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Veterans Feeding America

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By DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ

We believe that veterans possess the unique skills and character needed to strengthen rural communities and create sustainable food systems," explains Jeanette Lombardo, executive director, of the Farmer Veteran Coalition (FVC). "We believe that agriculture offers purpose, opportunity, and physical and psychological benefits."

FVC is being supported in these efforts by 85-year-old retailer Tractor Supply Co., the largest rural lifestyle retailer in the U.S. with 2,164 stores in 49 states. "We first teamed up with FVC in 2018 and were thrilled to join forces assisting farmer veterans in their agricultural pursuits," notes Mary Winn Pilkington, Tractor Supply senior vice president of investor relations and public relations. "Since then, we have contributed more than \$450,000 in gift cards and funding to FVC, which has helped to support more than 300 farmer veterans. The mission and values of FVC are a perfect match for those upheld at Tractor Supply. We are truly proud and honored to provide our support to this exceptional nonprofit organization."

The Farmer Veteran Coalition grew out of a 2006 report by William O'Hare and Bill Bishop of the University of New Hampshire's Carsey Institute, which found that rural families were paying a disproportionately high price for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The study confirmed that ever-increasing numbers of those enlisted in the U.S. military had their roots in rural America. In response, FVC founder and organic farmer Michael O'Gorman organized a gathering for farmers on California's Central Coast in May 2007 to discuss creating jobs on farms for returning veterans. A small group attended that initial meeting, which included three women who had lost sons in Iraq or Afghanistan. Those moms were Nadia McCaffrey, Dolores Kesterson and Mary Tillman, the mother of Pat Tillman, the Arizona Cardinals football player who left a lucrative NFL career to serve his country. The idea of opening their farms for those returning from war captivated those who attended and the Farmer Veteran Coalition was born in 2008.

"It's about finding new purpose in helping them establish and grow their operations and enjoy a quality of life that can bring them healing, prosperity and peace," explains Lombardo. "The secondary goal is to create a new generation of farmers to fill the gaps of those retiring. To reach that goal, we constantly survey our members to have a better understanding of their needs to take their operations to the next level. It's about being responsive to their needs."

Lombardo herself is from a farming and military family: "I was born in Wiesbaden, Germany, while my father served in the U.S. Air Force," she shares. "I was raised on my family's multi-generational farm outside Erie, Pennsylvania, where our family raised Angus and Hereford cattle and had a dairy operation."

FVC currently has more than 42,000 members across the nation, and membership is free; applications can be found on the FVC

website: <https://farmvetco.org/membership/>. "Typically we work with people who have been discharged from the military and some still participate in the National Guard," Lombardo points out. "Separation from their branch of service has them looking for a new purpose and career path in civilian life. We help them find satisfying careers in the agricultural sector or help them start their own farms and ranches. Our partnership with AgCareers helps secure meaningful employment, even offering a remote job option for those who have started farms but need off-farm income. For those choosing to start their own farms and ranches, we offer training, business planning, counseling, product discounts, a 1-800 call center, and access to market, land and capital." Veteran members also get exclusive discounts from farm equipment suppliers and agricultural service providers.

The FVC-Tractor Supply partnership has been a productive one for veterans. "We consider our primary mission to be providing unwavering support for our farmer veterans as they establish and operate their businesses, which help feed America," comments Pilkington. "Whatever it takes, we are dedicated to making it happen. From funding grant and scholarship programs to offering expert guidance in selecting products from our stores, we aim to be there for them. At Tractor Supply, we are wholeheartedly committed to 'Life Out Here' – a lifestyle that champions self-reliance, independence, integrity, and the fostering of strong community bonds. An enduring core value of ours is the support we provide to our nation's military personnel, veterans and their families. Their immense sacrifices drive us at Tractor Supply to continue demonstrating our gratitude for their selfless service. They have given so much for our country's freedom and independence, and its incumbent on all of us to support them however we can.

"Military life poses considerable chal-

Changing Lives, One Farmer At A Time

Executives from both the Farmer Veteran Coalition and Tractor Supply Co. have poignant stories about veterans that they have assisted:

"Last May, we had a fellowship awardee who had served five years in the Marine Corps, deploying in support of Operation Enduring Freedom," relates Lombardo. "In Afghanistan, he encountered an IED (improvised explosive device), losing his right leg, the use of his right hand, and vision in his right eye. Despite these challenges, he continued to follow his passion for raising beef cattle. FVC's assistance allowed him to purchase the fencing needed to expand his operation and implement pasture rotation."

"This year we had a beekeeper from Idaho that was concerned about how he would continue after losing multiple hives," she adds. "Fortunately, through the Fellowship Fund program, and generous support from our funders, we were able to award him a honey extractor, five hives, and five swarm traps for his business. After the items were delivered, he told us, 'I had the best day that I have had in a long time! Being a disabled veteran, I don't cry much anymore. The urge is here, and I will admit to a couple of tears.'"

Pilkington notes, "Over the years, witnessing

the scope and creativity of these farmers' endeavors has been truly astounding. They have ventured into diverse domains while showcasing their creativity and ingenuity. This year, we had the privilege of supporting an Air Force veteran who owns HoneyBreeze Orchards, a charming five-acre orchard nestled in Eastern Nebraska. The orchard specializes in producing various fruits, berries, vegetables, natural florals and honey-derived products, all directly available to consumers. The orchard maintains several bee colonies for honey production, complementing its offerings. These exceptional products are showcased at local community Farmer's Markets and a dedicated produce stand in Schuyler, Nebraska.

"We also supported Naroni Springs, led by a seasoned Coast Guard veteran, which is dedicated to fostering bees, birds, birches and bait," she continues. "The business aims to boost hive count, aid birch forest reforestation for increased sap production, and align with the family's tradition of raising quail, pheasants and wood ducks. Notably, the veteran owner harvests birch sap, processing it into Birch Beer, with plans to expand into quail egg production to meet market demands. The future vision also includes a bait shop."

For more information, call 855-FVC-FARM or visit <https://farmvetco.org/>.

enges for service members and their families," Pilkington continues. "We understand that those with the dedication and determination to launch a business know the hardships and extensive effort it entails. This principle aligns with what we've undertaken at Tractor Supply over the years to establish ourselves as a thriving company – it takes relentless hard work, unwavering support for our Team Members and the community, and having some fun along the way. If our support can aid these farmer veterans as they start and grow their agricultural endeavors, we are committed to standing by them, fostering their success and celebrating their achievements."

Lombardo asserts that FVC is committed to helping members weather whatever storms may come their way. "Our programs have assisted many in unpredictable circumstances," she declares. "In 2022, during the devastating wildfires, we helped many veterans receive hay and have access to USDA emergency relief programs. Since our Fellowship Fund grant began, we have helped hundreds of farmers and ranchers begin and grow their operations. Through inflation, recession, input shortages, COVID, and droughts, we have been there for our veterans, and we plan on continuing that for generations to come."



