Breaking New Ground: 2016 First Coast Specialty Crop Conference

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A statewide Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises Conference has been a signature event in the Florida farming community since 2009. As a result of these conferences, more than 4000 attendees have benefited from the numerous educational and networking opportunities offered at these successful annual events.

Building on this foundation, in 2014 the Conference Executive Committee decided to shift to regional events to better serve the needs of local farmers across the state. The goal of these regional events was to continue to offer the same quality of programming as past statewide conferences, while meeting targeted specialty crop industries needs at local levels, with in-depth programming to increase likelihood of adoption of best practices.

In response to this shift, agents in Northeast Florida provided leadership, education, planning, and coordination of the 2015 First Coast Specialty Crop Conference at the University of North Florida. This was the first regional small farm and alternative enterprise conference in Northeast Florida.

The goal of the conference was to provide farmers with up-to-date, research-based, in-depth educational information. The conference aimed to facilitate solutions-based collaboration by encouraging networking among members of Florida’s small farms community. The conference was an excellent vehicle for increasing awareness of Florida’s small farms industry among decision makers, agricultural organizations and professionals.

The conference provided essential skills for hardworking entrepreneurs who want to work on the farm or in the food system chain. Speakers included University of Florida/IFAS personnel, experienced growers and industry representatives, while educational components emphasized practical skills and networking as an important benefit. The First Coast Specialty Crop Conference was well attended with 177 participants (60% prospective farmers; 19% nonprofit organizations; 13% researcher, educator, or student; and 4% industry representatives). The two-day event consisted of three on-farm workshops, twelve educational seminars, three educational labs and twelve exhibitor booths.

Sixty-four respondents participated in the post-conference survey. The survey was designed to determine changes in confidence in one’s own ability, new knowledge obtained, acquired skills, and implementation of learned skills. Participants’ responses to survey questions related to “confidence in own skill set after conference” were skewed toward the “moderately confident” and “completely confident” values. When surveyed for “new knowledge gained as a result of attending the conference,” respondents answered “yes and maybe” for most questions, with organizational skills most evenly distributed among all answers. When asked about “acquired skills due to attending the conference,” respondents’ most common answer was “yes” with roughly 50% of response in all categories (Fig. 1). The survey revealed similar responses to their intent to implement learned skills, with the predominant answer to all categories as “yes,” followed by “maybe.”

By all accounts, the 2015 First Coast Specialty Crop Conference was a success. The conference continued the reputation of the conference team to provide high quality programs and unmatched networking opportunities for producers. The success of this new programming paradigm should empower and encourage future programming efforts in this area.

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Fig 1. As a result of attending the conference, I can…