

DROPPING DOTS ON THE MAP

Farmer veterans expand their footprint nationwide



Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee.

Farmer veterans in these states just became a little more connected to their mission.

These three dots on the map add to a growing network of state chapters that boast ties to a national organization who cultivates a new generation of farmers and food leaders.

The Farmer Veteran Coalition (FVC) is a non-profit that helps veterans pursue careers in agriculture. Headquartered in Davis, California, they service a network of over 20,000 veteran members nationwide. FVC works with the agricultural community, partners and sponsors to support those who served our country once by defending it, and now serve a second time as farmers feeding it.

Many operate their own independent farms.

“A study showed that ever increasing numbers of our military veterans came from rural areas,” reflected Michael O’Gorman, the project’s Founder and Executive Director. “We wanted to find ways to offer them opportunities in agriculture. We have assisted hundreds of veterans with everything from equipment, business plans, financial advice and training.”

Rooted in its strong belief that veterans possess the unique skills and character needed to strengthen rural communities and create sustainable food systems, the organization recognizes that agriculture additionally offers veterans purpose, opportunity, and physical and psychological benefits.

Already with chapter presence in Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, New York, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington, FVC has a major impact at the local level.

As of today, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee officially have launched full-fledged chapters to add to that list.

Chapters are effective at integrating farmer veterans into local agricultural communities. They bridge the gap between a nationally driven movement and resources at the state/county level to help them achieve success in agriculture. They are essential for ensuring members are aware of regional opportunities.

FVC relies heavily on its state leaders to connect with members; they offer an additional way to personalize the farmer veteran experience to individual needs.

“Because national travel remains uncertain, our chapters may be the first to organize local gatherings and on-farm training opportunities that are so important to our members,” shared O’Gorman, whose greatest pride is in helping these veterans with their new mission.

“Even as we are unable to engage in person on a larger scale, chapter organizers are networking with local farmer veterans through teleconference capabilities; the growth is occurring despite COVID-19.”

This, in part, fueled FVC’s ambitious goal for 2020: to have 20 chapters by the end of the year.

To facilitate this growth, FVC made a significant investment last year with a major nonprofit legal firm to standardize the governance of their chapters. In Austin last November for their national Stakeholders Conference, more than 200 veterans dedicated an extra day to learn about building presence in their states. A real testament to the non-profit’s expanding web across the U.S.

Now Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee are the first to emerge as official new chapters since that gathering.

“Having these three new state chapters approved by our Board of Directors today is a true milestone,” beamed Sarah Dachos, Deputy Director, who has been the single most instrumental player to spearhead state-level development. “We are committing considerable time and resources towards developing several more active chapters by the end of the year,”

The new chapters at a glance...

Arkansas

"We are excited and humbled to serve the Veteran Farmers of Arkansas and come alongside the national organization as we become a voice and source of support for an incredible community of Americans." - Michael Sparks, President

- Serving 500 Arkansas members
- Primary crop is rice, but ag in the state is diverse
- Formation started in the Fall of 2019 with the Vets4Ag Summit – a trifecta of Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation, Arkansas Dept of Veteran Affairs, and the Arkansas Dept of Agriculture.
- Jason Smedley of Arkansas Farm Bureau led the charge. He is a Marine Corps veteran and a small farmer himself, and now holds a seat on the chapter board

North Carolina

"'To be rather than to seem,' is the state motto of North Carolina. That is what we are seeking to do with the launch of FVC of North Carolina. **To be** supportive of the military members who have served this country. **To be** part of the backbone of the agricultural industry which is No. 1 in the state of North Carolina. **To be what we are:** veterans who are farmers and ranchers, in service once again to our country." - Lovay Wallace Singleton, President

- Serving 1,000 North Carolina members
- Top crops are cotton, soybean and corn
- Wallace-Singleton is the Founder of Veterans Employment Base Camp and Organic Garden. She was essential in getting the team across the line. Her dedication and commitment are a testament to how she treats every challenge in life - one step at a time, and you will get it done!
- Farm Bureau NC was critical in ensuring the chapter's formation. Debbie Hamrick has been on the organizing committee since its inception and motivated the win every step of the way.

Tennessee

"The creation of the Tennessee Chapter of the Farmer Veteran Coalition is the culmination of months (and in some cases, years) of hard work by a great team of people with a shared interest in supporting veterans in agriculture. We look forward to creating a stronger community of farmer veterans across the state and finding new ways to network and share resources." - Ron Bridges, President

- Serving 1,000 Tennessee members
- Initially started their work in 2017 and have patiently waiting to launch while National revamped the chapter ordinance. They quickly became one of the first to do so under the new process.
- Ron Bridges is an Army veteran and professor of biology at Pellissippi State Community College.
- Tim Prather, now retired from University of Tennessee Extension, was essential in making this chapter happen.

UPDATE: In August, South Carolina joined the ranks with a chapter of their own.

South Carolina

"We are so excited that South Carolina is the newest addition to the Farmer Veteran Coalition family. We know that our chapter will provide the support needed across the Palmetto state to help mobilize South Carolinians to feed America." - Matthew Rutter, President

- Serving 500 South Carolina members
- Veterans farming 800,000 acres of the state
- One in ten South Carolina adults are veterans, with South Carolina ranking ninth in the United States in military retiree population.
- Members grow a tremendous variety from truffles to apples to commodity crops to livestock.
- Chapter President, Matthew Rutter of Project Victory Gardens, is an eighth generation South Carolinian. He strongly advocated for a state chapter, drawing support from the South Carolina Secretary of Veteran's Affairs, the Commissioner of Agriculture, and numerous stakeholders.

If interested in learning more about forming a chapter in your state, or connecting into your existing state chapter, contact chapters@farmvetco.org.