

State fund to decrease health disparities

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into preventive health initiatives and \$78 million to fund a prescription drug assistance program.

The Department of Health Education at historically-black North Carolina Central University in

Durham will provide technical assistance to applicants and grant recipients over the three-year period. Six regional half-day information workshops for potential applicants will be held in Durham on Dec. 10; Winston-Salem on Jan. 12;

Charlotte on Jan. 18; Lumberton on Jan. 21; Greenville on Jan. 25 and Elizabeth City on Feb. 1. Anyone interested in attending should pre-register for these regional workshops by calling (800) 530-5356. Grant proposals will be

accepted from existing HWTF grantees and organizations not receiving HWTF funding. Organizations are eligible to receive a trust fund grant if they are:

- A state agency
- A local government or other political subdivision of

the state, or a combination of such entities

• A nonprofit organization which has a significant purpose promoting the public's health, limiting youth access to tobacco products, or reducing the health consequences of tobacco use

Applicants can obtain a copy of the Request for Proposal and other application materials by visiting the web site at www.HealthWellNC.com. Final applications must be received by March 1.

Black farmers look to Ethiopian crop to find market niche

By Roxana Hegeman
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WICHITA, Kan. — Black farmers in Kansas are experimenting with growing the Ethiopian crop known as teff — a cereal grain popular as an alternative to wheat for gluten-sensitive consumers — as a historical and cultural niche in today's marketplace.

Backed by a grant from the Agriculture Department, researchers and black farmers planted several test plots of teff in Kansas this year to see if it would be a viable alternative crop in Kansas climate.

It grew well.

In the late 1870s and early 1880s, thousands of former black slaves — known locally as "Exodusters" — flocked to the fertile Kansas prairie in search of a better life. Of the nearly half dozen black settlements here, only Nicodemus survived. The northwest Kansas town, located about 300 miles west of Kansas City, is now a protected National Historic Park site.

It's there that Gary and Gil Alexander planted their first teff plots in the spring, experimenting with different varieties. The Alexanders — distant cousins and descendants of the former slaves that first settled Nicodemus — were both intrigued by the connection teff had with Ethiopia and Africa.

Just three black farmers still toil the land around Nicodemus, and the Kansas Black Farmers Association is comprised of only about a dozen black farmers statewide who are still left on their family farms.

"We are trying to find a way not to deal on the open commodity markets market," Gil Alexander said. "The farmers are not getting a fair shake. We raise a lot of wheat, a lot of sorghum. I've raised my best sorghum crop ever this year and it's not worth anything."

Looking for an alternative crop they could grow and that would fill a market niche, the cousins were receptive when Edgar Hicks, a grain marketing consultant in Omaha, Neb., approached them with the idea of growing teff.

"Teff is a crop grown primarily in Ethiopia, and using

the connection between Ethiopia and Nicodemus being a black settlement, we thought teff would be something to try," Gil Alexander said.

A native Louisianian with no family ties to Nicodemus, Hicks has nonetheless long been drawn to this all-black settlement. His grain industry expertise earned a \$83,965 grant three years ago to develop a historical community-based wheat milling cooperative, a project that is still in the works. He got a \$197,000 grant last year to fund teff research in Kansas.

"When I approached it, I kind of started it off as a black project," Hicks said. "It has gotten to be far beyond that right now."

Teff's low gluten content, nutritional qualities, drought resistance and forage benefits have all added to the cultural ties that first drew Hicks to the crop. Teff is also used by Ethiopians to make a flatbread that is a staple in their diet.

"Times are so tough for farmers now ... Tough times have made people more

open to look at this as not so much a crackpot-type thing," Hicks said.

Sarah Evert, a graduate student at Kansas State University, is writing her master's degree thesis on the research she's doing on growing teff in Kansas. She worked with the black farmers, experimenting on growing teff at different planting rates and using different planting techniques to see what worked best.

"We have only one summer research," she said. "It definitely grew. It grew well in western Kansas. Once we got the stand established, it was pretty drought tolerant and hardy."

Back in Nicodemus, Gary Alexander was harvesting this week the last of his two acres of teff. The test plot was small enough to be cut with hedge trimmers or a small hand scythe.

It reminded him of the old days, when farmers would still cut wheat by hand and big shocks of wheat would stand in the fields. He knows of at least one commercial grower in Oklahoma who grows hundreds of acres of

teff, enough to run his combine to harvest it.

Someday, big teff fields could dot the countryside around Nicodemus. But not

even black farmers who are toying with growing it in the hopes of supplementing their income expect it will ever become a primary crop.

"This is wheat country," Gil Alexander said. "The plains of Kansas have always been wheat country and I don't see that changing."

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