



FINDINGS

In February and March, 2017, Local Environmental Agriculture Project (LEAP) hosted a series of three Farmer Listening Sessions around the Roanoke Valley and surrounding region. Sessions were held on Monday and Tuesday evenings from 6:00 to 8:00 in Bonsack (Roanoke County), Rocky Mount (Franklin County), and Christiansburg (Montgomery County). Outreach for the sessions was conducted through a variety of channels, and roughly twenty people attended each. Of those twenty or so attendees, there was a fairly even mix of farmers and service providers/other stakeholders. In all, there were 45 individual voices represented, of which 31 were producers (some individuals attended multiple sessions). Virginia Cooperative Extension agriculture and natural resources agents served as facilitators (**Bonsack**: Scott Baker, Bedford County; **Rocky Mount**: Kevin Camm, Lynchburg; **Christiansburg**: Kelli Scott, Montgomery County). The sessions were recorded, and audio/video and transcripts of each session are available for review.

The sessions' format began with a welcome and overview by LEAP Executive Director Maureen McNamara Best, followed by introductions by the facilitator and all attendees. Each attendee was then instructed to think of three issues that they face as farmers, after which they formed into small groups, which were tasked with narrowing down their collective issues to their top three. Each small group then presented their top three issues/needs to the whole group, which were recorded on a pad at the front of the room. After all challenges were recorded, all participants were given three sticky dots, and instructed to choose, among the various needs identified by the smaller groups, the three that affected them the most. Those tallies were then recorded, and the three issues receiving the most votes were singled out for further discussion. Those discussions lasted approximately 20 minutes each. After the three topics were discussed in depth, LEAP thanked participants, talked about next steps, and concluded the session.

We have attempted to boil down the roughly six hours of conversation into a coherent document, organized by perceived challenges and proposed solution(s) to each obstacle. This document clearly does not represent the totality of opinions, challenges, or suggestions that attendees voiced, but rather attempts to summarize consistent themes that came up independently on multiple occasions. In an attempt to present the ideas as they were expressed, we have used direct quotes extensively, which on some occasions have been edited slightly from the verbatim transcript for purposes of clarity and brevity. All identifying information has been removed so as to maintain the anonymity of participants.

The top issues identified at each session, along with their respective vote tallies, were:

Bonsack: Accessibility to Market (9), Profitability (6), Scale/Transition to Increase Production (4), Consumer Education/Awareness (3), Tools/Infrastructure for Small-Scale Producers (3), Low Prices for goods grown (3), Enough producers (3), Labor (3), Cost of Production (2), Supply Consistency/Volume (2), Technology Specific to Marketing (0), Regulation (0), Affordable Land (0)

Rocky Mount: Marketing (18), Profitability (17), Government regulation/intervention (9), Labor (7), Capital (6)

Christiansburg: Consumer Education (10), Profitability (9), Access to land, equipment, resources (9), Labor (8), Financial help/access to capital (6), Market Access (3), FSMA/GAP (3), Producer education/technical training/resources (1)

In each session, the number one priority dealt with markets – marketing, accessibility to markets, and consumer education. Other challenges which didn't make the top three also dealt with this notion, including consumer education, low prices, technology specific to marketing, and access to markets.

Common themes that emerged at all sessions relating to marketing included how to grow the tiny percentage of consumers who participate in the local market, the inability of farmers to effectively market themselves and the need for an outside agency/collective to direct technology-savvy marketing and consumer education efforts. Working with schools to educate students about the 'true value' of food was also mentioned at two sessions, as was using farm visits as a (potentially profitable) educational tool.

Two groups also mentioned the challenges to entering into the conventional retail market, i.e. grocery stores, as consumers increasingly demand convenience. They often take care of marketing products, but demand expensive certifications, insurance, and have too much power in negotiating prices. GAP was a concern at all three sessions, especially how small farmers could afford the certification – two mentioned coordinating Group GAP certification to cut costs to producers.

Profitability was a primary concern at each session. This topic was sufficiently broad to touch on a wide array of issues, but some raised additional concerns around consumer education and convincing consumers to pay true costs of food, cooperation between growers to demand higher prices from wholesalers and cut costs on bulk purchases, and more concerns around access to varying markets.

The difficulty of finding and supporting a reliable labor force was a common theme. Labor was fourth at all three sessions, within one vote of third priority at two sessions and within two votes at the other. Farmland acquisition and farm transition were also identified as challenges facing a number of farmers.

CHALLENGES: MARKET SHARE, PRICES

The fact that consumers are, by and large, spending their food dollars at conventional grocery stores was not lost on farmers who attended the sessions, as this challenge was brought up repeatedly:

- “Where are they actually spending their food dollar, Food Lion?”
- “What are we doing to get more than 1/10 of 1% of the market?”

Many farmers pointed out the prices their products demand in the market, which at times are unfair and don't support a living wage.

- “Farmers need to get fair prices.”
- “Prices of everything are down. We're not even breaking even.”
- “Depressed prices that farmers receive for goods... don't necessarily get us where we need to go in terms of our profitability because there's a lot of competition between growers that keeps prices really low.”
- “I can remember going down there [to a popular farmers market] and the farmers are selling gorgeous hand-picked fresh lettuce for a dollar less than you could buy it at Kroger. That makes it tough for someone like me who wants to charge more.”
- “I mean, you're taking the risk... you put your product out there [at a produce auction] and it goes for literally pennies on the dollar, and that is just not right.”

PROPOSED SOLUTION: CONSUMER EDUCATION

At each session, a better-educated consumer population was touted as a goal, which would increase the tiny percentage of the market spending their food dollars on local food, would help justify premium prices for quality local products, and ultimately increase profitability. Many farmers talked about the importance of conveying the true value of the food they produce.

- “We need to educate people locally of the true cost of producing the products, because what they're buying at Walmart is not equivalent to what I'm raising, and they don't understand, they see the price difference, they don't understand the costs that go into that, and I think that education has to be a big part of marketing.”
- “[Consumers] recognize I have a better product, but [as a population], we're still not quite there whether we're willing to pay that much extra.”
- “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."

- "Try to do marketing campaigns, some way to make people better understand to support local agriculture."

Many ideas were floated to address the consumer education question:

- The idea that farmers are too busy farming to meaningfully engage with consumers was a consistent point. Other support agencies should be doing this work on farmers' behalf:
 - "I see education as more an Extension agency task rather than an actual farmer task."
 - "We as farmers don't have time to do this thing, we're hoping that VA Extension and LEAP and [other groups] can be our outreach arm. We don't have money or tech skills, outreach time, etc. to accomplish this."
- One farmer suggested cooking education, as consumers who are comfortable in the kitchen will spend more on un-processed fresh ingredients.
- Many farmers brought up the idea of educating students at their schools; indeed, this was brought up independently at each session:
 - "School lunch should be an educational opportunity."
 - "Schools are really the first place where we need to start, you need to get kids when they're young."
 - "If we talk about the consumer education, we should really start with elementary school. Ten 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."
- In a related vein, some farmers suggested farm-to-school programs as a way to link education for tomorrow's consumers to profitability for today's producers: "Tie into the school systems, create a program that could pull everybody's product and supply the school systems."
- The idea of an outside agency organizing educational farm tours seemed popular with several growers at the Christiansburg session, particularly tours for institutional buyers, natural food store buyers, etc.:
 - "LEAP or whoever could help facilitate a tour that comes to our farm, even people who run natural food stores, if they could come see everything that we're doing, you could reach people we don't normally reach."
 - "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, 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!"
 - "Extension could go into somewhere like Harvest Moon with a proposal for a day they could come out [to a farm] and learn something."

CHALLENGE: MARKETING

Lots of farmers bemoaned the fact that they are too busy working the land and producing food to spend time and energy finding customers. And the lack of technological know-how among many farmers was identified as a particular barrier to effective marketing.

- “Farmers don’t have time to be sitting on the computer and writing blogs and being on Facebook and trying to look for those customers. Not every farmer is tech savvy.”
- “If you’re working land, you don’t necessarily have time to develop a commercial or pamphlets, brochures, literature.”
- “We as farmers don’t have time to do this thing, we’re hoping that VA Extension and LEAP and [others] can be our outreach arm. We don’t have money or tech skills, outreach time, etc. to accomplish this.”
- “How you can juggle your actual work load with trying to be the friendly Facebook social media blogger/agritourism hero/local food bright light in the world? There’s an expectation you’re going to be able to market in that way and satisfy your customers in that way. I find it’s a technology problem, spending hours doing a blog or whatever.”
- “Time constraints [are an issue], because as a farmer you have to wear all the different hats, the marketing hat, the business hat, the farming hat.”
- “If you’re not trying to compete in the wholesale market but if you’re trying to find a niche, that can be difficult sometimes.”

PROPOSED SOLUTION: COLLECTIVE BRANDING

This was a concept that arose at all three listening sessions and generated extensive conversation. Numerous farmers mentioned regional branding efforts in surrounding areas (Greenbrier Valley Grown, Virginia Grown, Bedford Grown, Appalachian Grown, “Shenandoah Valley has one, Charlottesville area has one, Tidewater’s got one, Northern Virginia’s got one.”), some of which seem to have garnered more success for farmers than others. Many farmers and service providers talked of the potential such a program could have to boost sales, and some strategies that have worked for other programs:

- “Where are we building power as small farmers in our region to maybe deal with marketing as a group instead of all individually trying to work for a customer who doesn’t necessarily care?”
- “A branding campaign... it’s awareness, it’s education, it’s really a community thing. It’s like, we’re proud of where we’re from, and if you’re really proud of where you’re from then support where you’re from.”
- “I think Appalachian Sustainable Development created a nice program, they do a heck of a job of marketing Southwest growers... They have a marketing director, they put their label ‘Appalachian’ on it, and they promote that label in the grocery stores... if a group gets together and you could put someone in charge of it it’s a very viable thing.”
- “This is a product that was grown in the Roanoke Valley that meet some kind of criteria, and the website that you could take those people to that says, this is a grower that is using sustainable practices... that’s a huge missing piece here in our market.”

- “Branding coupled with the Co-operative tends to work well.”
- “There are opportunities to develop it without having it be a big cost to the producer.”

Other farmers noted some of the challenges of a branding campaign:

- “They've had that [branding campaign] for a couple years, they've got little marquees and little things that you can put on your stuff, I don't know that it's gone any further than that. I haven't seen that putting [the brand] on my stuff to mean much of anything.”
- “You can't just have a brand and then stick it out there, let it go on its own. It's gotta be supported from the community that created it; if it's not supported, it's going to die.”
- “A sticker does nothing but a story of why that sticker is important is hugely important.”

CHALLENGE: MARKET ACCESSABILITY

This was the number one priority at one session, and was a concern raised consistently throughout all three. One small grower summed up the prevailing sentiment succinctly:

- “Profitability is directly correlated to ability for the farmer to take goods to a market that is sustainable and consistent... If you don’t have a market that’s consistent you won’t make profit.”

Farmers at two sessions talked about consumers’ demand for convenience:

- “[As a society,] we’ve been trained to have instant gratification and want everything so convenient, to be able to shop whenever you want.”
- “From a consumer standpoint, I like local food, but I’ve got to have easier access to it.”
- “[Consumers] need convenience. Unless you’re driven by true high ideals and have a lot of disposable income and time, there are a lot of families that are younger and have small children, or work far away; they don’t have time to pursue this kind of thing. It needs to be convenient. Convenience is huge in our society.”

One stakeholder, however, repeatedly warned against treating customer convenience with too much primacy:

- “Can you really have a system that works both for consumers and farmers, or are those different stakeholders and how are you being really conscious of that?... Not that consumers aren’t an important piece of this, obviously that’s how this whole thing runs, but if we are not focused on what begins the food system which is farmers & farm viability, I think we are really missing something and just catering to the convenience of consumers and forgetting the producers... What could we maybe be thinking about so that we’re not all bending over backwards and trying different ways to appease a customer who we have no idea what that person’s gonna do.”

For both consumers and farmers, the limitations of a traditional farmers market were raised repeatedly:

- “We’ve limited ourselves to 4 hours or 6 hours on Saturday and expect the consumer to respond to that.”
- “The problem we have we go to market once a week at this, but the consumer wants something more often than we can provide.”
- “There’s a grocery store on every corner... They’re open 24 hours a day and we’re asking people in 3 hours to go buy their stuff.”
- “I don’t want to spend Saturday and Sunday sitting at the farmers market, that’s the only time I get to see my family. From a convenience point of view, I’d love to market my product through a storefront rather than a farmers market.”
- “I can’t show up at a market and hope that I can sell stuff.”

The oft-mentioned convenience that consumers demand was, for many, embodied in the grocery store, where the vast majority of shoppers buy the bulk of their food. Also tying into the marketing question, a number of farmers liked the concept of focusing their energy on producing food to sell wholesale and leaving the marketing to the grocery stores:

- “Most people’s produce shopping occurs in grocery stores. The easiest value-added for marketing is if you can get your produce into that grocery store and then they do the marketing for you.”
- “We [a distributor that sells to grocery chains] have a marketing department that puts together a history of the farm with a picture of you on it, and they insert that in the Harris Teeter cards.”

But the challenges of selling to grocery chains, for most small farmers, are formidable:

- “We have to carry GAP certification – it’s a lot of paperwork.”
- “We’ve already talked to Kroger. The insurance you’ve got to carry is outrageous, number one. They’re a pain in the butt to deal with, two.”

Despite the appeal of selling to grocery chains, the direct-sales model maintained a certain value that wholesale methods lack, at least for a few farmers:

- “We’ve done a lot of direct marketing, including getting people to come to our farm. If we show them the land and the animals, and really have that transparency of what we’re doing and the education aspect. I guess part of me, we’ve enjoyed developing those relationships with people that come to our farm store, who come for farm tours, as well as at the market. That direct relationship is really valuable. And so I think it’s hard to let go of product to be sold through something else where we don’t get to hear ‘That was the best chicken we’ve ever had!’ Not that it’s all about our ego, but it’s about the relationships.”
- “[The lack of need for expensive liability insurance], that’s another bonus for selling direct. You’re not going through middlemen, you’re not going through aggregators, you’re just eyeball to eyeball with your customer.”

PROPOSED SOLUTION: FOOD SYSTEM INFRASTRUCTURE

Coming out of the conversations around market accessibility, there was a lot of talk during the first two sessions about the prospect of some sort of collectively-owned and -operated auction house/food hub/year-round marketplace.

- “Where are we building power as small farmers in our region to maybe deal with marketing as a group?”
- “We opened an every-day farmers market where we were all cooperative instead of competitive, and some people had meat, some people had fish, some people had vegetables and stuff. I’ve got access to a humongous warehouse, and if we could get a group of people, so you grow a little bit of this a little bit of that, and I’ve got people who could publicize that. It’s something to think about if anyone would be interested in cooperating in something like that.”
- “The most successful food hubs in this country are owned by farmers, are cooperatively run and owned.”
- “We need to look at regional aggregation points, where there’s slaughterhouses and canning kitchens and produce storage that are regionally spaced out.”

- “That’s the problem with beef and pork, you have to have it USDA-processed. Where are you going to take that?”
- “Roanoke is ripe for a nice food hub.”

This conversation really took off at the session in Rocky Mount; the group talked about a project modeled on the produce auction house in Hillsville, envisioned as part of Franklin County’s economic development strategy, to complement the industrial park and agriculture center proposed at Sink Farm:

- “Sink Farm was bought by Franklin County to be used as an industrial park, and there were also plans to move the fairgrounds for the Sontag area into this new development. And I know the produce auction was looking at a spot.”
- “It would be really nice if we had a hub like the Southwest Market that’s in Hillsville.”
- “What if Franklin County invested in the Sink Farm where they’re planning on putting the agriculture center, and put in an operation similar to Hillsville?”
- “It’s kind of at Franklin County’s discretion now, to push them to look at this, whether it’s something they want to do. I just think it goes hand-in-hand, if you’re gonna put an agriculture center there, do the rest of it.”
- “It’s the county’s big economic development investment for the next generation, 500 acres. And to say, well, what are your target industries? And if agriculture’s going to be one, let’s invest at least as much local government effort in supporting diversified local agriculture.”
- “So this is the opportunity, and this is probably the group to organize that and advocate for it, and I think you would have a fairly receptive county board, to say local agriculture matters. This is the point to invest in a positive government intervention.”
- “We could draft up a template letter that clearly defined what it is that we want and what we’re trying to do, and we could circulate this and get a bunch of people... if they get 500, 1000 letters all saying the same thing, that message is going to get across.”
- “If Franklin County invested in the Sink Farm where they’re planning on putting the agriculture center, and put in an operation similar to Hillsville, maybe not in the same format. But those guys, it’s a really neat organization. It’s all local product. If you aren’t able to pack it, they’ll pack it for you. They market it to grocery stores, large grocery store chains – we’re talking about selling truckloads of product. In our area, we have nothing like it. How would it be if you had a cooler in there with your product in it, they sold it for you, you didn’t have to be there. We’re at a point to where we could have something big if we push it as a group. This is something this area could really, really profit from. I mean it’s like a group like us could put all our ideas together into some kind of plan for a perfect marketing situation to help every person in this room.”

CHALLENGE: CERTIFICATIONS AND LIABILITY

The last quote, as well as the above references to the challenges of selling to grocery chains, hint at a challenge that was expressed repeatedly at all three sessions: the burdensome, expensive nature or maintaining proper liability and food safety certifications required by wholesale markets.

- “Food safety and liability issues... can be very difficult for a small producer.”
- “Product liability and all this other stuff – it’s a complicated world out there.”
- “You spend hours and hours every week just keeping up with the paperwork.”
- “This whole thing has gotten more complicated. We’ve got at least four levels of food certifications that different companies require, and it can cost you between \$500 to \$8000, even \$12000 just to get the food certification, in addition to the improvements you’ve got to do at your farm.”
- [To get product into institutions like schools]: “Unless you have this government certification mess, you can’t do it.”
- “Food safety, I think that topic is moving like a large freight train coming down the track at all of us. This business is really going to affect profitability down the road. These certifications are key.”

GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) Certification, in particular, was brought up independently at each session, as a major barrier to accessing wholesale markets. Indeed, at the Christiansburg session, GAP was identified as a major issue warranting its own category (it received three votes, tied with market access).

- “We are selling to individuals. When we start getting into institutions and bigger wholesale buyers, they require GAP certification.”
- “To a grocery chain is not going to happen without the GAP certification. Every one of them want GAP now.”
- “The requirements for whatever certifications you have to have – for us it’s GAP – the burden of paperwork, the expense of the inspections – they hurt you in profitability.”
- “I don't deal with any farmers in this area, and the reason being that we have to carry GAP certification.”

Even just the term ‘GAP’ was noted to cause confusion with consumers and even some growers and buyers:

- “I’m sorry, I’m ignorant. What’s GAP?” “Good Agricultural Practices. It’s a certification for the Food Safety Modernization Act that passed back in 2012.” “It’s paperwork, it’s just paperwork. It don’t mean anything, it’s just paperwork.”
- “Nobody understands this GAP thing. You start talking about GAP, they get a glazed-over look on you. And nobody understands the value nor the cost to produce the product under a GAP umbrella.”
- “You have terms like GAP, people have no earthly idea what you’re talking about. We’ve done such a poor job setting the tables of what we’re trying to do.”

- “With the right mentality I think it would be good, but then there’s no education to the general public as to what it’s all about. Even the buyers don’t know what it’s all about. I’ve heard stories about Wal-Mart buyers showing up on farms and they can’t be admitted because they’re not properly attired, and they don’t even know that.”

But while there was some degree of consensus that GAP Certification was a barrier to market access, a number of stakeholders expressed the importance of obtaining the certification:

- “Don't let the cost thing hold you back from getting something that's going to be law down the road, depending on how large you are.”
- “GAP certification is common sense that you need to be doing to keep from killing people. It's one of the least government-regulated, cumbersome programs I've ever seen, really.”

PROPOSED SOLUTION: **GROUP GAP**

In response to the oft-repeated challenge of GAP Certification, the concept of Group GAP certification was suggested at each session.

- “If folks are working together, like a cooperative model or any kind of group marketing structure, then there’s Group GAP, which can be a lot cheaper and easier for individual farmers to go through than if they’re each trying to individually be certified.”
- “Appalachian [Sustainable Development] sponsors our GAP classes. Our GAP classes cost \$10... you get breakfast and lunch and [the instructor] gives you a big notebook and all you have to do is fill in the blanks. And then you're talking about cost, he teaches you how to make copies of it, send it ahead of time to the Department. They look at it on their own time, then you get another farmer close to you and you get certified the same day, you split the cost. And now there are companies, i.e. Wegmans, and ourselves, we're on the verge, we are going to pay a portion of your costs to get GAP certified. Because we know for small growers, even \$500 is an expense. But if you can get grants or if you learn how to take care of this expense through a group, it knocks the cost almost in half.”
- “How come Extension Service can’t do combined GAP training to lower the cost per grower?”

CHALLENGE: INPUT COSTS

At each session, farmers identified input costs as part of the equation that affects profitability:

- “The only way you can really control probability, regardless of whether or not you're selling commodity wholesale or retail or a niche product, is to control your input. That's what profitability is at the end of the day. So controlling the input costs, regardless of whether you're a huge conventional operation or whether you're a small backyard operation, that's going to drive profitability. That's really the one thing I'm hearing across the scale of production: it's controlling input costs. Because [a cattle rancher] doesn't have any control over beef prices, and [an aquaponic fish farmer] has a specialized product, if he's talking to a restaurant that will only buy it up to a specific price point, then he doesn't have any control over his price. It's controlling your input cost at the front end to increase your profitability at the end of the day.”
- “Every year I had to raise the price of strawberries because of the inputs.”
- “We mostly talked about the price on the buying side, we haven't talked about input costs.”

PROPOSED SOLUTION: COOPERATIVE PURCHASING

The question of how to control input costs as a means to improve profitability came up at all three sessions, and at each session, the concept of cooperative purchasing seemed popular:

- “I'd like to see more cooperation between producers in combining to get purchase power. For example, if I could split the cost on getting pallets of certain things that I might need for growing. Tool sharing would be a lovely idea. I don't need to have a tractor but once in a blue moon, so some of that would be helpful.”
- “I really appreciate 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. Somewhere that could be facilitated, so money could be saved, so you can look at costs and minimize that as much as you possibly can, so like a database with the workers and equipment.”
- “There are growers that, when we got together, we found other ways to cut costs down a little bit.”
- “It's an opportunity to collaborate, on plastics and seeds and all that stuff... We participate in a cooperative, things like white plastics for high tunnels and greenhouses, and there's simple ways like that that are good ways.”
- “Something as simple as a closed Facebook group where people could go on and say, 'hey, I need a tiller' or whatever, and try to make that closed group among [farmers] within the Roanoke Valley, in this area, would be very helpful.”

CHALLENGE: ACCESS TO QUALIFIED LABOR

The difficulty of finding and supporting a reliable workforce was a common theme. Labor was voted the fourth-most-pressing need at all three sessions, within one vote of the third-place priority at two sessions and within two votes at the other. Even though it fell just outside the top three priorities chosen to discuss in depth, the labor issue received plenty of attention:

- “Even if you have money to pay for labor, finding it can be extremely difficult.”
- “We’re advertising for three growers right here in the Roanoke Valley right now, and we have had almost zero applicants.”
- “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.”
- “I think the hiring process is one of the things I dread the most in my entire life.”
- “Our issue with increased production is labor and the fact that there aren't many people available with the organization and the management skills who know how to grow food... We don't have the management people that can transcend from the office out into the field and back and forth. Those people are almost non-existent, that mid-level management person on a farm.”
- “My partner is a farmer. He’s having a hard time finding someone to manage his farm for him.”
- “Schools aren’t teaching [agricultural science students] how to grow food [on anything other than industrial scale].”
- “There are kids coming out of Horticulture programs, they have a degree in Horticulture but they really don't know how to grow food.”
- “You cannot find any grant or any money or anything to pay labor.”
- “We need commitment, someone who will be there at least six months, and that tends to be a little bit older, not someone that’s in school.”
- “You hit that point you have to depend on other people. That kind of training is a huge missing thing.”

PROPOSED SOLUTION: ONLINE JOB SEEKER/EMPLOYER DATABASE, WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

A few stakeholders mentioned existing job development programs, and one grower suggested a database to match job seekers with those in need of labor.

- “This is what this Sprouting Farms thing is doing in West Virginia, we are going to teach people how to be growers, and I think those people will go out and demand pretty high labor prices in the market, because they're going to have that expertise... because it's a huge chasm of unqualified people.”
- “I mean there's a couple Institutes, but they're all taken. As soon as they graduate, they've already got a job somewhere.”
- “I was at one [farm] this morning in Dublin, and they are recognized for their whole training process. They bring in a new crew, 67 people, every year, and they have classroom, they do the

whole thing. And they don't come back, they go on to higher paid jobs. They are actually teaching an H2A group how to make more money outside than working for them. I was very impressed with it, to be honest. I'd never heard of that.”

- “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. Cyber-vetting at the least. Essentially like a dating service.”

CHALLENGE: ACCESS TO CAPITAL

This was brought up independently at all three sessions, and while it never quite cracked the top three needs farmers expressed, it was voted as one of the top five issues at two of the sessions, and came up repeatedly during conversations around profitability and scale.

- “You're raising a niche product and [lending institutions] don't see that as being profitable.”
- “Most people in our group are small scale and trying to come up with capital for equipment costs and production costs.”
- “No lending institution will lend to a farm with anticipated sales ideas. They don't look at business plans anymore. The banking is so tight, unless you can show cash flow, it's a chicken or an egg thing. So it's hard to scale up, because you can't get the money to do it... Let's say you were buying [my product], and you signed a letter saying 'If you produce 10000 pounds of [my product] a year, I will buy it.' I can't take that letter to an institution and say 'I need to scale up 5-fold to meet this company's needs. They're going to buy from me.' That's still not good enough to get money.”
- “I've been denied every time I've applied.”

PROPOSED SOLUTION: EXISTING PROGRAMS

One representative from a lending institution talked about a program they had developed to address this very need, but that it was woefully under-utilized:

- “Farm Credit has a program called Farm Launch for people who for various reasons couldn't meet our underwriting standards, but have a business plan. We provide a mentor that works with them. It's not to be used for land at all, but equipment, operating money. 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.”

In contrast to the majority of farmers who talked about lending, one cattle rancher noted their perceived ease of accessing capital through another existing lender:

- “Farm Service Agency has great programs to lend money to beginner farmers, beginner producers. If you haven't filed a schedule for more than 10 years, you're still a beginner farmer/rancher. They've got production loans and all kinds of stuff, crazy low interest rates... They give me money and I lose money religiously, and they still give it to me.”

Further discussion revealed the difference between traditional commodity production, like beef cattle, and niche or specialty products, in the eyes of lenders.

- “It's a systemic problem because she's raising a commodity and you're raising a niche product, and they don't see that as being profitable because they don't have any records on it. They're only looking at numbers.”

CHALLENGE: ACCESS TO LAND AND FARM TRANSITION

At the Christiansburg session in particular, the land question was the focus of a lengthy conversation, but it was also raised at the Bonsack Session.

- “Affordable land [is an issue for] folks who don't have land in their family who want to get into [farming]. And also juggling what kind of outside employment income do I need to have to pay off a mortgage on land I buy?”
- “If a farmer is retiring and they don't have an heir who wants to take up the farm, [how can we] find ways to make that farm accessible, affordable to aspiring beginning farmers?”
- “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. Beginning farmers aren't going to be able to afford a conservation easement property.”
- “Many of us have built up operations that are larger than we need now, and [we want] to bring someone in, to mentor, to take over a portion of that operation.”
- “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?”

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS: TAX CREDITS, FARM LINK

Numerous potential solutions to this question were proffered, most of them specific policies that government could enact to encourage or facilitate land transfer:

- “Maybe a tax credit or something like that in our tax code that allowed taxes to be deferred for ten years [for beginner farmers].”
- “Workshops on estate transfer, avoiding state property taxes.”
- “Maybe programs to help incentivize bigger landowners to sell off smaller pieces.”
- “Farm Link through VDACS. There's tons of people looking for land, and it's not just to buy, it's to rent or lease. Those that have land have not really populated that database. There needs to be someone, 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.”

CHALLENGE: INFORMATION SHARING

This last proposed solution to the land issue identifies an existing program that is attempting to address the problem, but for whatever reason is under-utilized. This was also the case with programs to address the issue of access to capital (Farm Launch), finding qualified labor (VA Beginner Farmer/Rancher Coalition), agricultural education in schools (Ag in the Classroom), and market accessibility (Market Maker). In each case, a potential solution is already in place, but the connection between those facing obstacles and the programs designed to alleviate them is not being made. Perhaps better communication among stakeholders, such as a centralized information clearinghouse, could help make these connections and allow farmers to utilize existing resources to address their needs.

- “With the conservation easements there’s some of that [tax credits for keeping land in production], but maybe getting a better understanding of that and communicating that better with farmers.”
- “It’s been in place for a little more than a year, we have maybe four applicants that have applied to it. We’ve publicized it, tried to get the word out like crazy.” “Missed opportunity there.”
- “Farmers throw their stuff in there [the Market Maker program], but you never hear of any hit whatsoever. I’ve never gotten a single hit, and I’ve kept stuff on there for a year... If the restaurants or whomever doesn’t know it’s there, it’s like a tree falling in the forest, and nobody’s there.”
- “Sounds like a similar problem as what the auction has on Saturday: too many suppliers show up and not enough buyers, and the price drops and nobody’s happy. So as you build that market, you have to ensure you have enough coming in on both sides of it. Whoever’s running Market Maker needs to be doing the same thing.”
- “The VA Beginner Farmer and Rancher Coalition, we have attempted that [connecting job seekers to farmers in need of labor]. 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.”
- “Hell, there’s 8000 agencies involved in local food; I can’t even keep up with them. And if all that money got put in one place instead of 8000 places, where you could know that this is the designated place to get stuff done...”

CHALLENGE: UNFAIR POLICIES

The Rocky Mount session identified government intervention as one of their three primary barriers, though the feeling of an unfair policy landscape was raised at the Bonsack session, and a number of specific policy proposals were floated at the Christiansburg session.

- “I think they’re playing with people too, paid lobbyists, so if there’s some kind of policy message you want, or that is the realm that you want to put some time and effort, you have to play the game that they’re playing.”
- “The way that the law is written, there’s a lot of support for the big guys in subsidies and things like that, not so much for the little guys. Government picks winners and losers.”
- “Right now they [government] dismiss us completely except to regulate us. Because their idea of ag is big ag, because that’s who pays them, and we don’t. So our voice is absolutely not heard at the government level, at any government level.”
- “If you’re expecting the federal government to do anything, you’re just barking up the wrong tree. And even the state. The best bet you have is local government. You can get to those people and you have a conversation with them. But getting anything to change is a whole different story.”

PROPOSED SOLUTION: ADVOCACY FOR POLICY CHANGE

There were a number of suggestions of specific policies or programs that different levels of government might address. The conversation around the proposed auction house in Franklin County specifically honed in on this idea of advocating to local elected leaders for policies and investments.

- “I think the education part perhaps needs to be to local government because of the value, the GDP that is produced, money changing hands, the value that that brings to local communities by the money that is produced by people who produce things... So that’s important for the localities to understand so that they can modify their economic development plans to include more small business owners and production side of the coin than trying to bring in someone who’s going to employ 300 people.”
- “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 [for beginning farmers], so talking to the legislators.”
- “[For beginning farmers] How about deferring student loans, or actually working towards forgiveness, like Peace Corps or whatever, where you get a percentage forgiven?”
- “Maybe programs to help incentivize bigger landowners to sell off smaller pieces, which isn’t necessarily incentivized through estate planning. Ten acres would mean a lot to a beginning farmer but not a whole lot to some of these bigger landowners.”
- “There’s billions and billions of dollars going to the Midwest for these farms that aren’t feeding people. Maybe we should change the way we look at subsidies.” “All right, but the difference is I can’t buy a congressman.”
- “If you’re going to slaughter animals, you’re inspected by the state of Virginia. It’s the law. And so why is it even necessary to get a federal stamp? To me it’s just a money racket.”
- “If it’s safe for me to take my cow there [to the processing facility] and bring it home and eat it, then why can I not sell it, why is it not safe for me to sell to my neighbor?”

CHALLENGE: TECHNICAL TRAINING

A few producers identified continuing education and technical training as an unmet need, particularly for smaller-scale operations – large production operations, it seems, are already being supported with this sort of education and training.

- “Virginia Tech, as far as small farms, they have not done their job. There’s nothing wrong with it, but they’re on beef cattle and corn and soybeans. And we need more seminars and more information. So we need more education, education from government employees.”
- “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.”
- “Not being in the produce business, I have another question. So like in production ag, like especially row crops or dairy production, a lot of times we’ll go and try to learn from someone, something that they’ve kind of figured out that may work on their system. Not necessarily copy that, but take it back to our own operation, and how can we replicate [that]?”