

# Urban agriculture may see boom in Fort Myers

Jack Payne 2:08 p.m. EDT June 9, 2015



(Photo: UF/IFAS File Photo)

In the near future, we could see a boom in urban agriculture in [Fort Myers](#), the birth of an agritourism industry in Lee County, a food business start-up accelerator spring up just down the road in Naples and a cluster of new scientists arriving in [Immokalee](#) to help strengthen Southwest Florida agriculture.

The common element in this vision for a vibrant food-based economy in Southwest Florida is University of [Florida](#) Institute of Food and Agricultural Science expertise. How fast and how extensively this vision takes shape is largely in state hands at the moment.

The current budget morass that has sent the Legislature into special session has cast uncertainty on our hopes to expand what we do for Southwest Florida.

We're seeking a 3 percent increase in state funding for our work statewide. Yet as the proposed budget stands today, we could potentially lose funding for some of our high-impact research programs.

The Legislature has a decision to make about how much it buys into our vision for Southwest Florida by investing in agricultural research and extension.

The Legislature by and large is good to UF/IFAS. In mid-May we broke ground on a \$2 million expansion of the Southwest Florida Research and Education Center in Immokalee that is funded by the state, for example.

But right now we can't afford to populate it with the soil microbiologist, plant physiologist, agricultural economist, weed scientist and citrus pathologist we'd like to put in the new labs to help Southwest Florida agriculture maintain and even grow in profitability.

A recent study by respected academics estimates that every dollar invested in public agricultural research returns \$20 to the economy.

Although UF/IFAS is a state institution, it's an entrepreneurial organization that goes out and finds more than half of its funding from sources other than state government.

Local governments are valuable partners in our work. For example, our Lee County Extension director, Roy Beckford, is seeking approval from the county commission this month (June) to make public a Lee County Agritourism Farm Trail map with promotional videos for food-related stops along the trail.

Beckford has also helped Selovita start a small farm in an abandoned warehouse in an industrial Fort Myers neighborhood, providing jobs, cleaning up blight, and giving residents access to more locally produced healthy food.

Lee County Extension agent Stephen Brown is arguably worth \$11 million. That's about how much it would cost the county to build facilities to keep the 22,000 pounds of nitrogen a year out of the county's waterways. Brown does it by training landscapers, government employees, growers and homeowners to select and use the right fertilizers at the appropriate time.

We're currently talking with [Collier County](#) officials about UF/IFAS running a food testing lab inside a food business accelerator they're trying to establish. The lab would assure the safety of products developed there.

These are examples of how state support for UF helps communities all over the state. We help create healthy people, healthy communities and healthy economies.

We don't do it alone. Companies, donors and local governments all play key roles. So does the state. We know your elected representatives want the best for the community. One of the best ways to do that is to invest in institutions dedicated to finding solutions to local challenges.

We also know that even in good years, legislators face very tough spending decisions. It is our hope, though, that IFAS funding does not get lost in the much larger budget debate.

Jack Payne is the University of Florida's senior vice president for agriculture and natural resources and leader of the Institute of Food and Agricultural [Sciences](#).

Read or Share this story: <http://newspr.es/1ICvWCU>