

**Pender County Listening Session
Cooperative Extension Service Offices
January 25, 2013**

Partners: Feast Downeast, formerly feast Southeast (*Jane Steigerwald and Leslie Hossfeld*); NC State University & NCA&T Cooperative Extension (*Mark Seitz*), Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (*Shivaugn Rayl*).

Nearly 30 people attended. Experts from the state regulatory community were present including a representative of NCDA&CS Food & Drug (*Kirstin Baughman*) (departed early due to weather) and federal expertise from USDA Rural Development (*Randy Gore, State Director, North Carolina*). **NC Local Sustainable Foods Council members present:** Margaret Newbold, Conservation Trust for North Carolina and Debbie Hamrick, NC Farm Bureau Federation

Special Guest: Randy Gore, Director for North Carolina, USDA Rural Development addressed the group. He is a native of Brunswick County and worked in Pender County. USDA RD has distributed \$6.3 billion in funds to North Carolina in the past 4 years. Randy reviewed the USDA Rural Development programs that have been operating and are available in the region:

- Business & Industry Guarantee Program, which guarantees loans from conventional lenders. Loans are available to new and disadvantaged farmers up to \$35,000; these loans have simplified application requirements.
- Community Facilities Loan and Grant Program, available to non-profit, federally-recognized Indian tribe, or a unit of local government.
- Rural Business Grants: available to smaller emerging businesses with fewer than 50 employees or having generated less than \$1 million in first 4 years.
- Rural Business Opportunity Grant, capped at \$50,000 for engineering studies, market studies, feasibility studies, etc.
- Rural Cooperative Development Grant, which has provided \$175,000 to NC A&T SU and \$225,000 to NCSU to help with rural education.
- Value-Added Producer Program, grants available to producers ranging from goat dairy to sweet potato fries. About 8 grants were made in 2011 and about 6 in 2012. 2013 grant funds will be available 10/1-9/30.

Discussion

Department of Transportation Planning: An attendee raised an issue with water backing up onto her farm after construction on I-40; she asked the council for additional resources to address the flooding on her property. A representative of the town of Burgaw

planning department echoed concerns about expansions of roadways causing additional flooding because wetlands and soil types are not thoroughly considered in planning—this causes negative impacts on property values in the town as well.

Invest in Local Communities: Participants discussed the level of poor nutrition, ill-health, and lack of available access to healthy food as a community level problem, one that local farmers are committed to fixing. These farmers asked that more funds be spent at the local level rather than on state and federal level programs, to allow the local people to invest in their own communities in the way that will improve them.

Marketing & Distribution: Several participants agreed that it was too hard for many small farmers to farm and to do their own marketing and distribution. Many lauded the work of the regional food hub in Burgaw and asked for additional funding to help cooperative extension agents, the food hub, and others continue to support farmers' needs for marketing and distribution. One of the biggest challenges discussed was setting a price for farm products that is fair to the farmer and fair to the distributor, recognizing these small farms do not have the economies of scale that the large growers do.

Technical Assistance & Education: Many participants expressed dismay at the shrinking public investment in the cooperative extension service. One person referenced a local vegetable agent and said she has to cover five counties. While extension is adopting technology that can increase impact (e-mail, web), many small farmers who need assistance are not ready to use those formats to receive information. Also, internet coverage is unavailable in some areas. One participant urged others to share information about a program from NC A&T SU called, Farmers Adopting Computer Technology (FACT), which provides a computer to farmers who complete the class.

EBT/SNAP: The application is huge and training volunteers is time consuming. Many stakeholders saw the need for more public investment in getting EBT/SNAP access in more low income communities.

Organic Certification: “Why do we have to pay for a certifier to come from Clemson or Virginia?” was asked by one participant. Another said that about 11 different companies do certification in NC. Participants suggested the state could support an in-state certifier as a resource for organic growers. Certifiers' travel-time and the time they are on land are billed. Though some growers coordinate with nearby farms to lower costs, it can be prohibitively expensive and some otherwise-organic growers don't certify because of the cost.

One participant suggested the council should be more actively supporting organic agriculture. He said “people want to learn organic. They are concerned about the rising use of pesticides. Since this is a food council session, more attention needs to be turned in this direction. The people are concerned.”

Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs): Concerns were raised about the costs of GAP audits and certification, citing travel costs and audit fees, especially where the auditor requires a visit for each individual product to be certified. Many participants also expressed the need for additional GAP training for farmers market vendors, for direct-market growers, and for those who want to sell into wholesale markets or to institutional buyers.

Farmland preservation: Available tax breaks for Present-Use Value do not help farmers who are just starting out when their start-up costs are high at the same time they are paying full market value taxes during the 3 year waiting period. Some farmers who want to keep their land in agriculture have difficulty finding someone else to farm their land, and when they cannot, they turn to development as an option.

Job creation: Many participants described local food as a part of sustainable economic development. One person highlighted that large companies are looking at corporate sustainable responsibility models and are including food in those conversations. There may be unexplored options for building the local food economy that grow from commitments by local companies to support the sector.

The Burgaw shared use facility was cited as a job creator: 15 new jobs over 2 years. The facility also provides information on nearby packaging and processing facilities, which funnels business into the community and is sometimes a better choice for food entrepreneurs rather than trying to do everything on his/her own.

New products: Concerns were raised that required new product testing for pH and food safety takes forever through the NCSU lab. This slows down new product development and hinders entrepreneurs in their efforts. Can more resources be directed here to solve this bottleneck?