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UGA Odum School researcher creates tool demonstrating profitability of organic farming

Athens, Ga. – Research at the Agroecology Laboratory at the UGA Odum School of Ecology has led to the creation of organic farming enterprise budgets. Prior to this development, the economic decision-making tool used to estimate profitability was not widely available for organic production.

“Centuries of extensive tillage to produce crops like tobacco and cotton have caused much of our native topsoil to be washed into rivers,” said Krista Jacobsen, a recent Odum School Ph.D. graduate. “Many farmers in the Southeast inherit these degraded soils and it is important to develop and study farming practices that can restore soil and allow it to be farmed profitably at the same time. That’s where enterprise budgets come in.”

Until Jacobsen’s innovation, only one set of budgets for a limited number of organic crops had been developed for the Southeastern U.S. Now, budgets for okra, hot peppers and a corn/winter squash mix are available – providing organic farmers with one of the only organic conservation tillage budgets in the country.

“Conservation tillage is the practice of reducing tillage on farming systems and leaving at least 30 percent of crop residues on the soil surface,” explained Jacobsen. “My research demonstrates that using this practice outperforms a conventional system that uses regular tillage and chemical fertilizers in degraded soils like those of the Georgia Piedmont.”

According to Jacobsen’s advisor Carl Jordan, there is overwhelming evidence that organic agriculture is more sustainable than industrial agriculture. Organic agriculture improves the soil, reduces pollution from fertilizers and helps agriculture-friendly insects. The big question, therefore, is determining if organic agriculture can be economically competitive.

“Krista’s research at Spring Valley EcoFarms in Athens has shown that while yield from organically managed fields often is slightly less than from industrial cropland, energy-intensive inputs such as nitrogen fertilizer, pesticides and tractor fuel is much less,” said

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Jordan, senior research associate at the Odum School of Ecology. “As a result, input costs are less and profit margins can be higher. Low energy costs are especially important in these days of surging petroleum prices.”

For more information on Spring Valley EcoFarms, see www.springvalleyecofarms.org.

With roots that date back to the 1950s, the UGA Odum School of Ecology offers undergraduate and graduate degrees, as well as a certification program. Founder Eugene P. Odum is recognized internationally as a pioneer of ecosystem ecology. The school is ranked tenth by U.S. News and World Report for its graduate program. The Odum School is the first standalone school of ecology in the world. For more information, see <http://www.ecology.uga.edu>.

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Note to editors: Photos are available by contacting **Anisa S. Jimenez** at 706/542-6013 or anisaj@uga.edu.