

# Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan





This plan was commissioned by Ashe County government in 2018 and produced by High Country Council of Governments. A steering committee made up of the following farmers and stakeholders advised and provided valuable input and direction:

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Thanks to all the farmers who agreed to be interviewed. Their observations and insights have been critical in formulating the recommendations.

Thanks also to Cooperative Extension Agents Travis Birdsell and Micah Orfield for their assessment of agriculture in Ashe County. Their comments and explanations have been incorporated throughout the plan.





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# Introduction

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

Agriculture makes a major contribution to the well being of Ashe County residents, both those living within, and outside the county's towns. Farms make direct contributions to the local economy in the form of product expenditures on farm services and inputs, along with employment on farms and farm support businesses. Farmers also make significant contributions as stewards of undeveloped land in the county. Their stewardship protects the county's soil and water resources, recharges groundwater and abates storm water runoff, connects wildlife habitat, and safeguards the scenic and historic vistas that have defined the county's character. For these reasons, it is in the County's interest to promote the local agricultural industry and protect farmland. Enabling farmers who want to continue to farm to do so is a cost effective way of maintaining the quality of life of everyone in Ashe County.

### **General county characteristics**

Ashe County is a mountain county located in the extreme northwestern corner of North Carolina, bordering Tennessee and Virginia. The county has three towns- Jefferson, West Jefferson, and Lansing- but it is overwhelmingly rural, with the largest town (West Jefferson) having a population of only 1,299. Agriculture is the largest economic sector, but manufacturing is also significant; three of the largest employers are GE Aviation, American Emergency Vehicles, and Northwest Emergency Vehicles. Tourism also has an important economic impact. Visitors are drawn by the Blue Ridge Parkway, New River State Park, and Mount Jefferson State Natural Area. The county also contains two large game land areas. In the fall and early winter, tourists are come to the county for the fall leaf color and choose-&-cut Christmas tree farms. The generally scenic rural landscape of the county, of which agriculture is a major part, enhances visitors' experience.

### **Background to the plan**

In 1986, the North Carolina General Assembly passed the Agricultural Development and Preservation of Farmland Act (G.S. Article 61 106-735). The Act established, among other programs, the North Carolina Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund. It was authorized to provide grants to counties for the purchase of agricultural conservation easements, and "for the costs of public and private enterprise programs that will promote profitable and sustainable family farms through assistance to farmers in developing and implementing plans for the production of food, fiber, and value-added products, agritourism activities, marketing and sales of agricultural products produced on the farm, and other agriculturally related business activities." Such projects funded by the Trust Fund require matching funds of 30% of the total project cost. However, the required match is lowered to 15% if a county has prepared a countywide farmland protection plan. Further, no match is required from a county with a farmland protection plan that is a Tier 1 county (as defined by the NC Dept of Commerce according to a county's economic status).

The Act declares that a countywide farmland protection plan shall:

- Contain a list and description of existing agricultural activity in the county.
- Contain a list of existing challenges to continued family farming in the county.
- Contain a list of opportunities for maintaining or enhancing small, family-owned farms and the local agricultural economy.
- Describe how the county plans to maintain a viable agricultural community and shall address farmland preservation tools, such as agricultural economic development, including farm diversification and marketing assistance; other kinds of agricultural technical assistance, such as farm infrastructure financing, farmland purchasing, linking with younger farmers, and estate planning; the desirability and feasibility of donating agricultural conservation easements, and entering into voluntary agricultural districts.
- Contain a schedule for implementing the plan and an identification of possible funding sources for the long-term support of the plan.



# Introduction

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

### **Benefits of a plan**

In addition to facilitating grant funding, a farmland protection plan customized to the unique situations in a county provides direction and a reference for the county's Farmland Preservation Program Advisory Board and others, and clarifies options for agricultural development and farmland protection. In order for farmers, the farmland preservation advisory board, county commissioners, private land trusts, and others to support agriculture and preserve farmland, they need a clear view of what options are available, viable, and acceptable. A plan will enable development and preservation efforts to be efficient and effective, avoiding duplication and piecemeal approaches that might ultimately prove ineffective and wasteful. Counties with a growth management and/or a general economic development plan find that a farmland protection plan complements those documents and balances county priorities.

Seeing the benefits of having a county farmland protection plan, Ashe County submitted an application to the Trust Fund for a grant to pay the cost of developing such a plan. A grant was awarded, and the County commissioned High Country Council of Governments to create the document in 2018.

### **Identifying Farms**

All property that receives present-use value taxation is farmland. The assumption is made that only a few (if any) property owners would not take advantage of the lower taxes offered by the program, therefore almost all farmland in Ashe County can be represented by the parcels receiving present-use value taxation, which are mapped on the following page. The pattern most evident on the map is that farmland in Ashe County is widely and fairly evenly distributed. With the possible exception of the area between Hwy 88 and 221, the map exhibits no major concentrations of farm parcels. The implication of this pattern is that there are no districts of farms in the county different from other parts of the county where other land uses might dominate, even adjacent to the towns. Agricultural development activities would not need to favor certain sections of the county over others.

### **Important Soil Classifications**

The map that follows shows the locations of prime farmland, farmland of statewide importance, and farmland of local importance as defined by the Natural Resources Conservation Service according to soil types. When compared to the topography map on the next page, a pattern that emerges is that these important farmlands are associated with the most level land; i.e. little important farmland is located in the more mountainous areas in the central and north-western parts of the county. Using these classifications to define the significance of a farmland tract is problematic, however, because farmland with a steeper slope can be profitably utilized to the same degree as more level land. This is especially true in Ashe County where cattle, a major agricultural product, can be grazed on even the most extreme steep slopes. Further, Christmas trees grown on more level ground, which is subject to wetter soils, are susceptible to disease. Therefore, most Christmas trees are grown on elevated land. In other words, the value of important farmland, as defined by NRCS, is tempered by the fact that it is challenging to grow one of the most significant farm products in Ashe County on much of it. These circumstances should be considered if prioritizing farmland for preservation.





# History of Agriculture in Ashe County

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

- ▶ Following is an excerpt from the 1912 Soil Survey of Ashe County. It is a historical summary of agriculture in the county, including market networks, from the first settlements through 1912.

*From the time of the first settlement of this section of North Carolina stock raising and the growing of hay and grain crops have been the chief agricultural pursuits. The earliest settlers cleared small areas of upland soils, on which they grew rye and buckwheat, together with some corn and wheat. Cultivation consisted merely of scratching the surface with such implements as could be made at home. When the lands decreased in productiveness they were said to be "worn out," and new farming land was brought under cultivation. Within one or two seasons abandoned fields became covered with grass, mainly bluegrass, and this tended to encourage stock raising. In the early days there was no great demand for stock. Each settler raised enough work stock for his individual use, and cattle, sheep, and hogs were raised only to supply the home demands for beef, mutton, and bacon.*

*Hides were tanned for making shoes, and wool was spun and woven at home. Flax was grown to some extent for home use. At a later period trading was established with Fayetteville and Wilmington, and with Cheraw, S. C., and with this the production of all crops increased and more stock was raised. The first settlers grew only a small amount of corn and wheat. The seasons were said to be too short and too cool for corn, and the soil was not considered well adapted to wheat.*

*At the beginning of the nineteenth century trade had been opened up between Ashe County and the towns on the watercourses of eastern North Carolina and South Carolina. Subsequently, when the railroads reached Salisbury, Statesville, and Winston-Salem, N. C., and Marion, Va., these points became important markets. Trade with these towns increased until 1890, when the Southern Railway reached North Wilkesboro.*

*It was not until about 1880 that Ashe County began to make any considerable progress along agricultural lines. A few good plows had been introduced as early as 1872, but these were exceptions. Before this time nearly all the farm implements used in the county were home made, the iron being taken from mines within the county. The cutting and shocking of corn was practiced for the first time in 1882, and it was about the same time that wheat growing over the entire county began. The first grain drills were introduced in 1884. Scarcely any commercial fertilizers were used prior to 1891.*

*Although corn was grown only to a small extent in the early history of Ashe County, its production increased rapidly. In 1880, and probably earlier, corn became the leading crop, and it has since held that place [in 1912]. According to the census for 1880, 277,027 bushels of corn were produced in 1879 from 15,616 acres. According to the census of 1900 the acreage in 1899 was 20,907 and the yield was 381,510 bushels. In 1909, the year covered by the census of 1910, only 18,918 acres were planted to corn, and the total yield was 397,716 bushels.*



*The crop of second importance is hay. In 1879 grass was mowed from 9,439 acres, producing a yield of 7,349 tons of hay. The total hay crop in 1909 was 14,590 tons, from 17,994 acres. Although very little wheat was grown originally, this has become the crop of third importance. According to the 1910 census 4,357 acres were planted to wheat in 1909, and the total yield was 28,994 bushels.*

Buckwheat & clover cover crops. Buckwheat was a major farm product in Ashe in the late 19th/early 20th centuries.



# History of Agriculture in Ashe County

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

### ▶ 1912 Soil Survey of Ashe County continued:

Rye is still one of the important crops of Ashe County [in 1912]; 2,045 acres were devoted to this crop in 1909, and the yield was 16,243 bushels. One thousand one hundred and twenty-nine acres were devoted to oats in 1909, and a yield of 10,922 bushels was obtained. Buckwheat has always been an important crop. In 1879, according to the 1880 census, 818 acres were sown in buckwheat, and the total yield was 6,131 bushels. In 1899 a yield of 12,160 bushels was secured from 1,233 acres, while in 1909 a total of 3,856 acres produced 47,698 bushels.

The soils of Ashe County are admirably adapted to the production of apples. This industry would doubtless have been developed many years ago had it not been for lack of transportation facilities for putting the fruit on distant markets. Nearly every farmer has orchards of both summer and winter varieties, which furnish an abundance of fruit for home use and for the local markets. The most popular varieties are the Red June, Yellow Transparent, Early Harvest, Red Astrachan, and Summer Rambo. A great number of winter varieties do exceptionally well. The best shipping varieties common to this county are the York Imperial, Ben Davis, Winesap; Stayman Winesap, Red Limber Twig, Smokehouse, Rome Beauty, and Fall Pippin. Spraying is not generally practiced and little attention is paid to pruning. A few of the best farmers prune and spray the trees with good results, and these practices are receiving more attention than formerly. In 1909 a total fruit yield of 142,523 bushels is reported, including 133,065 bushels of apples.



Rye & other small grains were prominent crops in the past in Ashe

Sorghum is grown on small patches of land near the houses to supply molasses for home consumption. Beans for market are produced to some extent throughout the county. In 1909 a total of 622 acres were planted to this crop, and the yield was 2,120 bushels. Garden vegetables are grown for home consumption. The soils of the county are well suited to Irish potatoes, but not enough of this crop is grown to meet local demands. Sweet potatoes are grown to a small extent only, the soils not being particularly suited to this crop. Pumpkins are produced both for table use and for feeding purposes. The gathering of nuts, bark, herbs, and roots is a source of considerable income.

The favorable climate of Ashe County, together with the natural adaptability of the soils to grass crops, has encouraged stock raising, and with the increase in hay and grain production this has become its most important agricultural industry. The trading in horses, established early in the history of the county with central and eastern North Carolina and South Carolina, has increased and extended to the Valley of Virginia.

The best grades of feeders are sold to traders from Virginia, where they are fed and grazed for several years and subsequently sold as export cattle. Most of the poorer grades of cattle are sold in the Piedmont sections of North Carolina and South Carolina. Sheep are shipped to northern markets. Hogs are raised mainly for home consumption. For many years no especial attempt was made to raise pure-bred stock, but within recent years blooded horses, cattle, sheep, and hogs have been introduced. The most desirable draft horses in the county are the Percheron, German Coach, and French Coach breeds. The pure-bred saddle horses are of the Hambletonian strain. There are a number of large Kentucky jacks in the county. The pure-bred beef cattle include the Hereford, Shorthorn, and the Poled Angus breeds. The dairy cattle are nearly all grades. The Southdown, Shropshire, and Hampshire are the principal breeds of sheep. Pure-bred hogs are numerous in the county. The Berkshire is believed to be the most desirable breed for this section. A large number of turkeys are raised in Ashe County. Most of these are driven to railroad points and shipped to distant markets, while a few are sold locally.

With some crops and livestock, Ashe has been among the leading counties in the state, going back at least as far as 1860, when the first agricultural census was taken. At right are statistics on a selection of crops from that year:

Notable statistics not mentioned in the soil survey above are: 173,508 bushels of apples from 74,081 trees were produced in 1890, and 422 acres of sorghum yielded 21,004 gallons of molasses in 1900.

Corn remained a leading crop through at least 1935, but permanently declined in the following years. Small grains also fell off; wheat dropped from 4,215 acres in 1935 to 370 acres in 1945; rye went down from 4,750 acres in 1935 to 402 acres in 1945. Apples increased to 128,301 trees in 1925, but decreased through the rest of the century.

State rank, 1860		
1	cheese	6,463 lbs.
2	buckwheat	8,929 lbs.
2	maple sugar	12,742 lbs.
4	flax	12,721 lbs.
6	sheep	12,053 head
7	rye	16,149 bushels
11	hay	4,780 tons



# History of Agriculture in Ashe County

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

### Dairy

Other farm products were on the rise, however. The amount of whole milk sold in 1925 was 3,656 gallons; by 1945 it had shot up to 1,656,807 gallons and stayed at or near that level through 1964. The number of dairy cows peaked in 1954 at 11,269 cows, but declined every census year after that to only 115 milk cows in 2012. (see Livestock analysis for historical statistics on beef cattle)



Tobacco dominated Ashe County agriculture for many years

### Tobacco

Between 1935 and 1945, tobacco went from 177 acres producing 186,396 lbs. on 328 farms to 986 acres producing 1,481,342 lbs. on 1,475 farms. By 1964, those figures rose to 1,057 acres producing 2,157,461 lbs. on 1,739 farms. Production increased dramatically to 5,392,500 lbs. in 1982. From 1983-1994 the pounds of tobacco grown in Ashe County fluctuated between 3,400,000 lbs. and 1,854,300 lbs. From 1995-1999 the average of pounds of tobacco produced and sold was 1,239,973 lbs. In 2002, only 230 farms produced tobacco. By 2012, tobacco fell to only 172,012 lbs. grown on 92 acres on 12 farms.

### Chickens

In the 1960s, Ashe County farmers began raising chickens for what was then known as Holly Farms (later bought by Tyson Foods). 2,730,294 broilers were sold in 1964. It was a major agricultural product for many years, with 1,199,928 broilers sold in 1987. But the company ended contracts with growers soon after that, eliminating poultry as a viable product.

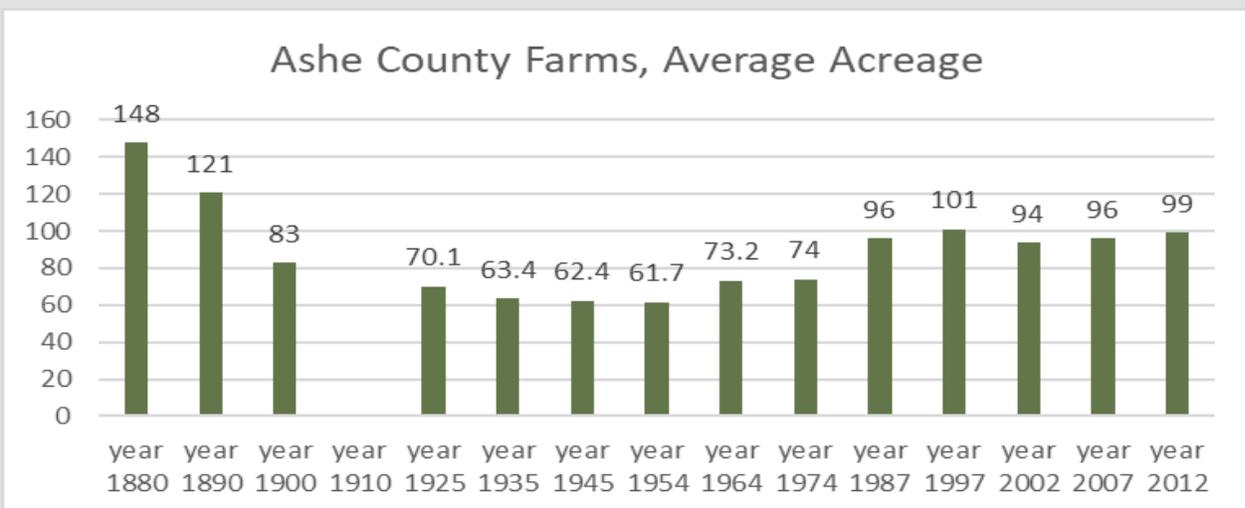
### Beans

Green bean production began to gain prominence in the 1940s. The bean market in bordering Johnson County, Tennessee was the largest in the world, and Ashe County was an offshoot of it. Ashe had the advantage of having a railroad to transport the beans out of the county. In 1944, 1,430 farms grew 2,157 acres of beans. Production peaked in 1954 when 2,873 acres were planted on 1,400 farms. It declined in the 1960s and 1970s, to the point where only 27 farms grew 286 acres in 1974.

### Christmas trees

In a history of Christmas tree production in North Carolina, Dr. Jill Sidebottom with Cooperative Extension finds that some of the earliest Fraser firs in Ashe County were established in 1959-1963 when Fred Colvard and Sidney Gambill planted 20,000 trees each. Soon, more than 100,000 trees per year were being set out. By 1974, Ashe County was described as having “the largest individual [Christmas tree] plantations in North Carolina.” An estimated 10 million trees were growing in the county by the late 1980s. In 1997, the North Carolina Department of Agriculture, in an attempt to more precisely inventory Christmas tree production, conducted a survey and found that “Ashe County led the state with 9.8 million trees on 6,500 acres.” In 2002, for the first time the Census of Agriculture documented Christmas tree production. In that year, 9,611 acres were in production and 876,194 trees were cut in Ashe County on 317 farms. In 2007, the Census reported that 290 farms had cut 1,165,798 trees with 12,642 acres in production.

### Historical trend on the size of farms:





# General Agricultural Statistics

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

- ▶ Ashe County has 1,140 farms, a number that has varied little since 1987. Of the county's total land area, 41.2% (112,462 acres) is farmland, up from 108,452 acres in 2007. Though farmland covers a large land area, individual farms are of a moderate size. The median size of farms in Ashe County is 50 acres, essentially equal to the state's median size of 51 acres. 874 farms are between 10 and 179 acres; or 77% of all farms in the county. In 2012, 549 or 46% of farmers consider farming to be their primary occupation, up from 478 in 2007.

### Economic Impact of Agricultural Production

Agriculture is ranked as Ashe County's number one industry. Annual income from just the County's two primary agricultural products- Christmas trees (\$90 million) and cattle (\$12 million)- total \$102 million, ranking the Ashe high among counties in the state with the highest farm receipts. Total farm production expenses in 2012 was over \$48 million. Combining cash receipts with the amount spent by farms, results in a total economic impact of over \$150 million a year; illustrating agriculture's importance to the local economy.

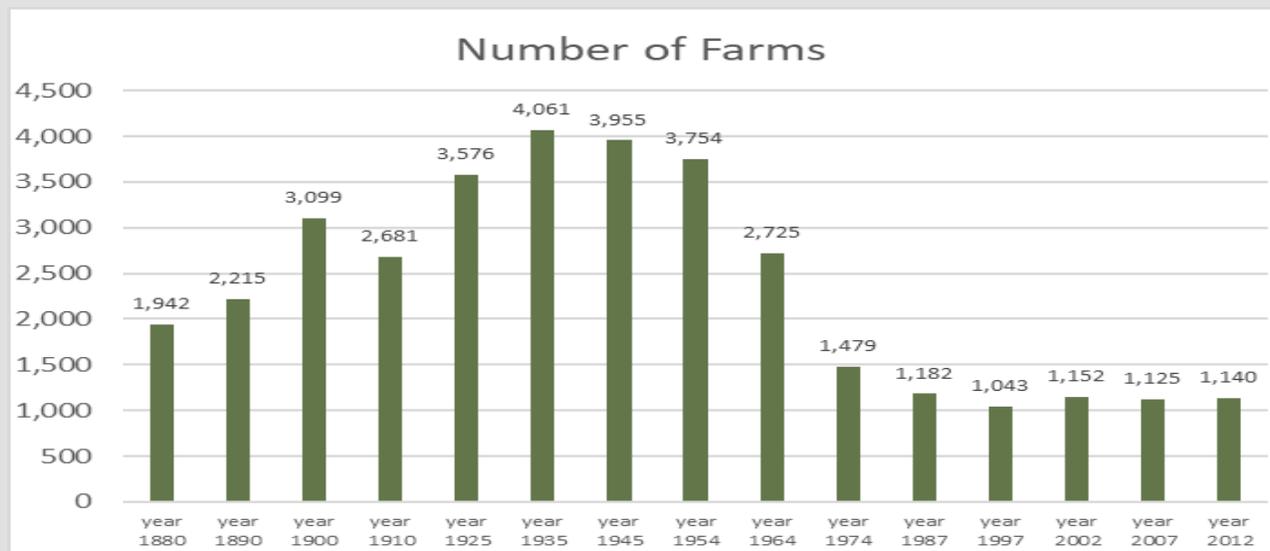
Ashe County farmers annually spend \$2.4 million on fertilizers and lime and \$10.3 million on hired farm labor. Agriculture is much more than farming in that a substantial number of non-agricultural businesses supply the needs of farmers. For example, local farmers annually buy \$2.7 million of petroleum products and spend \$2.6 million on various repairs, supplies, and maintenance costs. For these businesses to survive and prosper, a core critical mass of farmers must be preserved and vice-versa. Though difficult to measure, these businesses supporting agriculture undoubtedly account for a significant portion of Ashe County's employment base.



Ashe ranks 21st in the state for hay production.

### Family Farm Statistics

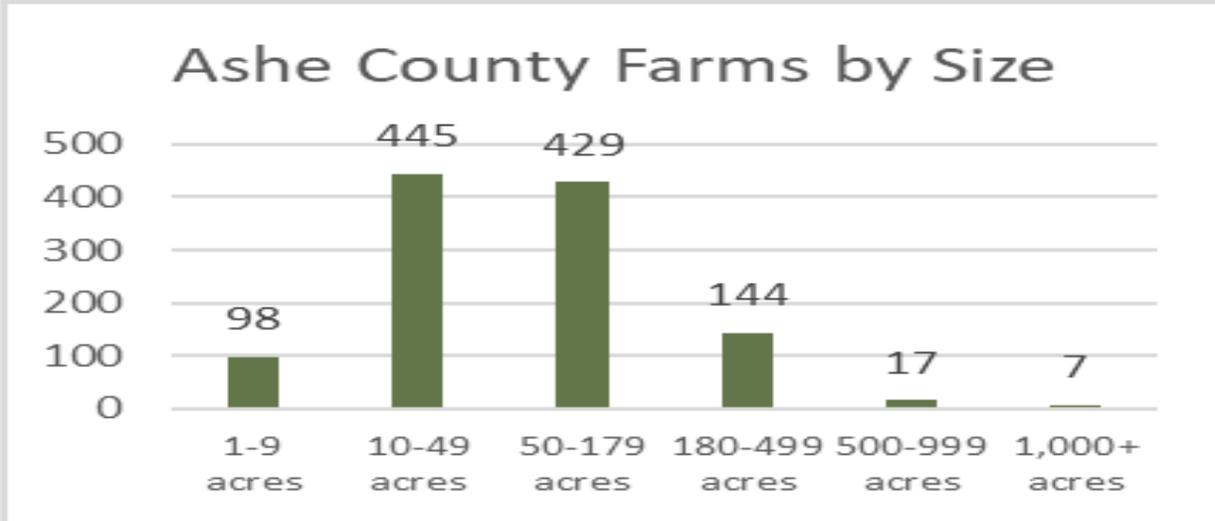
Family farms make up essentially all agricultural production in the county. Out of 1,140 total farms in Ashe County, the 2012 Census of Agriculture categorizes 1,034 as family or individual farms. Partnerships and family corporations account for 102 farms, meaning that 99.7% of farms in Ashe County would be considered family farms by most definitions.





# General Agricultural Statistics

Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan



## Existing Agricultural Activity- Dominant Products

Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

Ashe County’s farm economy is dominated by Fraser fir Christmas tree production and beef cattle, though other products- such as pumpkins- are not insignificant. Cattle are found on 479 farms, i.e. 42% of all farms in the county. Christmas trees are grown on 359 farms, or 31% of all farms. Three influential factors have led to the significance of these commodities: 1) they can be produced on the county’s mountainous topography where row crops can’t be grown; 2) the area’s short growing season is not as restrictive on them; and 3) the county’s climate is actually beneficial and even essential to production. Fraser firs can be grown only in the cooler mountains, and the area has a “great climate to grow some of the best forages in North Carolina,” according to Cooperative Extension agent Micah Orfield. Christmas trees and greenery claim a greater share of income (\$90 million compared to \$12.8 million for cattle), but over half of the farm land in the county is devoted to livestock (54% compared to 13% for Christmas trees).

### Agricultural Land Use

Pasture	49,428 acres	44% of all land in farms
Hay	11,776 acres	10% of all land in farms
Christmas trees	14,188 acres	13% of all land in farms
Woodlands	25,344 acres	23% of all land in farms

Remainder (11,726 acres or 10%) includes other crops, cover crops, farmsteads, land in homes, buildings, livestock facilities, pond, roads, and wasteland.



## Existing Agricultural Activity- Christmas Trees

### Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

Ashe County produces more Christmas trees than any other county in the United States. In 2012, the number of acres in production was 14,188, with approximately 23.6 million trees. Approximately three million trees are harvested each year. In addition, greenery (e.g. wreaths, roping) production is substantial. The Christmas tree industry in Ashe County employs over 700 workers year-round; over 2,000 during the harvest season. Annual revenue from Christmas tree sales is approximately \$74 million. With an additional income of \$16 million from greenery, the total income from Christmas tree production is \$90 million.

Almost all Christmas trees in Ashe County are Fraser fir. The tree occurs naturally at high elevations only in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, but it can be cultivated at lower elevations in the mountains. Ashe County trees have been chosen as the White House Christmas tree seven times, more than any other county in the nation.

The Christmas tree industry has been unbalanced for many years. Beginning in 2009, growers were hit on both the supply and demand sides with two negative incidents- the deep recession (i.e. less demand) and an increasing oversupply. Many quit grow-

“There’s a lot of trees being planted right now; that shortage should start to ease in the next two to three years.”

ing in response (especially those with smaller acreage) or planted fewer trees. The situation, however, was mitigated by the fact that the county has a lot of greenery producers who were able to utilize the oversupply. By 2015, supply and demand flipped, and shortages have been characteristic of the market up to the present. Cooperative Extension agent Travis Birdsell observes, “There’s a lot of trees being planted right now; that shortage should start to ease in the next two to three years.”

However, many farmers who want to get back into the business are unable to do so because seedlings are unavailable. Seedling suppliers were hit hardest by the recession/oversupply and now are operating only on contracts, with very little overrun, which goes to their current customers. In response, local seedling production in greenhouses is being promoted. Four producers have constructed greenhouses for this purpose and the Upper Mountain Research Station in the county is conducting research on seedling production. In a few years, seedlings will be available from the state nursery in Crossnore.

Choose-&-cut Christmas tree operations (where trees are sold direct to the consumer in the field) are becoming more common. Ashe has surpassed Watauga County, which has usually dominated this business model. Nevertheless, supply is not meeting the demand. “Last year the choose-&-cut that we had could not function.” says Birdsell, “They were inundated with people, they didn’t have enough trees, and they sold out early.” There is concern that such shortages will cause consumers to turn away from real trees in favor of artificial ones.

Choose-&-cut doesn’t require as much acreage to be profitable, and Birdsell sees a great opportunity in choose-&-cut, especially for young people who might not have access to a large number of acres.

The economic impact of choose-&-cut Christmas trees sales extends beyond the farmers, as visitors spend money elsewhere while they are in the county. Many businesses get two extra months of high sales volume because of choose-&-cut Christmas tree farms, which also boosts sales tax revenues.





# Existing Agricultural Activity– Livestock

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

The number of cattle has varied significantly since 1945, from a low of 14,042 (1954) to a high of 28,363 (1974). The number given by the 2012 Census of Agriculture is 19,414, is close to halfway between the extremes. However, many familiar with the county’s cattle economy feel that cattle numbers are substantially underreported in the official census data.

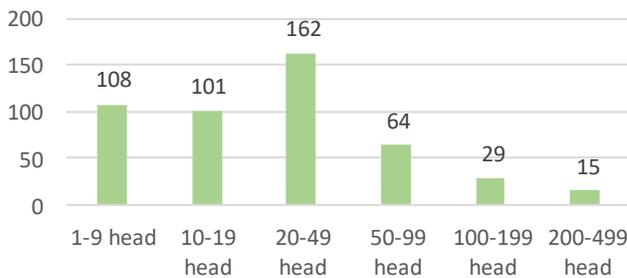
The county ranks 13<sup>th</sup> in the state in the number of cattle, however most cattle farms are small- 77% have less than 50 head.

Cattle graze on 49,428 acres of pasture. The county has 11,776 acres of hay in production on 502 farms, ranking 21<sup>st</sup> in the state.

Profits are being made in cattle right now, but cattlemen “are watching their costs” says Extension Agent Micah Orfield. She sees the need for farmers to invest in facilities, fencing, and liming, but “a lot of farmers don’t feel like they can afford to do that as much because of the cost of feeding in the winter and the cost of equipment.” Many cattlemen see that the biggest obstacle to more profitability is the inability to sell their livestock in Ashe County in a manner that would appeal to large buyers. Most farmers do not raise enough calves to fill a commercial cattle truck and therefore would need to combine their livestock with other farmers to sell at a premium price. Scales and a facility to sort calves uniformly by weight for lot loads (as desired by buyers) are needed for that to be possible. Currently, most cattle are transported to Glade Springs, Virginia, Turnersburg, North Carolina, or Abingdon, Virginia for sale. Cattle often lose up to 3% of their weight in transport and usually sell for less money per pound than they would bring if sold locally in lot loads. In addition, Ashe County cattlemen who purchase stockers are unable to buy locally because no scales are available.



### Ashe County Cattle & Calves; Number of Farms by Inventory

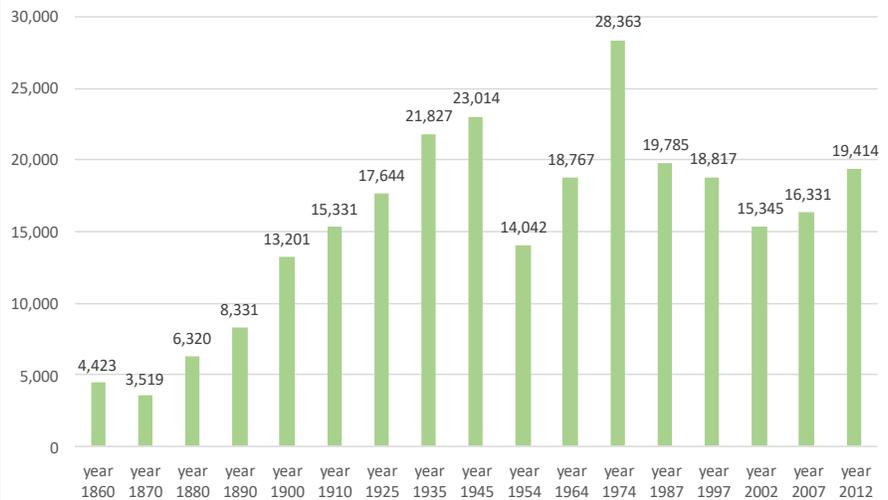


ability are two barriers farmers face when considering investing in cattle processing infrastructure, therefore installing the infrastructure on rented land is not an option in situations where the owner might discontinue the agreement anytime.

Sheep and goat numbers in the county are increasing. The 2012 census identified 111 farms with goats, numbering a total of 1,411. Sheep are raised on 58 farms, up from 25 in 2007. Sheep totaled 1,148 in 2012, compared to 936 in 2007. Predators have been a problem in the past. Sheep and goats are especially well-suited for farms with small acreage, which is common in Ashe County (47% of farms are below 50 acres).

In addition to the need for a sales facility, many farmers lack adequate processing infrastructure for tagging, vaccinating, deworming, castrating, or otherwise attending to the health of their herd. Some have facilities that are old and dilapidated, and therefore a threat to the safety of both the farmer and the animals. Cost (approximately \$8,000) and land avail-

### Number of Cattle





## Existing Agricultural Activity– Other Products

### Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

#### Timber

Cooperative Extension agent Travis Birdsell says, “Timbering is as much a part of Ashe County’s agricultural history as cattle. The land has been harvested three or four times.” The county is currently experiencing a large round of timber harvesting. In 2016, the stumpage value of timber cut in the county was \$2,546,704 (price paid to landowners for standing timber). The delivered value was \$4,953,002 (price paid to timber buyers upon delivery of timber to the mill). Ashe County ranks 58<sup>th</sup> in the state for timber production.

#### Pumpkins & Strawberries

Widespread pumpkin production in Ashe County began in the late 2000s. “It came about because of our Christmas tree contracts with chain stores,” says Birdsell, “They wanted to cut their number of vendors down, so they approached Christmas tree growers and asked them if they could produce pumpkins as well.” Geography has played a role, as the county is located closer to southeastern markets than other pumpkin-growing areas of the country. Acreage has leveled off at a stable 950-1,000 acres. Growers “are producing more pumpkins, but acreage is staying about the same because they are getting better at pumpkin production.” Testing to determine the best varieties is currently underway at Upper Mountain Research Station, where nine seed companies have invested in the trials.

Strawberry transplants is another specialty crop that is fairly new. Thirty million are produced and shipped every fall.

#### Local Food- Vegetables and Fruit

Vegetables harvested for sale grew 280% in 10 years; from 98 acres in 2002, to 175 acres in 2007, to 274 acres in 2012. The Ashe County Farmers Market, however, is struggling to find more vegetable producers because the county has only a few full-time growers. “The barrier is that food safety requirements have made it to where you’re either a hobby farm or you’re all in, and you have to be pretty large to afford the costs that are incurred with managing a food safety plan,” says Travis Birdsell. A key factor to a thriving local food sector is close access to a densely populated area, which Ashe lacks. One of the more successful growers in the county has a large organic operation and transports his produce to a buyer in Durham. Organic vegetables can be hard to grow because the county’s wet climate is ideal for the proliferation of disease. Another climatic factor is the relatively short growing season in a market where retailers are demanding a more year-round supply. Season extenders (e.g. high tunnels) help, but are costly. In summary, when it comes to local food, Birdsell says, “We’ve got a lot of barriers that other areas don’t face.”



This agritourism enterprise is taking advantage of a major Ashe County farm product.



# Farmer Input- Survey Analysis

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

- ▶ Three hundred paper surveys and 1,000 postcards were mailed to all landowners who receive present-use value taxation. The postcards directed the farmers to the same survey online. The County issued a press release about the survey. Ninety-four farmers completed the survey (paper and online); a response rate of 7.23%.

Complete survey results are located in the appendix. The following pages contain condensed versions of survey results and an analysis.

### **How challenging are the following issues to your farm operation?**

For an analysis of the responses to this question, see the section titled, “Challenges to Continued Family Farming.”

### **Following are various programs, activities, issues, and actions that can potentially affect the long-term success of farming in Ashe County. Please indicate how important you think each item is to maintaining and improving agriculture in the county.**

Over 50% of respondents say that every item listed is at least important (i.e. “important,” “very important,” and “extremely important” combined). The significance of this result is that actions related to any of the items would be justified by the survey.

If, however, there is a need to prioritize projects, considering only those who responded “very important” and “extremely important” yields a different result. Only 15 items were chosen by a majority of respondents as very important or extremely important.

“Present-use value land taxation” ranked first. This program saves a considerable amount of money for most participants, making farming more profitable and mitigating expenses, which ranked first in the survey as a major or moderate challenge.

A concern for young farmers is evident in that “Youth agricultural education” ranked second at 75% and “Access to land for beginning farmers” was chosen by 55% of respondents as very or extremely important. An interview with the agriculture teacher at the high school revealed a strong program there with good participation, including the local Future Farmers of America chapter.

“Estate planning for farm transition” came in third at 73%. The need for such planning is underscored by the fact that 50% of respondents do not have a transition plan.

Number 4 “Ability to market farm products directly to consumers” (68%), number 7 “Consumer ‘Buy Local’ education” (64%), and Number 11 “Opening institutional markets” (54%) are all related to retail marketing where products can be sold at a premium.

“Development of new farm products & markets” ranked fifth at 67%. Cooperative Extension agent Travis Birdsell mentioned choose-&-cut Christmas tree operations, U-pick apple orchards, (both related to number 15 “Agricultural tourism”), growing white pines for greenery, and production of Christmas tree seedlings as opportunities that are new or have not been fully exploited. One interviewee has been successfully growing corn and soybeans, two grain commodities that are rare in Ashe County.

**“Estate planning for farm transition”  
came in third at 73%**

“Ability to secure adequate labor” (sixth at 66%) is a significant concern. Conversations with representatives of the cattlemen’s association and Cooperative Extension agent Micah Orfield confirm the need for “A facility for livestock sales” as expressed by 55% of respondents as very or extremely important.

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Fifty-three percent of the respondents say that “The County’s existing voluntary farmland preservation program” is very or extremely important to maintaining and improving agriculture. Approximately 300 farms are currently enrolled in the program, but up to 1,000 more could possibly be eligible.



# Farmer Input- Survey Analysis

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

Travis Birdsell says that successful farmers have to be willing to borrow money because of the seasonal nature of farming; i.e. income is concentrated into a few weeks of the year while production costs might be spread out over several months. This situation is especially true for Christmas tree growers, as they initially face seven years of no income from newly planted trees. The survey agrees, with 53% of respondents saying that financing is very important or extremely important for maintaining and improving agriculture in the county.

### **Within the next 10 years, what are your plans for your farming operation?**

Almost half of the respondents plan no changes to their farming operation, while a quarter plan to expand. Thirteen percent plan to scale back, and the same number plan to stop farming. Hypothetically, if those planning to expand absorb the farmland of those planning to scale back or stop, there would be a net loss of only 1% of existing farmland.

### **What do you expect will happen to most of your farmland in the next 20 years?**

The question lists six possible futures for a person's farmland. In three of those options, the farmland will still be in production, i.e. at least 67% of the farmland in question (possibly more if some of the property belonging to farmers with "no idea" remains farmland). Twenty percent of the farmland would go out of production (again, possibly more depending on the fate of that in the "no idea" option). Considering that 1,140 farms currently exist in Ashe County and the median size is 50 acres, that would mean a loss of 228 farms or 11,400 acres.

If 20% of farmland goes out of production, the county will lose 228 farms or 11,400 acres.

### **Do you have a transition plan for what will happen to your land after you pass on?**

Half have a plan (which includes those planning to dispose of their land before they pass on), half do not. It is difficult to draw conclusions from these responses from the perspective of farmland preservation because those with a plan might or might not intend for their farmland to remain in production. Similarly, when those without a plan die, it is uncertain whether or not another farmer will possess their land.

### **How long has your land been in your family?**

The fact that over half of the respondents own land that has been in their family over 50 years is significant from a farmland preservation perspective. Though that does not guarantee that family members will continue to farm, it does indicate a reluctance to sell outside the family for conversion to non-farm use. Many of these farms might be eligible for enrollment in the North Carolina Century Farm Program (see recommendations).

### **What is your age?**

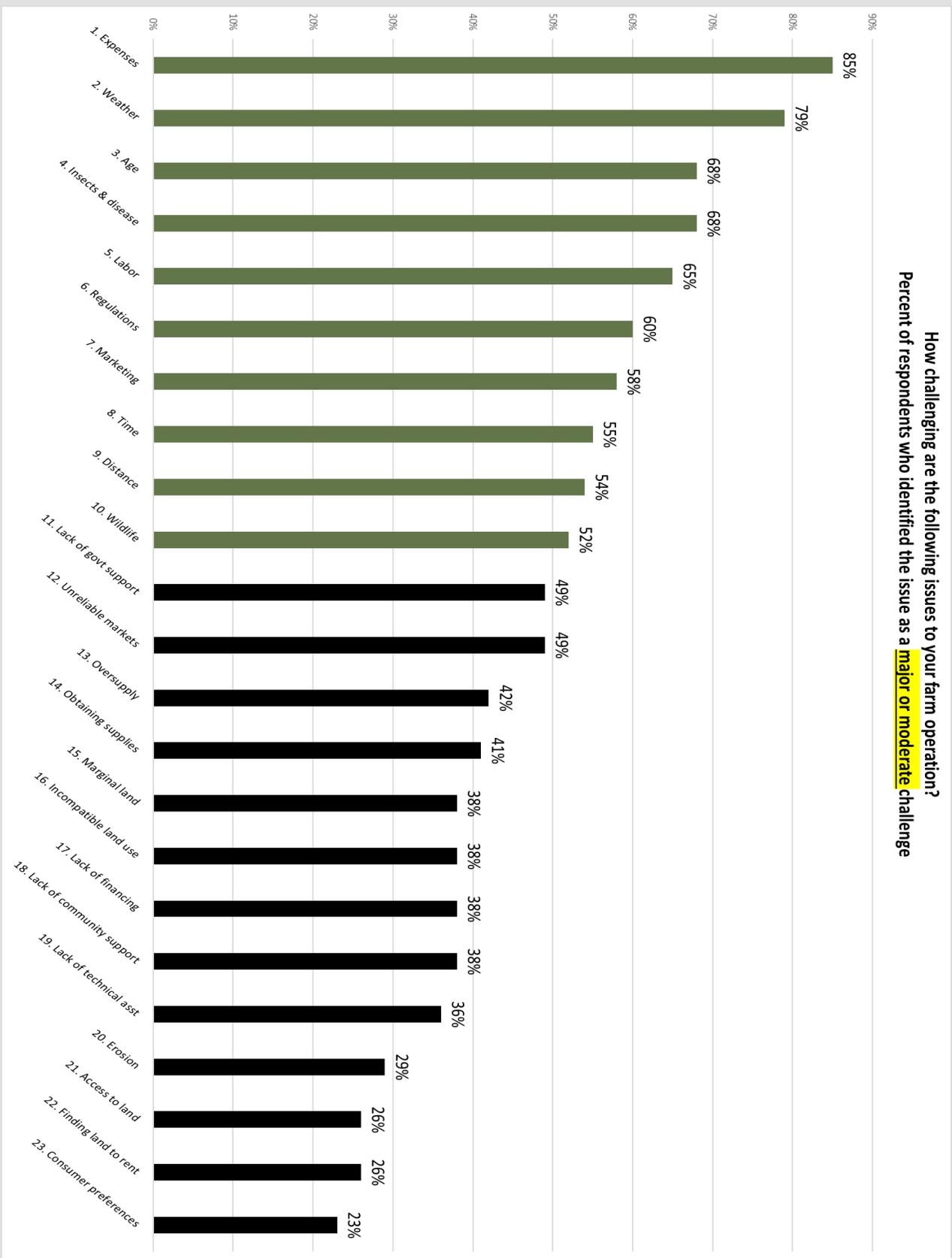
According to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, the average age of farmers in Ashe County is 59. Seventy three percent of survey respondents are over 60, with an average age of 65.





# Farmer Input- Survey Results Summary

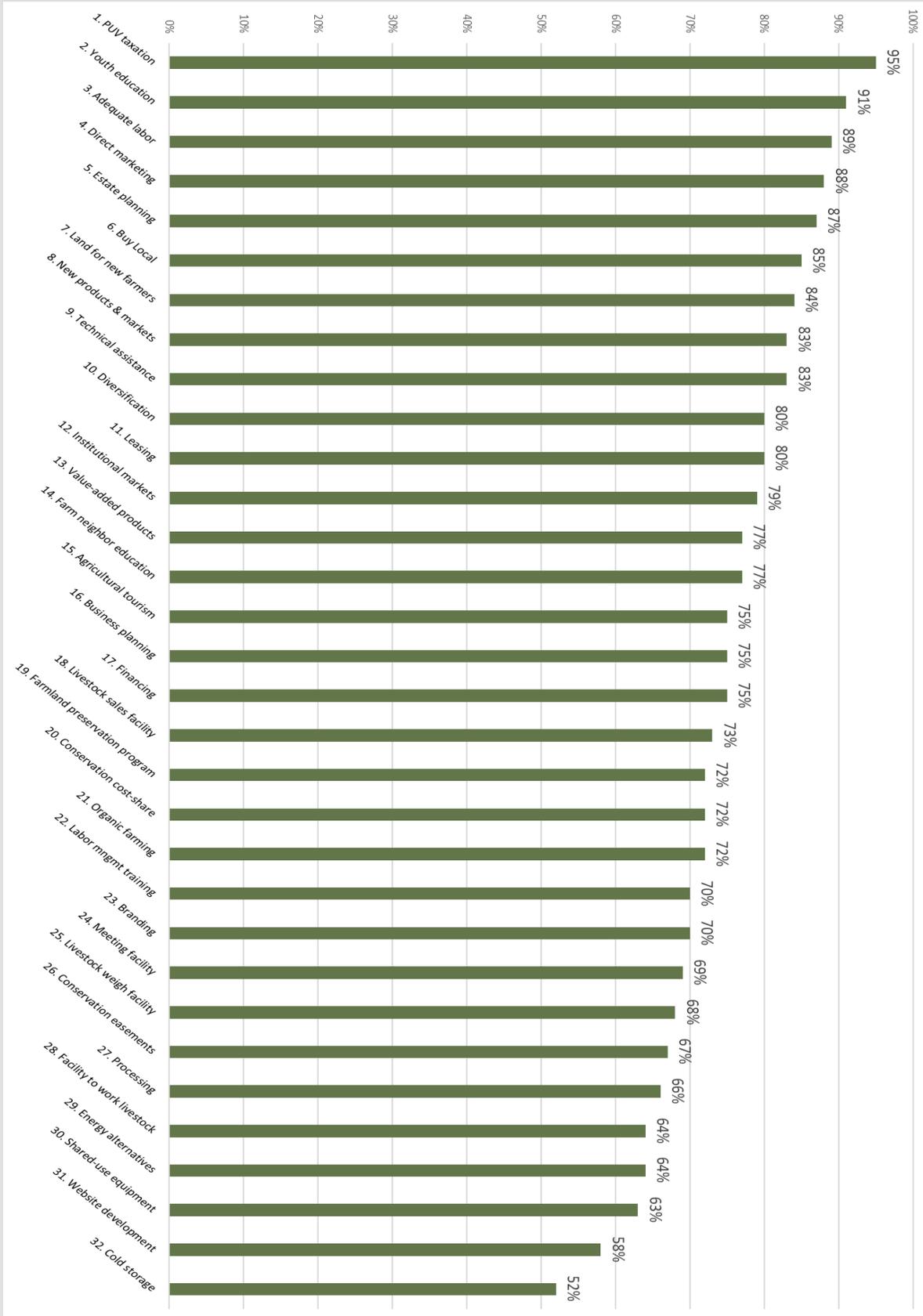
## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan





# Farmer Input- Survey Results Summary

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

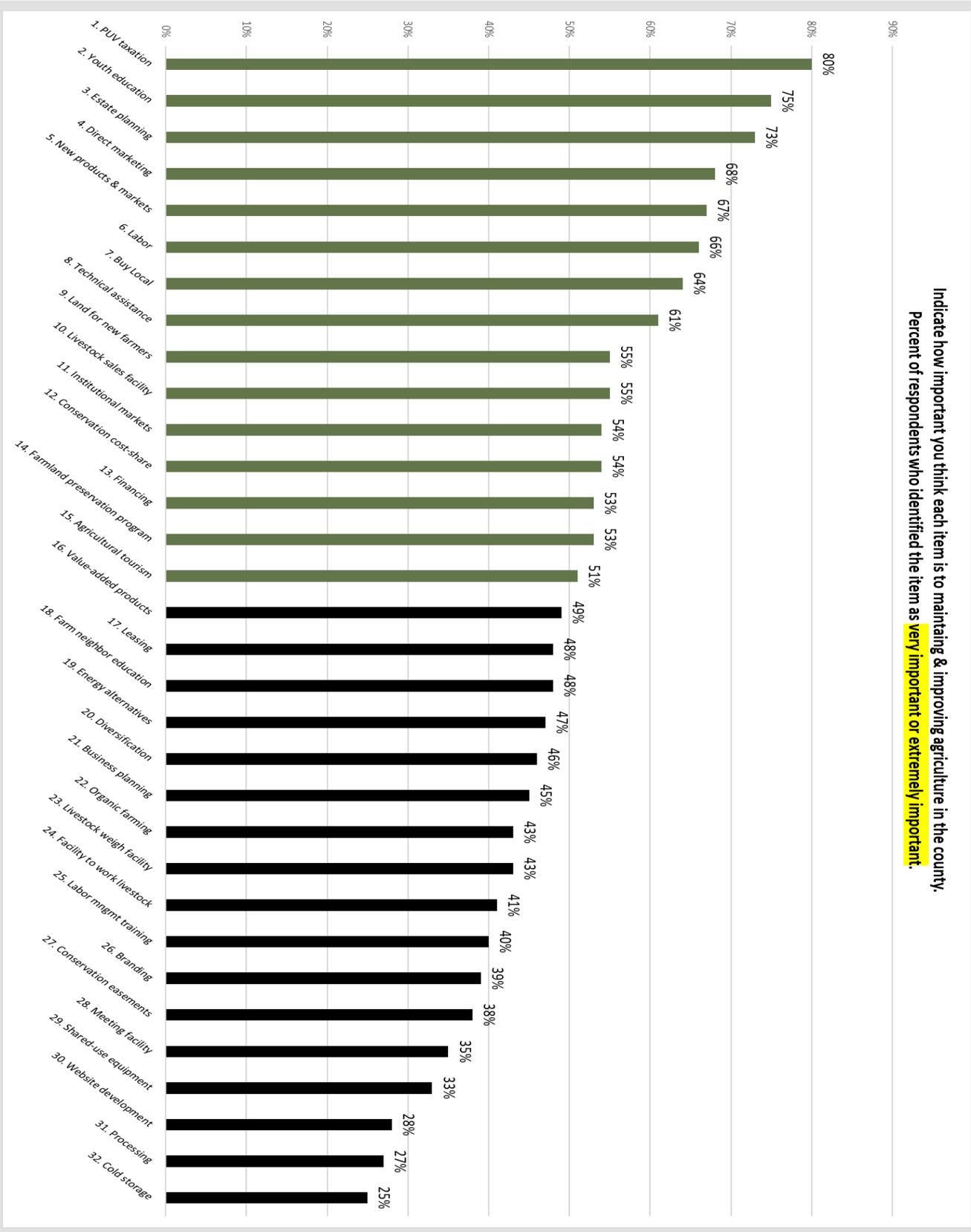


Indicate how important you think each item is to maintaining & improving agriculture in the county.  
Percent of respondents who identified the item as **important, very important, or extremely important**



# Farmer Input- Survey Results Summary

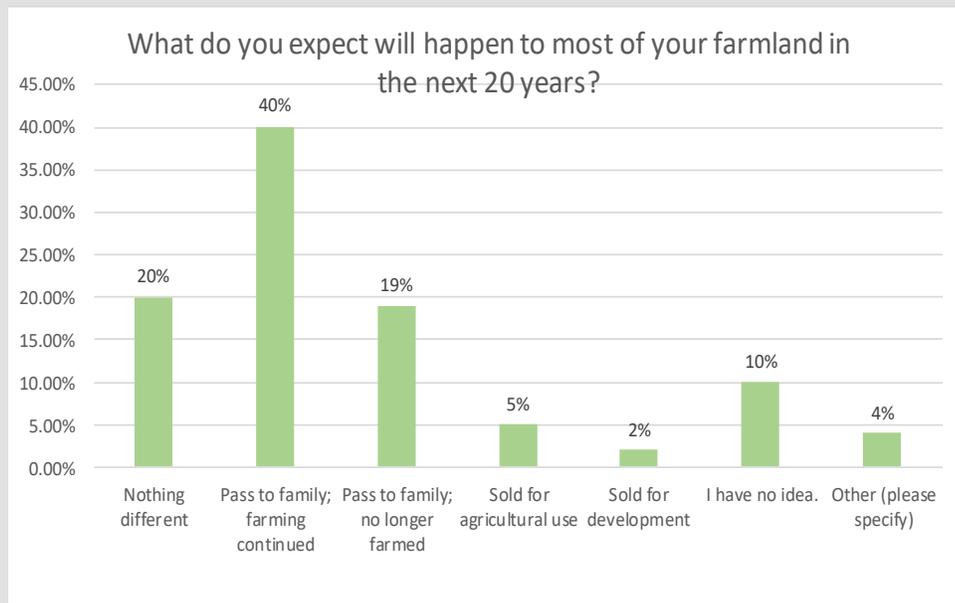
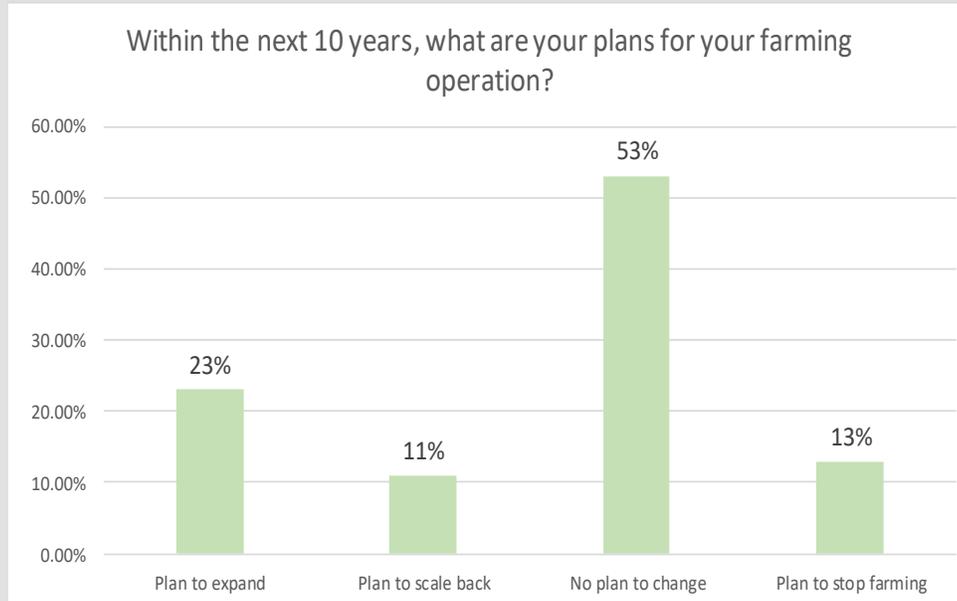
## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan





# Farmer Input- Survey Results Summary

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

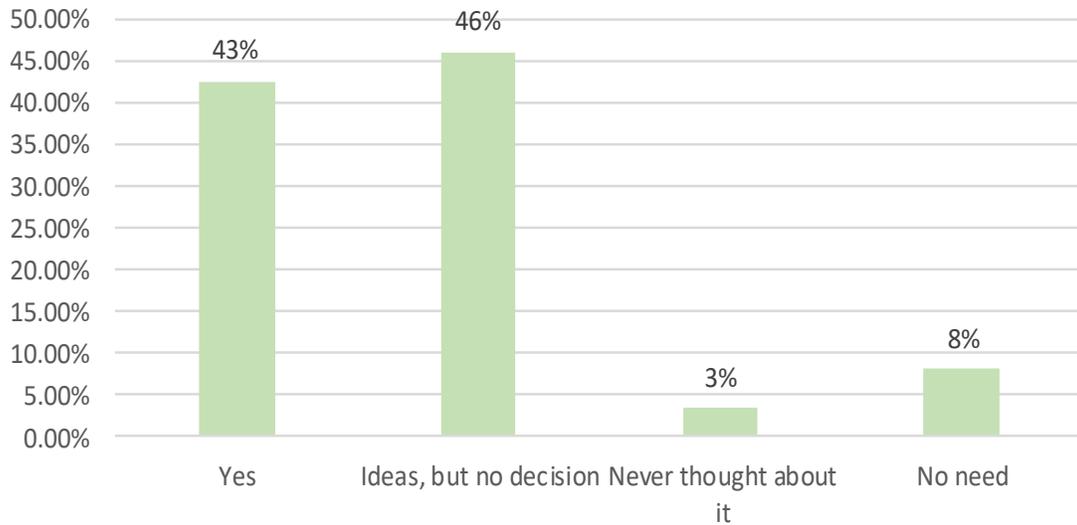




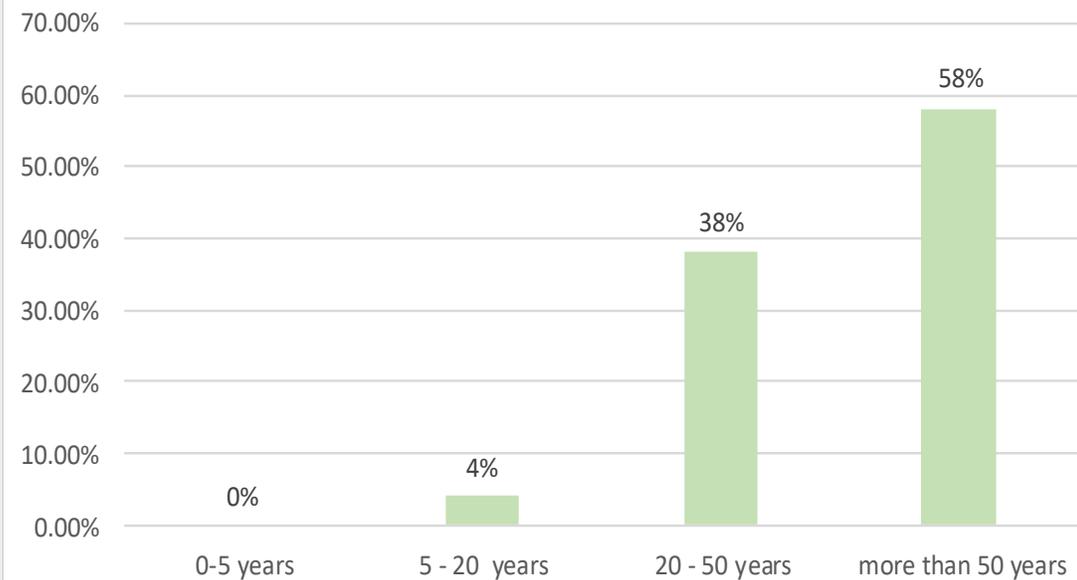
# Farmer Input- Survey Results Summary

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

Do you have a transition plan for what will happen to your land after you pass on?



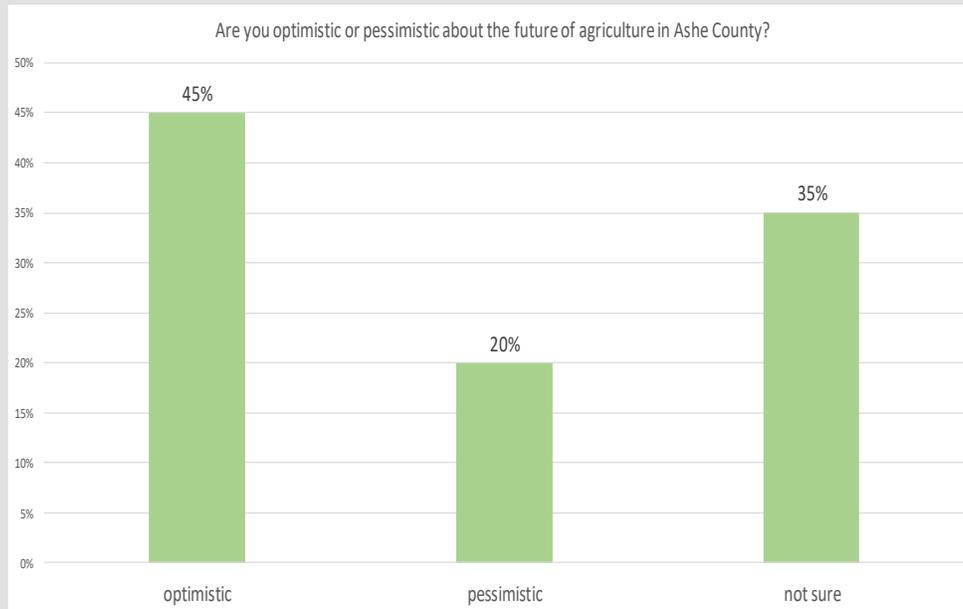
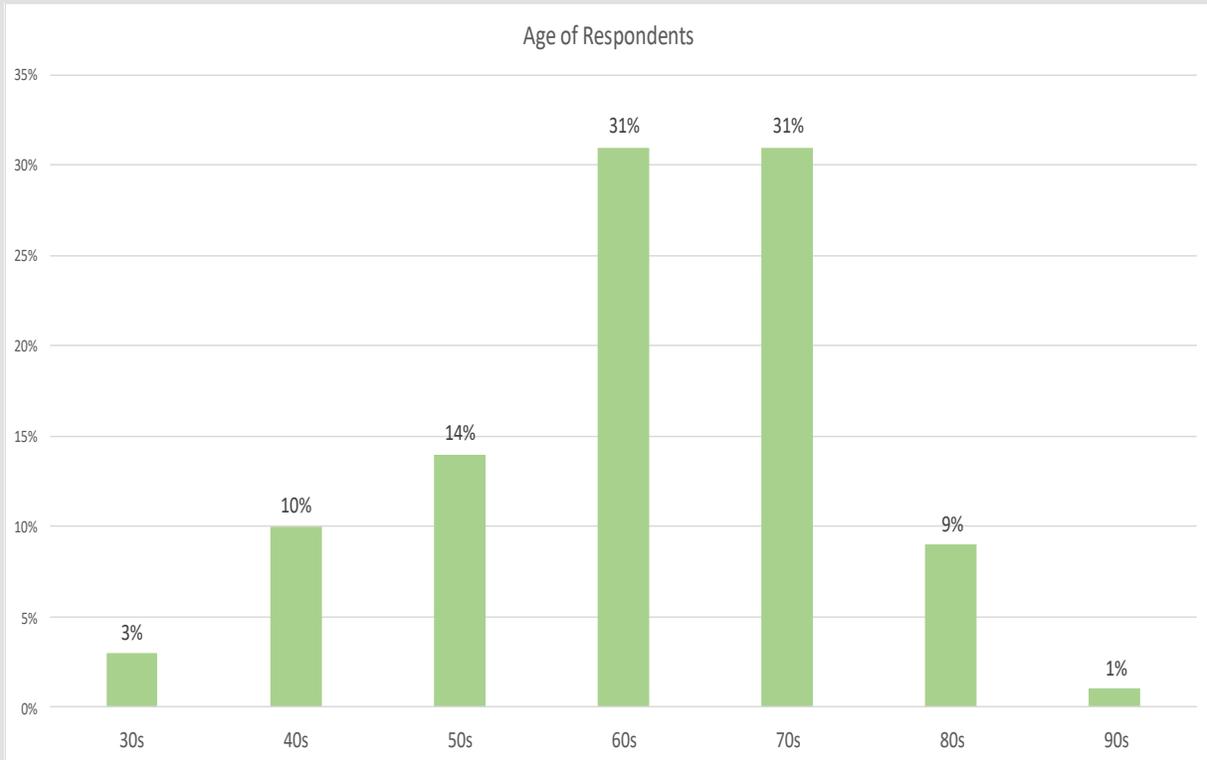
How long has your land been in your family?





# Farmer Input- Survey Results Summary

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan





## ▶ Vickie & Jed Young, beef cattle & sheep

Vickie and Jed Young own and operate a 200-acre farm in the Grassy Creek community. They also rent four farms which average 30 acres each. Jed has farmed all his life. Vickie did not grow up on a farm, but “I got to one as quick as I could.” The core of the farm is Jed’s homeplace, and they have augmented it with surrounding property bought over the years. The farm is an Angus-cross cow/calf operation (including hay acreage), consisting of 70 cows and four bulls. They recently began raising sheep and currently have 45 ewes and one ram. The couple started out farming tobacco and Christmas trees, but they ceased growing tobacco as a result of the buyout, and quit tree production when the market was flooded.

Jed is on the farm almost full-time, but he is also a building contractor, doing jobs on the side to maintain cash flow for the family. Vickie says, “His love has always been with the farm; he’s always done that as much as he could. He’s very tied to the land, and I am too.” Vickie works full-time at Farm Credit in Jefferson. She says she loves her job but wants to farm full-time, noting that farming is difficult with off-farm work.

The Youngs currently sell sheep to a trader, who markets them elsewhere. However, they see opportunities for cooperative marketing. Vickie says one option to improve profits is to haul the sheep to Pennsylvania, but they have yet to determine if the benefits outweigh the costs. Putting together loads with other producers might make such a distant market more feasible.

“I would love to educate people about agriculture. It’s sad to me that we live in a rural county, and a lot of the kids and even the adults don’t realize how big agriculture is.”

The Youngs have been considering starting an agritourism enterprise, especially since they have begun raising sheep. A farm they recently bought has suitable buildings and a silo that would provide an ideal setting. In addition, since Jed is a builder, they have talked about building rental cabins. Vickie says, “I would love to educate people about agriculture. It’s sad to me that we live in a rural county, and a lot of the kids and even the adults don’t realize how big agriculture is.” She notes, however, that finding the time to pursue this idea is difficult.

Vickie and her husband have plans to increase sheep production, but getting more cattle is not likely. Finding and keeping land to rent holds back expansion. They will shortly lose one farm they currently rent because the owner is going to sell it to a Christmas tree grower. Securing a long-term lease is difficult; most of their rented land is based on short-term verbal agreements. Unlike trees and pumpkins, “with cattle you’ve got to have fence and that’s an expense that someone has to take on; that’s something else to consider,” Vickie says. The owners they rent from varies from a local woman whose husband died, to a couple of part-time residents.

Vickie is frustrated by the lack of time she can devote to farming. Another hardship is rising expenses without an accompanying rise in income, but she seems resigned to that reality. Since sheep is a new farm product, learning how to manage them is a challenge, as well as dealing with predators. She finds support for farming from County leadership to be deficient, noting a lack of awareness of agriculture’s significance and potential in Ashe County.



Photo by Micah Orfield

Vickie and Jed have three children who have expressed interest in farming. Their son, who works in Asheville, bought 80 acres with them last year. One daughter is getting married and will soon have a teaching degree. Vickie says that she could see her taking on some aspects of an agritourism enterprise. The youngest daughter has some calves and sheep of her own. While these activities are encouraging, Vickie speculates that the children will not likely farm to the same degree as their parents.

Vickie is optimistic about the future of farming in Ashe County, and sees a lot of potential. She and her husband hope to expand, and know others who do too. She observes that while cattle prices are currently down, pumpkins and Christmas trees are doing good. Despite these positive signs, she is concerned about the small number of new farmers.

There seems to be little to no risk of the Young farm going out of production in the foreseeable future. Jed’s tie to his family’s farm at the core of the operation would seemingly make parting with it unlikely. The fact that they weathered an unsuccessful Christmas tree venture shows resilience. Planning to expand sheep production, maintaining their cattle operation, and considering some form of agritourism are indications of a healthy farm.



### ▶ Keith Phillips, beef cattle

Keith (age 52) and his brother Tony (age 51) own and manage a cow/calf operation on Hwy 163 just outside West Jefferson. They own 85 acres and rent an adjacent 40-acre tract from a cousin. The land was inherited from their father, and has been in the Phillips family for generations, going back to the first land claimed in the area. The brothers were raised on the farm they own, where, Keith says, “Daddy did everything with mules.” Currently, the farm consists of 32 cows and a bull, and includes hayfields.

Keith retired in 2017 from his job as assistant athletic director and wrestling coach at Ashe County High School (Tony is farm manager for Barr Evergreens). He has farmed part-time throughout his career. He grew Christmas trees and tobacco in Crumpler for a time, sold out about 15 years ago, but continued running his cattle operation.

Keith and Tony sell their calves to a large producer in Alleghany County, who grows out the calves in the winter and following summer, then sells them to a feedlot. Keith seems satisfied with this marketing arrangement and expresses no interest in other sale alternatives. He is pleased with his operation’s profitability, noting that even when prices dropped recently, they did not lose money. Keith attributes their profitability at least partially to their low cost of inputs. The Town of West Jefferson fertilizes and limes their hayfield three times a year- free of charge- with biosolids from the Town’s wastewater treatment plant. The cheese factory fertilizes part of their pasture with whey, at no cost. Because he receives off-farm income, Keith has never been dependent on farm profits for living expenses, rather he has always been able to reinvest his farm earnings into buying more cattle and equipment.

**In Keith’s opinion, relatively small farmers like himself tend to be the most successful.**

Keith notes that his main challenge is the weather. For example, at the time of this interview, he was prepared to spread fertilizer, but was prevented from doing so by heavy rains that had saturated the ground, making it impossible to get equipment on the pasture. Wind in the winter is a problem, creating large snowdrifts in the farm road.

The farm operation is run as a business enterprise, but Keith enjoys farming and sees it as a hobby too. In contrast, his brother views it only as a source of income. The brothers will almost double their acreage very soon by renting over 100 acres from a cousin in Alleghany County. Keith notes that finding farmland to rent is difficult, as few farmers are willing to part with the acreage they hold.

Though he is planning a significant expansion, it is a calculated move, and he still sees himself as a small producer. In Keith’s opinion, relatively small farmers like himself tend to be the most successful. Larger farmers are inclined to be too ambitious, overextend, and accumulate a lot of debt.

Keith is very optimistic about the future of farming in Ashe County. He observes that many young people are going directly out of high school into farming or to NC State and returning to farm. Children in farm families are staying with the business. As for the long-term future of his own farm, Keith has no children and says that it will pass to Tony’s son, a high school freshman, who is beginning to show an interest in farming.

No threats to the Phillips’ farmland are apparent. The farm is profitable and a viable business enterprise. Keith is happy with his situation and expresses no indication that he will cease farming for any reason, which is confirmed by his plan to expand. A lifetime of farming has likely ingrained the occupation, making it difficult to give up. The fact that the land is a family legacy probably lessens the chance that it will be sold outside the family for nonagricultural purposes. Keith identified no challenges, other than the weather, and mentioned nothing that he needed to be more successful. His ability to reinvest his earnings back into the farm provides any needed capital without debt, and helps ensure the farm’s sustainability, along with the low costs of inputs. Keith’s caution about overextending will prevent the loss of the farm as a result of debt default or burnout. The farm’s long-term outlook is good, as it will likely stay in the family and continue to be farmed.

*Barn designed by Keith's father & built in 1945*



#### ▶ Ron & Suzanne Joyner, apple tree nursery

Ron and Suzanne Joyner's 75 acre farm, located in the northern part of the county off Big Horse Creek Road, consists of an apple orchard and nursery. Big Horse Creek Farm has 250 trees producing 340 different varieties of apples (some trees have more than one variety grafted on). All are heritage varieties. They usually graft and sell about 1,500 trees from their nursery every year, mostly via mail. The varieties are grafted onto rootstocks and grown for a season in pots until they ship the saplings bare-rooted. At one time, they were selling over 3,000 trees, but they have been slowly been cutting back each year. While they sell the apples produced by the mature trees, the trees are mainly a source of scion wood for the nursery. "We've always viewed the apple production as just a sideline," Ron says. Within the past five years, they have started selling scion wood. This enterprise "has been super popular", so much so that they have had to limit orders. There are very few places in the country that sell heritage variety scion wood, and they have been told that theirs is the best. Ron says that it is a substantial source of income at a time of year (winter) when they have little income from other sources. It is not strenuous work, and they plan to continue selling scion wood after they retire from the nursery.

"We couldn't make a living without the internet; there's no way."

Ron and Suzanne's business is almost totally through their website, which has been in existence for almost 20 years. Suzanne says, "We couldn't make a living without the internet; we couldn't make a living selling locally, there's no way." They planted their first trees in 1986. "Our business grew about the same time the internet was becoming available," Ron recalls. Most of their customers are located in states bordering North Carolina, but they proudly say that they have shipped trees to every state in the country, except Hawaii.

Ron comes from a military family, growing up in a variety of places around the country and the world. However, he spent his childhood summers on his grandparents' farm in eastern North Carolina, helping raise cotton and tobacco. Suzanne was raised in upper New York state (an apple growing area) in a suburban environment, but "I was always drawn to the woods and rural areas." The two lived and worked in the Raleigh area for 20 years but had a goal of living in a rural location and being self-reliant. They frequently went canoeing in Ashe County, and decided it was the place where they wanted to live, so they bought the land they have now in 1985.

While living in Wake County, Ron had a big garden with heirloom vegetable varieties, "so it was a natural transition [to heirloom apples] after we got our land up in the mountains." They lived relatively close to Lee Calhoun, who literally wrote the book on old southern apples, and sold thousands of trees from his nursery. Calhoun rescued many old varieties from extinction and is widely recognized as the leading expert in the nation on heirloom apples in the south. Ron explains, "we got to know him real well and he became my mentor, and taught us how to graft and how to ship trees, etc. I think without his influence, we would have gone off in a different direction. For years I followed his work and became fascinated by what he was doing. We got up here and had some vague notions about what we wanted to do agriculturally, but apples were a natural progression. We have a great climate up here for raising apples. I had experience working with plants and working with Lee Calhoun, and it just all fell into place."

Weather and wildlife cause them major problems. "Last year was our worst year ever," Suzanne says. They didn't have any apples due to weather, and deer destroyed hundreds of trees in their nursery. Ron says that in the past ten years he has observed a progression of unpredictable weather; e.g. relative warm winters that cause the trees to bud-out, followed by spring freezes which kill the trees in the nursery and eliminate any chance of getting fruit from the orchard. This year they lost 900 trees to this weather pattern and bad rootstock. Bears are another problem. They climb trees to get at the apples, breaking large limbs in the process. "We had a couple of trees really torn this year," Suzanne says. continued



## ▶ Ron & Suzanne Joyner, apple tree nursery

The couple have been full-time farmers, but they are getting close to retirement age and are in the process of cutting back. In addition, Ron has a health issue that hinders him. He says, “For the first time I’ve realized there’s things on the farm I can no longer do, which has been a very eye-opening experience, so we hire a lot of people to do grass mowing and weed whacking that I normally do myself. We’re going to hire a crew to do pruning for us this year.” They say labor issues are definitely challenging. They hire mostly young people, but “it seems that everyone we hire leaves after finding a full-time job,” says Suzanne. In addition, they say that many workers quit after a few days because they don’t like hard work. “We’ve done more with hiring labor this year than we ever have,” Suzanne says, and notes that she would not have been able to run the nursery this year without help. Ron says, “It’s not just labor, it’s specialized labor.” The help they need requires someone who’s highly skilled in grafting and pruning. He is uncomfortable with turning just anyone loose on the farm without close supervision. This might be the last year they sell a large volume of trees. “The arduous process of grafting a couple thousand trees—that’s just getting harder and harder to do,” Ron states.

The couple have no children, and they’ve been considering who is going to maintain their operation, but they say, “We haven’t figured that out yet.” But they have ensured that the land will be protected from most nonfarm land uses. A few years ago, they donated a conservation easement to New River Conservancy. The easement allows agricultural activities and another house to be built, but the remainder of the land will remain in its existing natural state.

Suzanne sees “a growing demand for old fashion apples and cider apples.” There’s opportunities for young people who would be interested in fruit-growing. Molley Chomper cidery in Lansing specializes in cider made from heirloom varieties, and wants more people to grow them. Such an opportunity probably exists with other ciderys (which are becoming more common) as well. In addition, the Joyners think a U-pick apple orchard would definitely be successful. Suzanne says, “In the fall, we have people calling us every week, if not every day, asking if they can pick apples. There’s really a demand for it.”

The Joyners have found a niche market, and advise potential farmers to do the same. “You really have to find specialty crops that will grow well in the mountains,” Suzanne says. For example, they mention a farmer they know who is investigating growing industrial hemp.

Big Horse Creek Farm is nationally significant for saving old apple varieties from extinction by maintaining them in their orchard, and selling and distributing them across the country. As long as these trees continue to bear and be propagated, the Joyners legacy will extend for decades, if not longer. Few farms can claim such influence. However, the Joyners are faced with an issue that is common (or will be soon) in Ashe County—how to keep their farmland in production as they age and need to cut back.





### ▶ Sanford Fishel

## Christmas trees, organic vegetables, pumpkins

Sanford Fishel is a full-time Christmas tree farmer (Grouse Ridge Christmas Tree Farms) who also grows a large amount of vegetables and pumpkins. In addition to trees, his operation includes making wreaths and roping. He has approximately 55 acres of pumpkins and 35 acres of organic produce. Sanford was raised in a farming environment in Winston-Salem; his father and grandfather had cattle and grew tobacco, wheat, and grain corn. In the 1970s, he bought two farms in Ashe County and planted Christmas trees, then moved to the mountains in 1986. He eventually was selling enough trees to quit his off-farm job and farm full-time. His trees are sold wholesale and at four or five retail lots (some he's had since the early 1980s). He also does choose-&-cut, but it's a relatively minor aspect of his tree marketing.

Sanford says, "We got into vegetables back when the glut of the tree market hit; just needed something else to supplement our income." He finds raising vegetables appealing because the income is made in one growing season; i.e. it's not a 7-8 year sales cycle like trees. He's found organic vegetables to be profitable, and sells through several outlets, including two farmers markets.

"Weather can be a real peril in tree farming or any other kind of farming,"

Sanford employs seven migrant workers full-time, and hires more during Christmas tree harvesting time. Two have been with him for 30 years, and they and their wives recently obtained U.S. citizenship (the wives are also employed in vegetable production and making greenery). When he began farming, he had no difficulty obtaining satisfactory local help, but now he says that's "out of the question."

Sanford says that expenses, weather, and wildlife are among his farm's difficulties. "Weather can be a real peril in tree farming or any other kind of farming," he observes, and "seed costs keep escalating," especially organic seed. One year a late frost killed the new growth on the trees, which rendered half his trees unmarketable that year. This year's wet spring made it difficult to plant. A long distance to a market is costly. Sanford sells a substantial amount of his organic vegetables to a distributor in Durham, where he delivers twice a week during the peak growing time. This marketing arrangement has required him to purchase and maintain a refrigerated truck, and hire a driver. The nature of organic farming is a challenge, with a limited number of options for controlling weeds, insects, and disease. "Patch farming" is problematic. Not all his land is contiguous, with parcels as small as four acres scattered over a wide area. Hauling workers from patch to patch can "kill 10 or 15 minutes just in that ride time, and if you've got 8 or 10 of them [workers], put that on the clock every few days and that adds up into a vacation or a new rifle or tires for your vehicle," he notes. Fluctuating markets are discouraging. When the market was flooded with Christmas trees a few years ago, Sanford says they had the most trees that they ever had. Vegetables and pumpkins are not immune from such oversupply, as he's seen prices drop on them too. Despite the challenges, however, Sanford gets satisfaction from farming. "I like to be outside; I like to watch stuff grow," he says.



Though he makes adjustments in what he grows every year, Sanford has no plans to scale back. In fact, he hopes to buy a bordering farm very soon if negotiations work out. In 42 years, he has been able to weather challenges and grow new crops in response to changing markets. His success is likely to continue.

Young pumpkin plants on the Fishel farm.



## ▶ Cheek Farmstead Creamery

Rodney Cheek (age 57) and his sons Trathen (age 31) and Brandon (age 28) own and operate Cheek Farmstead Creamery in Fleetwood. They produce and sell whole milk to various independent retail outlets in Ashe, Watauga, Wilkes, and Alleghany Counties; and directly to consumers at the Ashe and Watauga Farmers Markets. They also market direct to customers through an online food hub. Until just recently, they operated wholly as a conventional dairy farm, selling milk wholesale to a farmers cooperative. But with increasing consumer preferences for local food, they saw an opportunity to bypass the wholesaler and sell at a higher price farther along the supply chain.

The Cheek farm goes back a couple of generations to 1911, when Rodney's grandparents acquired the land. Their sons established the dairy operation in the 1950s, and helped Rodney get started in 1979. Trathen and Brandon grew into it several years later. They began to act on their vision of selling locally in 2012, when they bought processing equipment and started construction on a building to house it. It took four years for them to get established and permitted. Brandon says, "When we started, we were selling 25 gallons about every week and a half; and now we're up to 220-250 gallons a week. So people have been real good to us; trying us and supporting us."

Their cows produce about 1,000 gallons every seven days, so they still sell some wholesale, but they hope to eventually utilize all their production locally. In addition to regular milk, they also sell buttermilk, and they're thinking about offering cream products (butter, half-and-half, pure cream). Brandon says, "We could sell an unbelievable amount of butter. At the farmers market, people are always asking for butter. [Some] don't want milk, period, but they want butter." A problem with selling cream products is that 100 gallons of skim milk is leftover for every four gallons of cream produced, and they don't have many customers who want skim milk. In addition, the Cheeks would have to buy more equipment. "It's expensive to get into, so we're taking our time," Brandon says.

Several school groups have been coming to the farm for tours and milk tastings. Brandon says, "Kids love it." Trathen adds, "That's what's surprised me. I figured that old people who grew up on raw milk would like it, but it's unreal that the little kids say, 'This is better than the milk we've got at home.'"

Milk production is heavily regulated. FDA's Pasteurized Milk Ordinance is "a book about that thick," Rodney says, holding his thumb and forefinger three inches apart. An inspector comes by regularly to check the temperature in the pasteurizer and take samples for testing. The Cheeks have to leave a paper trail for much of what they do. Regardless of government regulations, the Cheeks have their own high standards and commitment to customer satisfaction. "We're grateful for the people who buy our milk," Brandon says, "This is our passion. What you're going to buy and take home with you- we have our life invested in it, so we're going to make sure it's good."

Some people who come by at the farmers markets have watched PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) videos of farm animals being mistreated. They inquire about the welfare of the Cheeks' cows, but Brandon responds, "They're your livelihood. You're not going to hurt your cows, you're going to treat them the best you can."

"This is our passion. What you're going to buy and take home with you- we have our life invested in it, so we're going to make sure it's good."

The Cheeks do all the work themselves and have no employees. Brandon says, "Hired help would be nice to help run some of these deliveries, but we can't pay anybody right now." He speculates that when they are financially able, they might hire one person in the future. Right now, debt is a challenge, says Trathen, and points to two pieces of processing equipment that cost \$20,000 each. They constructed the building that houses the equipment themselves to save money. The Cheeks also cut costs by growing their own hay and silage. They consider themselves fortunate that their access to land comes through the family. "For people interested in doing it [farming], if their family doesn't already do it, you can't afford to start," observes Brandon.

Both of the younger Cheeks are married. Brandon has two small children. Trathen says, "I hope someday me and my wife can have some kids, and I hope they're interested [in farming]; in trying to keep the farm going, some way or another." Brandon adds, "It's a good life as long as you don't care about making a lot of money. It's peaceable here."



Fresh milk being processed at the Cheek farm.



### ▶ Brian Chatham, High Mountain Farms

Ashe County native Brian Chatham is a 36-year-old full-time farmer who cultivates approximately 1,000 rented acres. Most of the acreage is in Ashe County, with the remainder in Wilkes and Alleghany. The acreage in Ashe consists of 16 individual units, varying in size up to 165 acres. His labor consists of seven Hispanic employees who work as needed, and two part-time high school students.

Vegetable production for direct-to-consumer markets is a major aspect of his operation. He runs a 20-customer CSA, and sells at three farmers markets, six restaurants, and 13 daycare centers. The variety of vegetables he produces is impressive - tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, cabbage, okra, kale, Swiss chard, among others. He is planning to install season-extending high tunnels. In addition to conventionally-grown vegetables, he is producing 20 acres of certified organic squash that will be processed into baby food. Brian sees a need for cold storage in the county; a shared-use facility that would be available to all vegetable and fruit growers.

Pumpkins is an important crop for Brian. He grows 60 acres of many different varieties, and markets them direct-to-consumer at two retail lots. He also sells to two wholesale buyers in Florida.

**Brian is distinctive in Ashe County in that he produces corn and soybeans, crops uncommon in the mountains.**

Brian obtained a degree in wildlife management ("farming for wildlife," as he puts it) and worked on farms in the West, where he developed an interest in row crops. Brian is distinctive in Ashe County in that he produces grain crops; i.e. corn and soybeans. With his grain production equipment, he also custom farms for other producers, which is a significant source of income for his overall business. He plants soybeans, sprays pesticides, and offers other services for farmers outside of Ashe County.

Finding land to farm is a challenge for Brian. He is losing his biggest farm- 165 acres that he calls the hub of his operation, where he grows vegetables and corn- because the landowner wants to grow hay. He says many landowners are reluctant to rent because they have misconceptions about farming, such as the perceived danger of pesticides. Some have had bad experiences with other crops, like soil erosion associated with tobacco production or unsightly stumps left behind by Christmas tree growers, that makes them prejudiced against any type of agriculture. The "fickleness of the weather" is another challenge. Labor is hard to find because "nobody wants to work." Distance from markets is a limiting factor. For example, he says he would produce more vegetables if a processor was located nearby. Wildlife is a problem, crows and deer in particular. For example, crows recently ate \$5,000 worth of pumpkin seed that he had planted.



Brian is planning to buy 60 acres of land in Wilkes County with a group of investors. He sees opportunities to expand row crop production, but says that the high price of land hinders such growth. Right now, in a research collaboration with NC State and the University of Georgia, he is experimenting with a new crop- rice. If successful, he plans to sell it retail to restaurants and consumers. He says a key to expansion is finding niche products, such as popcorn that he grows, packages, and sells retail. He markets his own value-added products- buckwheat flour, corn meal, and grits.

Regarding agriculture in general in Ashe County, Brian sees room for improvement. He says county leaders should support agriculture more. They should "realize there's money and economic value in agriculture." He observes that there is much potential for row crops in the county, but "a lot of people don't understand the value of their land. You can graze livestock where you can't grow crops, and I think a lot of cropland is wasted on grazing." Land "is not being utilized to its greatest capacity." In his view, younger people have very little interest in farming. He says there's an "unrealistic portrayal of agriculture in Ashe County. There's kids that don't even think you can grow corn grain up here. They don't understand the level of opportunity that's here. They think everything's a beef cow or a Christmas tree."

Brian's innovative approach to farming is his greatest strength. The diversity of his operation and his willingness to try new crops are hedges against crop failures, market downturns, or other negative outcomes. He exhibits enthusiasm and energy that bode well for the future of his farming enterprise.



### ▶ Daniel Calhoun, Christmas trees and beef cattle

The Calhoun family owns and manages a cattle and Christmas tree farm, with most of the land located in Creston. Cattle have always been a component of the farm. They once grew burley tobacco, but no longer. In the late 1990s, the family began growing Christmas trees. This crop has expanded over the years to the point where they harvested 70,000 trees in 2017. Although the Calhouns once experimented briefly with choose-&-cut, the operation is now totally wholesale.

Their farming enterprise began with land that had been in the family for some time, but they have augmented this acreage with additional land purchases and rented land. Daniel notes that he wouldn't be farming without that initial family land.

Daniel is the agriculture education teacher at Ashe County High School. He assists with the family's Christmas tree farming, and recently acquired his grandfather's 51-head cattle herd (a cow/calf operation). He sells his cattle at various markets in the region (mostly Abingdon), but says that he would definitely like to see the development of a local sales facility.

The Calhoun family harvested 70,000 trees in 2017

With a full-time job, finding time to farm is a challenge for him, but he enjoys farming. He says that time spent away from the farm at college and a teaching job elsewhere "left a void." To him, farming is not a hobby, but he says if he didn't farm, he would have to find a hobby to be satisfied.

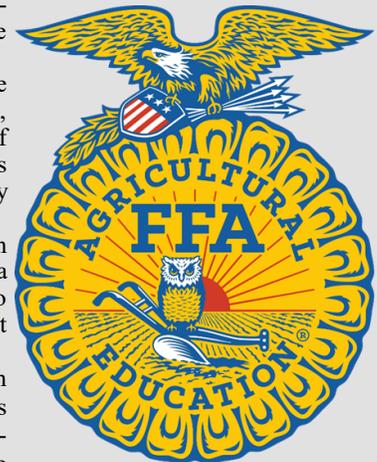
When asked about the future of farming in Ashe County, Daniel says he is "more on the optimistic side." He notes that Christmas trees are an important agricultural sector, but he sees other opportunities and potential in vegetables and cattle. However, he observes the high average age of Ashe County farmers, and sees the need to reduce that figure for farming to remain viable.

Daniel is also the agriculture education teacher at Ashe County High School. Agriculture education there consists of courses in animal science (both livestock & small animals) and veterinary assisting. In addition, Agriscience is a freshman-level course that serves as an introduction to agriculture and explores its various aspects. Approximately 85 students are enrolled in agriculture education classes (though some take more than one class).

According to Daniel, there is no typical agriculture education student. Some have a farming background, others might be a generation or two removed from farming, and some have no experience at all with agriculture other than the family garden. Some of his students intend to make a career of agriculture or veterinary medicine, while others take the classes only because they are interested. Still others enroll "just because they need a class" (though some do go on to develop an interest).

As an example of what his pupils might achieve, Daniel described a student with no previous farming experience who utilized his grandparents' idle farmland and built a successful cow/calf operation. The former student also works for another farmer who produces Christmas trees and organic vegetables. Daniel mentioned that the most difficult hurdle for a young person who wants to farm is access to land.

Daniel oversees a thriving Future Farmers of America chapter at the high school. The organization has 35 members, and most are active. Competitions that students have participated in include livestock and dairy judging, job interviewing, extemporaneous speaking, and tool identification. Members of the Ashe chapter have attended both the state and national conventions, and Daniel notes that they have come close to winning competitions at the state level.



### Summary of Interviews

It is notable that almost all the interviewees have diversified their operation or have done something innovative. Brian Chatham is the epitome of diversification. He is also growing unconventional crops (for the mountains), trying new crops, and producing value-added products. The Youngs have also diversified, into sheep. The Joyners have taken an alternative approach to marketing by selling via the internet. Similarly, the Cheeks are finding that a different marketing strategy is working for them. Sanford Fishel quickly responded to a downturn in the Christmas tree market by diversifying into organic produce, as well as pumpkins. The Phillips have cut costs by using unconventional fertilizers for their fields. Also notable is the fact that all the interviewees except the Joyners are planning to expand, in one way or another, and even they are expanding in one sense by selling more scionwood. These farmers were chosen at random to be interviewed; not with any prior knowledge of their practices. All have been successful. If they are a representative sample of farmers in Ashe, agriculture in the county is healthy and able to withstand numerous challenges.



# Challenges to Continued Family Farming

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

- ▶ Following is an analysis of the top ten challenges identified by more than 50% of survey respondents as a major or moderate challenge, along with opinions and observations made by interviewees on the same subjects.
1. Twelve out of the 23 challenges listed were chosen by over 50% of the respondents as a major or moderate challenge. “**Expenses**” ranked first at 85%. The cost of seeds was mentioned by a couple of interviewees, and the Cheeks noted that expensive processing equipment delays their plans to expand.
  2. “**Weather & Climate**” came in second at 79%. Difficulties due to bad weather was a common theme in the interviews. Late frosts, drifting snow, and muddy fields, among others, were all mentioned as hindrances. At issue is not just expected weather events, but the “fickleness” of the weather as Brian Chatham put it; e.g. warm winters and cold springs.
  3. With the average age of farmers in the county being 59, and 73% of the respondents are over 60, it is not surprising that “**Age**” ranked third (68%) as a challenge. Most of the interviewees, by chance, are middle-age or younger, so they didn’t mention age as an issue. One interviewee, though young himself, sees the need to lower the average age of farmers for agriculture to remain viable in the county.
  4. Cooperative Extension gets the most calls about pest control- i.e. weeds, insects, and disease. “**Insects and disease**” ranked fourth in the survey, where 68% of respondents said it is a major or moderate challenge. Sanford Fishel mentioned pest control as especially challenging for his organic vegetable operation.
  5. Sixty-five percent said “**Finding Adequate Labor**” is a major or moderate challenge; an issue mentioned frequently by interviewees. Farmers who were interviewed stressed that good *local* labor is hard to find. “Nobody wants to work,” says Brian Chatham. Finding good local help is “out of the question,” states Sanford Fishel. As a result, they have turned to hiring foreign nationals who have what is called H-2A visas. The drawback of hiring such workers is that the employer is required to pay inbound and outbound transportation, and provide free housing and meals. The U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division audits and inspects H-2A employers. According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, “H-2A agricultural employers are among the most heavily regulated and monitored employers in the United States.” Twenty-nine percent of farms in Ashe County hire farm labor, and 64% of those hired are H-2A workers. 82% of all workers are employed for less than 150 days.
  6. “**Government regulations/certification requirements**” was chosen by 60% of respondents. For many who grow vegetables and fruit, food safety certification is a challenge. One of Sanford Fishel’s employees spends a significant amount of his time keeping the farm in compliance with organic and food safety certification. The Cheeks dairy operation is heavily regulated, like all milk producers.

Farmers who were interviewed stressed that good *local* labor is hard to find.



7. & 8. “**Marketing (e.g. finding a suitable market)**” ranked seventh at 58%, followed by “**Lack of time/another job or other obligations**” at 55%. This figure is backed-up by census data which shows that 54% of farmers in Ashe County have a primary occupation other than farming. Two interviewees, though they like their off-farm jobs, mentioned that it hinders what they would like to do with their farms.

9. “**Distance from Market**” came in ninth at 54%. Cattlemen have expressed dissatisfaction with having to leave the county to sell their cattle. Distance was mentioned by two interviewees. One said he would expand vegetable production if a market was closer. The other noted the expense associated with transportation to a market in Durham.

10. Fifty-two percent say “**Wildlife (deer, raccoons, etc.)**” is a major/moderate challenge. A Cooperative Extension agent goes farther and says deer are “a huge, huge problem.” One interviewee had very recently lost almost all his pumpkin seedlings to crows, which cost him several thousand dollars in seed, not to mention time required to replant. The Joyners say bears climb their apple trees, breaking limbs and nearly destroying the trees.



# Challenges to Continued Family Farming

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

### ► Other Challenges

#### Access to land

A substantial number of farmers interviewed say that finding and keeping land to rent is difficult. “Leasing of idle farmland to bring it back in production” was chosen by 80% of the survey respondents as important, very important, or extremely important to maintaining and improving agriculture in the county.

Brian Chatham says that some landowners refuse to rent because of bad experiences with renting in the past. Two of the interviewees will be losing rental land shortly because the landowner intends to put the land to a different agricultural use.

Cooperative Extension agent Micah Orfield says that opportunities to rent are available if a farmer is willing to improve the property in exchange for free rent for a few years. Building a fence or clearing an overgrown pasture are two examples. She says, “There are so many ways to work around it.” She notes that such land is available in abundance in Creston and Helton.

The high cost of land makes it difficult for young people to purchase land to farm

#### High cost of land

Most interviewees mentioned that the high cost of land makes it difficult for young people to purchase land to farm. Young people who are currently farming have typically acquired land through their families. Youth are showing an increased interest in farming, but many do not come from a farming background and therefore find it difficult to acquire land. High land costs have compelled many farmers, especially cattlemen, to rent land. This situation creates uncertainty and hampers planning and investment for the farmer. Many of the landowners are absentee, meaning that they might have little attachment to the land, and therefore they might be more apt to sell the land for nonagricultural use.

#### Financing

The amount of time necessary to grow a Christmas tree to a marketable size is seven years. Therefore, a new grower must have the means to make a large initial investment without seeing any returns for many years. Seventy-five percent of survey respondents said financing is important, very important, or extremely important to maintain and enhancing agriculture in the county.

#### Commercial & residential development

The widening of Hwy 221 into four lanes (currently underway) has the potential to stimulate more commercial and residential development, which would cause land prices- currently already high- to increase even more, and pressure landowners to sell their property for nonagricultural use.

#### Proximity of farmland to water and sewer infrastructure

The map on the following page shows Jefferson and West Jefferson’s water and sewer lines that extend beyond town limits (none extend beyond town limits in Lansing), which is overlaid on property parcels receiving present-use value taxation (i.e. farmland). The availability of water and sewer infrastructure makes bordering property attractive for dense commercial and residential development because it lowers the cost of development and even makes it feasible on sites where it otherwise would not be possible.

The map shows a significant amount of farmland actually located within the town limits of the two towns. Water and sewer lines are likely readily available to those parcels. Beyond the town limits, lines extend approximately one mile along Highways 221, 163, and 16. Many farmland parcels border those lines or are close-by. This farmland is perhaps the most threatened in the county, as it would probably be attractive to developers willing to pay a premium price. Consequently, landowners might be tempted by high land prices and under pressure from developers to sell their property, resulting in conversion of farmland to non-farm use. Any opportunity to purchase an agricultural conservation easement or accept a donated easement on any of these farms should receive priority.

#### Competing land use

In more than one interview, concern was expressed about the substantial amount of productive farmland in Ashe County being acquired to enlarge state parks and state game lands (see Public Lands map and Nature Conservancy Parcels map that follow). State regulations prohibit leasing such land for farm use, and consequently this land is taken out of production permanently.

#### Age and the future of farming

The future of farming is obviously determined by the number of young people who enter the profession. The average age of farmers in the county is 59, and the average age of respondents to the survey is 65; figures that are not encouraging. 68% of survey respondents identified “age” as a major or moderate challenge to their farming operation.

84% of survey respondents said that “Access to land for beginning farmers” is important, very important, or extremely important to maintaining agriculture in the county. Most of those who successfully begin farming at a young age do so with land that has been in their family for many years. Frequently mentioned is the fact that land prices are prohibitively high for most young people without access to family land.

91% of survey respondents identified “Youth agricultural education” as important, very important, or extremely important to maintaining and improving agriculture in Ashe. Fortunately, Ashe County High School has a strong agricultural education program with many interested students. Membership in the local Future Farmers of America chapter is high and the organization is very active.



# Farmland Preservation Tools

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

### Present-Use Value Taxation

In areas where second-home development is prevalent and land prices are escalating as a result, present-use value taxation is widely regarded as one of the best methods to keep farmland in agricultural production. Without present-use value taxation, most undeveloped property is appraised for tax assessment according to its value if developed commercially or residentially. Without tax relief, many farmers would be unable to afford the property taxes and therefore be forced to sell part or all of their farmland. In Counties that have adopted present-use value taxation, farmland is appraised for its value as farmland, which in most cases is considerably less than its value for other uses. Ashe County currently utilizes present-use value taxation, and it has widespread support among farmers, according to the survey. Maintaining this program should be a priority for farmland preservation purposes.

### North Carolina Right to Farm Law

The North Carolina Right to Farm Law limits “the circumstances under which an agricultural or forestry operation may be deemed to be a nuisance.” The law simply states that no farm shall become a nuisance “by any changed conditions in or about the locality outside the operation after the operation has been in operation for more than one year, when such operation was not a nuisance at the time the operation began.”

Owners of large, multi-generational family farms would be open to an agricultural conservation easement because “they love their land and would be heartbroken to see it developed.”

### Agricultural conservation easements

An agricultural conservation easement is suitable for farm owners who wish to ensure preservation of their farmland forever. A conservation easement typically limits the number of parcels that can be subdivided from the farm and restricts the number of buildings that can be constructed. Most, if not all, farm activities can continue on the property indefinitely. The landowner retains all rights not specified as restricted, including the right to sell or bequeath the farm. Most conservation easements are perpetual; i.e. the easement runs with the deed to the property. A land trust (also known as a “conservancy”) holds the easement, monitors the property annually, and can enforce its terms through legal action if a violation occurs. Conservation easements are unique to each farm and tailored to the desires of the landowner through negotiations with the land trust. Two land trusts—Blue Ridge Conservancy and New River Conservancy—operate in Ashe County. (A third land trust—Conservation Trust for North Carolina—works to preserve land along the Blue Ridge Parkway) Currently, Blue Ridge Conservancy holds conservation easements on nine farms in the county, ranging in size from 50 to 652 acres; totaling 1,583 acres. Ten farm owners have signed conservation easements with New River Conservancy, ranging in size from 24 to 150 acres; totaling 678 acres. (see following map)



Cooperative Extension Agent Travis Birdsell believes that owners of large farms and large, multi-generational family farms would be open to an agricultural conservation easement because “they love their land and would be heartbroken to see it developed.” But most “have no idea that an agricultural conservation even exists or what that process looks like.” Agricultural conservation easements can be donated or purchased. Landowners who donate an easement usually receive a substantial tax benefit, as the dollar value of the easement is tax deductible. The North Carolina Farmland Preservation Enabling Act enables counties to purchase agricultural conservation easements. In addition, the state’s Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund provides grants for purchasing easements and certain transaction costs (e.g. attorney fees, land trust staff time, etc.).



More information on agricultural conservation easements can be found at [www.blueridgeconservancy.org](http://www.blueridgeconservancy.org) and [www.newriverconservancy.org](http://www.newriverconservancy.org).

### Farm Transition Planning

“Estate planning is a private matter that can have enormous public consequences, as landowners probably precipitate more changes to the land by dying than by anything they do while living.” (Smithson Mills “A Farmland Protection Plan for Clay County”)

Many people are familiar with at least one situation where a farmer dies without having done proper estate planning, and the heirs were forced to sell the farm for nonagricultural purposes because of tax issues. Estate planning is especially critical at this time, when the average age of farmers is 59 in Ashe County, meaning that a large transfer of farmland will occur in the next 20-30 years. Fortunately, half of the survey respondents said they have a transition plan in place. Nevertheless, the future of a significant amount of farmland likely remains in doubt. Even though many farmers have a will, that is no guarantee that the farmland will remain in production since the children of many farmers have no interest in continuing the activity.



# Farmland Preservation Tools

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

### Ashe County's Voluntary Farmland Preservation Program

A county Voluntary Farmland Preservation Program helps raise community awareness of farmland preservation among farmers and the general public.

Farming becomes difficult when threatened by neighboring land uses that are often incompatible with agriculture, as well as public and private activities with little interest in maintaining the county's farming heritage. In order to address these situations that challenge even the existence of farms, the North Carolina General Assembly created for counties the voluntary farmland preservation program as an option to adopt and implement.

Most farms are eligible to participate, as the qualifications are not stringent. In general, productive, genuine farms using acceptable management practices qualify. Participation in the Voluntary Farmland Preservation Program requires a conservation agreement between the landowner and Ashe County prohibiting non-farm use or development for at least 10 years, though a few allowances are permitted.

Informing the public, especially those buying property, of the County's program is an important element of the program's implementation. Notices are posted in County offices, and each farm receives a sign displaying a similar notice, which can be posted at an appropriate location on the farm.

A local Agricultural Advisory Board governs the program. Board members are farmers or employed in a farm-related business. They are appointed by the Ashe County Board of Commissioners. The program is administered by Cooperative Extension.

All or part of a farmer's land can be removed from the Voluntary Farmland Preservation Program, including removal of the conservation agreement restrictions, by giving written notice to the program's Agricultural Advisory Board. If part of the land is removed, the remaining portion must continue to meet the program eligibility requirements in order to remain enrolled. Every aspect of the program, listed below, benefits participating farms. Specifically, it:

- lessens the chance of conflicts with those unfamiliar with farm activities by informing the public of the program, and the locations of enrolled farms
- provides increased protection from nuisance lawsuits
- can help deter or lessen the impact of farmland condemnation by requiring a public hearing before action is taken by a government agency
- allows member farms to benefit from projects intended to enhance the profitability and preservation of farms. These projects can be funded with grants from the state's Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund.
- increases identity and pride in the agricultural community
- offers satisfaction in knowing that a farm's conservation agreement helps ensure the future of farming in Ashe County

### Other

Other farmland preservation tools are incorporated into the following section, "Opportunities for maintaining or enhancing a viable agricultural community."





# Recommendations

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

### ▶ Opportunities for maintaining or enhancing a viable agricultural community & a schedule for implementation

#### **Construct a livestock center consisting of a sales facility, processing infrastructure, a show ring, and a large conference room**

See Existing Agricultural Activity– Livestock section for more information. The need for such a facility is stressed as the highest priority by livestock producers. Scales and a facility to sort calves uniformly by weight for lot loads (as desired by buyers) are needed. Transportation of livestock out of the county for sale is problematic. The county has no large meeting space that will accommodate meetings of groups such as the cattlemen’s association. An informal group has been meeting to plan how to make a facility a reality. An unsuccessful grant application was submitted to the Tobacco Trust Fund, but applications to other funding sources are underway. Ashe County has agreed to serve as the applicant and grant manager, and take ownership when completed. The facility would reduce expenses and time associated with transporting livestock out of the county, create a suitable market, and reduce the distance to market- all challenges that ranked high in the survey.

Implementation Responsibility: Cattlemen’s Association, County government  
Schedule for Implementation: Short-term; 1-3 years

#### **Promote the enrollment of more farms into the County Farmland Preservation Program**

There is much potential for expanding the number of participants. Only 300 farms are currently enrolled, but the number of landowners receiving present-use value taxation is 1,300 (Compare the program participants map that follows with the present-use value parcel map following the introduction). Media coverage and a mailing are two examples of actions that could be taken to promote participation.

Implementation Responsibility: Farmland Preservation Advisory Board  
Schedule for Implementation: Short-term; 1-3 years

#### **Establish an Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District Program**

Augmenting the County’s existing Farmland Preservation Program with an Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District Program further advances farmland preservation efforts. Enrollment in this program makes landowners eligible to receive higher percentage (up to 90%) of cost share under the Agricultural Cost Share Program. In exchange, the land is subject to non-revocable conservation agreement that prohibits non-farm use for development for 10 years. The temporary nature of the agreement gives the landowner the opportunity to experience deeded restrictions and therefore consider a permanent conservation easement. Farms enrolled in the program are more competitive for a conservation easement grant from the North Carolina Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund.

Only 300 farms are currently enrolled in the Farmland Preservation Program, but the number of landowners receiving present-use value taxation is 1,300

Implementation Responsibility: Farmland Preservation Advisory Board  
Schedule for Implementation: Mid-term; 4-6 years

#### **Promote agricultural conservation easements to farmers with large acreage, especially those who have multi-generational farms**

Funding for agricultural conservation easements can be more easily obtained if the farm is large and/or has some distinctive characteristic (such as bordering public lands or other land with an easement). A mailing to such landowners describing easements, or a workshop on the subject would be ways to introduce them to the concept. Those who have frequent contact with farmers, such as Cooperative Extension or Soil and Water Conservation technicians, should also promote easements.

Implementation Responsibility: Land Trusts, Farmland Preservation Advisory Board, Cooperative Extension, Soil & Water Conservation District  
Schedule for Implementation: Ongoing

#### **Encourage farmers to consider using their farms for agritourism**

In view of the large number of tourists who already visit Ashe County, farmers are well-positioned to add a successful agritourism component to their operation. Agritourism holds much potential for growth in Ashe County; i.e. selling an experience, not just a product. In addition to the potential for choose-&-cut Christmas trees, products associated with the fall leaf season is another opportunity. With tourists already in the mountains buying pumpkins, Travis Birdsell says U-pick apple orchards would likely be successful, for example (none currently exist). Suzanne Joyner says, “In the fall, we have people calling us every week, if not every day, asking if they can pick apples. There’s really a demand for it.” But agritourism is not for every farm. Lack of adequate parking space would be a barrier on some farms. And it requires a sociable personality that not everyone has. A key ingredient to a successful agritourism endeavor is to sell the farm’s story as much as they sell their product. How-to workshops can be held along with tours of existing agritourism operations.

Implementation Responsibility: Cooperative Extension, Chamber of Commerce  
Schedule for Implementation: Ongoing



# Recommendations

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

### ▶ Opportunities for maintaining or enhancing a viable agricultural community & a schedule for implementation

#### **For farmers with a large number of acres that is not productive farmland, provide information and possibly educational workshops on use of such land for recreational purposes for a use fee**

Farmers willing to allow limited access to their land might gain supplemental income by charging users for hunting, fishing, bird watching, hiking, or horseback riding.

Implementation Responsibility: Cooperative Extension  
Schedule for Implementation: Mid-term; 4-6 years

#### **Inform and update county commissioners and state legislators on the status of agriculture in Ashe County**

49% of those surveyed say that “Lack of political/governmental support” is a major or moderate challenge. This challenge has also been mentioned in interviews and informal conversations. Occasional reports to the board and state elected officials on topics such as recent agriculture sales figures, new census data, new enrollments in the Farmland Preservation Program, accomplishments of the local FFA chapter, awards/recognition farmers have received, etc. would do much to draw attention to agriculture. An invitation to visit farms would give them first-hand knowledge of the farm experience.

Implementation responsibility: Representatives of the farmers market, Farm Bureau, the cattlemen’s association, and the Christmas tree association; County commissioners  
Schedule for Implementation: ongoing

#### **Rather than purchasing farmland to buffer state parks and gamelands, encourage appropriate state agencies to instead purchase easements on buffering farmland to keep it in production**

While state parks might acquire land for varying purposes and uses, often it is purchased to buffer existing park land from commercial and/or residential development. An agricultural conservation easement on bordering farmland, however, would serve the same purpose, maintain the scenic landscape, and keep the land in agricultural production. Funds that might be used to purchase the property as a buffer could go toward purchasing an easement for much less cost.

Implementation Responsibility: Farmland Preservation Advisory Board  
Schedule for Implementation: Long-term; 7-10 years



#### **Encourage the planting of white pines**

Farmers who produce greenery are now going hundreds of miles away to buy white pine stands. Cooperative Extension is currently promoting dense planting of the tree. Part of it can be harvested in 7 to 10 years for greenery, and the rest allowed to mature for timber. Such promotion should be continued.

Implementation Responsibility: Cooperative Extension  
Schedule for Implementation: Short-term; 1-3 years

#### **Educate the public about agriculture in the county**

Making the public aware of agricultural issues can have many benefits, among them- general community support for farming, which can translate into political/governmental support; reduction in the number of nuisance complaints and possible lawsuits; and increase in sales of local farm products. Public education can take many forms. Press releases and presentations to schools and civic organizations are two examples.

Implementation Responsibility: Representatives of the farmers market, Farm Bureau, the cattlemen’s association, and the Christmas tree association  
Schedule for Implementation: ongoing

#### **Develop a model lease agreement that farmers wanting to rent land can use to begin negotiations with owners of idle farmland**

Opportunities exist for farmers to rent land if they are willing to make improvements to the property in exchange for free rent for a few years. Examples include building a fence or clearing an overgrown pasture. But they might not be aware of what would be a fair exchange; e.g. the number of feet of fence constructed for a year of free rent. Providing a template with this information could encourage them to approach landowners and start negotiations.

Implementation Responsibility: Cooperative Extension; Farmland Preservation Program Advisory Board  
Schedule for Implementation: Short-term; 1-3 years

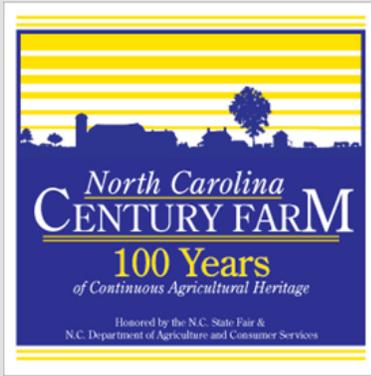


# Recommendations

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

### ▶ Opportunities for maintaining or enhancing a viable agricultural community & a schedule for implementation

#### Encourage eligible farms to enroll in the North Carolina Century Farm Program



The purpose of the North Carolina Dept. of Agriculture’s Century Farm Program is to recognize farmland that has been in the same family for at least 100 years. The farm owners receive a certificate signed by the governor and the secretary of agriculture, a durable sign for posting on the property, and an invitation to the Century Farm family reunion held every three years at the North Carolina State Fair. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the recognition is the ability to use the designation for marketing purposes. Food and ornamentals grown on a Century Farm has an added appeal to some buyers and likely gives the grower a marginal advantage when marketing the farm’s products. The designation does not impose any land use regulations and does not prohibit the sale of the property for any use. No obligations of any type are required or implied.

From the perspective of farmland preservation, a Century Farm designation emphasizes the value of a property as a farm over other types of land uses. It encourages the farm family to view their land as having special significance, and therefore could add a degree of reluctance to convert the land to non-farm use. The designation could also facilitate

consideration of a conservation easement for the property. In addition, the recognition could be a source of pride for the community as well, fostering grassroots support for preserving farmland.

The process for obtaining the designation is fairly simple. The landowner submits an abstract of title or copies of deeds showing a chain of title to blood relatives reaching back at least 100 years. The conveyances do not have to be direct from parents to offspring; as long as ownership remains in the same extended family. The current owner does not have to own all of the original acreage to be eligible; i.e. if parcels of the original farm were sold off over the years, the remaining acreage still qualifies for the designation.

According to the NCDA website, fifteen Ashe County farms, listed below with the date of their establishment, have received the designation so far:

- James C. Barlow, Kathy C. Barlow (1905)
- G. Earl Blevins (1862)
- Virgle Brown, Lorene Brown (1862)
- Nancy Duncan, Clyde Cox heirs (1834)
- James Gwyn Gambill
- Charles King (1861)
- Bruce Miller (1883)
- Fisher Farms Mrs. Dini F. Parsons (1874)
- Matt & Mike Miller Farm: Matthew Shubal Miller, Michael Paul Miller (1893)
- Joseph Phipps, Katherine Phipps (1854)
- Cheryl A. Hurt Radley
- Randy Revis, Barbara Revis
- Spencer Branch: Joyce W. Spencer (1872)
- Martin Sturgill, Wilma Sturgill (1882)
- John E. Woodie (1880)

It encourages the farm family to view their land as having special significance, and therefore could add a degree of reluctance to convert the land to non-farm use.

More information and the application form are found on this website: <http://www.ncagr.gov/paffairs/century/index.htm>

Implementation Responsibility:

Those who have frequent contact with farmers, such as Cooperative Extension or Soil and Water Conservation technicians

Schedule for Implementation:

Mid-term; 4-6 years





# Recommendations

## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

### ▶ Opportunities for maintaining or enhancing a viable agricultural community & a schedule for implementation



#### **Work with Western North Carolina FarmLink to help prospective young farmers gain access to farmland**

In the survey and interviews, farmers stressed the need for young people to acquire affordable farmland. WNC FarmLink is an organization whose purpose is to facilitate “successful relationships between farmers looking for land to farm, and landowners aspiring to keep their farm and forest land in agriculture.” More information can be found on their website: <https://wncfarmlink.org/>

Implementation Responsibility: Cooperative Extension; Farmland Preservation Program Advisory Board  
Schedule for Implementation: Mid-term; 4-6 years

#### **Educate farmers about farm transition planning**

Workshops on estate planning could jump-start the process for many farmers, as 44% of survey respondents said that they have ideas, but have not followed-up with definite plans.

Implementation Responsibility: Farmland Preservation Program Advisory Board  
Schedule for Implementation: Short-term; 1-3 years

#### **Conduct Agricultural Impact Assessments**

County ordinances, plans, programs, and actions can sometimes undermine farmland preservation efforts. Assessing their impact on agriculture and perhaps modifying such activities before taking action can lessen negative consequences. For example, the site selection process for a new industrial park or school should favor non-farmland sites over sites in agricultural use.

Implementation Responsibility: County government departments as relevant  
Schedule for Implementation: as needed

#### **Encourage municipalities to consider farmland preservation when implementing projects and making land use decisions**

A great deal of farmland is located adjacent to or actually inside town limits of Jefferson, West Jefferson, and Lansing. These Towns should be encouraged to consider possible negative impacts to farmland when making decisions regarding land use, utility extensions, and other governmental actions.

Implementation Responsibility: Farmland Preservation Program Advisory Board  
Schedule for Implementation: as needed

#### **Establish a regional identity**

Work with neighboring counties where cooperative efforts are possible, such as sponsorship of festivals and farm tours. Many grant funders favor, or even require, a regional approach to projects. Establishing a network of contacts now will facilitate partnerships when they become necessary and desirable.

Implementation Responsibility: all stakeholders    Schedule for Implementation: ongoing

#### **Cultivate good relationships with the media**

Invite members of the press to attend meetings, presentations, and other agricultural-related events in order to educate the public and government officials on the status of agriculture in the county.

Implementation Responsibility: all stakeholders    Schedule for Implementation: ongoing

#### **Foster a sense of community in the agricultural sector**

An example is the annual meeting currently sponsored by the Farmland Preservation Program Advisory Board. Look for other opportunities to bring together farmers from different commodity groups in order to network and possibly work together on projects. Be sure to include representatives of agribusiness enterprises, farm-related government agencies, elected officials (both local and state), and even funding agencies.

Implementation Responsibility: all stakeholders    Schedule for Implementation: ongoing

#### **Support programs that educate youth in general about farming, and programs that encourage and train youth for agricultural careers**

Concern about the aging farmer population and the need for more young people to make farming a career was evident in the survey and interviews. 4-H, Farm Bureau’s Ag in the Classroom, and FFA help address this situation. Support for these programs should continue.



## Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

### North Carolina Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund

The program is described on its website (<https://ncadfp.org/>) as follows:

“The purpose of the fund is to support the farming, forestry, and horticulture communities within the agriculture industry by:

- Supporting the purchase of agricultural conservation easements (on farm, forest, and horticulture lands), including transaction costs.
- Funding public and private enterprise programs that will promote profitable and sustainable family farms through assistance to farmers in developing and implementing plans for the production of food, fiber, and value-added products, agritourism activities, marketing and sales of agricultural products produced on the farm, and other agriculturally related business activities.
- Funding conservation agreements (on farm, forest, and horticulture lands) targeted at the active production of food, fiber and other agricultural products.”

### Golden LEAF Foundation

Agriculture is one of the funding priorities of Golden LEAF. Their grants “support agriculture projects as an economic development engine. Our grants for agriculture projects have supported the development of new crops, expanded markets for agriculture products, scientific research, training for farmers, cost-effective techniques and value-added agricultural enterprises.” <https://www.goldenleaf.org/>

### Tobacco Trust Fund

The program targets “a population that has been adversely affected by changes in the state’s tobacco industry.” One goal is to encourage “the economic stability of participants in the state’s agricultural economy.” Examples of projects include “incentives to grow and/or research alternative crops and/or fuel sources,” and “development of value-added facilities and/or resources.”

### North Carolina Forest Stewardship Program

The Program offers technical assistance in developing a stewardship management plan to help owners achieve their goals for their timber land. [https://www.ncforestservice.gov/fsandfl/are\\_you\\_stewardship\\_material.htm](https://www.ncforestservice.gov/fsandfl/are_you_stewardship_material.htm)

### Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)

A wide variety of agricultural projects are eligible for funding from ARC. Economic benefit must be demonstrated. [www.arc.gov](http://www.arc.gov)

### Natural Resources Conservation Services’ Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

This program provides up to 50% of the cost to purchase conservation easements on eligible farmland. Details can be found on this website- <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/easements/acep/?cid=stelprdb1242695>

### USDA Farm Service Agency’s Conservation Reserve Program

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a land conservation program administered by the Farm Service Agency. In exchange for a yearly rental payment, farmers enrolled in the program agree to remove environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production and plant species that will improve environmental health and quality. Contracts for land enrolled in CRP are 10-15 years in length. The long-term goal of the program is to re-establish valuable land cover to help improve water quality, prevent soil erosion, and reduce loss of wildlife habitat.

<https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-program/index>

### Natural Resources Conservation Service’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

“EQIP helps agricultural producers confront challenges to farming while conserving natural resources like soil, water and air. Through EQIP, NRCS provides agricultural producers with financial resources and one-on-one help to plan and implement improvements, or what NRCS calls conservation practices. Using these practices can lead to cleaner water and air, healthier soil, and better wildlife habitat, while improving agricultural operations. Through EQIP, farmers can voluntarily implement conservation practices, and NRCS co-invests in these practices. To get started, NRCS first works one-on-one with farmers to develop a conservation plan that meets their goals and vision for the land. This becomes a roadmap for which conservation practices best meet the farm’s needs. Conservation practices include high tunnels, cover crops, and on-farm energy initiatives. Financial assistance covers part of the costs from implementing conservation practices. NRCS offers about 200 practices depending on where the land is located. These practices are geared towards working farms and forests, and provide producers with many options for conservation.”



### Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan

#### **USDA Local Food Promotion Program**

The program's website states that it "offers grant funds with a 25% match to support the development and expansion of local and regional food business enterprises to increase domestic consumption of, and access to, locally and regionally produced agricultural products, and to develop new market opportunities for farm and ranch operations serving local markets."

#### **USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program**

The program's website states that its purpose is to "increase domestic consumption of, and access to, locally and regionally produced agricultural products, and to develop new market opportunities for farm and ranch operations serving local markets by developing, improving, expanding, and providing outreach, training, and technical assistance to, or assisting in the development, improvement, and expansion of, domestic farmers markets, roadside stands, community-supported agriculture programs, agritourism activities, and other direct producer-to-consumer market opportunities."

#### **USDA Farm Service Agency Loans**

Provides loans to farmers unable to obtain them from commercial sources. Program includes farm operating loans, micro-loans, farm ownership loans, youth loans, beginning farmer loans, and emergency farm loans.

#### **USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE) grants**

The goal of the grant program is for farmers to conduct projects to solve challenges and problems they face and develop information on what works and doesn't work so that other farmers facing those same problems can benefit from the results of the funded project.

#### **USDA Value-Added Producer grants**

The goals of this program are to generate new value-added products, create and expand marketing opportunities, and increase producer income.

#### **North Carolina Agriculture Cost Share Program**

A Soil and Water District program that provides cost-share funds to farmers who install conservation features and employ best management practices that address non-point source water pollution.





# Survey Results – Cover Letter

June 13, 2018

Dear Ashe County farmer,

Agriculture is a major part of Ashe County’s economy. As such, preserving a viable farm sector is important not only for farmers, but for all county residents. Keeping farmland in production involves maintaining and enhancing profitability, addressing challenges to farming, and facilitating farmland transition, among other measures. These actions can be elements of an overall county farmland preservation plan, which 55 counties in North Carolina so far have developed.

Like those 55 other counties, Ashe County has received a grant from the North Carolina Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund to develop a farmland preservation plan. A steering committee of Ashe County farmers and representatives of related organizations has been formed to guide plan development. High Country Council of Governments has been commissioned to produce the plan. It will be based on input from farmers, through the enclosed survey, and interviews of a selected group of farmers who represent all aspects of agriculture in Ashe County. The plan will analyze challenges to farming and present a range of possible solutions to address those challenges.

Who will implement the plan? It will contain a wide array of recommendations that can be voluntarily carried out by almost any organization associated with agriculture- commodity groups, Cooperative Extension, the Soil and Water District, the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board, County government, and even individual farmers.

Why is a plan needed? Grants are available to Ashe County from the Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund to pay for a variety of projects that would support agriculture. Examples of grants received in other counties include funding for shared-use equipment, feasibility studies for new crops, and purchase of voluntary agricultural conservation easements. The amount of match required from a county to receive a grant is reduced considerably if the county has a farmland preservation plan. More directly, a plan can provide direction and prioritization for agricultural organizations and County government in their efforts to support farming.

Your input is critical for the development of this plan. Please complete the attached survey and mail it in the enclosed envelope as soon as possible. We hope you will answer all the questions, but completing even a portion will be useful. Your participation is entirely voluntary, but would be much appreciated.

The survey can be taken online, if you prefer, at the following link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/M2LLF8W> . Please have the survey in the mail or taken online no later than **June 30, 2018**. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Ashe County Farmland Preservation Plan Steering Committee

Ryan Huffman  
Martin McVey  
Bill Henson

Todd Young  
Joel McNeill  
Keith Phillips

Vickie Young  
Trathen Cheek  
Priscilla Cox

Rodney Cheek  
Judy Bare



# Survey Results

Q1 How challenging are the following issues to your farm operation?

	MAJOR CHALLENGE	MODERATE CHALLENGE	MINOR CHALLENGE
Weather & climate	30.19%	49.06%	20.75%
Insects & disease	20.75%	47.17%	32.08%
Government regulations/certification requirements	24.53%	35.85%	39.62%
Expenses	50.00%	35.19%	14.81%
Finding adequate labor	44.44%	20.37%	35.19%
Marketing (e.g. finding a suitable market)	25.00%	32.69%	42.31%
Competition/oversupply	13.21%	28.30%	58.49%
Neighboring land use that is incompatible with farming	11.32%	26.42%	62.26%
Changing consumer preferences	9.62%	13.46%	76.92%
Lack of access to an adequate amount of land	18.87%	7.55%	73.58%
Lack of capital or financing needed to expand	17.31%	21.15%	61.54%
Lack of time/another job or other obligations	37.74%	16.98%	45.28%
Lack of technical assistance/education	5.66%	30.19%	64.15%
Lack of community support for farming	11.54%	26.92%	61.54%
Lack of political/governmental support for farming	20.75%	28.30%	50.94%
Difficulty obtaining supplies or farm-related services	14.81%	25.93%	59.26%
Unreliable markets	28.30%	20.75%	50.94%
Distance from market	27.78%	25.93%	46.30%
Age	19.64%	48.21%	32.14%
Land that is only marginally suitable for farming	12.73%	25.45%	61.82%
Soil &/or stream bank erosion	5.36%	23.21%	71.43%
Wildlife (deer, raccoons, etc.)	17.86%	33.93%	48.21%
Finding and/or keeping land to rent	9.26%	16.67%	74.07%



# Survey Results

Q2 Following are various programs, activities, issues, and actions that can potentially affect the long-term success of farming in Ashe County. Please indicate how important you think each item is to maintaining and improving agriculture in the county.

	EXTREMELY IMPORTANT	VERY IMPORTANT	IMPORTANT	SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT	NOT IMPORTANT	DON'T KNOW/NEUTRAL
Access to land for beginning farmers	34.55%	20.00%	29.09%	9.09%	1.82%	5.45%
Purchase of agricultural conservation easements	10.91%	27.27%	29.09%	12.73%	9.09%	10.91%
Present-use value land taxation	64.29%	14.29%	16.07%	0.00%	1.79%	3.57%
A facility for livestock sales	25.45%	29.09%	18.18%	7.27%	7.27%	12.73%
Diversifying the products produced by individual farms	14.29%	30.36%	35.71%	8.93%	1.79%	8.93%
The County's existing voluntary farmland preservation program	33.33%	19.30%	19.30%	12.28%	1.75%	14.04%
Ability to secure adequate labor	32.73%	32.73%	23.64%	9.09%	1.82%	0.00%
Labor management training	7.41%	31.48%	31.48%	14.81%	9.26%	5.56%
Local or regional branding of farm products	11.11%	27.78%	31.48%	12.96%	1.85%	14.81%
A meeting facility for agricultural education, demonstrations, commodity groups, etc.	12.96%	22.22%	33.33%	12.96%	12.96%	5.56%
Website development for individual farms	5.77%	21.15%	30.77%	26.92%	7.69%	7.69%
Estate planning for farm transition	22.64%	49.06%	15.09%	7.55%	1.89%	3.77%
Availability of shared-use equipment	14.81%	18.52%	29.63%	18.52%	9.26%	9.26%
Access to farm product processing equipment/services	11.32%	16.98%	37.74%	20.75%	5.66%	7.55%
Development of new farm products & markets	26.42%	39.62%	16.98%	13.21%	1.89%	1.89%



# Survey Results

Q2 Following are various programs, activities, issues, and actions that can potentially affect the long-term success of farming in Ashe County. Please indicate how important you think each item is to maintaining and improving agriculture in the county. (continued)

	EXTREMELY IMPORTANT	VERY IMPORTANT	IMPORTANT	SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT	NOT IMPORTANT	DON'T KNOW/NEUTRAL
Youth agricultural education	38.89%	35.19%	16.67%	5.56%	0.00%	3.70%
Promotion of agricultural tourism	20.75%	30.19%	24.53%	13.21%	3.77%	7.55%
Access to cold storage	7.69%	17.31%	26.92%	19.23%	15.38%	13.46%
Conservation cost-share programs	20.37%	33.33%	18.52%	11.11%	7.41%	9.26%
Organic farming support & training	7.55%	35.85%	28.30%	15.09%	7.55%	5.66%
Ability to produce value-added products	11.32%	37.74%	28.30%	9.43%	3.77%	9.43%
Crop & livestock production technical assistance, education, & training	33.96%	26.42%	22.64%	5.66%	3.77%	7.55%
Availability of energy alternatives	9.43%	37.74%	16.98%	18.87%	9.43%	7.55%
A facility to work livestock (e.g. vaccinate, castrate, etc.)	22.64%	18.87%	22.64%	13.21%	11.32%	11.32%
Ability to market farm products directly to consumers	36.54%	30.77%	21.15%	5.77%	1.92%	3.85%
Consumer "Buy Local" education	23.08%	40.38%	21.15%	9.62%	0.00%	5.77%
Farm neighbor education	19.23%	28.85%	28.85%	9.62%	5.77%	7.69%
Business planning assistance	13.21%	32.08%	30.19%	13.21%	5.66%	5.66%
Availability of financing	26.42%	26.42%	22.64%	16.98%	1.89%	5.66%
Leasing of idle farmland to bring it back into production	29.63%	18.52%	31.48%	9.26%	7.41%	3.70%
Opening institutional markets (e.g. schools, hospitals, etc.) for local farm products	28.85%	25.00%	25.00%	5.77%	3.85%	11.54%
A facility to weigh, sort, & prepare livestock for sale	28.30%	15.09%	24.53%	5.66%	9.43%	16.98%



# Survey Results

Q3 Within the next 10 years, what are your plans for your farming operation?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Plan to expand	25.45%
Plan to scale back	12.73%
No plan to change	49.09%
Plan to stop farming	12.73%

Q4 What do you expect will happen to most of your farmland in the next 20 years?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Nothing different; I'll keep it just the way it is.	22.81%
It will pass to a family member(s) and continue to be farmed.	35.09%
It will pass to a family member(s) and no longer be farmed.	15.79%
It will be sold to someone else for agricultural use.	8.77%
It will be sold for development by me or a relative.	3.51%
I have no idea.	10.53%
Other (please specify)	3.51%

Q5 Do you have a transition plan for what will happen to your land after you pass on?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes, I have it all worked out.	44.44%
I have some ideas, but have made no decisions.	44.44%
I have never thought about a transition plan for my land.	5.56%
No, I don't need a transition plan as I plan to dispose of my land before then.	5.56%



# Survey Results

## Q6 How long has your land been in your family?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
0-5 years	0.00%
5 - 20 years	3.51%
20 - 50 years	43.86%
more than 50 years	52.63%

## Q7 What is your age?

	RESPONSES
30-39 years	3%
40-49 years	10%
50-59 years	14%
60-69 years	31%
70-79 years	31%
80-89 years	9%
90-99 years	1%

## Q8 Do you rent land from anyone?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes	23.21%
No	76.79%

## Q9 Do you rent land to anyone?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes	36.84%
No	63.16%



# Survey Results

Q10 What do you produce on your farm?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
cattle	53.57%
sheep or goats	10.71%
hay	58.93%
Christmas trees	23.21%
other ornamentals	7.14%
produce (vegetables, fruit)	14.29%
pumpkins	1.79%
greenhouse products	3.57%
grain corn	1.79%
Other (please specify)	28.57%

Q11 Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of agriculture in Ashe County?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
optimistic	45.45%
pessimistic	20.00%
not sure	34.55%