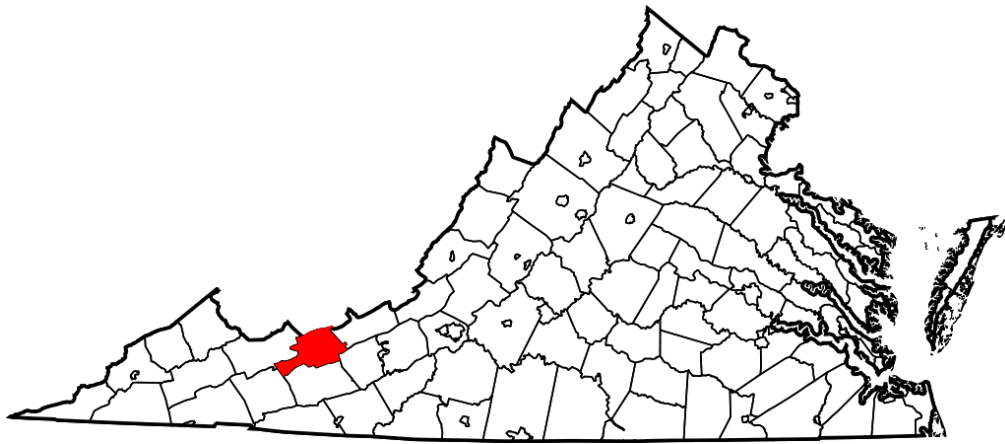




## Bland County 2023 Situation Analysis Report



### *UNIT Extension Staff*

*Elizabeth Johnson, Senior Agent 4-H Youth and Unit Coordinator; Hunter Romano, ANR/4-H Extension Agent; Kathryn Dunn, Unit Administrative Assistant*

### *UNIT Extension Leadership Council*

*Bill Crabtree – Chairman; Nikki Adkins; Rachel Havens; Amy Havens; Jan Hermanson; Steve Hermanson; Betty Hubble; Barbara Justice; Beverly Morehead; Josh Neal; Dana Niday*

## Key Issues

Agriculture – Assisting farmers and forest landowners in production, profitability, and preserving farm and forest land. Agriculture is Bland County’s number one industry with 339 total farms covering more than 70,000 acres. In the next 25 years, much of the U.S. farmland will change ownership. Not only do we need consumers that understand modern agricultural practices, but we also need to continue to educate current landowners how to successfully plan their estate to preserve the family farm.

Economy - Economic Development continues to be a major issue in Bland County according to the survey conducted. Residents of the county expressed the need for more jobs, both full and part-time for adults and youth. There is a need to create more attractive employment opportunities so that younger generations will remain in Bland instead of seeking gainful employment elsewhere. Bland County residents would like to have a new school built, but without more economic growth, this would be a financial tax burden to the citizens.

Youth/Education – Development of youth life skills, leadership, and citizenship were issues identified in surveys. Youth lack basic life skills such as financial literacy, food preservation and nutrition. Bland County 4-H currently offers in-school programming to help enhance youth development. Summer and day 4-H camps address some of these issues. VCE will provide additional learning opportunities for youth in future programming. Extension food preservation workshops are currently provided at our local canneries. While VCE can be a key player in addressing this issue, the school system, community groups, and youth agencies must also work together to form programs to enhance and strengthen programs already in place.

Controlling Invasive Pest (Plants, Animals & Insects) – Multi-floral rose and autumn olives are a growing problem in Bland County. Extension programming offers educational opportunities such as Farm Management meetings, Master Cattlemen’s, Multi-flora Rose Control Program, Summer Beef Field Day, forage, and soil sampling, weed identification and control, on-site farm visits, Private Pesticide Applicator testing and recertification. VCE partners with the Board of Supervisors to provide a cost share program to assist landowners with the eradication of multi-floral rose and autumn olives.

## Introduction

Bland County Extension conducted a comprehensive situation analysis during the fall of 2023. The purpose of the situation analysis is to identify the needs and issues of citizens in the county. The 2018 Situation Analysis was used as a baseline to prepare and plan the process.

A community survey was developed to gather information from residents, community leaders and key informants. Extension Leadership Council (ELC) members distributed surveys and conducted interviews to collect information. Key informants included county and school administration, county agencies, social services, youth, and residents from each electoral district in Bland County.

Data and information were obtained to determine needs that Extension could address with programming. Various data collection was obtained from 2020 United States Census, 2017 Ag Census, and the 2023 Bland County Comprehensive Plan.

## Unit Profile

Bland County is located in the southwestern part of Virginia on the border of West Virginia, approximately 70 miles from Blacksburg and approximately 90 miles from Roanoke. A fifty-six-mile portion of the Appalachian Trail runs through Bland County.

Bland County is a small rural area in Southwest Virginia covering 357 square miles of land area and is the 52<sup>nd</sup> largest county in Virginia by total area. It is comprised of small communities and does not have an incorporated town. Nearly 78 percent of the county’s total area is wooded. Approximately one-third of the county is designated as National Forest, the natural character and scenic beauty of Bland County is some of the most well

preserved in Southwest Virginia. Bland County's population is 6,858, which includes 588 inmates housed at the Bland Correctional Center.

The main transportation infrastructure in Bland County is the road and highway system which includes all public roadways ranging from Interstate 77 to unpaved state secondary roads. I-77 travels nearly 22 miles South/North from the Wythe County line, Virginia Border to the Mercer County line at the West Virginia border. Bland County also borders Tazewell, Pulaski, Smyth and Giles Counties.

### **Demographics**

- The population of Bland County increased 1% from 2018 to 2023.
- Bland County 65 years and older population is 23.7% compared to 16.8% across Virginia.
- The female population has decreased from 2,824 in 2019 to 2,670 in 2021.
- Bland County's population in 2018 continued to be predominantly white (94.09%). The minority population represented only 6.82% of the total population in 2021 (428 persons). The majority of the non-white population are African American residents.

### **Agriculture**

- The number of farms in Bland County decreased by 6% (362 in 2012 to 339 in 2017). Average acreage also decreased from 214 to 207 (3% decrease).
- 99% of farms in Bland County are family owned.
- Cattle and calves are the largest agriculture product in the county with a beef inventory of 13,769. This ranks Bland County 32nd in the Commonwealth.
- According to the 2017 Ag Census, the market value of products sold from Bland County was \$8,782,000.

### **Health**

- The data indicates that in Bland County adult obesity has increased from 30% in 2021 to 37% in 2023.
- Physical inactivity in Bland County was 23% compared to 22% nationally.
- Disabled population in Bland County is 17.5% compared to 12.7% in Virginia.

### **Education**

- The Education Profile for Bland County indicates that 8.78% of the population 18 years and over have attained a bachelor's degree or higher, which is significantly lower than the State (23.47) and the National (21.25%). However, the high school graduation rates for Bland County were 45%, which was higher than the State (23.91%) and National (26.29%).
- Bland County schools enrollment in Kindergarten – 12<sup>th</sup> grade is 81.1% compared to 65.9% in Virginia.
- Bland County School System has continued working with the Wythe-Bland Foundation to secure grant funding and training to provide STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) for students.
- Wythe-Bland Foundation Scholarship program is available to Bland County graduating seniors and offers free tuition for five semesters to students attending Wytheville Community College.
- Bland County School System provides the opportunity for students to learn a technical skill at Tazewell County Career & Technology Center.

### **Economics**

- The unemployment rate in Bland County has increased from 2.7% in 2018 to 2.8% in 2022. The state rate is 2.7% and the national rate is 3.7%.
- Bland County’s leading industry employers are in the government and manufacturing sectors. A total of 76 businesses are housed in Bland County with a total of 1,857 employees.
- The percentage of Bland County citizens earning below \$10,000 per year was 4.56%, compared to state rate of 5.2% and 6.03% nationally.
- County median household income was \$59,901 which is far below the \$85,873 state rate.
- Only 63.6% of Bland County households have broadband internet.

## Community and Resident Perspectives

Schools – Jobs for Graduates, Civic Engagement, Recreation

Agriculture – Youth Ag Education, Alternative Energy, Invasive Weeds, Pesticide Use, Farming Education

Health Care – Substance Abuse, Mental Health, Suicide Prevention, Parenting Skills

Economy – Internet Access, Housing, Economic Development

## Community Issues

A community survey was developed to gather information from residents, community leaders and key informants. Extension Leadership Council (ELC) members distributed surveys and conducted interviews to collect information. Key informants included county and school administration, county agencies, social services, youth, and residents from each electoral district in Bland County.

## Future Programming to Address Community Issues

Agriculture - Situational Analysis surveys indicated agriculture as an important topic for Bland County residents. The purpose of the Virginia Cooperative Extension at its core is to provide leadership in determining, implementing, and evaluating educational programs which are designed to solve social, economic, and environmental problems in agriculture. The agent is an educator, an information provider, a needs assessor, a problem-solving resource for clientele. Agriculture is the largest industry in Bland County. According to the most recent agriculture census provided by USDA there are 339 farms in Bland County totaling over eight million dollars in market value of products. An important program in the Bland County has been the delivery of Farm Management meetings during the fall, winter, and early spring for farmers to stay in touch with each other and with new practical information in the industry. Various workshops are held through the year to provide education on a wide variety of topics including berry production, apple grafting, bee keeping, and forestry management. As an office we provide leadership for the Bland County 4-H Livestock Club which promotes education on farming practices, livestock husbandry, and career readiness in the agriculture industry. We work closely with the Bland County High School Ag Department to provide supplemental instruction when needed. A large focus for our office is to prepare the next generation of agricultural leaders for the workforce.

Economy – While Extension cannot create employment opportunities, they can educate future generations with civic engagement, leadership and decision making. Bland Extension will address youth financial literacy and economic education through in-school programming. Reality Store will help students see the correlation of education, career choices, and money management. Our Healthy Kids Bucks program will give youth experience with budgeting at our local Farmer’s Market.

Youth Education – Bland County Extension will continue to offer programming to help youth obtain life skills, leadership, and citizenship. In-school programming, day and summer camps will help with these skills. Youth in sixth grade will receive financial literacy programming and participate in Reality Store simulation. Food preservation and nutrition workshops will be conducted during day and summer camps.

Controlling Invasive Pests - Through situational analysis surveys invasive pests have been a major topic of discussion. Bland County Extension has provided farm management meetings utilizing specialists from Virginia Tech to discuss how to handle Gypsy Moths, Spotted Lantern Fly, and Asian Longhorned Ticks. In partnership with our local government, we offer a noxious weed program to help combat the spread of Multiflora Rose and Autumn Olive throughout the county. We will continue to provide meetings when new information becomes available to keep county residents informed of new practices and procedures.

Visit Virginia Cooperative Extension: [ext.vt.edu](http://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-596-12NP (VCE-1175-12NP)