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Saving farms

Projects seek to protect farmland

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Many of the benefits of farmland go to people who aren't farmers, but how many of those people value the land from which they reap these benefits?

The results of two recently released studies helped to quantify the value farmers and non-farmers place on agricultural land. The results were presented to the general public for the first time March 19 at a public forum at the Haywood County Cooperative Extension Office. Area farmers received a presentation on the results March 12.

The Farm Prosperity Project, led by Jeanine Davis of the N.C. State Mountain Horticultural Crops Research and Extension Center in Mills River, worked with farmers in a five-county area - Buncombe, Haywood, Henderson, Madison and Transylvania counties - to determine what it would take to preserve farmland and make farms more profitable.

"Our hypothesis when we started this project was that if we combined the right mixture of the right high-value crops or enterprises with the right farmland protection techniques that we could make more profitable farms, we could protect open spaces, and we could have these balanced communities that people seem to be looking for," Davis said. "They want the rural areas, but they want their services and they want their conveniences."

The Farmland Values Project, led by Leah Greden Mathews, associate professor of economics at UNC Asheville, sought to learn how the community and visitors to the area viewed and valued farms.

Mathews study focused on the Asheville metropolitan statistical area, which includes Buncombe, Haywood, Henderson and Madison counties.

"There have been a lot of changes in these areas over the last 20 years," she said.

These projects were funded by grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture - Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service Small and Mid-Sized Farms Program. The Farmland Values and Farm Prosperity projects are supported by the National Research Initiative of the USDA Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service.

Valuing farmland

Agriculture is the North Carolina's No. 1 industry, Davis said, making up 17 percent of the workforce. Farm sales were \$10.3 billion in 2007 accounting for 20 percent of the state's income.

“This is a huge surprise when I talk to the general public because most people don't think of us as an agricultural state,” she said.

The state also leads the nation in loss of farmland. According to the latest U.S. Census of Agriculture, the state lost more than 600,000 acres of farmland from 2002-2007.

“We're in an area of great transition,” Davis said. “Our small mountain farms are giving way to development. Yet everyone you talk to wants to save farms.”

From 1987-2002, the number of farms in Haywood County decreased 12 percent, and 11 percent from 2002-2007, according to U.S. Census of Agriculture data. At the same time, the average size of farms has decreased, with farms reducing acreage by 7 percent from 1987-2002 and by 2 percent from 2002-2007.

The population of Haywood County has increased 20 percent from 1990-2007, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

“We have a pretty significant increase in population over the past 25 years here in Western North Carolina and that is part of the reason why you are seeing land use change,” Mathews said.

The nearly four-year Farmland Values Project used focus groups, interviews and surveys to gather information about the benefits farmland provides to the region and combined the data with maps to identify specific places in the region people value for cultural heritage and scenic beauty.

For example, the survey results show residents and visitors in Haywood place significant value on Bethel and Jonathan Valley communities.

The Farmland Value Project results showed that 77 percent of Haywood County residents surveyed are concerned about the likelihood that farmland would be developed for non-farm use, and 71 percent believe more needs to be done to protect farmland.

The survey also showed that both residents and visitors would be willing to pay an average of \$185 a year to help protect farmland in the region, and 65 percent of respondents said they'd be willing to pay more for food if the extra money went to protect farmland.

“The benefits of farmland go to people who aren't farmers in the form of scenic beauty, flood control, wildlife habitat and of course access to local food,” Mathews said.

The Farm Values study results can be found online at www.unca.edu/farmlandvalues.

Prosperous farms

The Farm Prosperity Project, which combined the forces of N.C. State University, Land-of-Sky Regional Council, Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, Carolina Mountain Conservancy, American Farmland Trust, Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy and Warren Wilson College, worked with local farmers to develop tools to help farmers make decisions about their farms, how to preserve them, and what to grow.

“We took a multi-faceted approach,” Davis said. “We wanted to develop decision making tools to help farmers assess their situation and choose the best combination of new crops and farmland protection techniques for their particular farms.”

“We wanted to provide education opportunities not just for the farmers but for our elected officials and for the communities in general. We wanted to put more staff in the land trust offices who were focused specifically in farmland protection, and we wanted to put out resources to help make farms more viable businesses.”

The project teams created some decision tools designed to help farmers determine which protection methods and new crop or agricultural enterprises are best suited for them and their land.

“A lot of times we need these little simple tools to try and help us go through what's right for us because all those options can be overwhelming. This tool helps with that,” Davis said.

The project's results and assistance tools are available online at <http://ncspecialtycrops.org/farmprosperity>.

The Farm Prosperity Project team also conducted three years of field studies on organic and heirloom tomatoes.

They found that organic heirloom tomato production is not cheap or easy to do, but it can be highly profitable, Davis said.

“Profitable enough that two weeks ago we submitted a new proposal to the USDA in cooperation with University of Tennessee to do a three-year \$2.5 million study on developing new varieties of tomatoes that are well-suited to organic production to help overcome some of the problems we encountered,” Davis said.
