

*A Survey of
North Carolina Cooperative Extension Agents
in
Western North Carolina*

Prepared for:



by

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North Carolina Cooperative Extension (NCCE) is a farm support agency whose purpose is to take knowledge and information from the state's two land-grant universities into communities across the state. NCCE agents working in all 100 counties of the state provide education to both the general public and the agricultural community through print materials, web-based resources, one-on-one technical support, business planning services, conferences, workshops and seminars. Structural oversight of County Centers is provided by District Directors representing seven regions of the state.

The Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to sustaining farms and farming in Western North Carolina (WNC) through programs and services designed to promote local consumption of locally-grown food and farm products. Since 2003 ASAP has conducted a series of surveys and other research designed to assess the food and farm economy in the region, with an emphasis on expanding local markets for local farm products. In 2006 ASAP added a survey of NCCE agents to its list of research activities, recognizing that the agents are in a unique position to understand issues affecting farmers and farming in the region.

Working in cooperation with District Directors, a written questionnaire was developed and distributed to NCCE agents ("Extension agents") in each of 23 counties of WNC.¹ Questions addressed county production, farmer attitudes and plans, and the ability of ASAP and NCCE to work together effectively toward common goals. Survey respondents were also asked to describe issues affecting farmers and the future of farming in counties where they work. Responses from 19 agents representing 22 counties were received.

Farmer Attitudes and Plans

There have been dramatic decreases in tobacco production across the state beginning in the mid-1990s when growers began anticipating the end of federal tobacco support. In the decade between 1992 and 2002, WNC experienced a 36% decrease in the number of acres devoted to tobacco and a reduction in the number of farms growing tobacco from 4,133 to 1,959.² As many North Carolina farmers exit tobacco production, there is a tremendous need and opportunity to shift farm production into different crops and markets.

In the context of a farm economy in transition, Extension agents were asked a series of questions designed to assess farmer attitudes and plans. Agents estimated that as many as 45% of farmers would exit farming over the next five years in some counties, though the average rate of exit predicted was around 16%. On a positive note, Extension agents also estimated that anywhere from 10% to 80% of farmers in their counties would respond to changing conditions by shifting to new crops, new markets or new methods of production over the next five years. On average, agents estimated that 30% of farmers in the region would make these kinds of shifts. When asked to rate the general mood among farmers in the region, agents gave an average rating of 6 on a scale where 1 equals pessimistic and 10 equals optimistic.

¹ For the purpose of this research, WNC is defined as the 23 counties in the Advantage West economic development region. Advantage West is one of seven economic development regions in the state.

² *Census of Agriculture*. National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA.

Extension agents were also asked to rate producers' interest in selling to different types of local markets. There was considerable variation from county to county. In general, agents rated interest in selling to distributors, grocers and institutions as highest, followed by tailgate markets, the Western North Carolina Farmers' Market and then restaurants. Community Supported Agriculture programs received the lowest ratings, though even that category received a high rating from some respondents.

Recognizing that new farmers are replacing some that retire each year, the majority of Extension agents reported that the farm population would probably stay the same in their counties over the next five years. Lifestyle farmers – a category which refers to people that choose to go into farming because they like the lifestyle it affords – were rated as the top category of replacement farmers, followed by organic farmers, then retirees, next-generation farmers and finally Latino farmers. Extension agents named several barriers to next-generation farmers becoming primary farm operators, including a lack of interest in farming and the challenge of farming profitably in a global farm economy.

The Local Food System in Western North Carolina

“Local food system” is a term used to describe the entire spectrum from food production, processing and distribution in Western North Carolina to food consumption by the region's residents. Part of ASAP's mission is to enhance the local food system as a way to strengthen and help sustain the region's farms. Extension agents were asked to name strengths and barriers related to expanding the local food system in the region, and to identify infrastructure needs in each county for moving locally-grown food to local markets. The information is presented here in three separate categories -- strengths, barriers and infrastructure – all of which are important determinants of the potential for a strong local food system in the region.

Strengths

Characteristics of the region's farms made up the largest category of asset named by Extension agents. In particular, agents explained that soil and climate conditions in WNC make the region's farms suitable for growing a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. In fact, 18 of 19 agents completing a survey named at least one type of crop with good potential for new or expanded production in their county. Several acknowledged that the region's climate and soil make it suitable for growing nearly all types of non-citrus fruits and vegetables.

Extension agents also named characteristics of the region's farmers as a source of strength for the region's farm sector. Characteristics such as a strong work ethic and a willingness to try new crops or methods of production were emphasized.

Finally, many agents acknowledged that strong demand for local food and farm products is an asset for the region's local food system. Comments pointed to strong demand from both residents and tourists as well as an increase in the number of local market channels or outlets for local farm products.

Barriers

Extension agents articulated a wide range of challenges to advancing the local food system in the region. At the top of the list were the need for support systems for farmers interested in accessing local markets, and the need for specific information for producers about growing for and selling to local markets. According to survey respondents, grower education and training in this context has several components:

- One involves the need for skills or assistance regarding marketing farm products locally.
- A second involves the need for technical support and information regarding growing new crops or using sustainable growing practices – which are generally more important in local markets.
- A third area deals with information. According to survey respondents, farmers need information about packaging requirements, quality standards, delivery parameters and similar characteristics for each type of local market (i.e., restaurant, retail, institutional).

Despite being recognized as an asset for the region's local food system, demand was also recognized as a barrier. Nearly twenty percent of all responses to a question about barriers revolved around the need to promote local farm products more effectively. Specifically, agents cited poor awareness about the availability of local food, unwillingness on the part of consumers to alter their food buying habits, and lack of interest in local food in smaller counties within the region.

Other obstacles named by survey respondents focused on financial issues. These can be grouped into two categories. The first involves rising land prices related to a surge in development in the region. The second is the combination of rising input costs and falling prices associated with heightened national and global competition in food production. Of a total of 58 comments describing important issues affecting the region's farm sector, half of all responses could be included in one of these two categories.

Some less prominent but still important barriers named by agents include farmer attitudes about shifting to local markets, the seasonality of production, and labor issues. According to Extension agents, the main way that labor represents a challenge for the local food system is that it is difficult for farmers to find local farm help.

Infrastructure

Extension agents were asked to comment on infrastructure elements associated with local food production and distribution in each county. For more than two thirds of the counties, processing facilities and refrigerated storage were identified as critical infrastructure needs if the local food system is to flourish. For more than half the counties, local distributors and more local markets were identified as important.

When asked to name specific types of infrastructure that already exists in each county, most agents named farmers' markets. A few named processing and packing facilities – mainly for apples in counties where apple production is prevalent – and a few named marketing

cooperatives like New River Organic Growers (NROG), Eastern Carolina Organics (ECO) and Madison Farms.

ASAP and NCCE Collaboration

Extension agents were asked a question about how ASAP and NCCE could work together towards common goals. Both organizations are concerned with providing training, education and support to farmers interested in transitioning to new crops and local markets. Of 13 responses to this question, nearly all focused on a need for better collaboration and communication between the two agencies. In other words, rather than suggesting that there were certain tasks that ASAP should do and other tasks that NCCE should take on, most Extension agents expressed a desire for better sharing of information in the planning phase of work. Specific comments included things like: “Each make an effort to include the other in the process,” “Jointly organize and promote workshops,” and “Plan and work together.”

The main way ASAP communicates information about its programs and activities is through a web-based listserv. Although only six NCCE agents reported that they currently belong to the listserv, eleven others indicated that they would like to have their names added to the list. While this provides evidence of a relatively low level of communication between the two agencies at present, it also indicates a genuine desire on the part of NCCE to elevate the level of communication.

Extension agents were also asked to comment on the usefulness and effectiveness of ASAP’s *Local Food Guide*, a resource in both print and online formats used by ASAP to promote locally-grown food and farm products in the region. Of 19 Extension agents completing the survey:

- two reported not being familiar with the guide;
- seven reported being familiar with the guide but not using it regularly; and
- eight reported that they use the guide by handing it out at conferences and seminars and/or encouraging farmers to be listed in the guide.

When asked for suggestions about how the guide could be improved, two agents suggested greater distribution, including to larger scale buyers like restaurants, grocers and brokers. One suggested expanded listings to include value-added producers. Another suggested that the guide be updated more frequently.

County Production Data

The main source of information about farm production in WNC is the Census of Agriculture, which is conducted every five years by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. There are significant gaps in data at the county level. The USDA’s intention is to protect the confidentiality of individual producers in counties where production is limited. And because of difficulties with data collection on direct marketing of farm products, USDA data for Direct Sales are widely believed to be both inaccurate and incomplete.³

³ *Direct Marketing Today: Challenges and Opportunities*. 2000. Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA.

In the survey, Extension agents were asked to evaluate the accuracy of the data reported on the most recent Census of Agriculture and offer suggestions for improving food and farm data collected by the USDA. Eleven of twenty-two surveys listed crops that were produced in a particular county but not listed on the 2002 Census of Agriculture’s county-level tables. Six suggestions were offered by Extension agents for improving USDA data collection. Verbatim responses are included in Table 1.

Table 1: What do you think could be done to improve the usefulness and accuracy of the Census of Agriculture and other USDA data?
<i>If everyone would report crops to their FSA office, this problem would be solved.</i>
<i>Include more options for reporting niche crops.</i>
<i>Network with points of sale (ie., farmers markets, tailgate markets, roadside stands). In order for them to sell "tax free" produce they must list their growers to include the acreage grown.</i>
<i>Survey of farmers' market participants</i>
<i>This will be difficult without some system that labels the origin of fruits and vegetables. More comprehensive phone surveys of farmers.</i>
<i>Work to improve the database of farmers. IRS - Schedule F filing may be one way to improve the list.</i>

Conclusion

Assessing the future of the local food system in WNC – one of the central goal’s of ASAP’s local food system research -- means examining farmer attitudes and plans, exploring strengths and challenges facing the region’s farmers, and identifying infrastructure elements needed to move locally-grown farm products to local markets in the region. This survey of NCCE agents was a way for ASAP to collect some of that important but difficult to gather information. It was also an effort by ASAP to involve NCCE in the research process aimed at identifying ways to strengthen and sustain the region’s farms, a top priority of both organizations.

The high response rate and interest by Extension agents in improving collaboration and cooperation between ASAP and NCCE was a positive finding of this research. Even more encouragingly, survey results suggest that there is good potential for expanding local markets for local farm products in Western North Carolina. According to the Extension agents, the region’s highly fertile land and long growing season coupled with a strong commitment to farming by the region’s farmers suggest that – despite the need to address some significant barriers and challenges to local food production and distribution – the future of the local food system in WNC is promising.