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Survey: Residents would pay to protect farmland

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Published: Saturday, April 4, 2009 at 4:30 a.m.

Henderson County residents would be willing to pay \$184 a year to protect farmland, according to a recent study.

The study surveyed nearly 1,000 residents in Henderson, Madison, Buncombe and Haywood counties, as well as visitors to the region. Called the Farmland Values Project, it examined the appeal of farmland and what value people placed on farms. The study was conducted by Leah Greden Mathews, a UNCA economics professor, and a team of researchers.

"Residents and visitors were willing to pay to protect farmland," Mathews said Thursday during a presentation on the study in Fletcher.

From 2002 to 2007, North Carolina lost more than 600,000 acres of farmland. At the same time, farming is the top industry in the state. Farm sales were \$10.3 billion in 2007 and accounted for 20 percent of the state's income.

The biggest threat to farming in Western North Carolina is development and population growth. The region saw a 45 percent increase in population from 1990 to 2004. Farm loss in Western North Carolina "was pretty dramatic" as a result, Mathews said.

In Henderson County, 89.9 percent of the people who participated in the study were concerned about farmland being developed and 84.6 percent wanted more done to protect farmland.

The main benefit respondents garnered from farms was locally produced food. Seventy-one percent say they would pay more for locally grown food if they

knew it came from protected farmland.

The survey asked respondents if they would be willing to pay money to help protect farmland, and the average amount was \$184.

FARMING STILL A BUSINESS

The challenge, though, is making farms in the region profitable. A second study discusses tools to help farms increase income.

"A lot of our farms are not making money," said Jeanine Davis, an associate professor and N.C. Cooperative Extension Service specialist at the Mountain Horticultural Crops Research and Extension Center in Fletcher.

The Farm Prosperity Project developed tools to help farmers assess their situations; provided educational opportunities for farmers, public officials and communities; and provided resources to keep farms viable and develop new crops.

The study talked with 35 agriculture professionals, conducting surveys, interviews and focus groups. The project developed methods to help farmers make decisions on crops and values.

"People need ways to figure out what is sustainable for them and their family," Davis said.

She talked with farmers about different specialty crops and ways to diversify farm income. She also looked at direct market outlets and how farmers can increase their profit margins on agriculture products.

"We are hoping to develop tools that can be used in other areas of the country," Davis said.

For the study, the researchers looked at organic and heirloom tomatoes. They found a strong local market for the tomatoes and local consumers were willing to pay a high price. There was high risk growing organic tomatoes, Davis said, but they had the potential for a high return.

"Farms are a business," Davis said. "If they can't be profitable, they will not continue to exist."
