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ELEVATION NOT STOPPING TUCKER COUNTY FARM TO SCHOOL EFFORT

Local Food Fueling Culinary and Science Programs

Perched 3,500 feet above sea level, Tucker County High School (TCHS) is accustomed to raw weather and high winds. Just up the road from the school, enormous windmills slowly spin alongside Route 219, generating electricity and providing travelers with an in-your-face mix of rugged mountain vistas and stunning modern technology.

Technology and scenery also combine behind TCHS, situated along the spine of Backbone Mountain. The school's agriculture complex includes what is thought to be the highest greenhouse and high tunnel east of the Mississippi River. Both are 30 by 72 feet, and the greenhouse features in-floor heating to fight off the sometimes arctic-like chill.

Along with a new agriculture classroom / laboratory building and a still-shiny John Deere tractor, the facilities are being used as a laboratory for chemistry students, a practical workshop for vo-ag students, and increasingly as a source of food for the school's student culinary program and its cafeteria.

A variety of grants have funded nearly all of agriculture and culinary facilities and equipment. Some of that money has come from the West Virginia Farm To School Community Development Group's Community Transformation Grant program, some from West Virginia Department of Education modernization grants, and other funding from private sources. John Deere gave the school a nearly \$10,000 discount on the tractor purchase.

And despite one of the harshest winters in decades, students were in the greenhouse in early April planting lettuce seeds, pinching tomato buds and preparing potted flowers.

The produce will go into the county's Farm To School (FTS) program. The flowers will be sold as a fund-raiser to help underwrite produce projects until they can be scaled up to a more cost-effective level. When it reaches full production, the greenhouse will be able to accommodate 300 heads of lettuce at a time.

Between students and local farmers, the county spent about \$6,000 on local food and can boast 30 consecutive weeks with some kind of local product in schools. Most of it was student-produced, but with a food budget that pushes \$322,000 annually, there's still plenty of opportunity for adult farmers and students to get an even bigger piece of the FTS pie.

Tucker County Child Nutrition Director Jonathan Hicks and county Extension Agent Jennifer Poling are working to streamline the FTS process. One day a week, farmers can drop off produce at the Board of Education office, which takes care of distributing the food to schools.

Poling said nine farmers are registered for FTS program – a number she would like to see doubled for next year. She also noted that Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education grants have reimbursed farmers for delivery mileage, and will pay for FTS signage that will be displayed in front of schools throughout the county. She said that two "Annie's Projects" – a WVU Extension program to assist women farmers – have new high tunnels and intend to produce for the FTS program in the coming school year.

Cafeteria Manager Cindy Snyder says fresh fruit and produce are extremely popular on the lunch salad bar and awareness of locally grown foods is increasing.

"Tucker County High School has really bought into this in a big way. As cooks – and as mothers – we're really happy to see that these kids are making healthier choices.... so far we're really getting positive feedback," said Snyder.

"The first year, it was a bit of a struggle to get them [students] to buy into it, but the more they have eaten it, the more they like it. One really cute thing about it is when the kids know that one of their friends have produced it ... they chose to take it," she said.

"Three years ago, we didn't even have an ag program. We now have 53 students taking agriculture classes," said TCHS Assistant Principal JR Helmick. The student body numbers only 315 and about 80 percent of them are in career and technical education (CTE) programs.

Eighty of those CTE students are in Chef Brian Covell's ProStart culinary program, the largest of its type in the state. The program is taking product from the greenhouse and offsite operations and processing it for sale to the cafeteria,

other schools and the public.

Students do “tons” of catering events around the community, which Covell said will provide funds to buy even more local produce next year. Covell said the program manufactured 200 canned products and processed 1,000 pounds of vegetables in its first year. The “classroom” has dining tables for desks and scenic murals painted on the walls. It’s located adjacent to a modern commercial kitchen with stoves, ovens, two walk-in freezers and equipment for preserving food items as soon as they come in.

“Back in February, we did the State Capitol rotunda breakfast. Eight of our students served over 500 people in a matter of hours. It brings a lot of pride for our students actually serving the public. Students that people might not ever have heard of are now on the front page of the paper,” said Covell. “It’s a pretty cool setup that we have going on.”

Demonstrating the overlap of science, agriculture and business “helps answer the question ‘What am I ever going to use this for?’” says chemistry teacher Shane Eakle, who ticked off projects he has planned for science students: the preserving qualities of ascorbic acid (vitamin C), passive and active solar technology, practical experiments on soil pH, water quality testing, hydroponics and hydropower.

At the heart of these science, cafeteria and culinary activities are the school’s agriculture education programs. Terry Hauser teaches horticulture, introduction to agriculture, animal production, ag mechanics and science of agriculture.

“We try to encourage students to put up their own high tunnels at home.... we have had some student success in the fact that we have a couple of students that have already erected what we call low-cost high tunnels.... Another student that did that last year has decide to take it one step further and has just recently ordered a 30-by-96 foot high tunnel, so we expect a large amount of produce to come off his place again this year,” said Hauser.

Hauser would like to have a larger volume of produce going into the FTS effort, but noted that it’s building momentum. The new tractor and attachments will be available to students involved in FTS and FFA to use during the year and on summer projects, and will help students go “a little larger scale – more toward a truck crop scenario, versus just a small vegetable garden,” he said.

“I can’t say enough about the community support we have for our program. We have a lot of adults that just really want to see this grow.... that is our success story,” said Hauser.

His son, Andrew Hauser, a junior, is also a bit of a success story. He joined FFA his freshman year “around the time the local food push was getting big,” he said.

“That first year, I sold about \$500 worth of sweet corn [to the school] and that just kind of propelled me to want to grow more the next year. And with the greenhouse - it made it much easier having this as a resource.” He has a small high tunnel at home that he’s experimenting with, and he believes there’s an immediate opportunity for students to go into farming as a profession.

“Local food has become a big thing in the last few years. People are wanting to buy local – wanting to know where their food is coming from. As far as growing produce, I think now is the time to do it – now is the time to make your money.

Junior Andy Minear, also has a small high tunnel at home and a lifelong link to agriculture.

“It was a good learning experience. Last year was my first year growing produce and I made my money back,” he said. This year I’m looking to upgrade to ... a new, bigger high tunnel. I want to go bigger this year, and try to make some more money.”

He grows a “little bit of everything” and sells to farmers’ markets and the school. He’s the ninth generation on his family’s farm and hopes to farm full-time someday. “It’s hard work, it’s nothing easy, but it’s worth it when you get to have good food on the table. You never go hungry. I have a good time doing it.”

In his International Harvester hoodie, Tucker County FFA chapter president Tyler Hebb wears his heart on his chest. While he’s “only” the fifth generation, he says he’s “going to take care of the farm someday.” He primarily raises beef cattle, but wants to grow hogs and sheep as well.

“I see that people are wanting more local meat. I think in the future I can sell all my meat locally,” he said. “Agriculture here in Tucker County ain’t dead. It was dying, but it’s coming back. It’s hard work but you get an honest living and it’s something you love to do every day.”

he West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs, as mandated by state law. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials in West Virginia. For more information, visit www.wvagriculture.org.