

## **Background and Justification for an “*Educational Pavilion*” at the North Florida Research and Education Center-Suwannee Valley**

**Robert Hochmuth, Assistant Center Director**

**North Florida Research and Education Center-Suwannee Valley, Live Oak, FL**

The University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF|IFAS), North Florida Research and Education Center is comprised of three locations: Quincy, Marianna, and Live Oak (known as NFREC-Suwannee Valley). The NFREC-Suwannee Valley unit, just east of the city of Live Oak at the intersection of CR 136 and CR 417, **includes 330 acres owned by UF|IFAS plus 70 acres of adjacent leased land.** NFREC-Suwannee Valley is the only UF|IFAS Research Center located in the borders of the Suwannee River Water Management District.

**Four Regional Specialized Extension Agents** (faculty positions of UF|IFAS) and **16 administrative and farm support staff are housed at NFREC-Suwannee Valley.** The Suwannee Valley unit **supports research led by at least 30 UF faculty from other locations,** primarily Gainesville, Quincy, and Marianna. Annually, **20-25 graduate students conduct their research,** under the direction of a UF|IFAS Professor, that will lead to their MS or PhD degrees. There has been a significant increase in research projects in the past 4 years resulting in **over \$30 million in research projects** now being supported at this Center. At least **50 distinct research projects are supported annually by the staff** at NFREC-Suwannee Valley.

Research and Extension areas of emphasis at this unit include water and nutrient management, integrated pest management, specialty and alternative crop evaluation, greenhouse and hydroponic production, and agribusiness. Research conducted at this unit and published in scientific journals is **instrumental in the development of Best Management Practices (BMPs)** that are helping farmers meet the regulatory water quality requirements outlined in the new and existing Basin Management Action Plans affecting this region. Water and nutrient management research for watermelon and corn has **formed the basis for recommendations used throughout Florida and other southeastern states.** Watermelon research conducted at this Center and extended to farmers through Extension faculty in the Suwannee Valley over the past two decades has led to **savings of 2 billion gallons of water annually, as well as substantial reductions in fuel and fertilizer.** The NFREC-Suwannee Valley has rapidly become a leader in water and nutrient management research in the southeastern US and is now **looked to by surrounding states for updated data on these topics.** Best management practices are also being developed at this Center for crops such as peanut, sweet potato, and carrot and those results will also lead to recommendations used throughout the southeastern US. A ten-year research effort at the Center **has led to advancements in sorghum breeding that is being used to develop an alternative crop for biofuel that will be widely suited for production in the region.** Another long-term effort has been sustained at this unit for over a decade by **one of the country’s premier tomato breeders at UF who is advancing the development and release of new tomato cultivars** that can be used, not only throughout Florida, but also **throughout the world.** The newest large project (\$7 million over 17 years) will **bring cattle into a research setting at the Center for the first time** as an integral part of a large farm-scale experiment using the benefits of cattle and Bahia grass in a long-term crop rotation to **reduce nitrogen inputs and improve water quality**

A relatively new program known throughout UF|IFAS as the “**Small Farms Academy**” was developed by faculty and staff at this Center and is focused on the **unique training needs of beginning farmers and ranchers**; and prospective or new family farmers. Small Farms Academy programs are interactive and are very popular with attendees because these hands-on trainings are unique to this center. A total of **2,790 small farmers have attended 37 different topic workshops traveling from Florida, 18 other states and 8 countries**, since the inception of this program in 2009.

The Center supports several **4-H & Youth, Future Farmers of America (FFA), incoming UF students** and other youth training events **reaching over 1,500 youth annually**. The feature annual event known as “The Fall Harvest Experience” brings **1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders** along with parent chaperones from Suwannee and surrounding counties to the Center **to learn about agriculture in the region** and includes a maze, pumpkin patch, and other agricultural product information. Several youth groups are also hosted for educational tours of the research being conducted at the Center. In addition, **Master Gardeners** from throughout Northeast Florida counties come to the farm for **specialized training events**.

Increases in research and Extension activities in the past 5 years has resulted in significant increases in educational events with **over 100 group educational events now attended annually by over 3,000 adult attendees**. It is estimated that annually: **400- 500 attendees of programs at NFREC-Suwannee Valley require lodging** in the area for at least one night, **over 2,500 meals are catered** at the Center, and **hundreds of lunches** are purchased in town by visitors working at or visiting the Center.

**The UF|IFAS administration has invested heavily (\$2 million)** in the expansion and enhancement of the NFREC-Suwannee Valley unit in the past 5 years. This expansion has been necessary to meet the needs of the faculty to conduct research important to this region and to continue offering excellent programming for the residents of North Florida. UF|IFAS investments have included: additional full-time faculty and staff positions, six new overhead irrigation systems (pivot and high-tech linear move types), new tractor leases, new specialized equipment purchases, agricultural technology additions (base station and GPS technology), expanded and renovated conference room (phase 1), renovated offices and work station areas, new equipment storage building including researcher work area (for plant processing). The Center has purchased over \$150,000 of equipment, goods and services annually over the past 5 years, **mostly from businesses within the Suwannee Valley region**.

Included among the recent investments was the expansion and renovation of a **new conference room** that can now **host 100 attendees** and includes a food prep and serving area. This renovation was the first phase of a two-phase plan. Phase 2 plans include an **educational pavilion** to be built adjacent to the existing conference room on the south lawn. An educational pavilion will provide the Center with an ideal venue to **demonstrate materials and techniques that require outdoor space** but with protection from the sun and rain. The versatile pavilion area will be used to: conduct **small equipment demonstrations**, provide **space for table top and other exhibits**, offer an excellent location for **concurrent classes or breakout sessions**, add to sheltered **space available for meetings** including our largest annual event the **CARES environmental stewardship recognition dinner**, and eliminate the need to move equipment in and out of the large pole barn (currently functioning as a pavilion). Using both the classroom and pavilion space innovatively will undoubtedly **enhance the quality of educational experience** for those attending workshops and other events while **raising the standard of excellence for programming in the Suwannee Valley**.

For more information contact: Bob Hochmuth  
Phone: 386-362-1725 ext. 103  
Cell: 386-288-6301  
Email: [bobhoch@ufl.edu](mailto:bobhoch@ufl.edu)