

Christiansburg Farmer Listening Session Transcript

Kelly - ...with some effort we might actually get somewhere and make some real progress with the conversation and some of the efforts behind agriculture in our region. So we've got Miss Maureen here, Maureen McNamara best with LEAP and also Ned Savage back there in the back, you guys want to do a quick introduction?

Maureen - LEAP is a 501c3 non-profit, we are based in Roanoke, we've been around since 2009 first working with farmers markets, we have two markets on the ground on the west end, the other in Grandin Village in Roanoke, we work with about 20 farmers give or take and we Define local as a 100-mile radius at least for us as an organization, in 2015 we started a mobile Farmers Market to help provide another Market Outlet for farmers in the area and also to address food access needs in Roanoke City. and then this past year 2016 we built a new food business incubator and shared commercial kitchen for value-added food processing that was identified as a community need, and then this past fall we worked with a recent Virginia Tech grad to compile all the existing food assessments, ag plans in the region to figure out in this Roanoke Valley area what are some of the biggest need what does agriculture look like and one thing that we learned through that process was that the farmer boys isn't really present in a lot of these ag plans and ag studies. there's a lot of data and a lot of project ideas without necessarily having ask what the community of farmers have identified as being needs, so in terms of really supporting the local food system and farming and agriculture we decided to move forward in partnership with Roanoke Valley Alleghany Regional Planning Commission that constitutes a lot of this area to look at agriculture and think about food system development moving forward, and so we decided to host these listening sessions and then we will compile the results and try to do a group presentation and try to figure out what does it mean, what happens next? It doesn't mean leap is going to take on all these projects but really to figure out how leap as an organization can support the community of farmers and producers and food system stakeholders in the area. So it's informal, thanks for being here and I look forward to hearing what you guys see as being big needs, barriers, problems in your day to day farming food system world.

Kelly - so before we get into the discussion I think it would be helpful, it seems like a lot of you folks know each other already by the networking that was happening at the beginning but I think it would be really helpful for everybody to go around and introduce themselves. Say what you grow if you are growing something and what organization or what farm you represent, so we'll start over here with Miss Sarah

Sarah - my name is Sarah Ramey I am Virginia gleaning Network director for the state of Virginia with the Society of St. Andrew, we go and glean fields and accept from Farmers what they can't sell and hand it over to hunger relief agencies. In Virginia we did 2.2 million pounds last year, 70% of it was fresh produce

You take items other than produce? Sarah - we do, we work with a little bit of manufacturing but most of it comes from packing houses and the fields

I'm Tenley Weaver, I am a ??? farmer, I have a few crops on the ground for a CSA, also I'm the owner of good food good people, local motive aggregators

Hi, I'm Dennis Dove, also an owner of good food good people, full-time farmer with full circle organic farm, we do produce

My name is Bette Brand, I work for Farm Credit, we are an agricultural lending organization co-op, so I am here really to listen and if there are capital needs that might be something we might be helpful with, and also we have a knowledge Center that's relatively unusual for Farm Credit organizations, Farm Credit is all across the country, but our organization here in Virginia has a Knowledge Center that

works with extension and other organizations, FSA, that sort of thing, to try to provide resources to people from all sorts of disciplines within farming to get them the information they need

Kelly - and Matt Lohr is running that? Bette - yes Matt Lohr is the director and he is the former commissioner and former state legislator but he is leaving at the end of May to go back to farming so we will be having a position available, his father is getting to the age where he would like to slow down some and so Matt is building a house on the farm and they have poultry and a pumpkin patch and other things

My name is Ann Blair Miller and I am a new employee of the Virginia Department of Agriculture I am the AFID coordinator, Agriculture, Forestry, Industries development coordinator, so we have different grants that we can talk with you about to learn more about that you may be able to benefit from, from the AFID grant which helps companies that are expanding and looking to come to the area that Source 30% of their raw materials from Virginia-sourced Products, grown in Virginia 30%, to Planning Grants, to the Virginia Farm business development program Grants for farmers, so there's different opportunities, but I'm just here to learn what I can tonight, thanks

I'm Alexis, I've worked in the agricultural community around this area for the past 5 years, I'm not currently farming but looking to do some Urban farming this year and get my hands dirty again, so I'm here to learn and listen

My name is Ned Savage, I am an AmeriCorps VISTA serving with LEAP for program development, thank you all for being here

Brent Noell, I'm with the Farm Service Agency here in Christiansburg, I cover Montgomery, Floyd, Giles, and Pulaski Counties and I'm here just to meet some additional people, find some more Avenues, we do some Farm loans, I personally do those farm loans, some conservation (???) and some other things, I'm just trying to learn about the LEAP program

I'm Mark Schonbeck, I'm just a gardener, I grow my own food but I also am a consultant for sustainable agriculture, you don't have to be certified organic or any label to work with me but I just help people with their soil tests and primarily with people who want to (???) organic (???), I've been quite a bit research in the past and I'm doing research now distilling organic research and soil health research and trying to make the information more accessible and available Farmers so they can just take it onto the land and use it

good evening, my name is Christy Gabbard I am coordinating development of the Chesapeake Foodshed Network, I'm also part of the New River Valley glean team and we've got a number of apples from local farms but also from the Society of St. Andrew, 43000 pounds I think distributed in January, I'm also on the Virginia food system Council and I'm here to listen and I'm very glad to be here

My name's Kevin Roberts, I'm the market manager for the Botetourt Farmer's Market in Daleville. We are modeled after LEAP so (???) experience outside of the area, farm tours (????)

Danny Neel, department of Agriculture, I think I've been here since the beginning of time, I started working part-time in 1976 just to give you an idea of how long I've been around, started out working for crop Report insurance and then I worked for livestock marketing and then in about 88 I changed over to this position, we work with fruits, vegetables, Christmas trees, (?) stock, processed foods and a lot of other projects that include forest (???) growing industrial beers(?), our friends in extension, and he has been Community leaders (???) thank you for what you got going (???)

my name is Jason Dilg, I'm relatively new to the area, my wife and I just moved here from Colorado back in November, we are teaming up with the group that is starting a farm in Indian Valley in

Floyd County, we're starting a farm, building a bakery, growing vegetables, so I'm mostly here just to listen

my name's Adam Taylor, I'm a new resident of Montgomery County, I just moved here from West Virginia with Liz over here, we ran a small vegetable operation and CSA and Farmers Market there in West Virginia, we just moved here and I am the new director of the Virginia Tech Catawba sustainability Center, (???) continue our efforts (??)

my name's Brian Parr, I'm actually in environmental science student at Virginia Tech, and I'm a farmer, Gardener, maybe a future farmer, and I'm here with my wife Liz

I'm Liz and I am the Virginia Outreach coordinator for sustainable agriculture research and education grants that take some of the risk out of innovation so that farmers that have bright ideas about their systems and how to improve them, and these grants are available to help reach markets, innovate in alternative crops and farming systems. In addition to that I'm the Northern District Virginia Cooperative Extension Service healthy food access Outreach person from Harrisonburg and the Northern District, so I'm interested in getting into mouths, out of the ground, keeping the ground healthy, and into mouths

I'm Liz Spellman and I'm working a little bit with LEAP and the ?? Foodshed Network part-time and ????

And I'm Kelly Scott, you guys I think mostly know me but on the extension agent here in Montgomery County, and so I do everything under the agriculture umbrella that I possibly can, but Horticulture is my background and I do a lot of local food systems work, a lot of produce (??) work, I also do beginning farmer and Rancher work so expensive can be pretty diversified

Sarah and Cedric, Weathertop Farm in Floyd County, we produce eggs, poultry, turkeys, chickens, hogs, sheep

Kelly - so we're just getting started and we did that round of introductions, and then usually what we do in facilitated meetings, we want to create a good environment for folks, you know the core idea of tonight is to get your ideas and we have to do that in a constructive manner with respect for each other, and still open we would go through the whole process of creating ground rules but for the sake of time tonight you all have some ground rules or shared expectations on the back of your name tents, so I'm just going to go over this really quickly, if anyone has any issues with these or you need Clarity around these or there's one you just don't agree with and we need to throw it out we can talk briefly about that and then move on to our bigger discussion. but we want to enter into this discussion enthusiastically, and I can tell already by our networking and our introductions that's not going to be a problem, also I will make a side note that it's really interesting to see the mix of farmers and service providers in the room, you know we've got a lot of service providers in the room as well as people have multiple hats on their head, Greg you didn't mention this but you do a lot of homesteading, grow a lot of stuff, have a farm of your own even though you may be don't classify yourself as a farmer, so I'm really excited to hear those different points of view enthusiastically from folks tonight. give freely of your experience, allow and encourage others to contribute so try to listen as much as you're talking, listen attentively and take accurate notes, we're going to be asking you guys break up into groups and have some discussions in just a few minutes and you're going to have to report out and so during that time to listen and make sure getting accurate notes and ideas from folks. Ask questions when you don't understand, Clarity is always a great point, we want to make sure that everyone is understanding. also if you misspeak or you say something and you're like oh that's really not what I meant to say then please go ahead and correct yourself, that's the time to do that, appreciate other points of view, provide constructive feedback and receive it willingly, and confine your discussion to the topic, so we're already 30 minutes into our 2-hour discussion tonight so you know if we stay on topic it will help us move along a little bit further. So does anybody have any issues with those, do those sound like good shared ground rules for a healthy community discussion? I see you guys are all

just chomping at the bit to get to it, right? Alright so we have that, we have everybody's names, everybody did introductions, so Maureen now we're going to break off into group discussions?

Maureen - so what we were hoping you guys would do is to think about all the needs problems concerns related to agriculture, and prioritize the top three, so you have three pieces of paper, so just take a minute on your own and think about and write down what you see as the biggest needs relating to agriculture and then pair off with a group of two or three people, and as a group of two or three people figure out what those top three as a group are, and we'll present out, we'll list them out, and then each of you will get three dots to vote on them, and then we'll pick the top three most common and then we will dive into each of those in detail. Does that make sense? So top three priorities, one on each paper, and then find a partner to discuss them and figure out with your partner or two what your top 3 are. Do it individually first so that your neighbor doesn't tell you all the answers.

Alright we're going to start over here on this side and what we're going to do from each group is get your top 3. Have you decided on that Liz?

Liz - access to land, equipment, labor, affordable land accessible to Markets, profitability

Kelly - so this group was saying, and I'll call these out as we keep going along, so access to land is one, accessible to markets, equipment so possibly a place to get (???) or equipment shares, is that what you mean Liz? Liz: yes. Kelly: and then access to labor, is that what you mean by labor? So access to equipment, access to labor, access to Affordable land that is accessible to Markets. That sound good for you guys?

Liz: profitability

Kelly - okay so from this group, you guys got 3? Viable Farm businesses, Market development (and you mean this for products?) Christy: no, so in terms of where the product is sold, so Farmers Markets, wholesale, retail vendors, etc., education for the consumers, and this is more producer education but really getting relevant research producers so they can be more efficient. Practical tools for sustainable production, everything from research findings that a farmer can use to (???), practical tools for sustainable production

Kelly -but it almost seems like getting the other two you guys suggested, consumer education and education for producers, that there would be a lot of those practical tools for sustainability right? Because it's not just one thing to educate the farmer or have the farmer want to be sustainable, we need a market that wants sustainable products as well right?

Mark - I agree but it's even two very separate issues (???) consumers need to understand the need for sustainable farming, that's very different from the need for better seeds and better methods, and I see that as an economic issue too because of (???)

Kelly - alright so you guys have your 3? Alexis - yes, we have Market access, echoing same sentiments [as other group, wholesale, etc.], financial help/access, equipment costs, land costs, and then labor.

Kelly - okay so financial help and access, would that be like in the form of lending? Alexis - loans, grants, what he said was creative financing, looking at all the different Outlets you have

Kelly - Alright and then this group over here, what are your three? Financial needs, which was similar to what this group was talking about. Consumer education, consumer buy in. and then labor, so that's one we've heard already.

Kelly - you guys are taking away my little shtick that I had all planned out by giving you the four

Tenley - modern food safety regulations are getting in the way for many of us

Kelly - so we added FISMA, food safety, insurance issues, liability that type of stuff. Okay everybody else gave four so I guess you guys can give me your 'profitability' now. alright so as you guys heard all of those what we were going to do is go through the three and then ask you if there's anything else that's just burning, that you can't live without, but you already gave me those, so we all did four, and what we've got up here are some different themes that we are beginning to see. So the regulatory, the FISMA and the GAP, this one is off kind of by itself right now. but we see a big cluster around financial help and access whether that's access to lending or more education, maybe access to co-ops, how to draw a business plan, insurance, that type of stuff, so not only access to financial institutions and lending but education around what does that mean and how can you best use what they are trying to offer you. then we got access to resources or inputs we could say, access to Affordable Land close to Markets, access to equipment, access to resources to scale up for a larger market, that's really like the theme of all of those. More of that profitability, more of that food dollar to the producer, we talked a lot about that. Producer education, mark tell of your sentence again that can captured it really nicely? Practical tools for sustainable production, so that could be the theme, and that includes publicly available crop varieties or livestock breeds that are better adapted to this region. Again we said regulations are kind of by themselves here. we've got to that are talking about Market development, they're not talking about product development as much as they are creating more markets for you to sell your products in whether that's wholesale markets, direct Markets, Institutions, restaurants, that type thing. you've got three labors here so not only access to people that are willing to work but then how do you support them, how do you give them a fair wage, you know how do you support them with health insurance, you know all of those things that we struggle with, I mean I'd say this is the main reason why I don't farm and I work for Cooperative Extension is because of all of these things. education, both of these are for Consumer education so informing that consumer more of what it takes to get that product to the Shelf, to the plate to your fork, to your mouth, and if they've got more value in what it takes in farming then possibly they'd be willing to spend more of their income on food or agriculture products, so that's what I was talking about with this table about that full loop, it's one thing just to educate the producer but we need consumers who are better educated as well so they're willing to buy the products that we want to sell them. Was there anything talked about at your tables or anything you want to say that's not addressed on the board?

I'd like to add something to the consumer buy-in, because I feel it's not just customers, it's also natural food stores and stuff, I think there's a certain culture within natural food stores that is heavily, heavily anti-meat, and I think they play a huge role in dictating people's approach to food and they themselves tend to be vegan or vegetarian and I happen to have an extremely different point of view of what the earth needs and animals have to be a part of that, and it's not that you can't be a vegetarian but there's not a whole lot of diversity in that mindset, so consumer buy-in could also include other people that are (??) health food stores or Markets or whatever, other people that are Middle Men, other than farmers who have extreme bias.

Alexis - I have a question. Do you think that has a lot to do with market prices? So when you look at the meat that they sell at the co-op or at a farmers market you're usually looking at a higher price meat product verses what you would find

it's not true for eggs, this is why I think it's very different, I can go to the coop and I can sell my eggs and they will sell out no problem, the co-op's weren't invented in Roanoke, there's a lot more, better ones if you take a typical if you go to Peet's or if you go to harvest moon or different ones, have you seen the meat section? They obviously don't value it. there are people that come to Market just a few blocks down and they buy my meat and they love it and they're regulars you know and I don't know how many years it's taken to build this relationship, it's not valued by the stores, and I think yeah sure it might be a problem but they're not even approaching it to get over it.

Kelly - so what I've written down is that natural stores, Middle Men, distributors influence what is promoted, increased product diversity, does that somewhat capture what you said?

Mark - so there's another angle to all this, if we are talking about food systems and food security and food access, the real conundrum is how to make sure that farmers are making a good living through all these Avenues and still make sure that everyone in this country can stay. For me it goes back to having a living wage is a minimum wage but that's maybe beyond the scope of our discussion, but in a sense it isn't

Kelly - I think that's hugely a part of that whole labor discussion.

All right so we've got all of these different themes showcased on the board here. Now what we're going to do is you've got your little sticky dots, everyone has 3 sticky dots, so what you guys are going to do is vote on what you think are the most important topic for us to begin to tackle collectively. again as Maureen said at the very beginning this isn't like we're going to come out of action items for LEAP to go back and they're going to start checking these boxes, we are going to continue to have the conversation and build partners, build the network, try to see how we can begin to these barriers that we're all facing. so that's what we're going to do with our dots, Everyone can come up and choose what they think are the most important issues, we would like to see you this tribute your dots, that's the best way to do it, but if labor is your number one important issue and nothing else matters to you then put all 3 of your dots on labor, okay does that make sense? Alright so I'll give you all a few minutes to do that, we determine what our top three are from your sticky dots we're going to talk about those three.

Okay folks, what we saw over here, our top three, our number one pick was consumer education. That's really interesting to me actually, usually in a room of farmers or service providers, we want to keep doing our job, have some job security, so we see a lot of producer education, and that was one of our ideas, but the actual vote, the largest vote of ten is under consumer education.

The next two were tied with nine apiece, and so it's access to resources/inputs, whatever that may be, land, equipment, and then profitability is also at nine. When we were first calculating these labor was in the running, but we had someone come up and vote and it knocked labor off, and put profitability back on. But as we were having the discussion, like Tenley said, they're so connected, if you make more money you can pay people more money, there's a lot of connection between those two, so we decided to pair those together so labor wouldn't completely get lost.

So if we start with consumer education, what are some things that we could tackle, either yourself or your organization, if we start thinking about this as a network, network thinking. It's not some separate organization that's going to come in and solve all these problems. But how are we all gonna pick up a corner of the heavy piece of furniture and begin to move it collectively towards the spot we want it to go. So what under consumer education can we do?

Alexis - I was actually kind of concerned about that one, because **if you're working land, you don't necessarily have time to develop** a commercial or **pamphlets, brochures, literature**, and perhaps curriculum planning for whatever educational institution you're looking at. So that was perplexing because I don't know how farming and being able to develop that kind of material would go hand in hand. So I was thinking that could be more an **extension agency task rather than an actual farmer task**. I think if there was more money I think you could do **more educational programs on a farm**. In that sense too we're only going to get people that are interested and not necessarily the general public, which you're not reaching already.

Tenley - I think... **we as farmers don't have time to do this thing**, **we're hoping that VA Extension and LEAP and... can be our outreach arm**. **We don't have money or tech skills** are huge for farmers, outreach **time**, etc. to accomplish this. I think there's a very **clear connection between customer education and profitability**, because I think what we all want to accomplish is to **encourage customers to value our contributions to the food chain**. And that's not just what we grow, it's what we're preserving for the community, environmentally, economically, culturally, and that cannot be if the consumer is ever driven to the cheapest buck from china. And so **consumer education is super key**,

almost more than anything else, because they're the ones that are creating the baseline foundation of this economy we're participating in. We can't go anywhere if the consumers won't buy what we're producing.

Kelly - and we don't just see that with food, growing up in America, in a capitalistic society, we want as much choice as possible for the lowest dollar possible, we want the Walmart mentality everywhere, no matter what product it may be, so what can we maybe do to change that?

Adam? I don't know if this is true for all farmers, but I know, and hopefully I'm speaking for both of us, I like the idea of someone like LEAP or whoever helping facilitate a tour that comes to our farm, because it's a great way to connect, and we also get a chance to give our spiel, and say look, this is the land we just bought, this is the soil, it's crappy. Now look over here, we've worked it for two years, look what it looks like, look how much carbon we're sequestering, look at all these different things, it's a visual thing they actually see, and they can see our chickens are outside, they're not organic chickens that are stuck in a building, and you show 'em how you rotate. Boom! That's gonna stick in their heads so much more than any literature or whatever. I know not all farms are like that. We've had an open farm before, but it's all our customers, and it's just preaching to the choir, but if there was somehow, like you mentioned even people who run natural food stores, if they could come see everything that we're doing, like she said the value for the social infrastructure, value for the environment, for all these things, for health, that you could reach people we don't normally reach who are buying from us

Bette- one example of that is Homestead Creamery. They have their field day and they have four or five? Ten thousand people? I don't know if it's the carnival atmosphere, or it's educational, I've never been, I don't want to deal with the crowds. But it is interesting that people think that's a cool thing to do.

Kelly – and maybe even taking it a step further, it's one thing to physically be on the farm tour and tangibly experience it, but how do you video that, how do you capture it? How do you create 'know your food' kind of... so many people are on social media these days, and everyone wants everything in three minute clips

Bette – Farm Bureau in Virginia is doing that, they're doing Takeover Tuesday where they're having their members take over their Farm Bureau Facebook page, which is a pretty big audience.

Kelly – and so a farmer or farm bureau member would take over their social media page for that day. What are some other ideas?

Kevin - ??? (reacquaint people with the kitchen... cooking education is a big part of consumer education)

Danny – one of the things that we've recommended to different farming operations over the years, to write an article to send to the media, news stations, newspapers, all those folks, write your own article and invite them out to your farm, a lot of times they're hungry for agriculture stories, and unless there's been some kind of bad accident or something they'll come out to the farm and ??? We haven't done the best job of promoting ourselves, we've got over 3000 acres of pumpkins in Virginia, 1200 acres of cabbage, and apples and peaches and all this other stuff, and even us in the ag industry, like the folks in Floyd, when they call me looking for duck and rabbit or something else, I've worked for ??? I have to go to localharvest.com to find somebody who had ducks and rabbits and this type of thing, had to go on the internet and do a search. I'll say this, you talk about market access, I have a lot of trouble... talking about labor and food safety and this and that, a lot of our little folks like me, gotta start out small, they gotta

use some kind of free media to advertise and that's a hard thing to do, if you're supposed to use these sites on the web to sell their products and advertise their farm, it's hard to give them that information, and a lot of these sites don't cost that much or are free, but a lot of these other folks, the best thing we could do to give them some kind of help, other than the labor and the food safety, that's only part of it, you gotta have product liability and all this other stuff, it's a complicated world out there.

Kelly – You've pretty much encapsulated it all Danny, that's what our problem is, for sure

Adam – If we talk about the consumer education, we should really start with elementary school (???), 10 years from now 75% of our nation is gonna be millennials, they are gonna care a little more about where their food comes from, there's some disconnection, generation-wise, from the farm, and getting ag back into the school system could go a long way. I don't feel like we're gonna change someone who's 60+ with a Facebook video, but I think we can start young and make it a theme throughout school, we can come out the other end in a few years, and we'd see a more educated consumer.

Kelly – and all the lessons that can be shared with the food, with that final product, all the science and math, sociology, you know there are so many lessons that can be taught and incorporated into food and agriculture. Have you guys heard of STEM turned into STEAM? You guys know what STEM is? They put agriculture in there and made it STEAM.

Bette – there is the Virginia Foundation for Agriculture in the Classroom and they develop curriculum that are SOL compliant, I'm actually on the board of that Foundation, I think they train the teachers, and supposedly have hit each year hundreds of thousands of kids through training the teachers, so there are people out there doing that, but it just takes a while

Kelly – How can we get more teachers to buy into that as well? Alexis, did you have a final comment on this one, then we need to move to the next topic.

Alexis – Yeah, it'll be quick. Is there any way for the extension agencies, or someone like LEAP, or the USDA to start making incentive programs for what Matt's talking about, getting people who do run these stores, to create some kind of incentive-based program for the wholesalers to actually investigate that and create a value-based relationship for the more sustainable, quality products. I don't know how you could do that without some money or some type of bribery, like please buy from this farm because it's more sustainable or better in general

Kelly – the USDA or someone like that might be able to take that on, but Extension we just offer education, so we could offer programs of curriculum that increased your awareness and hopefully led to some behavior change, but that would be a bigger organization, still, it's something to work towards

Alexis – so Extension could go into somewhere like Harvest Moon with a proposal for a day they could come out and learn something

Liz K. – Might help you get into the healthy retail, it sounds like there's a program called... healthy markets, smart markets, and it really is just a matter of going, targeting your audience, talking to managers and buyers, many of whom at a health food store have already halfway bought in, or bought in in a lot of strong ways, a lot of powerful dedication sort of ways, and broadening, they already want to understand, and just broadening that understanding to a more scientific, a more holistic, to a more

agro-ecological science-based research-oriented knowledge. Like a series of, like have dinner at the farm, and a series of farm tours. Let's do it!

Kelly – alright what's our number two Maureen? Access to resources and inputs, so on this one we were talking about land and equipment, even labor was in this one as well, so people to help you do your job, but maybe this even goes into what Mark was talking about with the seeds and the stuff that you need to be more sustainable, even if you went to Feed n Seed this day and time, you may not be able to find what you need, even if you're looking on the internet, sometimes that's a huge struggle to find seeds that are produced in the way that you want them produced. So what could we do collectively as a group or as a network of service providers and farmers to start addressing this issue, access to resources and inputs?

Mark – I think the Farm Link land transfer is huge, and that's been worked on for a long time with the Beginner Farmer and Rancher Coalition and the Farm Link, I think that's an urgent issue.

Kelly – FarmLink, that's a VDACS program.

Mark - ??? families or families of farmers retiring and he or she don't have an heir who wants to take up the farm, and find ways to make that farm accessible, affordable to aspiring beginning farmers.

Kelly – so maybe farm transition all together

Liz K. – So with that maybe a tax credit or something like that in our tax code that allowed taxes to be deferred for ten years or, so talking to the legislators, dot dot dot...

Kelly – with the conservation easements there's some of that, but maybe getting a better understanding of that and communicating that better with farmers

Steffany – there have also been workshops on estate transfer, avoiding state property taxes ???

Liz K - And I think there's conversation about deferring school, student loans, and considering that a noble profession.

Kelly – like teaching or nursing, some of the things that are already easily deferred.

? – So deferring or actually working towards forgiveness, like Peace Corps or whatever where you get a percentage forgiven

Liz S. – but that's not law, that's just proposed legislation, I'm not aware of what's going on in Virginia fully, but I've heard that conservation easements now, it's been done for so many years in Virginia that now a lot of the land trusts are only looking to ease properties that are hundreds of acres, not this few-acre parcel which is what a lot of beginning farmers might be able to afford, and then the costs are depressed, but beginning farmers aren't going to be able to afford a conservation easement property. Then maybe programs to help incentivize bigger landowners to sell off smaller pieces, which isn't necessarily incentivized through estate planning, but ten acres would mean a lot to a beginning farmer but not a whole lot to some of these bigger landowners

Kelly – or could it be some kind of alternative agreement, like a lease? a lot of people may be in a relationship, where they don't have kids, you know they don't necessarily want land like our parents wanted land, you know that desire is not as much there, they want land to use while they're here and

they're healthy, but they don't necessarily want land deeded to them, and so how can we begin to look at more creative agreements around land. We've had a lot of discussion around land, or a couple of points around land, how about smaller things: tractors, refrigerated trucks, that type thing

Bette – Farm Credit has a program called **Farm Launch**, and it's for people who, not for people who have bad credit, huge credit card debt, that type of thing, but it is for people who don't have maybe a credit history or for various reasons **couldn't meet our underwriting standards but have a business plan** and stuff, and it's up to \$50,000, and **we provide a mentor** that works with them, and you're scored on things like, you have references that speak on your behalf, so it's a way for people to get in, and it's **not to be used for land at all, but equipment, operating money**, that sort of thing, and so people who are starting a business, a fencing operation, some type of things like that, have found helpful. Actually it's been in place for a little more than a year, we have **maybe four applicants** that have applied to it, not that many, we've publicized it, tried to get the word out like crazy

Kelly – missed opportunity there

Dennis - You're saying about farmer transition, those of us that got involved with this back in the 80s and early 90s, we did great, but **many of us have built up operations that are larger than we need now, and to bring someone in, to mentor, to take over a portion of that operation** is important, it give us new legs, and it allows the ??? to come in and see if this is what they want to do, they come in with, and I'm speaking now from, I've been working with interns for thirty years now, but the good thing now, the **millennials come in with a lot of energy and a lot of digital knowhow, and those two things are invaluable to me**, I don't have the energy and my digital knowhow is way back in 1984, so those things are very valuable, and I'm not an exception but my operation could be broken into two or three separate operations that could advantage someone to start farming, who wanted to do poultry, or maybe that person wanted to do vegetable crops, a lot of the **infrastructure is in place**, it's bigger than I could use anymore, and my income doesn't necessarily come from all that acreage, **how can I transition someone into using that?** What's a good mechanism, what's a good cost, can it be leased, rented, can it be used? Is there a mechanism to do that? I think that would be really helpful if we could band two or three or four smaller farms together ??? infrastructure and the ownership of that ??? and they could create

Bette – Farm Link?

Kelly – isn't that just land?

Bette – but he's talking about, it's not necessarily, See I've always heard that **Farm Link** thing through VDACS, there's **tons of people looking for land, and it's not just to buy, it's to rent or lease** or buy to own, I mean there's all kinds of options, it's pretty much open, but the people on the other end, **those that have land, have not really populated that database**. To me, they have that certified farm seeker that's part of that stuff, that's where I would start

? – You know **there needs to be someone in the middle, or an entity in the middle, between the older farmers and the younger farmers, to make that coordination, to make that legal process, to facilitate the process**

Kelly – Alright yall, due to time we're going to move on to topic three, but again this is all really good conversation, and that connecting Farm Link and promoting programs like that, or Farm Launch, is

something that Extension can easily do, that's what we're here for. Alright so profitability and labor, this one's a big one, we could put on our little fuzzy pajamas on to talk about this one, Who's got some ideas about how we can become more profitable, or find more labor, or find folks, how can we pay people a better wage

Alexis – I don't have a solution to this, but I agree with what Tenley was saying, that the market access and the ability to work with sellers, but basically the **profitability and labor are directly correlated to ability for the farmer to take goods to a market that is sustainable and consistent**, so I suppose that perhaps if you're looking at this as a reciprocal relationship, that one can't come without the other, and that the **profitability and the labor are directly related to one another** as well, you would have to look at solutions for being able to sell your goods before you could think about, it's like putting the cart before the horse, **you can't think about profit if you don't have a place to sell it**, if you don't have a market that's consistent you won't make profit, you might need that but you won't see that

Brent - I think **all of these topics are tied together**, I think it's very hard to separate, if you have access to markets you're gonna be more profitable, if you have more profitable you can pay more labor, if you're more profitable you can buy more land, more equipment, you can come up with a better farm plan because you're making more money, so they're all tied together, it's hard to separate one and solve one problem, because they're all so tied together, any one of these, if you **solve one of them it's gonna have a trickle-down effect** and it's gonna solve another one and that's gonna solve another one...

Kelly – And that would be awesome to see, you know one glass filling another to another, but I guess what we're doing here tonight, and what I'm trying to help LEAP do, is see where do we go first, you know, there's this big ball out there, which piece of yarn do we pull first to start to unravel that ball

Maureen – And what is the most pressing? If there are twenty things that factor into profitability, what are some of the biggest aspects of that, the most insurmountable problems?

? – I would ask you, from our point of view, we've looked for labor, our biggest thing was to house labor, **you cannot find any grant or any money or anything to pay labor, housing labor**, I mean sure you can advertise on somebody's website that you would like to have an intern, so is it something that you guys could really do to help with labor, because **every time I look, there's no help** there, so I'm asking you

Kelly – I don't have a quick answer to that, the only legal programs that I'm connected to that deal with labor deal with migrant workers, and I'm not saying that that's the end all be all, but that's my awareness of it, that's the avenue that the government has created, it's usually around migrant workers, like the H2A and H2B programs

Bette – so when you talk about labor you're not talking about local labor that lives in the community, are you talking about trying to attract someone to come to your farm and live there, so you need housing for them and stuff?

? – I don't want to exclude local labor, but it tends to be, **we need commitment**, we need someone who will be there at least six months, and that **tends to be a little bit older, not someone that's in school**, and we need it to be open to people outside because you're not going to find from ??? so we have people come from overseas, actually for us, Texas, we have a lot of farms, the housing, the insurance, it really sucks, and you know it's hard, it's taken a long time to get to where we actually have a tractor that works, it certainly wasn't with any help from government or whatever

Tenley – I think labor is certainly tied to profitability, even if you have money to pay for labor, finding it can be extremely difficult, I think the hiring process is one of the things I dread the most in my entire life, and a lot of it is because especially nowadays that there's so many tech options, like ya know Monster.com, there's a lot of places that you can go to hopefully attract the kind of applicants you're looking for, but if you don't know what you are or don't know how to handle them, it seems advertising in the paper is about dead in the water. So one thing I think agencies like yours could do is potentially work a link program where you were to connect people interested in working on farms to folks who actually need work on farms in a fairly localized region. Essentially it's like ??? like Farm Link across generations, but finding the right person/people is the first problem, and then you've got the second problem of paying them and keeping them happy and all that, but if you can't get over the first hurdle of hiring the best possible candidates because you don't know where to find them, I think that's a tip of the iceberg I think you guys could help a lot with

? – do they have ?? for someone to do a preliminary vetting?

Tenley – well a cyber-vetting at the least, like a dating service

Kelly – I can't get my own date, I'm not going to get you a date! And I mean the VA Beginner Farmer and Rancher Coalition, we have attempted that, the program could make a better effort, and you know, time and money with the program, you have coordinators who are part time, people come and go, as soon as something starts to catch on the position goes away, so I see what you're saying and I see the barriers, we just haven't flipped that switch and gotten there

Tenley – so many puzzle pieces to fit

Kelly – and then, even if you're a service provider, you have some sort of an agrarian background, that's usually where your mentality is if you're in the room tonight, and when you start getting into people, that's a whole other field, you have to be good with personalities, you know plants don't talk back

Alexis – that's not true

Kelly – alright one more, we're gonna run out of time, so we might even go over about ten minutes

Alexis – This is very quick, something that was mentioned at the first meeting and I really appreciated was the idea of cooperative purchasing, so if you're looking at cost of whether it be landscaping fabrics, plastics, seed trays, whatever you might be able to order at wholesale, if there was some type of connector for people in this region, Roanoke, Montgomery County, Floyd County, just that something where that could be facilitated, so money could be saved, so you're not receiving loans or getting a grant or spending out of last year's make, you can look at costs and minimize that as much as you possibly can, so like a database with the workers and equipment

Kelly – so anyone with some final thoughts?

Mark – very quickly, I think one thing Extension could do to help in the long run is to continue the work you've been doing to get practical, science-based information on sustainable production, and that includes both profitability and resource stewardship, which is going to enhance long-term profitability. Like I said I did actually read ??? rotational grazing, we know this is sequestering carbon, so it's a good practice in the long run and enhances short term returns

Kelly – if we could somehow get you some tax incentive on that. Few other bigger fish to fry in the pan right now. Alright, any final thoughts?

Tenley – Kudos to you extension people for all the work you're doing with food safety, I think that topic is moving like a large freight train coming down the track as all of us, your process and the accessibility of them for many many people in the area is spot on

Business is really going to affect profitability down the road, ??? these certifications are key

Kelly – and we were having a side conversation when it first came up about GAP and food regulation, in my mind I'm thinking I could help people with that, I could help walk you through the process, but what I'm not privy of is that \$55,000 roof that you have to install as a part, to get your infrastructure up to GAP standards, that's the side of it I don't see as much, you know I'm thinking of it as, oh we just need to educate people more, we need to offer more classes, but there's a whole other side of it of why you can't always reach the place you need to be to be certified, or to be audited and all those things

Danny – this whole thing has got more complicated than that, we've got at least four levels of food certifications that different companies require, and it can cost you between \$500 to \$8000, \$12000 just to get the food certification in addition to the improvements you got to do at your farm level, and in another year or two ??? I can't say this, they're gonna come up with another application for this, it's gonna change, gonna be a big change – don't put that!

Kelly – “the VDACS man said...”

Danny – oh it's serious, you know it's serious, it's gonna affect a lot of the farmers, big and small

Kelly – thank you guys so much for that, I know we could probably have a whole day and probably still not get through everything that we would like to all the issues and the topics that are facing us within agriculture, local regional community food systems, food access, all of those topics, so Maureen would you like to close us out? I know you've been working hard so thank you for everything that you've been doing as well

Maureen – so as I said me and Ned mostly will be transcribing a lot of this and compiling it, this is the third and final session, you know it's really interesting from my perspective is that there are a lot of topics that didn't come up here that came up at other ones, so if we are trying to look at a food system from a regional perspective and not just county by county or town by town or city by city, what does that really look like, what are the needs, and is it really different from Botetourt vs Floyd vs Montgomery or is it just a matter of what conversations happened to happen based on who was present. So the next thing would be, we're gonna compile all this information and then have, I haven't really figured it all out yet but have some kind of group prioritization, what are the biggest things? One thing that I find really interesting is that in Roanoke County's ag plan, Botetourt County, they both recommend a food hub, and if we're just looking at it from a county by county basis does that mean every county needs a food hub, or are there things at a regional level that make more sense to look at regionally as opposed to city or county by county, and how do we as a whole region integrated food system, it's complicated, figure that out and say 'the biggest need that farmers have is A, B, and C' and then what can we do to support that, and for better or worse it's gonna be messy, and this isn't something that LEAP has a history of doing but it's something that in working in access, when you look at access to food you also have to look at production, and when you look at production you have to look at access to profitability and so trying

to figure out how do we support a whole farm and food system, so that ten years down the road we don't think, oh man it sure would be nice if we had farmland that people could actually grow on, and so we're trying to be more proactive and less reactive. So thanks for your time and your input and if you have any questions about this, feel free to send me an email, my card is back there. Unless anyone has a problem with it we will share contact information of you all, and we'll send out a next steps email to you all, you're welcome to join LEAP's email list if that's something of interest, of course you absolutely don't have to be involved with LEAP in any way shape or form, it's not for us to promote ourselves it's for us to say what are the needs of farmers, and what does that voice look like, and is there a way to have a collaborative, collective voice, we're not gonna all agree on everything but what are the biggest needs that ??? Thank you guys