



# The SARA Report

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THE  
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS  
RIO GRANDE VALLEY

OFFICE OF THE  
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT  
FOR RESEARCH,  
GRADUATE STUDIES, AND  
NEW PROGRAM  
DEVELOPMENT

*Dr. Parwinder Grewal*  
Executive Vice President  
for Research,  
Graduate Studies, and  
New Program  
Development

*Dr. Alex Racelis*  
Co-Director for SARA

*George Bennack*  
Co-Director for SARA

*Program Information:*  
The SARA Report shares on  
the research, education,  
outreach, and extension  
activities in  
sustainable agriculture  
and rural advancement  
at UTRGV

The University of Texas  
Rio Grande Valley™  
.....  
Center for Sustainable Agriculture  
& Rural Advancement

## IN THIS ISSUE:

*(Click on blue links)*

### RESEARCH & EDUCATION

1. [UTRGV Earth Fest 2018 moves towards food sovereignty](#)
2. [Fellowships provide educational experience for students in sustainable agriculture](#)
3. [Subtropical Soil Health Initiative reflects participatory research](#)
4. [Participatory research project provides insight into sweet-potato production](#)
5. [Participatory research initiated to assess soil-nutrient availability for sweet-potato](#)
6. [SARA supports continued research for sweet potato as a food and cover crop for the RGV](#)
7. [Potential specialty crop tested at the Edinburg-campus research garden](#)
8. [SARA establishes an additional research and demonstration site for sustainable agriculture](#)
9. [UTRGV graduate students tour agricultural research & demonstration site](#)
10. [B.S. degree program in Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems slated to start in Fall](#)
11. [Engineering faculty and students demonstrate greywater treatment system](#)
12. [Energy-audit project provides experiential learning for several engineering students](#)
13. [Consumer research a prominent part of the Rio Farms Grape Growing and Wine Festival](#)
14. [Preliminary wine-tasting surveys provide guidance to Texas winemakers](#)
15. [SARA supports proposal to the NSF Research Traineeship Program](#)
16. [New SARA website provides information on sustainable agriculture at UTRGV](#)
17. [SARA-affiliated faculty highlighted in the new SARA website](#)
18. [SARA begins to develop a distinguishing logo](#)

### OUTREACH & EXTENSION

19. [Video produced by SARA helps Spanish speakers with sustainable agriculture](#)
20. [SARA partners with local non-profit to provide workshop on value-added production](#)
21. [TRCC works to expand access to sustainable produce in rural Texas](#)
22. [SARA begins training series on strengthening local food systems](#)
23. [TRCC helps launch and expand small-scale producer cooperative serving coastal bend](#)
24. [SARA enables rural healthcare co-op to improve health in rural communities](#)
25. [Agricultural and rural businesses benefit from energy audits provided through SARA](#)
26. [Energy audits by UTRGV students result in energy-efficiency grants for rural businesses](#)
27. [SARA submits proposal to assist beginning farmers and ranchers in South Texas](#)
28. [Agricultural outreach project focusing on minority farmers and ranchers ends](#)
29. [SARA submits proposal to assist minority farmers and ranchers in South and East Texas](#)
30. [SARA supports proposal to assist in the development of farmers markets](#)

### [SARA STAFF IN THE NEWS](#)

To share feedback/questions or to join our mailing list, please e-mail Dahlia Vela at [dahlia.vela@utrgv.edu](mailto:dahlia.vela@utrgv.edu).

### **UTRGV Earth Fest 2018 moves towards food sovereignty**

The 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Food Security Forum was hosted on April 19 by the UTRGV Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Advancement (SARA), the UTRGV Office of Governmental Relations, Baylor University – Texas Hunger Initiative, and the UTRGV Office for Sustainability. The event marked a move towards food sovereignty through practice, policy, and partnerships. The event included a panel on Hunger, Food Access, & Nutrition; and a second panel on Strengthening Agriculture & Food Production, which included Juan Raygoza, a SARA staff member. The event closed with keynote speakers and a plenary panel that focused on Bridging Food Production & Consumption through Private & Non-Profit Partnership. For more information on this and future food forums, contact Dr. Alex Racelis at [alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu](mailto:alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu)

### **Fellowships provide educational experience for students in sustainable agriculture**

The USDA-funded *Integrated Approach to Graduate Research, Education, and Engagement* (IAGREE) includes a comprehensive fellowship plan to recruit eight students into UTRGV's newly developed master's program in Agriculture, Environmental, and Sustainability Sciences (AESS). The five-year project started in July 2017 and provides an educational experience for students in sustainable agriculture and food systems, in conjunction with career-development skills and research training. Project director Dr. Alex Racelis reports, "As of May, we've been able to recruit six students through this fellowship plan. Students will receive two years of funding to complete master's research in collaboration with local area partners, including the USDA, industry partners, as well as local-area farms". For more information about IAGREE and its fellowships, contact SARA co-director Dr. Alex Racelis at [alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu](mailto:alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu)

### **Subtropical Soil Health Initiative reflects collaboration and participatory research**

UTRGV researchers have helped launch the Subtropical Soil Health Initiative in close collaboration with the National Center for Appropriate Technology. The SSHI is sponsored by a USDA-NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG), centered on participatory research with local organic farms. Research is focused on the impact of cover crops on soil health and other ecosystem services, and draws from the strengths of various SARA-affiliated faculty. One of the more innovative aspects of the SSHI is that it engenders the involvement of graduate students in the master's program in Agricultural, Environmental, and Sustainability Sciences. For example, Stephanie Kasper is examining the impact of cover crops on soil nitrogen, while Habraham Lopez is exploring the impact of cover crops on soil biology. Both students are co-advised by Dr. Alex Racelis and Dr. Pushpa Soti. Jasleen Kaur (advised by Dr. Rupesh Kariyat) is examining the impact of cover crops on insect communities. These master students are entering their second year of research. For more information, contact Dr. Alex Racelis at [alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu](mailto:alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu)

### **Participatory research project provides insight into sweet-potato production**

The UTRGV Center for Sustainable Agriculture & Rural Advancement (SARA) collaborated with PPC Farms to research the possibility of using sweet potato as a summertime cover crop that also doubles as a commercial food crop. PPC Farms is a family-owned and -operated produce farm and packing facility located in the Rio Grande Valley, and was the applicant organization for the Southern SARE Producer Grant that funded the sweet-potato research. SARA co-director, Dr. Alex Racelis, collaborated extensively on the project, "This project gave us good information on sweet potato as a possible summertime crop in the Rio Grande Valley. We know that there are issues with soil pH, plant nutrition, and pest management that we'll have to deal with. Dr. Engil Pereira is developing follow-up research on the sweet potato" stated Dr. Racelis (see articles below). For more information, contact Dr. Alex Racelis at [alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu](mailto:alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu)

### **Participatory research initiated to assess soil-nutrient availability for sweet-potato**

SARA-affiliated faculty members Dr. Engil Pereira and Dr. James Kang are developing a field study, in partnership with McAllen Composting Facility, to assess soil-nutrient availability and crop-nutrient use in sweet-potato cultivation. Through the assistance of ag specialist Cruz Salinas, SARA has provided a layout

plan for the research plots, a drip-irrigation design, a materials list, and price quotes. In its first growing season, the trial will evaluate a variety of fertilizers for the cultivation of sweet potato as strategies to build soil fertility, increase productivity, and sustain nutritional value of sweet potato. This research engages students in environmental science and is partially funded by “*Stimulating Hispanic Participation in the Geosciences (SHIP-GEO)*” (NSF Award#1600585). For more information on this sweet-potato project, contact Dr. Engil Pereira at [engil.pereira@utrgv.edu](mailto:engil.pereira@utrgv.edu) For more information on the NSF grant, contact Dr. Chu-Lin Cheng at [chulin.cheng@utrgv.edu](mailto:chulin.cheng@utrgv.edu)

### **SARA supports continued research for sweet potato as a food and cover crop for the RGV**

Previous, collaborative research on sweet potato, with family-owned PPC Farms, supported the use of sweet potatoes as a summertime cover and cash crop in the RGV. However, questions remain on which varieties grow the best in the RGV, growing practices, and nutritional requirements. Also, the nutritional value of sweet potato grown in the RGV needs to be studied, as do processing, storage, and marketing options. Dr. Engil Pereira, assistant professor of soil ecology, is submitting a letter of intent to Southern SARE to continue sweet-potato research in the RGV, with hopes of answering these remaining questions. SARA has participated in the development of this potential project. States Dr. Pereira, “SARA has been very helpful in linking me with potential sweet-potato farmers that can participate in this research project”. Dr. Pereira is a SARA-affiliated faculty member in the School of Earth, Environmental, and Marine Sciences with research interest and expertise in soil management, microbial-mediated nutrient cycling, nutrient losses, and greenhouse gas emissions. For more information on sweet-potato research, contact Dr. Engil Pereira at [engil.pereira@utrgv.edu](mailto:engil.pereira@utrgv.edu)

### **Potential specialty crop tested at the Edinburg-campus research garden**

The certified-organic research garden on the Edinburg campus is home to an odd, vigorous-climbing perennial plant growing on a trellis system that is 14-feet high. The potential RGV specialty crop—hops—is being assessed by SARA co-director Dr. Alex Racelis and graduate student Stephanie Kasper. “We’ve received a lot of questions about this plant growing on a very high 14-foot trellis system,” states Dr. Racelis, “We’re growing several varieties of hops to see how this crop handles South Texas heat and growing conditions.” SARA staff person Avan Guerra designed and built the trellis system. Hops are the flowers, or seed cones, of the hop plant *Humulus lupulus*. They are used primarily as a flavoring and stability agent in beer, giving beer a bitter taste. For more information about research-garden projects on the Edinburg campus, contact Dr. Alex Racelis at [alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu](mailto:alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu)

### **SARA establishes an additional research and demonstration site for sustainable agriculture**

SARA co-director Dr. Alex Racelis is leading an effort to establish an additional research, teaching, and demonstration site for sustainable agriculture. The five-acre site is 1.8 miles west of the UTRGV Edinburg campus and will serve as an expansion of the much smaller certified-organic research garden located on the Edinburg campus. This site is available through a partnership with the Edinburg First United Methodist Church. The site is irrigated land that is destined to be a working farm that is at the cutting edge of sustainability, and eventually a zero-emission sustainable food system. “This new site is large enough to accommodate community-engaged research, outreach, and demonstration,” states Dr. Racelis, “and is close enough to the Edinburg campus to provide easy student access to faculty, undergraduate, and graduate students involved in UTRGV’s new programs in sustainable agriculture and food systems.” For more information on this site, please contact SARA co-director Dr. Alex Racelis at [alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu](mailto:alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu)

### **UTRGV graduate students tour agricultural research & demonstration site**

On April 27, UTRGV graduate students pursuing a MS degree in Agricultural, Environmental, and Sustainability Sciences (AESS) were provided a tour of SARA’s County-Line Research & Demonstration Site located on the border of Hidalgo and Willacy Counties about five miles west of Lyford. “This is a great tour to

provide students with a broad view of sustainable agriculture in the Rio Grande Valley,” reported Dr. Alex Racelis, instructor for the students’ master-level course, “We began the discussion with a brief history of sustainable agriculture in the RGV, then we discussed the current state of sustainable agriculture in this region. We discussed research on specialty crops being tested and developed for the hot, arid, and sometimes saline conditions in the RGV.” George Bennack, SARA co-director, provided the tour, which finished with a demonstration of permaculture, an approach to sustainable agriculture that is gaining popularity. For more information about this tour on sustainable agriculture, contact George Bennack at [george.bennack@utrgv.edu](mailto:george.bennack@utrgv.edu)

#### **B.S. degree program in Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems slated to start in Fall of 2018**

UTRGV’s Bachelor of Science degree in Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems has been formally approved by both UT System and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the program should launch in the Fall of 2018. Still pending is approval from SACSOC, which is expected this summer. Dr. Chris Gabler led the effort to develop the new program, “So our next step is to spread the word and tell all the interested and potentially interested students at UTGV and beyond about our exciting new interdisciplinary bachelor’s program,” states Gabler. Approval of this program significantly advances sustainable agriculture and food systems at UTRGV. Dr. Gabler is a SARA-affiliated faculty member with research interest and expertise in climate change, ecological restoration, invasive species, sustainable agriculture, and urban aquaponics. He can be reached at [christopher.gabler@utrgv.edu](mailto:christopher.gabler@utrgv.edu)

#### **Engineering faculty and students demonstrate greywater treatment system**

Four UTRGV mechanical-engineering students and their professor Dr. Ben Xu, assistant professor of mechanical engineering, presented a student-designed greywater treatment system to Gustavo Serrano, Warehouse General Manager for Lone Star Citrus Growers. The four mechanical engineering students—Thomas Rodriguez, Mar Gonzalez, Robert Trevino, and Jeremy Betancourt—designed and constructed the *Community Greywater Treatment System* as their Senior Design I and II coursework. The solar-powered treatment system could be used in value-added agricultural facilities, or for agricultural drip irrigation. Dr. Ben Xu is a SARA-affiliated faculty member with research interest and expertise in thermal energy storage, multiphase heat transfer in energy-system and wastewater treatment. More information about this senior design project can be acquired through Dr. Xu at [ben.xu@utrgv.edu](mailto:ben.xu@utrgv.edu).

#### **Energy-audit project provides experiential learning for several engineering students**

Six mechanical-engineering students benefited from their involvement in providing energy audits for agricultural and rural businesses through SARA. The energy-audit process typically started with student-engaged interviews with business entrepreneurs and corporate-level managers, which were followed by a thorough inventory of facilities lighting, air conditioning, refrigeration, other equipment, and construction. Analysis of energy usage engaged students at an engineering level, while cost-saving options and resulting payback periods engaged students at a business level. During the summer, engineering students will present their findings to corporate-level executives and refine their presentational and soft skills. “This was a challenging project”, reported SARA co-director George Bennack. “This project was truly multi-disciplinary, and the required collaboration at UTRGV was challenging during the post-unification year of 2016. Administrative hurdles were challenging too, but we were able to obtain a no-cost extension from the USDA funding agency and were then able to revive the project and provide UTRGV students with meaningful corporate-level engagement.” For more information on the energy-audit project, contact project director Dr. Ben Xu at [ben.xu@utrgv.edu](mailto:ben.xu@utrgv.edu) or Aisha Cruz-Reyes at [aisha.cruzreyes@utrgv.edu](mailto:aisha.cruzreyes@utrgv.edu)

#### **Consumer research a prominent part of the Rio Farms Grape Growing and Wine Festival**

The Rio Farms 2018 Grape Growing and Wine Festival was held on April 7 at the Rio Farms headquarters in the small, rural community of Monte Alto in eastern Hidalgo County. Rio Farms is a non-profit research farm that has done pioneering research on several RGV crops, including grapes. The event included

presentations by both commercial and home winemakers, and a research presentation by Dr. Craig Ledbetter, a USDA-ARS grape researcher. Frances Pontasch, TAMU Extension Program Viticulture Specialist, presented too. The event also included a tour of the Rio Farms Research and Demonstration Vineyard. SARA participated in the event by organizing and sponsoring a wine-tasting survey that is providing needed information on taste preferences for wine in the RGV. For more information, contact George Bennack at [george.bennack@utrgv.edu](mailto:george.bennack@utrgv.edu) A related article from The Monitor can be found at [http://www.themonitor.com/news/local/article\\_88a1f8ee-3a15-11e8-a060-9b1307ae7505.html](http://www.themonitor.com/news/local/article_88a1f8ee-3a15-11e8-a060-9b1307ae7505.html)

#### **Preliminary wine-tasting surveys provide guidance to Texas winemakers**

The UTRGV Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Advancement (SARA) recently began collecting consumer data through wine-tasting surveys, which has resulted in some interesting, preliminary results that could provide critical guidance to Texas winemakers. In two recent events, 694 surveys were collected on 20 different unidentified wines made in the RGV. In surprising results, the RGV's disease-resistant Convent, Black Spanish, and Blanc du Bois wines scored very high in the surveys when the wines had enough residual sugar in them to be classified as semi-sweet. Also demonstrated, the South Texas population tends to prefer residual sugar (RS) levels of 30 – 50 g/L, and potential specialty crops like Barbados Cherry and Prickly Pear made wines that scored high. Preliminary results suggest that South Texas grape growers and wine makers should not let European and Californian growers define their approach to the industry. For more information on these surveys, contact George Bennack at [george.bennack@utrgv.edu](mailto:george.bennack@utrgv.edu)

#### **SARA supports proposal to the NSF Research Traineeship Program**

In a strong letter of support, the Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Advancement (SARA) committed support to a recent proposal submitted by Dr. Alex Racelis to the National Science Foundation Research Traineeship (NRT) Program. The NRT Program is designed to encourage the development and implementation of bold, new, and potentially transformative models for STEM graduate education training. SARA committed to find opportunities for graduate research through its outreach programs and through research on new specialty crops, sustainable agricultural practices, and direct-marketing options for agricultural producers. If a qualified student is selected for this program, SARA will provide the student with access to its field research sites, technical staff, and other resources. For more information on the NRT proposal, contact Dr. Alex Racelis at [alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu](mailto:alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu)

#### **New SARA website provides information on sustainable agriculture at UTRGV**

A website is being developed for the Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Advancement (SARA) at <http://utrgv.edu/sara> The website provides information on the Research, Education, and Outreach related to sustainable agriculture at UTRGV, including listings and brief explanations of both research and outreach projects related to sustainable agriculture. The website includes an extensive listing of SARA Partners; both the Sponsors that help fund projects, and the Collaborators that help with project activities. The People associated with SARA—the Students, Faculty, and Staff—are listed with brief descriptions. Finally, the Facilities used by SARA, including five research and demonstration sites, are listed.

#### **SARA-affiliated faculty highlighted in the new SARA website**

The faculty members affiliated with the Center for Sustainable Agriculture & Rural Advancement (SARA) are the core of SARA. They lead in the agriculture- and food-related research and education that SARA promotes and supports. There are currently 16 SARA-affiliated faculty members highlighted on the SARA website at <http://www.utrgv.edu/sara/people/faculty/index.htm> SARA has also employed and engaged 36 students within the past year. These students are also highlighted on the SARA website with a brief description of the experiential learning that they engage in. A primary objective of SARA is to assist faculty with applied research related to sustainable agriculture and food systems, while engaging UTRGV students



in research and outreach activities. Faculty members are invited to become more involved in research related to sustainable agriculture and food systems. For more information, contact SARA co-directors Dr. Alex Racelis at [alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu](mailto:alexis.racelis@utrgv.edu) or George Bennack at [george.bennack@utrgv.edu](mailto:george.bennack@utrgv.edu)

#### **SARA begins to develop a distinguishing logo**

The Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Advancement (SARA) plans to distinguish itself with a logo that reflects sustainable agriculture and incorporates elements that could include the sun, photosynthesis, precipitation, sustainable crop production, healthy soils, and groundwater. An example of a possible logo for SARA is included in the upper left-hand corner of the first page of this SARA Report. Logo approval is currently on hold at UTRGV's Studio Twelve01 pending the establishment of policy for the development of logos. In the meantime, provide your feedback on this possible logo, or provide other logo options to Dahlia Vela at [dahlia.vela@utrgv.edu](mailto:dahlia.vela@utrgv.edu)

#### **Video produced by SARA helps Spanish speakers with sustainable agriculture**

The UTRGV Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Advancement (SARA) recently finished an 8-minute video that will help smaller-scale Spanish-speaking farmers make their own on-farm compost, becoming more productive, efficient, and sustainable. The video was produced by Israel Galindo, SARA's video-production manager. The video highlights Juan Raygoza, project director for SARA's beginning-farmer project, as he explains in detailed Spanish how to make one's own compost. States SARA co-director George Bennack, "Israel and Juan have produced a useful, high-quality video that will help Spanish-speaking farmers with limited resources. SARA will use this video for our own clients, but we'll also provide a copy to USDA, so the video can be posted on their website for Spanish-speaking farmers and ranchers across the United States. USDA uses a lot of the video content that we produce," This video can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X74tMdzcV8> For more information on video production at SARA, contact George Bennack at [george.bennack@utrgv.edu](mailto:george.bennack@utrgv.edu)

#### **SARA partners with local non-profit to provide workshop on value-added production**

The UTRGV Texas Rural Cooperative Center (TRCC), a SARA program, has partnered with HOPE for Small Farm Sustainability (HOPE) to develop a training workshop for gardeners and agricultural producers wanting to develop value-added products. HOPE is located near Harlingen and is a community-based non-profit that works to increase food security in high-need communities by developing new farmers and by providing cooperative-marketing opportunities for local growers. This two-part Value-Added Production series will cover:

- Value-added processing techniques—producing condiments, preserved goods, cheeses, health & beauty products, and cut fruits & vegetables;
- Value-added production techniques—differentiated growing and production methods, identity preservation, and product segregation;
- Product regulations—food safety, labeling, permits, and cottage-food laws;
- Project financing—financing options and requirements for value-added projects.

These trainings will be held on July 18 and 19 from 1:00 - 3:00 PM. For more information, or to register, please contact Colin Cain at [colin.cain@utrgv.edu](mailto:colin.cain@utrgv.edu)

#### **TRCC works to expand access to sustainable produce in rural Texas**

The UTRGV Texas Rural Cooperative Center (TRCC), a SARA program, has worked with small-scale and sustainable agricultural producers to launch and expand the Central Texas Farmers Co-op in San Marcos, Texas. TRCC has worked with members to help develop a sustainable business model for this start-up cooperative and has helped expand access to local food in Caldwell, Hays, and Blanco Counties, while

supporting small farmers through a multi-farm CSA. The co-op was founded in 2017 and is now in its second season, and the cooperative often incorporates educational events for members and the broader community. For more information please contact Annelies Lottmann at [annelies.lottmann@utrgv.edu](mailto:annelies.lottmann@utrgv.edu)

### **SARA begins training series on strengthening local food systems**

The UTRGV Texas Rural Cooperative Center (TRCC), a SARA program, has partnered with the Central Texas Farmers Co-op and Austin Cooperative Business Association to launch a training series on adapting cooperative-marketing strategies for local food systems. These trainings will include interactive and case-tested sessions from sustainable agricultural producers that have experience in serving local markets through collaborative marketing strategies, including CSAs and farm-to-work programs. Trainings will take place in the summer and fall of 2018. For more information, contact Colin Cain at [colin.cain@utrgv.edu](mailto:colin.cain@utrgv.edu)

### **TRCC helps launch and expand small-scale producer cooperative serving coastal bend**

The UTRGV Texas Rural Cooperative Center (TRCC), a SARA program, has helped launch and expand the Waller County Farmers and Ranchers Co-op, assisting with board development, financial planning, and business-model development. This agricultural marketing cooperative serves small-scale and sustainable agricultural producers in the Hempstead area, and markets its goods throughout the coastal-bend area. Co-op members benefit by connecting with one another at regular meetings to share ideas and solve problems together. The co-op also provides access to educational events, farm tours, and training on small equipment. In summer 2018, TRCC will provide a training on cooperative principles, business planning, and governance to Waller County Co-op members and other interested participants from the community. For more information, please contact Colin Cain at [colin.cain@utrgv.edu](mailto:colin.cain@utrgv.edu)

### **SARA enables rural healthcare co-op to improve health in rural communities**

The UTRGV Texas Rural Cooperative Center (TRCC), a SARA program, has helped launch and expand the eQuality Home Care Co-op. eQuality is the first worker-owned home-care business in the State of Texas. The skilled and dedicated worker-owners not only care for their clients, but for each other with fair wages and workplace autonomy that is seldom seen in the home-care industry. eQuality holds regular events in the community, including mend-a-thons and birthday parties at senior centers, and is also active in the local Hispanic chamber of commerce. TRCC has worked with eQuality on financial planning, capital acquisition, board development, and business planning. TRCC staff also provides monthly trainings with the eQuality board of directors and quarterly information sessions on co-op principles with the general membership. For more information, please contact Annelies Lottmann at [annelies.lottmann@utrgv.edu](mailto:annelies.lottmann@utrgv.edu)

### **Agricultural and rural businesses benefit from energy audits provided through SARA**

A total of 21 agribusinesses and other rural businesses benefited from energy audits provided through UTRGV's Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Advancement (SARA). "Private-sector competition can be really tough," reports SARA co-director George Bennack. "The work that UTRGV engineering faculty and students did will help these agricultural and rural businesses survive." As part of the energy audit, the farms and other rural businesses are provided energy-efficiency options along with the expected pay-back period associated with these options. For more information about this project, contact project co-directors Dr. Ben Xu at [ben.xu@utrgv.edu](mailto:ben.xu@utrgv.edu) or George Bennack at [george.bennack@utrgv.edu](mailto:george.bennack@utrgv.edu) or contact the project's lead energy auditor, and engineering lecturer, Jesse Sanchez at [jose.j.sanchez01@utrgv.edu](mailto:jose.j.sanchez01@utrgv.edu)

### **Energy audits by UTRGV students result in energy-efficiency grants for rural businesses**

Energy audits done with mechanical-engineering students for a convenience store and a pharmacy in the small community of Roma, in western Starr County, were used to secure USDA energy-efficiency grants for the two rural businesses. In March, the store was awarded \$5,000 for improvements in lighting and in

its meat-display cooler, while the pharmacy received \$20,000 for improved air conditioning, lighting, and insulation. Rural energy audits, done through the Center for Sustainable Agriculture & Rural Advancement (SARA), are used by farmers, ranchers, and other rural businesses to improve their energy efficiency, and the energy audits are also required to obtain grant funding from USDA for energy-efficiency or renewable-energy improvements. For more information on SARA's energy-audit program, contact Aisha Cruz-Reyes at [aisha.cruzreyes@utrgv.edu](mailto:aisha.cruzreyes@utrgv.edu)

#### **SARA submits proposal to assist beginning farmers and ranchers in South Texas**

The UTRGV Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Advancement (SARA) recently submitted a proposal to USDA-NIFA for \$600,000 to assist beginning farmers and ranchers in South and Southwest Texas. If funded, the three-year project will have SARA staff assisting beginning farmers and ranchers in South Texas, while three sub-awardees provide assistance in Central Texas; along the border in Southwest Texas; El Paso; and Dona Ana County, New Mexico. For more information about this project, please contact project director Juan Raygoza at [juan.raygoza@utrv.edu](mailto:juan.raygoza@utrv.edu)

#### **Agricultural outreach project focusing on minority farmers and ranchers ends**

A SARA agricultural outreach project funded through the USDA Office of Advocacy and Outreach (OAO) ended the end of March after posting significant results. The project focused on providing USDA farm-program training and outreach to Hispanic producers in South Texas, but also extended its reach to Black/African American farmers in East Texas, other areas of Texas, and into areas of New Mexico. This 18-month project helped deliver and host 35 training and outreach events attended by 1,178 mostly minority farmers and ranchers; however, more USDA assistance in this area is needed. For more information on this project, contact project director Carlos Lago at [carlos.lago@utrgv.edu](mailto:carlos.lago@utrgv.edu)

#### **SARA submits proposal to assist minority farmers and ranchers in South and East Texas**

The UTRGV Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Advancement (SARA) recently submitted a proposal to the USDA Office of Advocacy and Outreach for \$200,000 to provide USDA-program outreach, and other assistance, to minority farmers and ranchers in South and East Texas. If funded, the one-year project will have SARA staff organizing outreach and training events that highlight USDA farm programs and are geared towards Hispanic and Black/African American farmers and ranchers. The project would also provide a useful venue for disseminating research results in sustainable agriculture. For more information, contact project director Carlos Lago at [carlos.lago@utrgv.edu](mailto:carlos.lago@utrgv.edu)

#### **SARA supports proposal to assist in the development of farmers markets and direct marketing**

The UTRGV Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Advancement (SARA) provided a strong letter of support to Grace Heritage Ranch, a non-profit organization in Willacy County, to assist in the development of farmers markets and other direct-marketing venues in the RGV, particularly Willacy County. As resources allow, SARA will assist in the development of beginning farmers to supply farmers' markets; assist Hispanic producers to direct market their agricultural produce; and assist in the development of farmers' markets and other cooperatively-owned businesses. For more information about Grace Heritage Ranch, visit the organization's website at <http://graceheritageranch.com/> and also visit their media page to view the video of the Grace Heritage Ranch Owner Interview, which was developed in 2015 by UTPA business-administration students at <http://graceheritageranch.com/media/>

#### **SARA staff in the news**

On March 29, Cruz Salinas presented at a Texas A&M AgriLife event, *Production Planning for Direct Sales*. Cruz presented on drip irrigation, while TAMU Drs. Juan Enciso and Samuel Zapata presented on production and business planning, respectively. On April 5 – 7, George Bennack attended the Viva Fresh Expo in San Antonio. The Expo is a regional trade show sponsored by the Texas International Produce



Association (TIPA) and provides training, business-development, and networking opportunities for those in the Texas produce industry. On April 7, George Bennack attended the Rio Farms 2018 Grape Growing and Wine Festival where he obtained 551 wine-taster surveys on various wines made from Rio Farms fruit, grown in the RGV of South Texas.

On April 10 and 13, Aisha Cruz-Reyes and SARA's energy-audit team performed the last three, rural, energy audits before the end of the USDA funded project on April 15. On April 15 – 18, George Bennack attended the National Telecommunications Cooperative Association (NTCA) Legislative Conference in Washington D.C., which focused on legislative issues affecting rural telecommunications. On April 19, Juan Raygoza presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Food Security Forum on a panel that focused on *Strengthening Agriculture & Food Production*. On April 27, George Bennack provided a sustainable-agriculture tour for graduate students pursuing a MS degree in Agriculture, Environmental, and Sustainability Sciences at SARA's County-Line Research & Demonstration Site.

On May 4, George Bennack attended the Prospective/New Winery Owner Workshop at TAMU in College Station. The day-long workshop focused on the business, financial, production, and regulatory aspects of operating a winery in the State of Texas. On May 14, Carlos Lago submitted a proposal to USDA Office of Advocacy and Outreach requesting \$200,000 to provide training and assistance to Hispanic and Black/African American farmers and ranchers in Southwest and Northeast Texas. On May 16 – 18, Hector Solis attended Technology Conference 2018, hosted by Region One ESC. On May 18, Israel Galindo submitted a Spanish-language training video to USDA providing national exposure to SARA. On May 20 – 22, Juan Raygoza attended the Organic Confluences Summit in Washington D.C. where he teamed up with SARA co-director Dr. Alex Racelis to present on language barriers in organic agriculture.

UTRGV staff service awards and recognition took place on May 15. SARA staff receiving service awards included: Avan Orlando Guerra, Cruz Salinas, and Juan Raygoza for 5 years of service; Carlos Lago and Catalina Resto for 15 years of service; Alberto Ybarra, Dahlia C. Vela, Hector Solis Jr., and Israel Galindo for 20 years of service. Congratulations!