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The Thornwell Project: Re-Establishment of Lush Acres Farm

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ABSTRACT

The Thornwell Home for Children in Clinton, SC has a 300-acre farm. The administration contacted Clemson University for assistance with a business plan, upgrades and putting into operation sustainable practices. A team was formed with the goal of the home's administration to reactivate farming. The team has four groups working, respectively, on a business plan, a marketing plan, documentation via photography/videography, and student organizations/clubs service projects. The business plan includes steps to improve the small poultry flock and implement aquaponics. Funds for these operations are in place, but other phases for the farm require marketing to raise awareness and donations. This spring student groups helped work on a poultry house and assist with bringing the dining hall kitchen up to DHEC standards. The photography/videography group is documenting all improvements and implementations. In time, the farm will be fully functionally with animal and vegetable products for local markets.

INTRODUCTION

Lush Acres Farm at Thornwell has evolved through the years from a full working farm, to a teaching resource, to a 4-H partnership, and now to a hub for healthy living. Through the Lush Acres poultry project, kids on campus learn about agriculture, healthy eating, and community responsibility. Children are able to apply for paid positions caring for the animals and cleaning chicken coops. Through this process, they keep a time sheet and learn real world job skills. Cottage families also receive weekly shares of Lush Acres products to use in the home. The children love learning new recipes and preparing meals with items produced right on Thornwell's campus.

In an attempt to help plan and sustain Lush Acres Farm at the Thornwell Home For Children in Clinton, SC, as well as the future life-forms of the farm, four student groups, which make up one Creative Inquiry Team, were formed to help increase efficiency, diversity, and creativity for addressing project goals. Each subgroup contributes to the project in its own way (i.e., Business Planning, Marketing, Photography/Videography, Student Organization/Club Service Projects).

All aspects of planning, coordinating, communicating and implementing project work is administered by the Team with a member of the administrative team of the Home. With this, the Team still has the common goal to make use of the farm and in turn, provide some economic impact in the Clinton and Laurens areas of the State, as well as locally grown produce for the community. In all, the principal aim is to assist the Home with re-establishment of full-time farming activities for a sustainable and natural form of food production to meet the growing demands of consumers who frequent local markets and roadside produce stands.

APPROACH AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Business Planning

The goal of the Business Plan subgroup is to develop a business plan for the addition of the Aquaponic System to the farm. With help from Dr. Lance Beecher we have received all of the cost and expenditure information as well as total production from the aquaponics and projected cash flow for three years after production. In year three expected cash flows from the aquaponics system could reach up to \$32,000! We are also in correspondence with Thornwell Home for Children Executive Vice-President Lindy Scott and Lush Acres Farm Manager Gretchen Huggins in order to collect all of the financial information that we need for the current and expected poultry production at Lush Acres. The team is working to establish expected demand for the upcoming season in order to estimate production needs. With this information we can then create a business plan for the farm which should establish production needs and expected cash flows from the incorporation of aquaponics, poultry, and meat production. Other anticipated farming practices include vegetable garden, corn maze, and pumpkin patch.

Marketing

The Marketing Team has done several small tasks throughout the semester that will help lay some groundwork for the future of Lush Acres Farms. We have been in contact with several organizations outside of Clemson University to help with the public exposure of the farm and the CI team such as Farm Bureau. We have drafted ideas towards social media outlets and how that will help the farm and our team. By using sites such as Facebook and Instagram we can keep people posted on our work and what is going in the future. With the permission of Thornwell and the University we hope to have those sites up as soon as we can. We have also been in contact with several other CAFLS and University clubs. With the help of the Club Projects team we were able to go and talk to several clubs and get the word out on what is going on. We have several clubs interested in helping with future work and future contacts when more help is needed. We are also continuing to showcase our work with Lush Acres by attending student run fairs and competitions such as the Animal & Veterinary Sciences Department's annual Little North American livestock exhibition at Garrison Arena. At these events we will also have more opportunities to spread the word on what is being done at Lush Acres and what the future can bring us.

Photography/Videography

The goal of the photography/videography team is to accumulate as much documentation as possible. The ideal set of documentation would be of the current conditions of the Thornwell Home/Lush Acres Farm property, the progress of the project, and when we arrive, the final conditions of the property. We also plan to gain access to the old photographs of the farm for historic purposes. A trip was taken down to Thornwell on February 14th, 2015 to acquire some documentation prior to any work/progression of the farm. The farm manager pointed out the future purpose of some of the buildings. She also shared a few of her visions for the farm.

A group visit was made to the Thornwell home and Lush Acres Farm on March 7, 2015, the creative inquiry team's first day of service. While there, we captured more photos of the current conditions of the property. We plan to team up with the marketing group and talk to them about using some of our pictures for advertisements and on social media sites.

Student Organization/Club Projects

During this semester, this group has been working towards spreading the awareness about the Thornwell Farm project and arranging opportunities for people outside of the Creative Inquiry group to get involved. We have initiated contact with groups, primarily the College of Agriculture, Forestry and Life Sciences (CAFLS) clubs, and have begun networking with them to let people know about the project and what we are doing. In addition to spreading the word about the project, we made contact with the Thornwell administration and arranged a workday at the farm on March 7th. We had around a dozen students attend this workday and help get the farm facilities back to working order. During this service day, the volunteers cleaned out barns, feed rooms, and warehouses, cleaned and sanitized poultry equipment, and set up netting to protect free-range chickens from predators.

Our group also has plans for continuing our portion of the Thornwell project in the future. We would like to extend the awareness of the project to other colleges and majors and non-CALFS clubs in an effort to involve people from many different backgrounds. Additionally, we plan to set up more workdays next semester and continue to spread the word about the project to insure that Thornwell gets the attention it deserves to return to a fully functioning farm.

FIGURES



Figure 1. An aging barn originally built for housing cattle on the Lush Acres Farm at the Thornwell Home for Children. The barn has been designated for housing small ruminants (goats and sheep) or poultry (turkeys). Structural and cosmetic work is planned for the barn. Initial work has included cleaning out stall and storage areas in the barn. Repair work will involve structural improvements to the internal frame and external woodwork.



Figure 2. Lush Acres Farm sold its dairy herd in 2007 and removed all dairy processing equipment from this barn. The barn once housed milking dairy cows in free stall and held the milking equipment and chilled storage tank. Currently, the barn is being retrofitted to house poultry (chickens) during the brooding stages of life. Feed and small equipment are stored in this barn. The former feed mill area was cleaned of old items, swept, and rearranged for better access to stored items. All unneeded items were either recycled at the local recycling center or discarded at the local landfill.



Figure 3. Farm equipment and trash stored in the former dairy barn were piled on a concrete base for removal to the landfill. Items that were no longer used or too old for continued use were discarded.



Figure 4. The storage and wash room of the old dairy barn has been converted for use with poultry. This room was completely emptied, cleaned floor to ceiling then had content rearranged for better flow and storage. Many of the equipment items used to brood and raise young poultry in rooms or outside in free-range areas was washed and sanitized by student volunteers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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