

# Barriers to Farming in Western North Carolina Survey and Interview Data Assessment August 2015



## Executive Summary:



The organic foods market has grown to more than a \$35 billion national market and the demand for locally grown food is at an all-time high. While farming is a rich part of Western North Carolina's (WNC) heritage, both the land in farming and the total number of farms in NC have decreased. Since 2008 NC has lost 2,500 farms and the amount of land in farming has dropped by 100,000 acres (Krueger)<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, the average age of farmers in the US is 58 (Briefing on the Status of Rural America)<sup>2</sup>. In NC, over 70% of the farms are owned by farmers over the age of 55 and nearly two-thirds of those are over 65 (USDA 2012 COA)<sup>3</sup>.

Our region needs an influx of farming entrepreneurs in order to sustain and grow regional production. New farmers are more likely to be interested in sustainable agriculture practices and running farm operations in the small-to-mid-sized range, which is ideal for Western NC. At the same time, they are more likely to be inexperienced and underfunded. These farmers face many challenges including access to land, capital, skills, support, and training. If the retention and success rate of new farmers in our area is to increase, we need to provide assistance and training during the transition of new growers to viable agricultural business owners. Farming today takes courage and perseverance, dedication and time, but few who start will succeed without help. The success of beginning farmers and the WNC region are entwined.

From our internal evaluations, anecdotal feedback, and tracking of trends, we know that the training and support needs of new farmers includes production training, whole-farm business planning, mentorships, peer-to-peer access, and sustained support through the start-up years.

Since no programs of this scope exist in our region and no extensive evaluations of new farmers have been conducted, the Organic Growers School (OGS) felt the need to assess our farmer's specific needs in achieving viable farm businesses and conduct an analysis of the successful farmers to assess the ingredients to a thriving and tenable life in agriculture.

<sup>1</sup> Krueger

<sup>2</sup> USDA , Briefing on the Status of Rural America

<sup>3</sup> USDA Census Bureau

## Purpose, Methods & Use:

Organic Growers School is in the process of creating a comprehensive, regionally-informed farmer training program intended to maximize economic success for WNC farmers. The program, *Farm Pathways: Access to Land, Livelihood, & Learning* will not only cover all facets of whole-farm business planning from fiscal management and marketing to sustainable production, but will pull together the best practices and training components of regional organizations into a one-stop “school-and-field” educational program. This training program, with the help of our partners, will ensure not only production and fiscal competency but also provide innovative land access opportunities thus creating a pathway to long term land access and tenure.

In order to ensure that the program is farmer led and directed we sought information and input directly from WNC farmers. Our research implemented a mixed methods research model to specifically target emerging farmers as well as start-up and established farmers to collect data directly from those involved in commercial agriculture. We conducted an online survey, held one-on-one farmer interviews and a farmer focus group to assess the *barriers to farming* in WNC. Our intention was to discover the specific barriers to successful farming in WNC and more importantly, the kinds of services, training or support that are needed for our farmers to succeed. OGS will use the results of this study to guide our farmer programs and partnerships.

## Summary of Results & Common Themes:

The primary barriers to successful farm enterprises that emerged from this project (online survey, individual interviews and focus group discussions) are as follows:

- **Access to land**- The ability to find land to lease, rent or buy is considered the number one barrier to farming in WNC. The high price of land prohibits most new farmers from purchasing and equitable, long-term leases on usable agricultural land are hard to secure.
- **Access to capital**- New farmers find it difficult to navigate lending institutions and government programs offering start- up capital. This is compounded by the fact that many are not farming on land they own, lacking collateral or equity.
- **Access to markets**- This barrier was reiterated in all research formats, articulating a continuing need for diverse marketing options for new farmers all competing for direct marketing avenues.
- **Access to off-farm trainings and classes** - Also considered a significant barrier. This highlights a need for more off farm instruction and trainings.
- **A need for knowledge of legal requirements, business skills, and financial planning**. These topics were covered in multiple questions and all rated high. This was also confirmed in interviews and in the focus group confirming the need for a farmer training program that includes these elements.
- **A need for ongoing assistance and mentorship** for beginning farmers from experienced farmers as farm expansion decisions are made.

## Next Steps:

The Organic Growers School received support in 2015 from the USDA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program for the development of a comprehensive, regionally-informed farmer training program tailored to maximize economic success for WNC farmers. As a result Organic Growers School, in partnership with the Southern Appalachians Highlands Conservancy (SAHC), and WNC FarmLink, have developed, *Farm Pathways: Access to Land, Livelihood, and Learning*. This program will not only cover all facets of whole-farm business planning from fiscal management and marketing to sustainable production, but will pull together the best practices and training components of regional organizations into a one-stop "school-and-field" educational program. This training program will ensure not only production and fiscal competency but also provide innovative land access opportunities through the incubator farm at SAHC and WNC FarmLink farmland access program to create a pathway to long term land access and tenure.

The development and implementation of the *Farm Pathways* training program will be directly based on this research data. The most commonly selected services and trainings will be featured in our program in order to begin to address the above-named barriers. Farmers will continue to be directly involved in the development, implementation and instruction for *Farm Pathways*. While these barriers cannot all be solved by one program, we hope to prepare farmers with the needed tools to face uncertain markets and offer more opportunities for success.



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*For more information about this study, the Farm Pathways Project  
& the Organic Growers School please visit*

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