

## High Country Listening Session

Family Central, Jefferson NC

March 14, 2013

**Partners:** Advantage West; Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project; Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture; Carolina Farm Stewardship Association; NC Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services; NC Farm Bureau Federation; NCSU & NCA&T State Coop. Extension Services; Seeds of Change Appalachia; Appalachian District Health Dept.; Heifer International; and High Country Workforce Development Board.

About 15 people attended. NC Local Sustainable Foods Council members present: Debbie Hamrick

One audience member acknowledged the NC Local Sustainable Foods Advisory Council for addressing a barrier. Small farm GAP certification, preventing small farms in the region from selling to local institutional buyers such as Lees-McRae College. As a result input, Council members collaborated (CFSA/NCDA&CS/NCSU) and obtained a grant to work on the issue, resulting in whole farm GAPs audits.

Direct marketing to institutions. Encourage state run institutions to purchase local products, along the lines of the renewable energy portfolio.

Ready-to-cook produce. Issue in selling to institutions or others purchasing fresh produce is that the customer requires product processed to a certain point so it is ready to use. Many school systems for instance purchase foods that are precooked or cooked and frozen. Many institutions are not prepared to deal with cutting stalks off of broccoli. Could an aggregation center be set up next to the commercial Kitchen at Family Central? Example at BRFV...person who took potatoes from a grower and processed them to meet the school system standard. Also Winter Sun @BRFV does a winter CSA—they buy from farmers and flash freeze it, sell frozen f/v off-season.

Voluntary Ag Districts (VAD). A local farm facing an eminent domain issue with NCDOT...Are there ways to strengthen farm landowner rights in eminent domain situations so that it's stronger for other farmers? Is VAD the best protection? Could it be strengthened?

Cost share for organic farmers. Is anything being done to help organic farmers with cost share? Last year \$60,000 went to NC organic operations to farms and processors, \$750 at a time.

Accessibility of government employees. Voicemail messages of government employees don't always provide hours of availability. How can you reach them? It's very difficult to get in touch with the right people. Can they please include working hours in messages?

Food Safety. How is a small farmer supposed to approach GAPs? How can we get more connection between NCDA&CS, NCSU/NCA&T Extension and wholesale buyers to work together?

Marketing coops. NC statutes allow for formation of non-profit farmers marketing coops. IRS also recognizes 521a farmer's coop, that is an ideal model, but it has its own set of problems. It allows us to meet the need of some pretty big retail outlets like Earthfare and Whole Foods. We have 50+ farmers, so we can give them enough carrots. There are also some legal reasons to do it. Pricing exemptions under state and federal law to organize and establish prices. A lot of areas/regions would be ideal for farmers to organize.

CSA. Is there a challenge here to market CSAs? Rural people tend to have backyard gardens.. Struggle in marketing the shares. Have to do a lot of education. The ASAP CSA fair has helped to raise awareness. High Country CSA, multi-farm. In the last year w/other community members and health dept. started cost share for EBT. The Health Dept. asked how we can increase EBT usage. So last year (2012) for a 12-week CSA, folks with EBT or identified through the agency were eligible--each week they would swipe card for \$5 dollars and they would get \$15. Funded by grants ADHD and through membership. One of the participating farmers raised a couple of hundred dollars. About 35 signed up, some dropped off because of issues, like transportation. Hope to have the same number again. It's \$300 share, so they paid \$100 over the course of the season; the other \$200 came from grants and fund raising.

Meat processing. There is interest in on-farm mobile processing units for cattle and sheep and goats and pigs. For small pasture based farmers, beginning farmers, esp. in pilot year getting animals even 45 minutes down the mountain to the slaughter house is a very big deal. Is mobile processing an option in the region?

Brand proliferation. Someone may need to coordinate all the brands.....High Country Grown; High Country Local First; Appalachian Grown; Blue Ridge Naturally; NROG brand; Got to be NC.

Profit in local foods. How can you farm if you don't have another job? You have to build it up: hoop houses, tractors. I don't know how a young person does it if they don't have family w/assets. And you need insurance. Here in the county ag has been a supplemental income. Many farmers come from other professions into farming fulltime. One of barriers for young people, profitability, education and access to capital. If we could strengthen farmland preservation so you don't have to buy at development prices that would be beneficial. One of biggest things, business end of it so you know going into it at the end of the first year there is hope or no hope if you're not making money.

*Written comment submitted from Bill Hanlin, Wilkes County Extension Director.*

Vegetable industry is very small, and the number of vendors at our farmers' markets is limited. Many people have tried and failed to get into vegetable production often because of a low rate of return on investment and thus lack of economic viability. The local tree fruit industry can keep up with demand, but the average age of farmers is high and retirements will affect future supply.