



Virginia Cooperative Extension

Virginia Tech • Virginia State University

www.ext.vt.edu

Washington County 2023 Situation Analysis Report

Phil Blevins, Unit Coordinator, Extension Agent, Agriculture; Crystal Peek, Extension Agent, 4-H Youth Development; Andrea Wann, Extension Agent, Family Nutrition Program; Bailey Dotson, 4-H Program Assistant; Lisa Little, Unit Administrative Assistant; Trisha Morris, Unit Support Staff



Summary of community issues and Extension office response

Priority Issue	Planned Unit Response
The Continuing Increase of Input and Capital Costs	Provide educational programming on improved efficiencies in ag production and risk management.
Agriculture Literacy and Public Perception of Agriculture	Continue to emphasize the importance of agriculture in the economy. Educate non-farm public regarding normal ag practices and the truth about conventional practices and their safety and positive benefits.
Life Skills Development	Continued in-school programming towards goal setting, character and public speaking
Financial Education and Career Development	Programs including Kids Marketplace and Reality Store will be held to guide youth towards economic decision making
Nutrition Education and Food Literacy	Work towards Policy, Systems and Environmental changes within schools, grocery stores, farmers markets, food pantries and community gardens.

Introduction

The Washington County unit of Virginia Cooperative Extension conducted a situation analysis during calendar year 2023. The purpose of the analysis was to identify key issues facing the community and provide Extension staff with up-to-date information to use when developing educational programs for the community. Situation analysis is the first component of the Extension Programming Model and helps the organization provide programming based on the actual needs of the community.

Qualitative data was gathered through surveys and personal knowledge from client interaction. This information was combined with quantitative data (to develop a Unit Profile) to determine benchmarks from which to evaluate data gathered from community members and residents. Data and information from these activities was analyzed and priority issues were identified. In addition to the survey provided, the questions that were addressed were:

1. What are the issues related to _____?
2. Why are these issues affecting our citizens?
3. What can be done to address these issues?

Unit Profile

Washington County is a rural county of 564.2 square miles located in southwest Virginia. It is bounded on the east by Smyth and Grayson Counties, on the west by Scott County, on the north by Russell County, and to the south by the state of Tennessee. U.S. Census data indicated a population of 53,958 for the county and a population of 16,975 for the city of Bristol covering an area of 11.6 square miles. Abingdon serves as the county seat and is the largest town within the county boundaries. Other incorporated towns are Glade Spring and Damascus. Washington County has experienced significant development pressure in the past 20 years. The county population has remained steady 2020 while Bristol's has increased 1.4%.

Of the total population Black or African Americans represent about 1.5%, Asians - .6%, American Indians - 0.2%, some other race - .1%, two or more races – 1.1%, and Hispanics – 1.8%.

Washington County is a high-ranking county in agriculture production among Virginia counties with over \$69,000,000.00 in farm income ranking 3rd in number of farms, 1st in eggs, 3rd in cows and calves, and 4th in beef cows. The greatest agriculture resource in the county is pasture, which drives the livestock industry.

Beef cattle represent the greatest income in the agriculture sector with over \$43,000,000 in sales. In addition, Abingdon is a major livestock marketing center, being one of the largest east of the Mississippi. Weekly sales are held at 2 local markets. Changes in the beef industry are bringing about many opportunities in marketing which are being explored.

Average farm size decreased from 120 to 117 acres from 2012 to 2017. Personal experience and interviews clearly indicate that some of the larger farms are being divided into “farmettes” or subdivisions. Along with this change has arrived a group of new generation farmers eager for assistance.

Due to reduced margins and retirements, the dairy industry has decline dramatically in the past few years. Dairy farmers continue to struggle with high input costs and frequent low market prices for their product. Nevertheless, dairy farmers continue to represent a major force in agriculture in the county.

The sheep industry, while small, has experienced a renewed growth in recent years due to strong lamb prices. Another area which remains strong in the livestock sector is goat production. Predator control represents one of the major obstacles to growth in these industries. Horse numbers are also significant in the county.

An area that has received significant attention and growth is beekeeping. There has been great interest in protecting honeybees and increasing the number of beekeepers and honeybee colonies.

Agriculture Statistics	Year					
	2017	2012	2007	2002	1997	1992
Number of Farms	1,506	1,602	1,791	1,821	2,029	1,986
Land in Farms	176,344	192,123	198,850	197,495	190,573	190,062
Average Farm Size	117	120	111	108	94	96
Cropland Harvested	58,266	44,465	43,494	44,350	40,888	37,786
Cows and Calves	66,037	67,259	66,021	64,381	61,635	62,248
Dairy Cows	2,170	2,587	2,252	3,117	4,536	5,807
Sheep	4,403	6,071	7,649	2,883	1,638	1,849
Tobacco (acres)	?	?	388	1,887	2,995	3,550
Corn	3,674					
Hay (acres)	37,202	40,325	40,250	39,241	32,298	29,839
Average Age of Operator	58.9	59.9	58.5	56.7	55.4	56.0

Washington County is ranked 75th out of 133 counties in the state for overall health, with 1 being the healthiest and 133 in worst health. There are large percentages of smoking (20%), obesity (33%), food insecurity (13%), children in poverty (18%), all which contribute to the overall health within the county’s population. On average, Washington County ranks negatively higher than the state averages for poor mental health days (15%), poor physical health days (3.3), physical inactivity (23%) and access to exercise opportunities (64%). During the 2022-2023 school year Washington County had an overall free and reduced lunch rate of 70.70%.

Health Outcomes

Health outcomes represent how healthy a county is right now, in terms of length of life but quality of life as well.

Washington (WS) is ranked in the lower middle range of counties in Virginia (Lower 25%-50%).



Figure 1: Washington County Health Outcomes (County Health Rankings)

Data used in this situational analysis are in the tables below.

Youth

Youth Statistics (2010-2017)	
Area	Washington County
Number of Youth (under 5)	2332
Number of Youth (5-9)	2999
Number of Youth (10-14)	3016
Number of Youth (15-19)	3244
Free and Reduced Lunches	3363
Home Schooled Children	244
Students in GED Program	*
Students in Alternative Program	*
Poverty Level (below age 18)	20.6
Single Parent Households	3170
High School Dropouts (Ages 16-19) (2010-2011)	20
Children Receiving Special Education Services (2013)	15.8
Children in Foster Care	63
Child Abuse or Neglect (Cases Founded) (# per 1,000 children)	5.4
Day Care Facilities (# of Facilities 2-12 years)	27

*Resources were not available or were combined in county statistics

< = A group below state definition for personally identifiable results

Family and Community

Housing Statistics (2010-2017)	
Area	Washington County
Total Occupied Housing Units	22,388
Owner Occupied Housing Units	16,926
Renter Occupied Housing Units	5462
Households with Cash Public Assistance	670
Households on Food Stamp or SNAP Program	2865
Households Lacking Plumbing Facilities	56
Households Lacking Complete Kitchen Facilities	129
Median Gross Rent	644
Median Value-Owner Occupied Housing Units	137,200

*Resources were not available or were combined in county statistics

Education Statistics (2007-2011)		
Area	Washington County	Bristol
No Schooling Completed	388	149
Less than 9 th Grade	3110	690
Completed Grades 9-12 (no diploma)	4016	1590
High School Graduate (Including GED)	12822	3610
Some College	8068	2732
Associate Degree	3115	1022
Bachelor's Degree	5203	1840
Drop Out Rate	1.1	11

Community and Resident Perspectives

Agriculture

1. Legislative Issues that impact farmers and agriculture in a negative way by placing onerous regulation on producers. Over-regulation at both the state and federal level resulting in unnecessary cost and increased difficulty in producing a commodity.
2. Cheap foreign imports
3. Lack of land in urban areas for urbanites wishing to produce their own food.
4. Agriculture literacy and public perception of agriculture. There is a misunderstanding on the part of the public regarding how farmers treat animals and grow crops. Misleading and dishonest publicity have placed producers in a bad light when the opposite is true.
5. Labelling issues. Labelling plant-based foods milk and laboratory grown protein as meat (fake meat), as examples.
6. Taxes. Need a way to set aside reserves and avoid or lower taxes. Otherwise, the only way to reduce income tax is to increase expenses. That is not hard to do what with there always being a need to improve facilities, fences, buy feed, fertilizer, equipment, etc. But it would be beneficial to have a way to build farm cash reserves and not pay tax or as much tax on the annual deposits to cash reserves.
7. Input costs. Inflation is hurting net income. Input costs continue to effect agriculture negatively. Expense to income ratios are increasing, which continues to reduce margins. Equipment costs continue to increase, also having a negative effect on agriculture. Real estate prices continue to increase. Pressure from development is a factor and the abundance of cash in the economy is also a factor.
8. Supply chain issues.
9. Market volatility
10. Farm transition and inheritance. Concerns about legacy of farm, who will carry on the farm.
11. Ordinances that negatively affect urban agriculture.
12. Lack of a reliable labor pool continues to be an issue for all agriculture enterprises, especially tobacco and vegetables.
13. Volatility of prices for both inputs and products sold.

Youth

Elementary (K-5th grades)

1. Lack of parental involvement
2. Low Confidence
3. Lack of Life Skills/Soft Skills, specifically listed as:
4. Leadership skills
5. Citizenship

6. Communication skills
7. Work Ethic
8. Goal-setting
9. Decision-making skills
10. Low resiliency and coping skills
11. Overuse of video-games
12. Early influx of social media
13. Adoption of poor health habits

Middle School (6th – 8th grades)

1. Lack of parental involvement, guidance
2. Low Confidence
3. Loss of moral compass
4. Negative peer pressure
5. Lack of future aspirations (education/trade/career)
6. Lack of positive role models
7. Lack of specific Life skills/soft skills:
8. Leadership skills
9. Citizenship
10. Communication skills
11. Work Ethic
12. Decision-making skills
13. Desensitization from video games
14. Overuse of social media resulting in: isolation, low confidence, loss of empathy, and bullying)
15. Poor nutrition and lack of exercise

High School (9th – 12th grades)

1. Lack of parental involvement
2. Substance abuse (alcohol, prescription drugs, vaping, illegal drug use)
3. Overuse of social media (isolation, low confidence, loss of empathy and bullying)
4. Lack of future aspirations (education/trade/career)
5. Desensitization from video games
6. Lack of Life skills/soft skills:
7. Leadership
8. Citizenship
9. Communication
10. Work Ethic
11. Future Plans/Goals
12. Decision-making skills
13. Little understanding of personal financial management
14. Poor nutrition and sedentary lifestyle
15. Eating disorders

Health and Well-being

- Effects of poverty on physical health and mental health
- Financial well-being correlating to physical and mental health
- Food insecurity and sustainable access to fresh fruits and vegetables
- Substance abuse
- Diet/Nutrition/Exercise
- Access to quality healthcare and other services
- Disease maintenance and prevention (i.e. stroke, diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular diseases)

- Nutrition education, food literacy and food purchasing

“Stressing to people that overall wellness and health starts at what you put into your body. Children learn from the adults around them, if they see adults that know how to properly nourish themselves, they will learn and want to do the same.”

“[Having a] Class in school that all students must take in high school related to these topics.”

“Basic nutrition classes, I would love for care professionals to offer help to people struggling with the nutrition choices. I think finding a way to get more people to the local farmers market would do so much good for overall health and the agriculture industry.”

“People simply do not know how to properly fuel their bodies.”

“Too much fake food and not enough whole foods. Need more education about this as well.”

Community Issues

Agriculture

1. Increased regulation makes it harder to produce products for the consumer. In addition, it increases the cost for the producer and the consumer.
2. A lack of experience with or knowledge of all segments of the production chain. Higher input costs and market volatility make it vital that producers understand their cost of production and develop a strategy to operate profitably. The beef industry is changing, with a growing emphasis on end product and consumer satisfaction, a concept that for many years, has been lost on the average beef producer.
3. Decreasing margins, slowed production, and cash flow issues.
4. While Agriculture remains the largest industry in Washington County many people do not understand the scope or the practice of the industry. The biggest way I think these issues affect our citizens is it makes them have distrust in their food, that is unfounded and placed where it shouldn't be. This encourages people to look for information from sources that may not be reliable. It also makes these people choose food choices that aren't as nutritious or have a worse environmental impact than a conventional option.
5. Urban space is generally more expensive, so homeowners/renters often have access to less of it than those living in more rural areas. Evaluating space for horticulture use is probably not a deciding factor for most people moving to an urban area.

Youth

- Lack of parental guidance
- Lack of positive role models
- Lack of supervision/structure

Health and Well-being

- Misinformation on proper nutrition and food practices due to social media and non-credentialed websites
- Increase of “fad” dieting and trendy food choices, that claim to be health promoting.
- Increase of quick, convenience foods
- Lack of knowledge and opportunities on how to prepare food in the household.
- Lack of knowledge on how to budget for a household (groceries, savings, bills, etc.)

Future Programming to Address Community Issues

Increase of input and capital costs for producers

1. Legislative Issues that impact farmers (included in this would be urban agriculture) and agriculture in a negative way by placing onerous regulation on producers. Over-regulation at both the state and federal level resulting in unnecessary cost and increased difficulty in producing a commodity.
2. Input costs. Inflation is hurting net income. Input costs continue to effect agriculture negatively. Expense to income ratios are increasing, which continues to reduce margins. Equipment costs continue to increase, also having a negative effect on agriculture. Real estate prices continue to increase. Pressure from development is a factor and the abundance of cash in the economy is also a factor. Volatility of prices for both inputs and products sold.
3. Supply chain issues.
4. A dependable labor force is lacking for many farms that produce crops that require many hours of manual labor. Any efforts that will help farms find and maintain dependable, affordable labor are going to be critical for the success of many farm operations.

VCE Washington County will Provide educational programming on improved efficiencies in ag production and risk management.

Agriculture literacy and public perception of agriculture.

There is a misunderstanding on the part of the public regarding how farmers treat animals and grow crops. Misleading and dishonest publicity have placed producers in a bad light when the opposite is true. VCE Washington County will continue to emphasize the importance of agriculture in the economy. Educate non-farm public regarding normal ag practices and the truth about conventional practices and their safety and positive benefits.

Life Skills Development

A skill is a learned ability. Life Skills are those competencies that assist people in functioning adequately in the world. Developing life skills is an important component in preparing youth for the successful transition into adulthood. For school-aged youth specific concern is noted due to a noticed decline in the following life skill areas: citizenship, communication, work ethic, decision-making skills, and leadership. Virginia Cooperative Extension has the potential to counteract certain risk factors and build certain life skills or “soft skills” through positive youth programming and education using 4-H clubs, goal-oriented incentives, and projects as the vessel.

Youth Leadership and Personal Development

Youth look to adults for leadership, guidance, motivation, education, and discipline. As identified through surveys, many youths are viewed as lacking leadership, decision-making skills, citizenship and responsibility. Virginia Cooperative Extension will positively address this issue through traditional 4-H programming. Youth are given the opportunity to nominate and elect leaders for their club, learn and use parliamentary procedure, speak to a group of their peers, and make decisions affecting the club as a whole. 4-H clubs also offer positive role models and mentors through the extension staff and the use of trained volunteers. Volunteers and Virginia Cooperative Extension Agents work with 4-H youth throughout their lives, Kindergarten – 12th grade. This continuum of support keeps youth involved, supported, and motivated.

Financial Education and Career Development

Developing financial knowledge, skills, and habits is an important steppingstone on young people’s path to adult financial wellbeing. Providing tools and resources early-on in a child’s life will help develop an understanding of personal financial management to build on in the future. Furthermore, a true knowledge of the costs associated with becoming an adult will encourage youth to plan for both educational and career goals.

Virginia Cooperative Extension, 4-H youth development, provides programs to assist youth in gaining knowledge through hands-on, project-based opportunities. Two examples include “4-H Kid’s Marketplace” for third grade students, “4-H Reality Store” conducted with eighth grade students, and the “4-H Career Explore”, also works with eighth grade students. High School students take part in resume’ writing and interview programs to build skills to gain employment.

Dietary Lifestyle Education and Nutrition Education

The daily choices citizens make centered around food, are dependent on many factors including: economic, cultural, social, accessibility and education. The cost of food has been steadily increasing, leaving many households unsure how provide essential, whole foods from all of the five food groups while maintaining a budget and are tempted to purchase convenient, highly processed and energy-dense foods; which lead to illness, chronic diseases and increased absence in the work place. Evidence-based nutrition education and cooking education leads to positive behavior change and purchasing empowerment, leading to healthier families and communities.

Disease Maintenance and Prevention

Diseases including obesity, Diabetes Mellitus (Type II Diabetes), heart disease, hypertension and even certain types of cancers are considered preventable diseases that can be addressed via dietary lifestyles and exercise. Providing education on disease prevention and maintenance leads to healthier individuals, bleeding into further generations all leading to a more productive, happier, and healthier society.

Poverty, Income and Financial Management Related to Health

Individuals are usually unaware that personal economics are indicative of their overall health. All populations should receive educational opportunities towards financial management and literacy. In doing so, this will have a positive effect on personal health outcomes, physically, mentally and emotionally. In time, this will result in a positive full-circle effect within a community both socially and economically.

Visit Virginia Cooperative Extension: ext.vt.edu

Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments. Its programs and employment are open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, sex (including pregnancy), gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, military status, or any other basis protected by law.

2024

VCE-596-103NP (VCE-1175-103NP)