaker for one webinar in the series, The Art and Science of Pricing, in April of 2022. Cut flower growers from Kentucky and Utah participated in the webinar. In December, Stock will be participating in extension workshops for cut flower growers as part of this grant.
3. Several SERA 45 participants collaborated on a proposal for an SCRI grant on high tunnels that did not receive funding. Wszelaki said the team is planning to regroup with the reviews they got from their proposal and will meet soon to begin preparing another proposal.
4. The group discussed SCRI planning grants. Wenjing Guan (IN) and Ajay Nair (IA) are among the collaborators on a planning grant looking at root knot nematode in watermelon production. Guan said she wants to organize a meeting this fall to discuss a proposal.

D. The group discussed Objective 3, developing direct market information and decision aids that can be shared regionally.

1. Margarita Velandia (TN) shared that Tennessee has resumed their farmers market price reports, which are posted on the University of Kentucky Center for Crop Diversification (CCD) website. These price reports were stopped in 2020-21 due to COVID. Tennessee is using CCD standards – reporting a range of prices, and including volume based on the number of vendors selling a product. Because extension agents helping with the price reporting were overwhelmed, Tennessee began reporting prices every two weeks rather than weekly. Velandia said Tennessee has started collecting cut flower prices at farmers markets and noted a significant increase in the number of vendors selling cut flowers. Prices for cut flowers are reported only from urban farmers markets, as the rural markets do not have cut flower vendors. Velandia said that prices at Tennessee farmers markets were steady from 2015-2019, but in 2022, she has seen an increase in prices, which could be due to rising input costs.
2. Velandia said she and Wszelaki have been updating decision aid tools such as their tomato budget and have created a decision tool to accompany a 2019 large-scale pepper budget, both of which they hope to release in the next month or so. Tennessee also has a new blackberry budget that was released in January.
3. Velandia suggested collaborating on the CCD’s three-year farmers market price report publications, to look at similarities and differences across states.
4. Velandia and Christy Cassady (KY) discussed the need to update enterprise budgets, work

that is often dependent on grant funds to hire help as it is very labor-intensive. Velandia suggested collaborating on budgets, including controlled environment horticulture, and mentioned a request for a microgreens budget, which could be developed as a regional budget.

5. Brett Wolff (KY) shared that the Kentucky farmers market price report had as many as 14 markets reporting in 2019 but had fewer markets reporting during the pandemic. In 2022, as many as 10 markets in KY have been reporting. The CCD is also continuing to report prices from Kentucky produce auctions.
6. Wolff said a 2021 KY Specialty Crop Block Grant is allowing the CCD to continue its direct marketing curriculum, including topics like social media analytics and website building.

E. The group discussed Objective 4, continuing market research in the participating states on consumer preferences and marketing channels that are most effective and profitable for small farms.

1. Velandia said Alicia Rihn at the University of Tennessee, a relatively new faculty member in the Department of Agriculture and Resource Economics, has an eye tracking lab to identify what consumers are looking at when they look at products. Velandia plans to invite Rihn to join SERA 45.
2. Wolff directed the group to information about an Agricultural Marketing Service Local Food Systems Project that the University of Kentucky and Colorado State, among others, have been involved in since the onset of the pandemic. Part of that project was a consumer food survey that offers interesting insights.

<https://lfscovid.localfoodeconomics.com/consumer-food-insights/>

The group briefly discussed the process of officially becoming a participant in SERA 45, as well as the need to submit a renewal proposal by September 30, 2023.

Wolff directed the group to the HortBiz Quiz, a survey available through the CCD website that helps growers and the extension agents who work with them narrow down the list of crops that might be appropriate for their situations, based on access to land, labor and capital. It is available at https://uky.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_00gKXJHVHkPPdxH. The August CCD newsletter includes the first in a series of analyses of survey results. It can be accessed at <https://www.uky.edu/ccd/sites/www.uky.edu.ccd/files/CCDnewsaug2022.pdf>.

The group discussed the difficulty of determining fair land rental rates, including rental of high tunnels.

The group discussed pricing of specialty crops in several states, including Kentucky, Tennessee, and Iowa.

Discussion of activities in the participating states

1. Participants gave brief summaries of the activities in their states. Activities involving collaboration among the group not previously mentioned included development of a series of four Spring into Production Season webinars offered in February and March of 2022 by Rudolph (KY) and Wszelaki (TN) for growers in Kentucky and Tennessee. Lewis Jett (WV) shared information about how high tunnel workshops in West Virginia have led to the

development of a high tunnel management certification program. The program might have value in helping workshop participants get loans, or to get jobs on farms that need skilled labor. The program could be replicated in other states. Please see the attached state reports for details of activities in the participating states.

Rudolph (KY) mentioned the need to provide more details regarding impact of activities that represent collaboration among the group, such as attendance numbers for webinars, distribution of fact sheets, etc., based on the SERA 45 mid-term review.

E. Discussion of opportunities for collaboration

1. Rudolph suggested the group collaborate on developing resources on irrigation for small farms and high tunnels, and possibly a high tunnel management guide.
2. Lewis Jett (WV) suggested work being done with elderberries in West Virginia could lead to a co-branded fact sheet published through the CCD on elderberries for Appalachia.
3. The multistate squash trials will continue, and the group might add an onion trial.
4. Liz Maynard (IN) suggested looking at the potential for local small-scale processing as part of the squash variety trials.

Election of officers:

Chair: Lewis Jett, West Virginia University

Vice-Chair: Wenjing Guan, Purdue University

2023 Annual Meeting

Jett suggested possibly meeting in-person in Louisville, KY, in 2023, as it is a central location for many in the group.