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By Christopher James

The Athens Farmers Market is offering fresh Georgia Shrimp for the first time this season thanks to an assist from the University of Georgia.

UGA Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant, a unit of Public Service and Outreach, helped Valona Shrimp Company earn a spot at the market at Bishop Park by allaying fears of the product's sustainability.

"Last year we had a lengthy discussion (about shrimp) but decided to pass at the time because we were still unclear about the overall sustainability of shrimp in Georgia," said Athens Farmers Market Manager Jan Kozak. "This time we got feedback. These folks from Marine Extension allowed us to move forward feeling good about it."

UGA Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant Seafood Specialist Tori Stivers and Associate Director Bryan Fluech assured the market's board that Georgia shrimp were not threatened by over harvesting and provided links to government data on the species.

Kozak said the market in Athens has had a handful of applications to sell shrimp since 2011. This time the research contributed by UGA earned UGA grad and Valona Shrimp Company owner Mitchell Smith a spot at the market.

"Instead of shrimp going to a big, big buyer where they process or freeze them, there can be a little window where you capture that freshness and deliver it to the end user," Smith said as his truck was being loaded. "Wild caught Georgia shrimp, in my opinion, is the best in the world. It's sweet and tender."

Commercial fishermen, who produce a perishable product with a limited season, face a number of obstacles in getting their products to farmers markets in Georgia. Shrimpers often don't have the time or resources to transport their catch hundreds of miles in-land to consumers, Stivers said.

Smith has found a way to get around many of these issues by serving as a transporter. He takes fresh catch from the dock to markets in Atlanta, Augusta, Macon and now Athens. He's able to sell at these markets with a retail food sales establishment license that costs \$100 a year.

Jennifer Sweeney Tookes, an assistant professor of anthropology at Georgia Southern University, researched these barriers along with Emory University Associate Professor of Environmental Sciences Tracy Yandle as part of a Georgia Sea Grant-funded study. Sweeney Tookes said the study found only one other company, Dubberly's Seafood of Savannah, that sold fresh shrimp at farmers markets in Georgia.

"There are a handful of people who are trying to bridge that gap (between fishermen and consumers)," Sweeney Tookes said. "Somebody needs to. Small businesses, really forward-thinking entrepreneurs have found ways to make this work."

Many markets, including in Athens, are also designated "producer-only," which means that the person who catches the shrimp must bring the shrimp to markets and sell them. This precludes middle men like Smith. Kozak said the board chooses to view Valona Shrimp Company as adding value by packaging and transporting fresh shrimp, thus making the company a "producer."

Sweeney Tookes said that kind of innovative thinking can help make Georgia seafood part of a larger conversation about local food in the state. It's a big opportunity for an industry trying to compete with cheap, imported shrimp.

"It's a way of providing access to Georgia products to people outside the coast," Fluech said. "It is good for consumers and producers to establish those networks. Most Georgia shrimp stays in the (coastal) area."