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University of Kentucky Helps Bring Cooperative Extension Concept to Republic of Georgia

by Katie Pratt

LEXINGTON, Ky., (June 18, 2008) — University of Kentucky College of Agriculture professors, Extension specialists, agricultural and natural resource Extension agents and students have spent the last three years helping teachers at three colleges in the Republic of Georgia develop and implement their own version of the Cooperative Extension Service.

The program, which began in 2005, is through a cooperative agreement between UK and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). It officially wraps up in September.

“The USDA has things they want to teach them, and the government of Georgia has things they want to learn. We tried to accommodate them,” said Michael R. Reed, UK agricultural economics professor and director of international programs in the College of Agriculture.

The Republic of Georgia, a mountainous country that borders the Black Sea, is a former Soviet Union state, which gained its independence in 1991. Its economy prospered under the Soviets, but declined dramatically for several years after it gained independence. Today, the country is making reforms to regain the economic status it once had, but it faces challenges from high inflation and gas prices. Many of its people are unemployed, and those who do have jobs are not paid very well.

In large part, agriculture drives Georgia’s economy. The majority of its people are subsistence farmers who sell any crops they may have left after providing for their families. Self-sufficiency and basic business concepts are new to many farmers who, for years, were told what to do by supervisors. Farmers had no direct link with agriculturalists. Information was closely guarded and only distributed to a select few.

“What we’re doing is totally new to them,” said Terry Hutchens, UK Extension associate for goat management. “We’re providing information for the farmers so they can make their own decisions. It is a difficult transition for them.”

The Georgian colleges are similar to U.S. junior colleges or vocational and technical schools. Typically, the Georgian colleges teach 15- to 20-year-olds. In many of the rural areas, these schools provide the only source of agricultural education.

UK faculty, staff and students have traveled to the country over the course of three years to teach those at the colleges about Extension concepts, philosophies and ways UK Extension interacts with Kentucky farmers. The Republic of Georgia is interested in learning more about technologies associated with agriculture. Therefore, UK focused its Extension efforts on agriculture, teaching them about agricultural technologies, how to do demonstrations and conduct field days.

“The whole idea of Extension is to show farmers what works and what doesn’t,” said Michael S. Reed, Powell County agricultural and natural resource agent.

Rick Costin, Kentucky farm business management specialist, assisted with last year’s field day in Georgia and will travel back to the country in July to assist them with another field day.

“The field days have been very good,” Costin said. At last year’s field day, we had a group of farmers come in, and one of the farmers stood up and said, ‘We need more of this.’ We are showing them that Extension works and can be a big help to farmers and villagers.”

In addition to the trips UK faculty, staff and students made to the country, a group of Georgians came to the university in October 2007 to get firsthand knowledge of Extension, its philosophy and structure.

“We are trying to expose them to ways they can help people live better lives because really that’s what Extension is about,” Costin said.

Progress has been made since the partnership began. Two of the three schools are now affiliated with regional universities and the third is affiliated with a regional vocational school. The government is also renovating each school so they are more conducive to learning.

Hutchens, who recently returned from his second trip to the country, noticed a difference in peoples’ attitudes during his most recent trip.

“They were more open to the concept, and they seemed to be more receptive to what we had to say,” he said.

While the project is wrapping up in September, Michael R. Reed said they will assess the results of the program and keep in contact with the Georgians’ progress to determine any possible future collaboration.

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UK College of Agriculture, through its land-grant mission, reaches across the commonwealth with teaching, research and Extension to enhance the lives of Kentuckians.