NCSPC values the strength which comes from partnerships. To that point, we manage many and are always looking for more! While each partnership may be a bit different from the other, the one common theme they all share is the focus on how a partnership can provide benefit to our members and ultimately better our industry. Our partnership with NC State naturally has a predominant research focus. Research runs the spectrum of new varieties, best inputs to produce a superior crop, and even new ways to plant, harvest, sort, and size sweetpotatoes in the packing houses. We are committed to supporting the efforts of the NCSU Micropropagation Unit to ensure we have the highest quality of true-to-type seed for our producers. We partner with Cooperative Extension to ensure our producers have the most up-to-date knowledge of best practices.

Our partnership with NC Farm Bureau is valuable to not only the Commission but to its members. The services, knowledge, and collaborative leadership which NCFB provides to all of NC Agriculture is invaluable. In my role, it is incredibly comforting to know all I need to do is to pick up the phone to call NCFB and I will have immediate support to assist me in my (or a grower’s) question. That is a solid and valuable partnership.

An interview with NCSPC’s Michelle Grainger (cont.)
We do still advertise in traditional media, we look towards meeting consumers where they are, utilizing digital anywhere and everywhere we can! We maintain numerous social media accounts where we work to reach many different consumers by posting a variety of content; additionally, this past year we experimented with GSTV at the gas pumps, and even dipped our toe into streaming services such as Heart Radio. Most recently, we launched our year-long 60th Anniversary by posting 60 video shoutouts from NCFB President Harding, NC Lt. Governor Mark Robinson, NC Commissioner of Ag Steve Troxler, and so many more. Check out our YouTube Channel (NC SweetPotato Commission) – you may be surprised as to who else has an affection for our superfood!

One of the biggest challenges this past year has been coming into this position during a global pandemic when travel restrictions have limited my ability to meet and engage with all of our stakeholders and partners. While I have technology to thank for having at least had the chance to ‘connect’ with many, I am looking forward to traveling this coming year to begin meeting our valuable partners in person.

As for future goals, I would like to see the foodservice industry utilize sweet potatoes even more than they are, including in our schools. I am hopeful that we can demonstrate the versatility and flavor of the sweet potato and provide consumers the confidence to experiment with it – whether savory or sweet, as a holiday side or everyday staple. I’m also excited about further export exploration opportunities we are working on alongside the Department of Agriculture.

2 WHAT FACTORS HAVE MADE IT SUCH A SUCCESSFUL COMMODITY FOR NC FARMERS?

I believe that there are several reasons for how and why the sweet potato industry has excelled in North Carolina, all of which go hand-in-hand. It begins with our natural resources – our soil and climate are perfect for producing the sweet potato. Given similarities to tobacco in climate and soil requirements, overall infrastructure, and labor intensity, the sweet potato became a great rotational crop at first, and then as demand for the State’s vegetable increased, it was a perfect transition for operations that were being impacted by the decrease in demand for tobacco.

Additionally, our state benefits from an overall collaborative ecosystem with a focus on all things agriculture. We have an incredible Department of Agriculture, three fantastic ag-research institutions, one of the nation’s largest cooperative extension programs, and many global ag-research agribusinesses headquartered in our state, plus great leadership from Farm Bureau and other commodity groups. Each of the entities achieves an incredible amount individually, but when they work together their efforts are that much more impactful.

Just a few examples of this collaboration include development of the Covington Sweetpotato, growth of the sweet potato export market, introduction of Negative Horizontal Ventilation technology, and establishment of the NCSCU Micropropagation and Repository Unit.

But the real stars of our industry are the producers themselves! They have drawn upon not only the resources of the many entities listed above and openly collaborated along the way, but they have continued to use their ingenuity, innovation, tenacity, and passion to push their own operation’s possibilities. Our growers understand their customer better than anyone, and often the ideas in which the Commission pursues to promote NC sweet potatoes come straight from our growers! Our industry would not be the success story it is today without the perseverance of our members, growers, packers, and shippers.

Having just begun our 60th year, we remain true to our roots and our mission of raising consumer awareness and consumption both domestically and abroad. What has changed is the how we capture consumer awareness. In days of old, it was through printed advertising and billboards, and today while

3 THE NCSPC IS CELEBRATING ITS 60TH ANNIVERSARY. IN WHAT WAYS HAS YOUR MISSION AND WORK EVOLVED OVER THAT TIME, AND WHAT HAS REMAINED THE SAME?

4 YOU’VE BEEN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR ABOUT A YEAR. WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME OF YOUR HIGHLIGHTS, AND WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME OF YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES? LOOKING FORWARD, AND HOPEFULLY TO A MORE NORMAL YEAR TWO, WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS?

It’s crazy to think that August will mark one year since I embarked on what has been an incredibly rewarding first year! Given the fairly significant change of careers, everything that I have been exposed to has been memorable – as it’s all essentially been firsts. That said, some of my more personal highlights from this past year are centered around getting out and meeting as many of our growers as I possibly could meet. While I am committed to meeting all of our members over time, this past year’s meetings have been not only educational for me in learning the industry but have enabled me to begin building relationships. As a leader of an organization the size of the NC Sweetpotato Commission, relationships and trust are key. I may not have the opportunity to engage with all members at the same time, but ensuring our members feel that I am both reachable and responsive to their concerns and suggestions will help me advocate more effectively for our industry in the long run.

5 WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SWEETPOTATO GROWERS AT THIS TIME?

Currently, I would say the biggest challenge would be the weather. We have entered hurricane season, and our growers are dependent on enough rain to nurture our crop without drowning it. Along with that, COVID-19 not only exposed many inefficiencies and bottlenecks in the supply chain, but also created a lack of foodservice sales. While many states have opened back up, overall, the foodservice industry has not returned to its pre-COVID pace. Additionally, there is always the issue of labor.

In looking at opportunities, I believe it rests largely in the simple fact that everyone needs to eat. Consumers are more interested than ever in where their food comes from, and that interest can only help our producers by providing them market opportunities. We feel that there will be tremendous growth opportunities in the value-add products for both convenience and shelf-stable grocer items. We will continue to work to tell the story of our producers and how they work to ensure their products are not only the best, but that they are safe and affordable. Additionally, we will continue to work to communicate to consumers that sweet potatoes should be fun – so experiment in how you may serve and enjoy them all year long!