

# Farming in North Carolina

## Survey 2019-2020



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Thank you!!!

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### Executive Summary:



Farming is a rich part of North Carolina’s heritage. In today’s climate and due to the food system disruption caused by Covid-19, the role of farmers and agriculture is more critical than ever before. We know that farmers face myriad challenges, from natural disasters and climate disruption, to small business management and financial planning. Now, with global disruptions in all areas of life, farmers are even more pressed and need support.

In Western North Carolina, both the land in farming and the total number of farms in NC have decreased. North Carolina today has 46,000+ farms, but this is far fewer than we had during the last NASS survey in 2012. North Carolina lost 4,000 farms in the last five years, nearly 9% of farms. At the same time, North Carolina saw a slight uptick in the number of acres being farmed according to 2017 USDA census data. There was an increase in the number of farms with fewer than 10 acres. In addition, the number of organic farms have increased in sales and acreage (Sparko, CFSA). The average age of farmers primary producers increased from 58.3 in 2012 to 59.4 in 2017. Primary producers over 65 now outnumber farmers under 35 by more than 6 to 1 (USDA 2017 COA). In NC, over 70% of the farms are owned by farmers over the age 55 and nearly two thirds of those are over 65 (USDA 2012 COA). There has also been a decline in operators with 5-9 years on their present farm (USDA 2017 COA) .

Our region has evolved into a small farms hub, regardless of the loss of land and farm, and is built on a long tradition of small scale homestead and commercial farm legacies. Farmers in NC are resilient and adaptive and we see this right now, as many are pivoting to meet food system disruptions. After the success of the 2015 “Barriers to Farming in WNC” survey and report, the Far West Agriculture Resource Group initiated a request in late 2018 to have another edition of the Barriers to Farming survey to understand our local farmers’ needs more deeply. Many organizations had done rigorous program evaluations and assessed immediate and longer term outcomes to understand the training and support needs of new and established farmers.

This survey was designed to go more in-depth and build on OGS’s 2015 “Barriers to Farming in WNC” survey questions. Based on the farmer responses, our intended outcome is to ensure that all programs we create collectively respond to farmers’ needs. Therefore we sought information and input directly from NC farmers, expanded the reach of our survey outreach via our partners in the state and changed the name to reflect that expansion. We conducted an online survey in addition to sharing a downloadable paper copy to all our outreach partners in NC. This survey revealed distinct similarities in between farms operating more than 10 years and less than 10 years. The survey opened in February 2019 and closed in June 2019.

## Summary of Results & Common Themes:

This survey had a total of 233 respondents. Those responses were from 44 out of 100 counties in the state. Our highest responses were from Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, Rutherford, Ashe, and Jackson counties. Most respondents self identified as farm owners-operators, it was split nearly fifty/ fifty between male and female respondents, with 4% self identifying as non binary or preferred not to say. 88% of respondents were white, 11% total were non-white respondents, with 3.5% preferring not to say.

The top five biggest concerns for farmers regarding their farm viability, defined as their capability of working successfully and/or profitably, that emerged from this survey are as follows:

<p><b>Under 10 years farming (beginning farmers):</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Income (profitability)</li> <li>2. Climate Change</li> <li>3. Markets = to Physical Demands on the body</li> <li>4. Labor</li> <li>5. Regulations</li> </ol>	<p><b>Over 10 years farming (experienced farmers):</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Income (profitability)</li> <li>2. Climate Change = to Markets</li> <li>3. Physical Demands on the body</li> <li>4. Regulations</li> <li>5. Labor</li> </ol>
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The similarity of what the different farming populations felt were their biggest concerns illuminates that there is more in common between beginning (under 10 years) and experienced farmers (over 10 years) and that the top 4 concerns are basically the same: income, markets, climate change, and physical demands on the body.

Other guiding questions in the survey included:

- What is your motivation to farm commercially?
- Define your access to land to own, land to lease. How much land is owned and/ or leased?
- Access to wholesale and direct markets, viable water sources, hands on training, off farm training, farming mentors
- What is your biggest concern regarding your farm’s viability?

- Define your access to capital, financing and labor.
- Define your knowledge base in production methods, technical skills, business and financial management, marketing, food safety, regulations, and legal.
- Who works on the farm full time and/ or part time and who is paid?
- What are income numbers and goals for personal and farm income?

A particularly revealing question was, “What is your motivation to farm commercially?” The top answers, in order, were:

1. For the love of the land
2. To feed myself and my family
3. To know what’s in my food

This can be interpreted to see that profit and income are not key motivations for farmers in their occupation, but that they are driven by deeper values and concerns.

## Other Key Highlights

Access to land to own or lease was not a significant concern of this group of respondents, a significant difference from the 2015 Barriers to Farming Survey.

Access to markets, wholesale and direct was a significant concern equally in the under 10 and over 10 years farming respondents.

Access to capital and financing remained a significant concern in this survey (from family, government entities, or banks). It was elevated as a concern in the under 10 years farming respondents.

Access to reliable labor was rated as a significant concern, elevated in the over 10 years farming respondents.

We asked farmers to rate their knowledge levels on a series of farm business related topics. The top three in each category for all respondents included:

<b>Knowledge Level</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Fair</b>	<b>Poor</b>
<b>1st</b>	Production	Business Planning	Regulations (value added, licenses)
<b>2nd</b>	Financial Planning	Legal (employee/ labor law, liability, risk management)	Legal (employee/ labor law, liability, risk management)
<b>3rd</b>	On-farm Food Safety Practices	Fam Marketing and Promotions	Technical Skills (mechanics, construction,

			electrical,etc)
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9uy8These become a bit more distinct when you separate for under 10 and over 10 years farming. This is an important outcome for agricultural service providers to distill what training and programs our local farmers continue to need.

**Employment:** For questions related to who works on the farm, part time or full time, paid or unpaid, the overall majority for all categories was 1 to 2 people.

**Income numbers:** The majority of respondents concluded that their net is 0-\$5000 regardless of gross income. While there were differences in gross revenue (including 20% who grossed over \$100,000), the net income majority remained 0-\$5000 for all respondents.

The responses to the survey showed that farmers have deep values for farming and also very real financial and income concerns for their farm viability. Most have little labor on their farm and this remains a concern, as well, in addition to more challenging topics like regulations and legal requirements. As agricultural supporters, we have a baseline of information provided in this survey from which we can create robust programs and guide our decisions in how we provide training and technical support to farmers of all levels of experience.

**Full survey data can be found in the following documents.**

Full survey data:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AMUnSRkNOuxjnN6puxbClzVhR6j1csi-/view?usp=sharing>

Under 10 years farming data:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1x81GCEsS\\_vOSrS2ixNgJY9BzFCeYEh9h/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1x81GCEsS_vOSrS2ixNgJY9BzFCeYEh9h/view?usp=sharing)

Over 10 years farming data:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1o364XHTJqu5ikPeraPBZlXn9B273D\\_b/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1o364XHTJqu5ikPeraPBZlXn9B273D_b/view?usp=sharing)

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**Other works cited:**

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 2012 and 2017 USDA Census of Agriculture