

USDA Under Secretary Visits Alabama Small Farmers and Tuskegee University

April 3, 2013

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Chief Scientist and Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics Dr. Catherine Woteki spent the day in Alabama visiting with farmers, meeting with Tuskegee University (TU) faculty and students, and talking with state leaders and staff from USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Rural Development (RD), and Farm Service Agency (FSA).

Dr. Woteki met the group and toured a farm just outside Tuskegee that is operated by [Al Hooks](#) and his son, Demetris. These two, with help from three other growers, have been running a vegetable production operation for the last three years. The Hooks received NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) financial assistance for a hoop house, an Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) reservoir for irrigation water, and plasticulture. FSA funds helped them erect a building to process the farm's produce.

The Hooks market a wide variety of vegetable crops including turnip and mustard greens, kale, okra, tomatoes, peas, strawberries, onions, and potatoes. They sell directly to farmer's markets as well as restaurants, and recently, began to market their products to Walmart through the Alabama Small Farm Rural Economic Development Center's TU Cooperative Extension Program. "It takes a lot of know-how to run an operation like this," said Dr. Woteki. This is a great example of a how a small farmer can grow a high value crop and receive a return on his investment through direct sales.



Woteki meets with USDA and Tuskegee University staff/students. (l-r) Dr. Walter Hill, Dr. Catherine Woteki, and Dr. Bill Puckett.



USDA Under Secretary Dr. Catherine Woteki talks with Alabama Small Farmer Al Hooks

Dr. Woteki reminded everyone of the variety of experts that can be brought in to provide technical assistance such as NRCS, FSA, the Cooperative Extension System, and land grant universities like TU. She said, "We at USDA are trying to bring these various agencies with programmatic and expertise opportunities together to be more easily accessible to farmers."

The group stopped at the Tuskegee Agricultural Experiment Station. Goat products and goat meat is becoming increasingly popular in the U.S. At the Caprine Long-term Forage Study and Parasite

Control Innovations facility graduate students and faculty of TU are doing cutting edge research and new approaches in stopping goat parasitic diseases.

The last stop was the future site of the Carver Integrative Sustainability Center and USDA Service Center. This facility will house USDA agencies and TU agricultural faculty. Dr. Woteki summed it up by saying, "The vision of the Carver Center is to spark creative thinking about the development of long-term value of sustainable agricultural systems for Alabama."

After a luncheon hosted by TU at the campus Kellogg Conference Center, TU President Dr. Gilbert Rochon, and Executive VP/Provost Luther Williams welcomed Dr. Woteki and addressed the group. Vice Provost and Dean of the College of Agriculture, Environment and Nutrition Sciences Dr. Walter Hill introduced NRCS State Conservationist Dr. William Puckett, RD State Director Ronnie Davis, and FSA State Executive Director Daniel Robinson.

Dr. Woteki held a round-table discussion with TU graduate and undergraduate students majoring in agriculture and soil sciences. She also discussed various job opportunities available with USDA.

Before leaving campus, Dr. Hill showed Dr. Woteki and Dr. Puckett the site of the new Agricultural Life Sciences Research, Teaching, and Extension Building being constructed with the assistance of USDA and others.

Alabama USDA and TU were delighted to show Dr. Woteki how agriculture programs and projects are being implemented in the state. Dr. Woteki seemed pleased with her visit to Alabama and said, "It was a very informative day for me."



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