



South Carolina Department of Agriculture Hugh E. Weathers, Commissioner

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE- May 25, 2018

ACRE Selects Entrepreneurs for Funding and Mentoring

COLUMBIA – Five South Carolina agribusiness entrepreneurs are one step closer to taking their businesses to the marketplace or expanding an existing start-up, thanks to a competitive application and pitch process offered by the Agribusiness Center for Research and Entrepreneurship (ACRE).

The ACRE Entrepreneurship Program will provide funding and/or mentoring to Matt Miller of Manchester Farms in Columbia; Sam Norton of Heron Farms in Charleston; George Nelson of SweetBay Produce in Huger (Berkeley County); Dr. Janice Ryan-Bohac of CAREnergy in Smoaks (Colleton County) and Robbie Weathers of Southern Crop Solutions in Holly Hill.

“This inaugural group of ACRE entrepreneurs represents a broad range of agriculture in South Carolina and the start of a new initiative to expand agribusiness and economic development in our state,” said Commissioner of Agriculture Hugh Weathers. “Our plan is to grow this program annually and ultimately to bring new industries to South Carolina.”

Manchester Farms is the oldest quail producer in the United States. Co-owner Matt Miller pitched “Quail Qwap,” a high quality, nutrient rich compost made from quail manure, grass clippings and cotton waste. Miller will use ACRE funding to design and purchase two different size bags so Manchester Farms can sell Quail Qwap in different markets.

SweetBay Produce & Nursery, LLC in Berkeley County has produced high quality, long shelf-life produce for 10 years. SweetBay co-owner George Nelson applied for ACRE funding to help provide fresh food to the local community through the addition of a Farm camp and Farm School Program, expanding on the existing Sundrops Montessori Pilot Project.

Heron Farms in Charleston -- the first saltwater farm in the United States -- grows the native annual halophyte *Salicornia* (sometimes called samphire, sea pickle, sea beans, sea asparagus, or saltwort) by pumping full-strength seawater onto barren marsh areas degraded by the dredging process. Founder Sam Norton sells the fruiting spikes of this marsh plant to Charleston restaurants and applied for ACRE funding for product research and development.

CAREnergy CEO Dr. Janice Ryan-Bohac is a sweet potato breeder who has developed what she calls “excellent candidates for making attractive chips and fries, with mealy texture and less oil.” With the ultimate goal of attracting a sweet potato processing facility to South Carolina, Ryan-Bohac hopes her sweet potato will increase consumer demand and farmer contracts. She will use her ACRE funding to attend food conventions and meet with potential investors.

Created in 2015 by Robbie Weathers, Southern Crop Solutions in Holly Hill is a precision agriculture company that specializes in implementing technology solutions for growers. From installing auto steering systems on tractors to performing precision soil sampling, Southern Crop Solutions connects farmers with solutions. Weathers will use ACRE funding to hire and train employees.

“We had 30 applicants, and they were all qualified, dedicated and impressive, but these five entrepreneurs best represent the vision of ACRE,” said ACRE project coordinator Kyle Player.

South Carolina agribusiness has an annual economic impact of \$42 billion. SCDA hopes to increase that impact to \$50 billion by 2020 through ACRE and other initiatives.

For more information on the Entrepreneurship Center and other ACRE initiatives, contact Kyle Player, ACRE Project Coordinator, 803-734-2324 or kplayer@scda.sc.gov.

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