

# Oconee Economic Alliance gets lesson on food chain

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE  
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SENECA — Two of the most ardent promoters of agriculture in Oconee County brought a plateful of facts, figures and ideas to the Oconee Economic Alliance meeting Thursday on what it takes to bring home-grown food from the farm to the kitchen table.

Gwen McPhail and Stanley Gibson, who are among the directors who help put on the annual fall celebration of the county's agricultural heritage that is known as the South Carolina Foothills Heritage Fair, which is now in its seventh year, gave many gathered at the Thrift Development Center a deeper understanding and appreciation of farming and farmers.

Enthusiastically, they sang the praises of an industry that puts food on the table throughout the country at a cost to consumers that is much less than in other parts of world, including China. U.S. exports of grain, corn and other crops sustain people in other countries who would otherwise face starvation.

Sadly, McPhail and Gibson said farmers in the county are graying

and unable to keep up their farms. They'd like to see a new generation continue the rural legacy and tradition in Oconee.

A retired teacher, McPhail said she strongly believes farming should be incorporated as a viable career choice and opportunity that can be introduced to students at an early age. She somewhat winced when recounting her son's experience with a school guidance counselor who told him: "You don't want to be a farmer — you want a good job."

"He was a little upset about that," McPhail said.

The Oconee Economic Alliance audience comprised of bankers, businesspeople, entrepreneurs and government officials listened intently as McPhail offered up ideas to promote agribusiness, such as private capital investments to transport locally grown food to farmer's markets, supermarkets and restaurants.

McPhail also warned of how any biosecurity breach — such as the introduction of viral or bacterial infection by people moving from one facility to another — could decimate the livestock population in the county, state and region.

Gibson reiterated the

importance of inspiring a new generation of Oconee County farmers. He said crop and livestock production in the county generated a market value of \$121 million in 2012, or 5 percent less than the \$128 million market value for crops and livestock in 2007, according to the Ag Census.

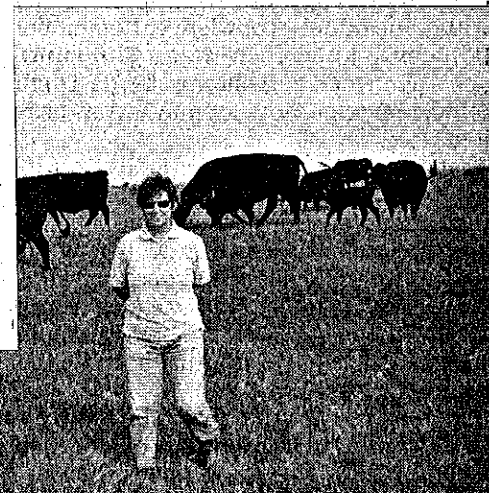
Gibson speculates the drop in production likely is tied to a decreasing number of farms, which the younger generation inheriting them is not, for the most part, interested in operating them. According to the 2012 Ag Census, Oconee had 864 farms with an average size of 77 acres.

The good news for a new generation of farmers, according to Gibson, is that large tracts are not needed to get started in agribusiness. He said education and research make it possible to turn an acre or two into a moneymaking farm.

McPhail added more food for thought when she said many crops are going to waste because there's not enough workers to pick them.

"Without migrant workers, we're in trouble," she said.

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Tookeena Angus Farms is one of the largest — if not the biggest — cattle farms in Oconee County. On Thursday, co-owner Gwen McPhail talked to locals about the importance of farms in the Golden Corner.