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Training prepares farmers for success

March 5, 2014
The Inter-Mountain

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More than 30 local farmers from seven counties gathered Feb. 22 at the Belington fire hall to learn about how to effectively label their food and farm products to meet regulatory requirements and improve marketing.

This event was hosted by West Virginia University Extension Service and organized in partnership with the Value Chain Cluster Initiative, West Virginia Department of Agriculture, and the Tygart Valley Growers Association. The event is part of larger efforts among these organizations to respond to farmers' emerging needs to prepare them to meet regulatory requirements and grow their businesses as the demand for local food continues to climb.

During the first part of the training, farmers learned what they need to put on labels to comply with state-wide regulations. Cindy Martel, marketing specialist at the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA), walked farmers through information requirements for products such as local produce, meats, baked goods and honey.

Farmers learned how they can prepare basic labels with needed information if they sell products at direct-to-consumer outlets such as farmers markets. They also learned that if they scale up and start to sell products in other market outlets such as grocery stores or retail markets they may be subject to other regulatory requirements.

Following the overview on statewide regulations, Jennifer Poling, of WVU Extension in Tucker County, provided information on local health department requirements. After farmers learned about current regulatory requirements, Elizabeth Spellman of the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition gave an overview of how possible new regulation related to the FDA's Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) could impact small farmers. Such information prepares farmers to make decisions about labeling and food safety on their farms.

The last part of the training switched gears to prepare farmers to use their labels as a marketing tool. Poling highlighted features that farmers can include to connect customers to their products and stories, such as QR codes. Lisa Armstrong of Ajuga Inc., a graphic design company based in Elkins, gave farmers insight on how to better market their business through labels that are designed to appeal to customers' needs and wants.

"You want your product to stand out when it is in your customer's kitchen cabinet," Armstrong said, "You want them to remember where they bought it so they can find you again."

As spring comes around the corner, farmers are busy planning for their crop production and marketing to meet the demand of the increasing number of West Virginia consumers that seek locally produced food and farm products. Training for small farmers helps boost rural income and the supply of fresh food in West Virginia.

For more information on this and other training opportunities for farmers in your area, contact Jennifer Poling, Tucker County Office of the WVU Extension Service at 304-478-2949 or jenniferpoling@small.wvu.edu. For more information about technical

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jennifer.poing@mail.wvu.edu. For more information about technical assistance offered by the Value Chain Cluster Initiative (a program of the Natural Capital Investment Fund), contact Jill Young at 304-661-4951 or jillyoung@vc2.org.

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