

# Tennessee AgVOLs

## Tennessee AgVets Opportunities on FarmLand (TN AgVOLs) Veteran Internship Program Handbook



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

National Institute  
of Food and  
Agriculture

*This material is based upon work supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture,  
U.S. Department of Agriculture, under Award Number 2024-77029-43789*



## **AgVOLs Partners**

University of Tennessee Center of Farm Management

Tennessee AgrAbility

Tennessee Farm Link

Appalachian Resource Conservation and Development Council Field School

Tennessee State University New Farmer Academy

Tennessee Department of Agriculture

Tennessee Farmer Veteran Coalition

## Table of Contents

<b>SECTION</b>	<b>PAGE</b>
Title Page	1
Partners	2
Table of Contents	3
Statement of Purpose	4
Purpose of Handbook	4
<b>1. General Overview and Guidance</b>	5
a. Thank You	5
b. Farming: The Truth	5
c. Host Eligibility Requirements	5
d. Intern Eligibility Requirements	6
e. Your Internship Experience	6
f. SMART Goals	6 - 7
g. SMART Goals Laid Out: Learning Goals	7 - 8
h. Effective Communication and Grievance	8
<b>2. Policies and Procedures</b>	
a. Enforcement	8
b. Interpretation	8
c. Drug-Free Environment	9
d. Program Participants with Disabilities	9
e. Religious Accommodations	9
f. Harassment	9
g. Violence within the Program	9
h. Temporary/Permanent Leave	10
i. Personal Items	10
j. Safety and Farm Equipment	10
k. Working Hours	10
l. Program Evaluation	10
m. General Attendance and Participation	11
n. Inclement Weather	11
o. Standards of Professionalism	11
<b>3. Participant Acknowledgement</b>	12
<b>4. Handbook Acknowledgments</b>	13

### **Program Statement of Purpose**

Through the Tennessee AgVets Opportunities on FarmLand (AgVOLs), we aim to nurture a new generation of veterans who farm in Tennessee. This program is designed to provide one-on-one opportunities for new and beginning veteran farmers to gain skills and education from industry professionals.

### **Purpose of the Intern Handbook**

This handbook outlines the policies and procedures of the AgVOLs Veteran Internship Program for participants and hosts. Participants and hosts are expected to follow the contents of this handbook and the policies and procedures outlined within.

This Handbook is not a contract between the Hosts and any program participant. Nothing in it, whether written or spoken, creates any express or implied agreement regarding service terms, hours, policies, or conditions of participation. The at-will relationship remains in effect, and either the Hosts or the participants may end the internship relationship at any time.

## 1. General Overview and Guidance

### a. Thank you

Thank you for your service and for participating in the AgVOLs Veteran Internship Program! This program aims to benefit both you, whether you're a new or experienced veteran farmer, and your Host. To help you get the most out of this opportunity, we have compiled a handbook of policies, best practices, and tips from successful internship programs across the country.

### b. Farming: The Truth

Farming in Tennessee is both a calling and a commitment—founded on early mornings, long days, and a strong belief in growing something meaningful. The truth is that farming isn't easy. It demands resilience, discipline, and the ability to adapt to obstacles like unpredictable weather, rising input costs, and changing markets. Despite these challenges, Tennessee farmers keep feeding, supporting, and strengthening their communities.

Across the state, veteran farmers play a vital role in this story. Many bring leadership, strong work ethics, and a mission-focused mindset learned during military service, applying these qualities to agriculture. Their transition from service to farming enriches Tennessee's agricultural community, adding purpose and a sense of stewardship. They often see farming not just as a job but as a way to find healing, build connections, and make a positive impact on the community.

From the rolling hills of Middle Tennessee to the mountain valleys of the East and the river bottoms of the West, farmers—both seasoned and new—grow various crops, raise livestock, cultivate specialty plants, cut flowers, and create value-added products. They blend tradition with innovation to preserve the land for future generations.

The truth about farming in Tennessee is that it remains a vital, living legacy, sustained by perseverance, community, and those willing to serve—both in uniform and on the land.

### c. Host Eligibility Requirements

To obtain a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for participating in the AgVOLs Veteran Internship, host sites must meet the following criteria:

- Business Legitimacy: Maintain good legal standing (not in default, etc.).
- Operational History: Generally established for at least three years (exceptions apply to federal, state, or local agencies).
- Training Outlook: Submit a brief training plan outlining objectives, duration, structure, and expected outcomes for the internship.
- Commit to a 4-, 6-, or 8-week internship training program.
- Liability Insurance: Show proof of coverage (required for host farms).
- Data Reporting: Refer to paragraph I. Program Evaluation.

#### d. Intern Eligibility Requirements

Interns must:

- Be a veteran and commit to either a 4-, 6-, or 8-week program.
- Some experience in farming or agriculture-related fields.
- Develop three personal learning goals based on SMART criteria (see paragraph f. SMART Goals) and track progress.
- Track the hours you spend with the internship host.
- Participate in the post-internship program evaluation.

#### di. Your AgVOLs Veteran Internship Program Experience

The AgVOLs program connects dedicated interns with experienced Hosts to develop specific agriculture and business skills through practical, hands-on work. Reflect on the following to clarify your goals:

- **Top Goals:** What do you hope to gain?
- **Areas of Interest:** Crops, livestock, or markets you want experience in?
- **Lifestyle Goals:** What type of agricultural life are you seeking?
- **Future Plans:** How will you use the knowledge and skills gained?
- **Learning Style:** Reading, demonstrations, working alongside, hands-on practice, etc.
- **Work Style or Responsibility:** Independent or guided work? Level of responsibility desired.
- **Physical Considerations:** Age, physical condition, and any impact on your farm career.
- **Availability and Commitment:** Days, hours, and ability to complete the program.
- **Special Needs/Accommodations:** Barriers or challenges, lifting restrictions, transportation, pre-scheduled events, or days off, etc.)

#### f. SMART Goals

Interns should set at least three educational goals for their internship experience. We match you with a Host who can help develop skills aligned with these goals. By writing down SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) and working through concrete action steps with your Host, you'll be better prepared to achieve your goals during this season. To help you in writing a SMART goal, answer the following:

- **Specific:** Clearly state what your goal is, what you want to accomplish, and your reasons and purpose for doing it.
- **Measurable:** How will you know that you have accomplished your goal? What mile-markers will show that you are making progress towards it?
- **Achievable:** Is your goal reasonable for your current capabilities? Conversely, could you be setting the bar too low?
- **Relevant:** Will achieving this goal meet your needs? Does this goal align with your other goals harmoniously, or are they in conflict? Is this goal consistent with your long-term plans?

- **Time-bound:** When do you want to accomplish this goal by? When do you want to achieve milestones along the way toward your goal?

SMART goals can be further refined by breaking down each goal into actionable steps. For each step, figure out who will do what, when, where, how often, and whatever other information might be needed to explain how your goal will be accomplished.

**Example:**

*Jason plans to start a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) with 30 shares and will intern at Three Star Farms, which has successfully operated a CSA for six years. One of Jason's SMART goals is to learn how to develop a crop plan that provides a continuous and diverse range of produce for his CSA.*

- **Specific:** Learn how to develop a crop plan for a 30-person CSA that includes at least 8 different crops in the weekly box for 20 weeks per year.
- **Measurable:** Will create a spreadsheet listing all crops with expected harvest, transplanting, and sowing dates.
- **Achievable:** Jason can use spreadsheets and expects it will be no problem to learn how to create a working crop plan in one.
- **Relevant:** Crop plans are essential for a CSA's success, as they need a variety of crops at specific times.
- **Time-bound:** Crop plans are usually made in winter, possibly before Jason interns on the farm. He should ask to meet with his mentor to review their crop plan and ask questions. As the intern creates his own crop plan, he should share it with his mentor for feedback and guidance.

**g. SMART Goals Laid Out: Learning Goals**

- To distinguish the internship program from regular employment, interns should establish clear educational goals.
- Hosts and interns will set up one-on-one meetings to develop and improve these goals and to support the intern's learning. Interns are encouraged to take the lead in guiding their learning, while hosts offer guidance and hold them accountable.

**i. We recommend:**

- Interns set three learning goals.
- Hosts meet with interns' multiple times throughout the internship to evaluate goals.
- Record all meetings on a log sheet and submit them with the final evaluation.
- This documentation is important because it helps protect your business from labor law issues by clearly showing that this is a learning experience for the intern.

**ii. *Example learning goals might include:***

- Crop planning for a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)
- Rotational grazing practices for livestock
- Season extension and production using high tunnels
- Basics of beekeeping and honey processing
- Marketing and business planning for local products
- Food safety and proper handling of harvested produce

**iii. *The Host may find it helpful to ask the following questions:***

- What are your goals for this internship experience?
- How will you determine if you achieve these goals?
- What challenges do you expect?

These goals are identified and monitored throughout the program to better ensure the interns' skills develop by the time they complete it.

**h. *Effective Communication and Grievance***

Clear and honest communication is essential during the internship. Interns should understand that this experience is more of a lifestyle than a regular job—early mornings, late nights, long days, blisters, sweat, getting dirty, and hands-on learning.

AgVOLs encourages an open-door communication policy. Participants should first talk about their concerns with their Host and, if unresolved, contact the AgVOLs program coordinators. Any issues that could affect performance or understanding of program policies should be addressed quickly. Clear communication helps prevent problems.

**2. Policies and Procedures**

**a. Enforcement**

Responsibility for enforcing these rules and regulations rests with the AgVOLs program coordinators. Standards for handling any partnership challenges are outlined in the program's grievance policy.

**b. Interpretation**

The interpretation of this handbook is the responsibility of the AgVOLs program coordinators. Interpretation may involve different and sometimes conflicting procedures from grantor agencies. In such cases, the rules and regulations of the grantor organization will take precedence.

**c. Drug-Free Environment**

The AgVOLs program is funded by a USDA NIFA grant. Program participants must arrive at the host site prepared for the day's activities. Alcohol and drug abuse impair performance and the work environment. The program requires adherence to the Drug-Free Workplace Act of 1988. All participants must acknowledge their understanding and agreement to follow this policy, and the program certifies compliance with the Drug-Free Workplace Act of 1988 in all federal grant applications. Participants may face immediate disciplinary action, including termination, for:

- Using, possessing, or distributing controlled substances at the Host site.
- Violating policies on alcohol use during work or before shifts.

**d. Program Participants with Disabilities**

The AgVOLs Veteran Internship Program complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other applicable laws. Discrimination based on disability is prohibited in all program practices, including eligibility criteria, terms, and conditions of participation. This program will provide reasonable accommodations for known physical or mental limitations unless doing so would cause undue hardship.

**e. Religious Accommodation**

The program will make reasonable efforts to accommodate religious practices. Interns must notify the AgVOLs program coordinators in advance of any dates and times they will be absent, so arrangements can be made to make up for the missed internship time.

**f. Harassment**

All program participants must treat others fairly and with respect. Harassment or discrimination based on race, religion, color, gender, sexual orientation, age, national origin, disability, or other protected categories is strictly prohibited.

Anyone experiencing harassment should report it immediately to an AgVOLs program coordinator. All reports will be promptly investigated and kept confidential. Confirmed violations may result in removal from the program.

**g. Violence within the Program**

The AgVOLs program prohibits any acts or threats of violence by participants against others, on or off program sites, at any time. Violence toward participants, family, customers, or visitors will not be tolerated. All reports will be investigated promptly, and appropriate action—including contacting authorities or discharge from the program—may be taken.

**h. Temporary or Permanent Leave from the Program**

**Note:** AgVOLs will allow leaves of absence for certain circumstances:

- **Military Leave:** Reserve or National Guard members can take leave for active duty or training. Participants must notify the AgVOLs program coordinators as soon as they receive orders. They can reapply after being released from duty.
- **Jury Duty:** Participants must provide advance notice if they are summoned for jury service or as a witness.
- **Other circumstances** may also result in dismissal, as determined by the AgVOLs program coordinators.

**i. Personal Items**

- Hosts will provide any specialized equipment or materials; interns are not responsible for purchasing them.
- Interns should dress appropriately for daily tasks and confirm with Hosts if unsure.

**j. Safety & Farm Equipment**

- Interns must follow proper safety procedures, and hosts will provide training as part of the internship.
- All Host equipment must be used respectfully and only as instructed. Access to certain equipment is subject to the Host's discretion.
- Violating this policy may lead to removal from the program.

**k. Working Hours**

- **Minimum** internship duration: **4 weeks**.
- **Maximum** weekly hours: **40 hours**.
- Hosts set daily schedules according to program and participant needs.
- Interns must log hours at the Host site and submit the log to the Host or AgVOLs coordinators at the end of the internship, either by email or as a physical copy.
- AgVOLs coordinators might perform spot checks to confirm participation.

**Note:** Poor attendance or lack of participation may result in **dismissal from the program**.

**l. Program Evaluation**

A third-party evaluation team from the University of Tennessee, in partnership with AgVOLs Coordinators will provide and collect evaluations from the Host and Intern:

- **Pre-survey** before the internship begins
- **Mid-survey** on Host farms (interviews with Host and intern)
- **Post-survey** at the end of the program

**Note:** Participation in all evaluations **is required** for successful completion of the internship.

m. **General Attendance and Expectations**

- **Notification:** If unable to attend, arriving late, or leaving early, interns must notify their Host or AgVOLs coordinator as soon as possible to adjust schedules.
- **Punctuality:** Consistent attendance and being on time are expected. Repeated lateness or absences may lead to dismissal.

n. **Inclement Weather**

- Interns must adhere to their scheduled hours unless they receive notice otherwise.
- For “Snow Days” or unsafe weather conditions, interns should compensate for missed time during the program.

o. **Other Expectations**

- Interns should notify program coordinators of schedule changes and record them in the monthly time logs.

p. **Program Participant Information**

- The program keeps an intake form for each participant and host. This information will be stored in the AgVOLs program for record-keeping and operational purposes.

q. **Standards of Professionalism**

- Interns should behave in a way that reflects well on the program. Success relies on the integrity, expertise, and professionalism of Hosts, interns, and coordinators.
- All participants should be respectful, considerate, and professional when interacting.

**3. Participant Acknowledgment**

This handbook is for informational purposes only and does not create any contract between program coordinators and participants. Participation is voluntary and can be stopped at any time by either the program or the participant.

I certify that I have received a copy of the AgVOLs Veteran Internship Program Handbook and agree to follow its policies, including any future updates. I understand that participating in the program requires conduct that aligns with its mission. I also acknowledge that this Handbook explains the program procedures and is not a binding contract for participation.

Host: \_\_\_\_\_

Intern: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Name and County/State

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participants Signature

**4. Handbook Development Acknowledgements:**

Information adapted from the Appalachian Resource Conservation & Development Council *F.A.R.M. Farmer and Rancher Mentorship Program: Intern Handbook* and readapted for the AgVOLs Veteran Internship Program.