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Barriers to Farming in Western NC Survey Results Released

PRESS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

Asheville, NC: Organic Growers School recently released the results of a months-long survey of local farmers to ascertain the barriers to farming in Western NC. The survey, *Barriers to Farming in Western North Carolina*, was conducted by the Farmer Programs staff of Organic Growers School (OGS) from April through July 2015 and is comprised of a widespread survey, one-on-one interviews, and input from a farmer focus group. The survey has been made public and is available [online](#).



"In order to develop our new *Farm Beginnings*® program, a comprehensive beginning farmer training program, we needed to understand the barriers to successful farming in Western North Carolina, and more importantly, discover the kinds of services, training, and support our farmers need in order to succeed," says Nicole DeIcogliano, the Farmer Programs Associate at OGS. She adds, "OGS will use the results of this study to guide our farmer programs and partnerships."

The *Barriers to Farming in Western North Carolina* survey was divided into three concentrations: access, knowledge & expertise, and lifestyle & community. With the guidance and suggestions of OGS staff, board, and farmer committee members, and with the help of their regional allies and partners the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy and WNC FarmLink, OGS launched the survey on May 7, 2015. In total, over 15 organizations and more than 30 market managers in Western NC shared the survey.



Despite the survey being disseminated during the busy growing season, over 150 farmers responded, making it a robust response group. The survey accomplished the goal of reaching new and aspiring farmers as 72% of the respondents have been farming 10 years or less, and 48% of the respondents are under the age of 39.

In addition to the on-line survey, OGS interviewed ten emerging and beginning farmers directly, asking about their specific barriers to farming in our region. These participants were selected based on their status as new farmers with 2-10 years of farming experience. These one-on-one interviews allowed each farmer to share

personal stories, training trajectories, and current challenges as they moved into farming enterprises. In addition, OGS held a farmer focus group with five farms, all with an average of seven years farming, to engage more deeply into some of nuances of the barriers to farming.

The reason for the Barriers to Farming in Western North Carolina survey is to help inform the creation of a comprehensive farmer training program intended to maximize economic success for WNC farmers. The program, *Farm Beginnings*® 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. Organic Growers School will launch the *Farm Beginnings*® program in October of 2015.

In order to ensure that the farmer training program is farmer led and directed, OGS sought information and input directly from WNC farmers. “If we do not directly ask and understand what our farmers in WNC are facing, we cannot adequately address the needs of new farmers in a training program,” says Cameron Farlow, Farmer Programs Coordinator at OGS.



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 and lack 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: Considered a significant barrier by our focus group. 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: Specifically from experienced farmers as farm expansion decisions are made.

The development and implementation of Organic Growers School's *Farm Beginnings*® training program will be directly based on this research data. “Our



farmer training program, Farm Beginnings® is geared toward aspiring and beginning farmers because we are committed to carving a path to success for emerging and expanding growers by providing training and assistance during the start-up years," says Lee Warren, the OGS Executive Director.

The most commonly selected services and trainings will be featured in the 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 Beginnings*®. While these barriers cannot all be solved by one program, OGS hopes to prepare farmers with the needed tools to face uncertain markets and offer more opportunities for success. To read the full report or a summary go to: <http://organicgrowersschool.org/barriers-to-farming-in-wnc>

The Barriers to Farming in Western North Carolina survey project as well as the creation of the *Farm Beginnings*® training program has been funded in part by the Community Foundation of WNC, the Clif Bar Foundation, and the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, USDA, Grant #2015-70017-22854

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