



Virginia Cooperative Extension

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Situation Analysis Report

Wise County

2013

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Introduction

During September to November 2013, an online survey was conducted to identify major issues impacting Wise County. The survey was submitted in person to stakeholder groups and was furthermore promoted via email newsletters and social media by both Virginia Cooperative Extension personnel and Extension Leadership Council (ELC) members.

The survey asked four questions:

1. What do you consider to be the issues affecting agriculture, natural resources, youth development or families in Wise County?
2. What assistance or resources would Extension require to address these issues?
3. What are some measurable ways to know we are making progress in addressing this issue?
4. What other suggestions can help Extension address this issue?

On November 18, 2013, ELC members met and were given the results of the issues survey as well as a copy of the unit profile for Wise County. The responses were categorized and prioritized, and members identified steps that Extension can take to address many of these concerns. It was agreed that, as a group, the ELC and Extension personnel will revisit the survey responses over the coming year(s) and adjust programming efforts as needed.

Unit Profile

Wise County occupies about 407 square miles and includes the towns of Appalachia, Big Stone Gap, Coeburn, Pound, St. Paul and Wise along with the City of Norton. The county is home to a four-year liberal arts college, a community college, three hospitals, and the Norton/Wise area is a major retail and service business hub in the region. The county is dissected by US 23 and US 58, which allow for a reasonable commute into Pikeville, Kentucky, Abingdon, Virginia and the Tri-Cities area of eastern Tennessee.

The county's natural resources have historically contributed much to the economy and quality of life in the region, from the jobs associated with coal, natural gas and timber to the recreational opportunities presented by the public lands within the county. Eco-tourism continues to evolve in the region and includes the development of the Pine Mountain Trail (for hikers) and the Spearhead Trails (for ATV riders and equestrian use).

The Wise County Unit Office of the Virginia Cooperative Extension system is housed in the Wise Skill Center complex of the Wise County Public School system. There are currently four employees working from the Extension Office, and two vacancies in the process of being filled.

The 2011 U.S. Census reports a population of 41,505, with a 5.8% minority population. The median household income was \$34,717.

A total of 6852 students are enrolled in public schools in Wise County. Approximately 45% of the population 25 years and over have received some level of college education.

From a health standpoint, 26% of the population of the county is considered to be in poor or fair health, with adult obesity at 35% and physical inactivity at 38%.

According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, available cropland decreased significantly from 2002 (at 9283 acres) to 2007 (at 3835). This is presumably due to multiple factors, including development and a movement away from agricultural endeavors. The average farm size also decreased somewhat during that period, from 136 acres to 125 acres.

Current commercial agricultural endeavors include over 3000 head of beef cattle, approximately five acres of blueberries, a vineyard/winery and a number of orchards. Five farmers' markets exist within the county, and beekeeping is also a common activity. Several producers of hair sheep and meat goats are located within the county, although the exact numbers and acres are difficult to estimate due to the fact that these producers operate independently and are not involved in an association.

An estimated 10,610 people in Wise County are in the workforce, with the highest percentages of those employed in education (13.7%), government (10.8%), health services (9.8%) and agriculture & mining (5.5%). Due to recent downturns in the mining industry, it's estimated that the last percentage will reflect a drastic change in the next census.

Community and Resident Perspectives

Surveys in a brochure format (but that also listed a URL for online access) were distributed at various meetings of Extension and commodity groups and via various places of business within the county, including farm stores, the Farm Bureau office and other establishments. Links to the survey were emailed directly to identified stakeholders and were included in social media outlets and e-newsletters.

The following responses were collected to Question #1, which asked participants to identify an issue impacting Wise County:

- Climate change
- SWD fly [spotted wing drosophila fly]
- Lack of parental support and involvement
- The Farmers Market should be available to those who have local products and outside things need to be removed.

- Farming seems to be a dying profession because younger people don't seem as interested in farming, or even in growing their own food. Those that are interested may not have the knowledge needed to be successful growers.
- Obesity
- I find that lots of people don't even know where the Extension Office is. Possibly a small campaign to pass out brochures to school kids, to let the "younger generation" and their parents know where the office is and what services are offered.
- Attitude! Not enough young people believe agriculture is a option. Way too many young people believe they have only two options: coal miner or move away from Wise County.
- Lack of knowledge.
- Making wise and healthy choices and making wise social choices, i.e., friends and groups
- We need more help with small agricultural development niches, i.e., ways of tying into the local food movement.
- Invasive Species- Primarily Autumn Olives.
- Map skills
- Current economic conditions seem to be continuing the downward slide due to coal industry problems.
- Environmental regulations and rules effecting permits for coal mines.
- Apple tree disease, i.e., San Jose Scale
- Climate change
- Lack of interest among area's youth with regards to all aspects of agriculture.
- County Schools/National Forest/Virginia Tech cooperation in education directed toward helping citizens understand potential of available resources (support of technical and agriculture education, encourage forest service to go beyond timber harvest, maximize encouragement of families to use available property to meet needs and interests).
- Our Farmers are getting old. Who will be farmers after they're not able to farm?

- Pollution and water quality. a) contamination of groundwater with chemical fertilizers and pesticides, b) pollutants in the atmosphere which are brought to the soil and groundwater by rain.
- Very few farmers.
- Lack of small markets for start-up farmers.
- Poor use of agri-tourism.
- New bug infestation of crops
- I believe family stability is the number one root issue that negatively affects our children. Children are thrown from house hold to house hold with no common thread of morals or expectations set for them. They experience horrible situations and loose hope in adults and become angry and fearful.
- Do a research on why the honey bees are being destroyed.
- New bugs on crops that haven't been seen before
- Death of the honey bees
- Farm labor

Priority Issues

Agricultural Transitions

An issue that appeared repeatedly in survey responses as well as being discussed by ELC members concerned the future of farming and how agricultural activities will be passed on as the farmers of today age. A concern was that youth don't necessarily recognize farming as an option. Furthermore, the consensus was that more people within the community could benefit from awareness about Extension resources. The 4-H Ag Awareness Day for fourth graders in Wise and Dickenson Counties was cited as a strong first step. As part of this issue, ELC members felt it would be beneficial to make a concerted effort to make local leadership aware of the agricultural potential within the county.

Family Stability

Survey responders identified a number of influences that negatively impact the family unit and youth in particular. Parental support and involvement were concerns, as were social pressures that youth face daily. From an economic standpoint, ELC members and survey respondees felt that a loss of coal jobs and a general lack of awareness of agricultural opportunities may

ultimately result in an economically and socially disadvantaged community, as well as a stronger migration of young people away from the region.

Environmental Influences

Survey responders cited a number of exotic pests that impact farming and land use in Wise County. Specifically, spotted wing drosophila fly and autumn olive were named. Tree fruit diseases and honey bee loss were listed as well. Climate change was identified as a factor that could severely alter how agriculture has traditionally been done. Water quality concerns were listed as well.

Marketing

Responders saw greater potential in farmers' markets and other local foods venues, agri-tourism and niche markets for small-scale growers. They felt that it would be beneficial to make young people, especially, aware of the resources of not only Extension, but also other agencies that serve farmers and landowners within the community.