Get the Buzz on Pollinator Conservation
Training programs coming in 2012

Farmers, Extension agents, Federal and state farm agency personnel, and others interested in pollinator conservation will have the opportunity to attend training programs throughout the Southern region beginning in 2012.

The Xerces Society, a non-profit invertebrate conservation organization, has received funding from the SARE program to develop and conduct pollinator conservation planning short courses throughout the country. The short courses will be coming to the South next year with the primary focus on native bee conservation.

“There are 4,000 species of native bees in North America, from small solitary mining bees to large and highly social bumble bees, all of which can be important pollinators for agriculture,” said Eric Mader, assistant pollinator program director for The Xerces Society. “With their numbers declining, just like the honey bee, it’s important that people are educated in identifying these bees and taking measures to try and conserve their populations and protect their habitats.”

The states tentatively scheduled for the 2012 pollinator short courses include North Carolina, Oklahoma, Georgia, Florida, Arkansas and Virginia, with the remaining states in the Southern region being covered in 2013. For now, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are not on the list.

Attendees get a crash course in basic bee field identification, pollinator biology and habitat requirements, habitat restoration, bee-friendly farm management practices, and incorporating pollinator conservation into federal conservation programs. Attendees also receive take-home resources, including the Xerces Society’s guide, Attracting Native Pollinators.

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Pollinator Conservation Continued

The Xerces Society developed the short course curriculum in 2008 and test piloted it in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Missouri. Since then, the pollinator short courses have been attended by over 1,200 people in 23 states across the country and have received overwhelming positive responses.

“In every case, the courses have exceeded our expectations. There has been such great demand to attend the courses that we’ve leveraged funds from other sources to increase the number of courses we offer in many states,” said Mader.

Mader estimates that the average participant has influenced about 100 acres of farmland to benefit pollinators by simply changing practices, such as mitigating the effects of pesticides, improving mowing practices, or increasing flower diversity and nest sites.

Mader believes that the short courses have been successful, in part, because they focus on wildlife nearly all are familiar with, and the conservation efforts can have a direct impact.

“Bees are tangible. They are something that people can see and relate to, as opposed to topics like climate change, which can be very intangible,” said Mader. “In addition, you can see the results of conservation efforts. The more invested one becomes, the more you directly see the results.”

Pollinator conservation not only protects bees, but it also has wider benefits for other wildlife and the environment, said Mader.

“By creating habitat for bees, you are also benefiting other beneficial insects—including those that attack crop pests. Pollinator habitat can also be incorporated into buffer systems that protect soil and water, and support other wildlife such as game and songbirds,” said Mader. “The conservation impact has a much broader reach than one may realize.”

For more information on The Xerces Society, log on to http://www.xerces.org. For more information on upcoming pollinator conservation planning short courses, contact Eric Mader at eric@xerces.org.
Breaking into Organic Hops Production

It only took a few e-mails to area microbreweries for Rita Pelczar to discover the demand for local, organic hops. But producing the crop, uncommon in her area, has turned out to be more of the learning curve.

“Marketing has not been the problem. It’s successfully growing the crop and getting a price worthy of our production expenses that has been the challenge,” said Pelczar. “But each year we stick with it, we learn more, and I’m hopeful that we’ll find a profitable marketing niche.”

Pelczar and her husband, John Wright, are owner/operators of Blue Ridge Hops, a small USDA organic-certified family farm in western North Carolina. In 2008, when the couple decided to take their son’s advice and put a ½-acre of their 30-acre farm into organic hops, they quickly realized they were pretty much alone in the endeavor.

“When we decided to grow organic hops, we found out that nobody else was growing them around here, so we were on our own in terms of figuring out the production requirements,” said Pelczar. “Generally, hops are not hard plants to grow in northern regions, but there are some interesting production issues with the crop when you try to grow it in the South, particularly given our sloping mountain terrain, and especially when they are produced organically,” said Pelczar.

In 2009, the couple received an $8,268 Southern SARE Producer grant to identify the most productive varieties and nail down the right production requirements – from fertility to pest management to irrigation. Pelczar feels they have made headway, but there’s more to learn.

“We started out with 5 varieties and eliminated the ones that didn’t perform well. We are down to two varieties that have consistently been our best performers and the plan now is to continue to find good organic options for the challenges we face, and to increase our production to an economically profitable level,” said Pelczar.

Through trial and error and with the assistance of North Carolina State University Extension, the regional North Carolina Department of Agriculture agronomist, a NCSU hop research team, and other hops growers, the couple has worked out a variety of production issues.

“For example, we found out that the vines grow best when trellised straight up and down, rather than at an angle. Last year we nailed down the fertilizer requirements and put in an irrigation system, and that helped our crop tremendously,” said Pelczar. “It’s just making those little changes that have made a difference.”

This year, Pelczar introduced predatory mites to combat pest issues with spider mites and is currently devising ways to delay harvest since the crops tend to produce earlier in the season in the Southern region.

“It’s been really exciting and fun to contribute to the effort of growing organic hops in the area, but it takes a lot of work and there are so many challenges,” said Pelczar.

Pelczar is hoping that the upcoming changes to USDA’s policies on organic hops will eventually make the effort worthwhile. For now, brewers can use conventional hops to produce organic beer, but on Jan. 1, 2013 that will change. Certified organic hops will be required for the production of organic beer, suggesting that the demand for organically grown hops may increase, along with the premium price for producing the certified organic product.

To learn more about the project, “Growing Organic Hops for the Local Market,” log on to SARE’s national database and search for project number FS09-237.

For more information on Blue Ridge Hops, log on to http://www.blueridge-hops.com.

Photos courtesy of Rita Pelczar
Food Hubs: The Next Evolution in Local Markets?

If you think the local food movement is a just a fad, think again.

For the first time, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has included restaurants and grocery store sales in its local food markets survey, and the sales are hard to ignore: nearly $5 billion a year in fruits and vegetables from local farmers. The number of farmers’ markets may have doubled over the past 10 years, but the bulk of the sales is coming from supermarkets and restaurants. That link connecting area farmers to local businesses is the food hub.

A food hub is an infrastructure that aids in distributing produce to local businesses, such as restaurants, grocery stores, schools, and community food banks. Development of food hubs across the country has exploded, according to the USDA. In the South interest in food hubs continues to increase with the infrastructures popping up in Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Alabama, Oklahoma, Florida and Texas.

With the assistance of a Southern SARE Sustainable Community Innovation Grant, the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League (SCCCL) launched its own food hub, GrowFood Carolina -- the first one in the state.

“The interest was there for local foods, but the one thing missing for the chefs, grocery stores and farmers in bringing it all together was an actual physical location where local produce could be delivered by the farmer and distributed to area businesses,” said Sara Clow, general manager of GrowFood Carolina.

The food hub is satisfying the growing demand for local foods. SCCCL executive director Dana Beach describes the movement as a 300-year revolution.

“There has been more excitement surrounding local foods and healthy eating than any environmental issue we’ve ever worked with,” he said. “There has been an avalanche of commerce activity and as long as we have that infrastructure in place, I think there’s nothing that can stop it.”

In the short time GrowFood Carolina has been operating, it’s already made an impact on the local community. The 10,000 square foot building, complete with a 6,500 square foot warehouse and an 800 square foot cooler, sits in an ideal location, right in the middle of Charleston’s food deserts, yet less than a mile from the vibrant downtown waterfront and restaurant scene and easy access to major highways and interstates that connect the city to the state’s coastal islands.

“Less than 10 percent of what is grown in South Carolina is consumed in the state,” said Clow. “We are hoping to change that with GrowFood Carolina.”

Food hubs may also be the next evolution in Georgia’s agricultural industry, turning the state’s largest economic sector into an even larger engine of job creation and rural community revitalization. The Georgia Sustainable Agriculture Consortium, newly formed with the aid of a Southern SARE Planning Grant, has its sights set on establishing at least two food hubs in Georgia over the next five years.

“We’ve got a strong agricultural industry and we’ve got all of these great resources,” said Julia Gaskin, who coordinates extension programming in sustainable agriculture at the University of Georgia. “The purpose of this group is to have a coordinating body that can help leverage and focus those resources in areas where there is sufficient public and private interest.”

For more information: http://www.sustainagga.org.
By the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s definition, a food hub is a “centrally located facility with a business management structure facilitating the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, and/or marketing of locally/regionally produced food products.” The USDA Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food Subcommittee on Food Hubs has identified over 100 food hubs that have sprung up across the country. The USDA maintains a website with a wealth of information on food hubs, farmers markets and local food marketing. Learn more at http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/foodhubs

The most current USDA Food Hub Map courtesy of the Food Hub Center
For decades, we have supported the application of systems research in sustainable agriculture. The concept targets the interactions of agricultural components and how those components function together to help define the characteristics of a whole agricultural production system.

Some of the Southern region’s most respected sustainable ag experts lend their experiences and advice about approaches to systems research in a new video tutorial series.

Researchers interested in pursuing systems research projects through our Research & Education and Large Systems Research grants now have access to a tutorial of what systems research is and how to successfully write a systems research grant.

The “Perspectives on Systems Research” video tutorial is divided into five modules: Introduction and Meet the Exemplars, Getting Started in Systems Research, Building a Systems Research Team, Overcoming Challenges and Obstacles, and Funding and Support.

The videos, produced by the University of Kentucky with support from the University of Georgia, are designed to help researchers be more successful in securing grant support for systems projects.

Dig deeper into our new Systems Research section on our site to learn more about systems research, including additional educational materials on approaches to systems research at http://www.southersare.org/Grants/Systems-Research.

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**First Large Systems Research Grants Funded**

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We have handed out the first awards of our newest grants program.

The Large Systems Research Grants, extensions of our Research & Education Grants, are designed to provide long-term funding towards the application and studying of whole systems research.

Large Systems Research Grants are for teams who already have successful agricultural systems research in place, but need support to accomplish additional long-term research goals. Funding is normally $100,000 per year for three years with the opportunity for additional three-year renewals.

Of the 21 full proposals submitted, 10 were selected for review by the Southern SARE Administrative Council, and two were chosen for the awards.

The two projects chosen were:

- **LS11-238: Long-Term AgroEcosystems Research and Adoption in the Texas Southern High Plains;** Texas; $296,645. The grant supports research by Vivien Allen of Texas Tech University. Allen has used SARE grants since 1997 for long-term research on the water conservation benefits of multi-cropping grazing beef and cotton. The long-term research indicates that the integrated system uses less water and nitrogen than the monoculture cotton crop, while remaining just as profitable.

- **LS11-239: Growing Local,** North Carolina; $329,999. The funding continues research by Charlie Jackson of the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, on a local foods assessment in 23 counties of western North Carolina.

Both projects have been funded for three years. Allen’s first-year funding totals $110,000, while Jackson’s first-year funding totals $95,441. Both Allen and Jackson have contributed to a series of video tutorials on systems research. To learn more about their perspectives on systems research, visit the Systems Research section of our website at http://www.southersare.org/Grants/Systems-Research.
Southern SARE administers seven grant programs, each with its own priorities and audiences. The process begins with the release of Calls for Proposals for each of the programs. All proposals must be submitted online. Get Calls for Proposals from the S-SARE website: http://www.southernsare.org.

**Research and Education Projects** generally are conducted by multi-disciplinary, multi-institutional research teams addressing whole systems. These projects include farmers as participants.

- **2011**
  - March: Call for preproposals released
  - June: Preproposals due
  - August: Full proposals requested
  - Nov.: Full proposals due

- **2012**
  - February: Administrative Council announces grant awards

**Large Systems Projects** are for systems research teams who have successful ongoing long-term systems research projects, but need additional support to accomplish long-term research goals.

- **2011**
  - Sept.: Call for proposals released
  - Nov.: Proposals due

- **2012**
  - February: Administrative Council announces grant awards

**Graduate Student Projects** are intended for full-time graduate students (masters or PhD) enrolled at accredited colleges and universities in the Southern Region.

- **2011**
  - March: Call for proposals released
  - June: Proposals due

- **2012**
  - September: Administrative Council announces awards

**Producer Grant Projects** are developed, coordinated and conducted by producers or producer organizations. These projects are generally located in one state, often on one farm. There is a $10,000 limit for funding proposals submitted by an individual producer and a $15,000-limit on proposals submitted by producer organizations.

- **2011**
  - September: Call for proposals released
  - November: Proposals due

- **2012**
  - February: Administrative Council announces grant awards

**Professional Development Program Projects** train agricultural information providers in sustainable agriculture techniques and concepts.

- **2011**
  - March: Call for preproposals released
  - June: Preproposals due
  - August: Full proposals requested
  - Nov.: Full proposals due

- **2012**
  - February: Administrative Council announces grant awards

**Sustainable Community Innovation Projects** link sound farm and nonfarm economic development with agricultural and natural resource management. Applicants may be farmers, ranchers, researchers, community organizations, environmentalists, ag and community development professionals, entrepreneurs, governmental and non-governmental organizations. Funded for a project maximum of $10,000 for up to two years of activities.

- **2011**
  - August: Call for proposals released
  - October: Proposals due

- **2012**
  - December: Administrative Council announces grant awards

**On-Farm Research Projects** are conducted by agricultural professionals such as extension agents, NRCS and/ or NGO personnel who currently work with farmers and ranchers. Cooperators must include at least one producer at all stages of the project. Funded for a maximum of $15,000 for up to two years of activities.

- **2011**
  - September: Call for proposals released
  - November: Proposals due

- **2012**
  - February: Administrative Council announces grant awards
Jan. 5-7: Southeast Regional Fruit & Vegetable Conference, Savannah, GA

Jan. 18-21: Southern SAWG, Practical Tools & Solutions for Sustainable Family Farms, Little Rock, AR

Jan. 28: AGRItunity 2012, Bushnell, FL

Jan. 31-Feb. 1: Cotton & Rice Conference, Harrah’s Tunica Convention Center, Tunica, MS

Feb. 17-19: Texas Organic Farmers & Gardeners Association Conference, Mesquite, TX

Feb. 24-25: Georgia Organics Conference, Columbus, GA

March 29-31: Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS) 27th Annual Career Fair and Training Conference, Atlanta, GA

For more events in the Southern region, or across the nation, check the calendar on http://www.southernsare.org.

The Southern SARE Administrative Council Winter Meeting will be held Feb. 14-15 in Atlanta, Ga.

The Council meets to review grant project proposals and announce grant funding for our Research & Education, Professional Development and Large Systems Research Grants -- among other activities.

The AC meets twice a year to conduct Southern Region SARE business.

Stay tuned for our Calls for Proposals for our Research & Education, Professional Development Program, and Graduate Student Grants in March of 2012.