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Local students learning how to raise chickens on Mars

By Larry Penkava
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TRINITY — Uwharrie Ridge Six-Twelve students are figuring out how to raise chickens on Mars. Sixth graders have been developing model chicken coops that could provide meat and eggs for future explorers to the Red Planet.

Sarah Moore is the lead teacher of the project called "Chicken Nuggets on Mars."

Moore and fellow teacher Keleigh Maracin have been working with their students during the fall semester and their models will be showcased in April at NC State University to display what the youth learned.

Moore said the project is the brainchild of Matt Koci, NC State poultry professor, as a way to get children interested in raising chickens. He wrote a two-year grant to fund the project and Moore was one of four North Carolina teachers chosen to take it into the classroom.

"The hook is to grow chickens on Mars," Moore said. She said Elon Musk of SpaceEx wants to put people on Mars but "the only research (for raising food) now is plants. This is a start to getting kids to think about poultry on Mars."

Moore, along with a teacher from Surry County and two more from Duplin County, went to Washington, D.C., during the summer for a crash course in everything from poultry to space. They met with NASA researchers to work on lesson plans for the project.

Moore brought the plans to Uwharrie Ridge sixth graders at the beginning of school this year, starting with growing grains to feed the chickens. She said Southern States donated seeds, which the students planted in a garden. Cooperative Extension agents assisted by advising which

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Uwharrie Ridge sixth graders who worked on a project called "Chicken Nuggets on Mars" pose for a picture. Their teachers are Keleigh Maracin, standing left, and Sarah Moore, standing right. [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]

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plants grew the best.

From there the students began learning about the challenges of living on Mars. Cooperative Extension provided them with an incubator to hatch fertile chicken eggs.

"They raised 15 chicks and learned what it takes to be a mother hen," Moore said. "Then they created 3-D chicken coops for Mars."

On Dec. 17, the students showed their model coops to NC State professors, Cooperative Extension agents, the Randolph County Farm Bureau and local poultry farmers.

"Now we'll use 3-D printers to make the coops," prior to taking them to Raleigh in April, Moore said. "We'll show what the kids have learned — how to apply earth techniques to Mars."

Brian Carpenter, a sixth grader, showed his chicken coop design, which has boxes for chickens, areas for water and food, and even a scratching pad for the birds to sharpen their claws. He said the plan is to grow crops such as wheat, corn and beets underneath the coop, with a mesh floor that will allow chicken manure to drop down and fertilize the crops.

Moore said that plants are being grown on the International Space Station. Seeds are being provided by the Fairchild Botanical Garden in Florida, which is working with NASA to develop plants for space. A plant scientist at Fairchild skyped with the Uwharrie Ridge students.

While some of her students have chickens at home, others have been introduced to the world of poultry, Moore said. "They know a chick starts as an egg, but when they see it, it's a different thing. They can see the egg move and say, 'They're alive!'

"They actually raise grain and chickens," she said. "Then they figure out how to raise and process them on Mars. They have a greater appreciation of raising chicks."

A new group of students will be brought in for the spring semester, hatching chicks and studying breeds, some for meat and some for eggs.

The entire project covers a wide curriculum, with agriculture at the core but using various topics such as heat transfer, space, math, growing plants, measuring, collecting data, creating a presentation, and forming and sharing thoughts.

"They incorporate everything into their own projects," Moore said.

"It started small," she said of "Chicken Nuggets on Mars," "then it began snowballing and kept growing. People from the community came to talk and to see if the kids' ideas had merit."

And who knows if one of them will actually go to Mars one day and raise chickens?