



NEWS

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UMES INGENUITY CREATES A PRIZE-WINNING AND EXPORTABLE ENTREPRENEURIAL MODEL

PRINCESS ANNE, MD - The University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES) was named a regional winner of a competition sponsored by the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) for its FARMS Project. All public four-year institutions were eligible to apply for the C. Peter Magrath/W.K. Kellogg Foundation Engagement Award, which was created to recognize “institutions that have redesigned their teaching, research, and extension and service functions to become more productively involved with their communities, however community may be defined.”

FARMS (Farmer Access to Regional Markets) is an agricultural supply chain model developed by the Rural Development Center (RDC) at UMES. The model is termed a “network.” It is based on appropriate greenhouse technology, market demand, an agri-business with expertise in growing and a strong market. The agri-business then promotes development in agriculture by providing fixed contracts and technical/logistical support to growers who normally wouldn’t utilize the technology.

In Maryland so far, the FARMS project has resulted in the creation of the “Greenhouse Growers Network,” a network of flower growers for Bell Nursery of Burtonsville, MD. As the partnership matures between UMES and U.S. Orchid Laboratory and Nursery, Inc., additional growers will be needed for that company, too. The potential exists for adoption of the model by other agribusiness enterprises, other commodities and other locales.

The RDC has been supporting the adoption of “hoop house” technology, which is less expensive than building a greenhouse and shows promise of enabling lower income

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clientele to become vegetable growers. “We are proud to say that UMES is living up to its land-grant mission to support rural economic development,” said Dr. Ron Forsythe, vice president for commercialization at UMES. “This national recognition from NASULGC for the FARMS initiative provides that reassurance.”

International expansion

In Jamaica, UMES personnel have provided consultative and hands-on assistance implementing the same model, which has created one network of growers of specialty lettuces, fresh herbs and spices and another network of growers of peppers, herbs and spices, both using hoop house technology. Development efforts using the FARMS model in Jamaica have been underwritten primarily by the Global Development Alliance within U.S. Agency for International Development with UMES’ non-profit affiliate Maryland Hawk Corporation as a subcontractor. As interest has grown, however, private industry is becoming involved, and the Alcoa Foundation has signed on as a partner. This spring, the University of the Virgin Islands signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UMES to bring the FARMS entrepreneurial model to that U.S. territory.

Inspiration from the poultry industry

“The FARMS project is derived from the vertically integrated business model of the poultry industry here on Delmarva,” said Daniel S. Kuennen, director of the Rural Development Center, “where individual family farms grow chickens under contract to major poultry companies.” As Kuennen explains it, “We’ve adapted that model so that instead of chicken houses, growers build greenhouses. These growers have more variety in the types of commodities they can produce, and we are helping them form service cooperatives to negotiate better bulk purchases and services for all aspects of their businesses. FARMS enables growers with limited amounts of land, farming expertise and market contact to gain access to technological and managerial expertise and major markets, thus reducing their risk and improving profitability. A greenhouse can make a relatively small parcel of land highly productive.”

Extension connection

Dr. Thomas Handwerker, a horticulturalist and specialist in emerging agricultural technologies, holds a joint appointment with Maryland Cooperative Extension and the

UMES Department of Agriculture. He and Kuennen in the RDC have been working for over a decade to develop and demonstrate the feasibility of the model, in particular for Maryland's Eastern Shore, where pressures from environmental concerns and real estate development have put the future of the agriculture industry at risk. "A substantial proportion of Greenhouse Growers Network members are women, or first-time farmers, or both," observed Handwerker. "Interest has been strong, and the Greenhouse Growers Network has grown in eight years from a few to over 40 growers."

"By focusing on the value of land-grant universities' engagement with their communities," said UMES President Thelma B. Thompson, "this NASULGC award encourages our continuing effort at UMES to enhance the well-being of the citizens of Maryland, particularly here on the Eastern Shore."

The regional NASULGC award included a \$6,000 cash prize. The FARMS project will be presented in Madison, WI, in October along with the other regional winners to compete for the national NASULGC Engagement award. See <http://www.umes.edu/Discover/Default.aspx?id=7668> to view "Discover UMES" videos about the FARMS work in Jamaica (JA FARMS). See <http://www.skipjack.net/farms> to view five short USDA videos about the Greenhouse Growers Network in Maryland. For more information, contact Suzanne Street, director, UMES Office of Public Relations, 410-651-6669.



Members of the greenhouse growers network on Maryland's Eastern Shore have included many new farmers, and the majority of them have been women. Photo: UMES



Leasing greenhouse space from UMES in Princess Anne, U.S. Orchids Laboratory and Nursery, Inc. is working to develop marketable products. Its contracts with local growers will reduce risk and add stability and diversification to the economy of the Delmarva Peninsula. Photo: UMES.



UMES Rural Development Center Director Daniel S. Kuennen helps erect a high tunnel hoop greenhouse for a network grower in Jamaica. Photo: Jim Glovier for UMES.



A steady source of supply of specialty vegetables enables Rock Mountain Herbs in Jamaica to sell to major supermarkets and restaurant chains. Photo: Jim Glovier for UMES.

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The University of Maryland Eastern Shore, a research and doctoral granting institution on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, is a historically black university and home to some 4,100 students. The 742-acre campus, which includes a 350-acre research and teaching farm, is nationally recognized for the beauty of its grounds. Its low student-to-faculty ratio, well-funded research programs, historic tradition of inclusiveness and constituent membership in the University System of Maryland combine to make UMES a strong engine of growth and development in its community, providing students with opportunities to learn from a well-balanced array of academic programs that respond to local needs as well as more global concerns.