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Study: Farms valued for beauty, local food option

By Dale Neal

Farms are worth more than just the market value of their acreage, according to a new study by an economist at UNC Asheville.

Local produce and scenic beauty ranked high in a survey of residents and visitors, who said they were willing to donate their money to protect those rural landscapes,

Backed by a \$390,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Leah Mathews and her team have wrapped up the Farmland Values Study, the first of its kind in the nation, polling 1,100 residents in Buncombe, Haywood, Madison and Henderson counties and 307 visitors for their thoughts about the value of farmland.

"The results show that scenic quality and the maintenance of rural landscapes are important, both for quality of life for residents and for attracting visitors," said Mathews.

On average, residents said they are willing to make voluntary donations of up to \$185 to protect scenic views and fields that grow local produce. Visitors to the area said they would be willing to donate \$195 a year to preserve rural landscapes of Western North Carolina.

"I was surprised by how much that was," Mathews said.

While survey respondents didn't want to see any increases in property taxes, they were interested in supporting nonprofits with their donations, Mathews said. "Most of the people wanted the donations to be run by locally managed nonprofits. We need to be thinking of creative ways to funnel that revenue from folks who say they value those nonprofits."

The Farmland Values Study pinpointed areas around the four-county region that respondents thought had special scenic and cultural value, including Sandy Mush and Fairview, Mills River in Henderson County, Bethel in Haywood County and Wolf Laurel in Madison County.

In other survey results:

The top five benefits for farmland were locally produced food, scenic beauty, jobs for farmers and others in agriculture, a link to agricultural heritage and open space.

88 percent of residents responding to the survey are concerned about development of farmland.

83 percent agreed the community needs to do more to protect farms.

88 percent of visitors and 64 percent of residents in the survey were willing to pay more for their food if the difference in price went directly to protect farmland.

The mail-in survey skewed older than the average age of the population since federal regulations required all participants be over 18 years old, Mathews said.

Respondents on average were 60 years old and have lived in their county for 35 years.

“Most of our sample were really long-term residents of our area who had been here on average 35 years,” Mathews said.

“These are folks who know the area pretty well. They know about farmlands. They been here and have seen some of the changes.”

The study will be rolled out across the region in a series of meetings with farmers, residents and elected officials. “For local policymakers, it gives them a snapshot of what people are thinking about farmland in their community. Right now we have many communities putting together farm protection programs or are working on them,” Mathews said.
