



2012-2015 Past Participant Evaluation Interviews Summary of Results

This report describes the evaluation findings for the Virginia Beginning Farmer & Rancher Coalition (VBFRC) Past Participant Interviews conducted in November and December 2016. The VBFRC aimed to understand how the attitudes and farming practices of participants in VBFRC Whole Farm Planning Programs of 2012-2015 have changed since completing their programs, as well as gauge overall satisfaction with the programs. The VBFRC Whole Farm Planning Programs provide farmers with a range of classroom-based workshops, farm tours, field instruction, and networking opportunities using a holistic approach to farming. The five areas of whole farm planning included in the curriculum are: Introduction to Whole Farm Planning, Marketing, Business Management, Land Tenure, and Sustainable Farming Practices.

In March 2016, a Qualtrics survey was distributed to approximately 224 individuals who participated in VBFRC Whole Farm Planning programs, with 38 responses received. The VBFRC Program Director disseminated the survey through email. Of the 38 responses received, 15 participants volunteered to be contacted to hold an interview to elaborate on their Whole Farm Planning Program experiences and current farming practices. Of the 15 individuals who were contacted, 3 scheduled and participated in interviews.

A separate survey was distributed in Spring 2016 to Certified Farm Seeker (CFS) program participants. Started in 2012, the CFS program is designed to provide individuals seeking farming opportunities with the tools needed to successfully demonstrate their farming commitment and vision to interested landowners using curricula to help aide in knowledge acquisition. The survey was distributed to 130 individuals, with 33 responses received. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to email the CFS Program Coordinator if they were interested in being interviewed. After the survey, 8 individuals were contacted for interviews, with 2 scheduling and participating in interviews.

Each interview was approximately 45-60 minutes, and was audio-recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Participants were prompted to talk about their current farming status and, if relevant, farming operation; changes made since program participation; resources that have helped them succeed; farming goals; and challenges they have faced. CFS interview participants were also prompted to discuss their expectations of the CFS program; which aspects of the program were most helpful to them; and how they would suggest the program be improved. The interviews were analyzed during the winter of 2016-2017.

The Virginia Beginning Farmer & Rancher Coalition Program is a state-wide and coalition-based Extension program housed in Virginia Tech's Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education. Funding was sponsored by the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) of the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) Award #2015-70017-22887. For more information, contact Kim Niewolny, Program Director and Extension Specialist, at niewolny@vt.edu or 540-231-5784.

Results in Brief

Whole Farm Planning Programs

The following results are based on three (3) interviews conducted in November and December 2016.

Most participants were already farming prior to beginning their respective WFP programs. One family was already selling farm products on-site and at the local farmers market.

They joined the program as a way to transition their farm to a new business model including other farm- and non-farm related opportunities. One family was growing for personal use and joined the program when they began considering expanding out to sell commercially. The third family owned land that they were thinking about putting into farming and joined the program to learn more about the business.

At the time of the interview, all participants were still farming. One family grows blackberries, blueberries, vegetables, and

some fruit trees and sells the produce on-site and at the local farmers market. One family grows mostly vegetables, sells at two local farmers markets, and has a small CSA of 8 individuals. The third family grows hops, peaches, apples, pears, vegetables, herbs, and berries for personal use only. Shortly after participating in the program, they decided they

did not have the time or capital available to dedicate to farming full-time or selling commercially.

Participants are taking their personal land and plant qualities into account when deciding on farming practices to use. One family researches which diseases a plant is susceptible to and which animals and

insects are drawn to it in order to reduce chemical treatments. Another family creates topsoil and uses hugelkultur, a german farming technique, to provide nutrients to a mountainous landscape. The third family grows organically, though they are not certified, and offers a CSA discount to a neighbor with horses in return for horse manure to use on the farm.

One objective of the WFP programs is to help participants learn to set goals and plan out how to reach those goals. Participants have all set goals since

completing the program, some even reaching those goals by the time of the interview. One family became an Audubon at Home site, which serves to conserve and restore natural ecosystems. Another family aims to expand their farm into a comprehensive vacation package including rental suites, farm and nature educational activities, and an art studio. The

“We always wanted to make this place a destination so that people come up here. And that’s still our goal, and everything we’ve done is kind of feeding into that vision.”

“We realized we didn’t have enough time to dedicate to it, you know? And available capital sitting around, waiting for something to do.”

third family is hoping to build a hops yard, hire a summer intern, learn how to compost, and have their kitchen inspected to produce value-added items.

However, with every goal comes a series of challenges that the farmers must overcome. Participants noted planting decisions, weather-related

difficulties, and familial responsibilities as challenges they have had to overcome. One family planted their vegetable

beds too close together and were not able to harvest all that was grown due to the crowded area. The same family had rainy weather cause their berries to mold two years in a row. Two families work full-time jobs to cover living expenses, with hired labor costing more than the family can afford to spend. This reduces the amount of time the families could spend farming. Two families had to stop or reduce their farming to care for children/dependents.

When it comes to the WFP programs, participants were happy with the content of the programs. Topics covered by guest speakers were relevant and interesting. Marketing, in particular, was a popular topic, and putting together a business plan was a helpful concept not covered by other programs.

One family found that the value-added information helped to reaffirm the plans they had set for their farm. Another family appreciated hearing guest

“It really makes you think hard about why it is you want to go into farming, and who it is that you think is going to help you.”

speakers and other program participants speak on various topics. The last family enjoyed meeting the various guest speakers and still refers to the program materials when looking to answer a farm-related question. As areas to improve on, participants noted program location and size as negative factors. One

participant suggested generalizing program content and adding supplemental materials where necessary,

rather than having in-depth discussions on every topic.

After completing the WFP programs, all of the participants continued to receive assistance from other programs and resources. One family has attended the Forum for Rural Innovation; a hops conference; and workshops at a cidery. Another participant regularly contacts the local Virginia Cooperative Extension agent for information. The third participant attended a program on non-forest products to discuss what can be done with their wooded land areas.

Certified Farm Seeker Program

The following results are based on two (2) interviews conducted in November 2016.

“I wouldn’t have been able to do without the business plan. That directly helped me get . . . the loans from the bank. I didn’t have to make any changes in what I had done . . . to become certified.”

Of the two interviewees, only one participated in and completed the CFS program. This individual expected to use

the CFS modules to better understand how to

write a business plan. The participant felt their combination of work experience and previous education was helpful in completing the program. After program completion, the participant used the business plan to obtain a loan and used the reimbursement to form an LLC.

The second interviewee looked into the program as a way to network and earn credentials that could help in finding farmland. They decided not to take part in the program due to time constraints, but continue to use the Virginia Farm Link database

Suggested improvements for the CFS program included offering a list of farmers who could teach or mentor inexperienced farmers; reaching out to areas of the state with available land; and offering an “Introduction to the CFS Program” to help potential participants understand what the program has to offer.

Both participants were involved in farming prior to finding the CFS program and continued to farm at the time of the interview. One participant had about 50 acres when beginning the program and expanded to have a little over 100 acres at the time of the interview. The other participant started on a small garden plot and has now moved to an 8-acre plot with 5 acres of organic vegetable crops, selling through a 22 member CSA and at local farmers markets.

While both participants were able to grow their farm enterprises, they noted several challenges along the way. One participant stated that his greatest challenge was obtaining farmland. The other has struggled with family obligations, setting up a secure leasing situation, and making the farm profitable enough to earn a living wage.

Conclusions

Three past participants of the VBFRC whole farm planning programs were interviewed in 2016. All interviewees were satisfied with the programs in which they participated. All three individuals were farming at the time of the interview – growing mostly fruits and vegetables, either personally or commercially. Common goals included expansion in business and/or production and incorporation of sustainable farming practices. Common challenges included weather-related impacts and familial responsibilities. Successful aspects of the whole farm planning programs included the various guest speakers, the development of a business plan, and marketing information. Suggested areas of improvement include program size and location, and an overwhelming amount of program material.

Two individuals were interviewed as part of the Certified Farm Seekers program. Of these two individuals, only one participated in and completed the CFS program. This individual most appreciated the development of the business plan and the reimbursement available, both of which helped them to reach farm-related goals after becoming certified. The second individual cited time constraints as the reason for not participating in the CFS program but continues to use the Virginia Farm Link database to search for available farmland. At the time of the interviews, both interviewees were farming and had expanded their business and production since looking into or participating in the CFS program. Common challenges included obtaining farmland, familial responsibilities, and earning a living wage through farming alone. Suggested areas of improvement for the CFS program included offering a list of farmers who could teach or mentor inexperienced farmers, reaching out to areas of the state with available farmland, and offering an introduction to the CFS program that would explain what the program is and how it could benefit participants.