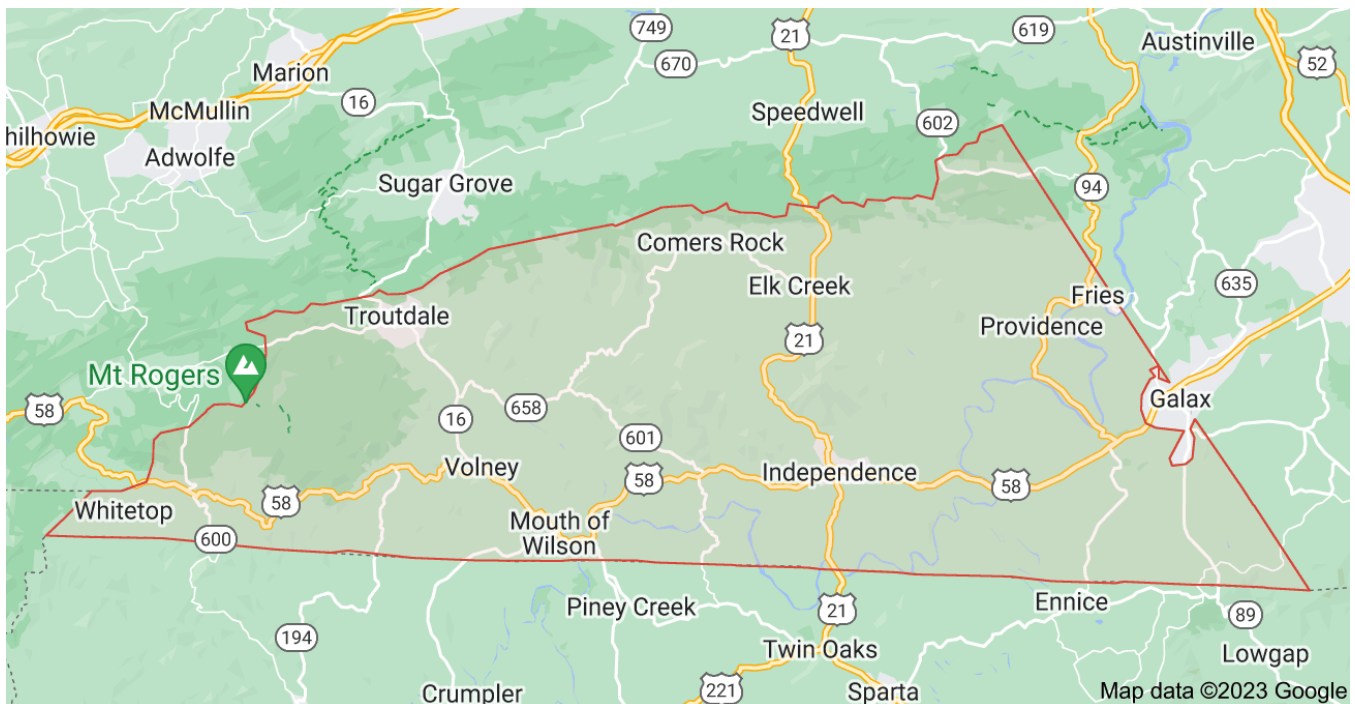




Grayson County 2023 Situation Analysis Report

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Summary of community issues and Extension office response

Priority Issue	Planned Unit Response
Preservation of natural and cultural assets	<p>Water quality monitoring of private water supplies</p> <p>Demonstrate agricultural and forestry best management practices to protect environment</p> <p>Promote Integrated Pest Management (IPM) to combat invasive threats</p> <p>Promote adoption of estate planning, and farm and forest business transition</p> <p>Support local government land use planning and policy development</p>
Lack of available and prepared current and future workforce and volunteer civic leaders	<p>Prepare youth for future careers through internships, mentoring and career exploration programs</p> <p>Incorporate youth civic engagement and soft skills development as a component of all 4-H clubs</p> <p>Expose youth to diversified interests/subjects beyond athletics through experiential and extracurricular programs</p> <p>Engage entire families in volunteerism and community betterment projects</p> <p>Teach leadership, civic engagement, conflict resolution and facilitation skills to youth and adult audiences</p>
Greater inclusion of farm and forest-based businesses in the county's economic development efforts	<p>Support countywide efforts to retain, grow and recruit agriculture and forestry businesses</p> <p>Farm business management education</p> <p>Promote adoption of new, research-based innovation and best farming and forestry practices</p> <p>Promote adoption of risk management strategies for farmers in case of natural disasters and industry crises</p> <p>Provide mental health awareness education for the farming community</p>
Ensuring a safe, secure and reliable local food supply	<p>Provide food safety education from farm to table including compliance with on-farm produce safety regulations</p> <p>ServSafe training for food service managers and their employees</p> <p>Teach safe food handling to youth and consumers as part of food preparation, culinary arts, and food preservation classes</p> <p>Educate citizens on appropriate lifestyle changes such as exercise, avoiding unhealthy habits, and proper dietary choices to improve well-being</p>

Introduction

The greatest Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) impacts occur when local critical needs are addressed through Extension programs and collaborative partnerships. The first step in Extension's programming process is to identify and prioritize major local needs. The Situation Analysis provides the rationale for deciding which issues should receive the time, energy, and resources of VCE. Identification of local issues occurs continuously by on-going engagement with a multitude of citizens and representative stakeholders. VCE faculty, staff and volunteers gather more focused input during the Situation Analysis update from cooperating agencies, focus groups, individuals, and partners to build a more comprehensive picture of the county's concerns and possible strategies to address those concerns. Data sources such as Unit Profiles, Virginia Department of Health Data Commons, the United States Census Bureau, United States Department of Agriculture Census, and others provide critical background data that is then built upon through local input.

Unit Profile

Below are key findings from multiple sources, particularly Unit Profiles compiled from national, government-supported data sources. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (<https://www.bls.gov/>) Virginia Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (<https://nces.ed.gov/Programs/Edge/ACSDashboard/5101690>), Data Commons (<https://datacommons.org/>) websites were also used as primary data sources.

Demographics

- Since 2010, Grayson County's population has remained between 15,000 to 15,500 people. The general trend is less than 2% annual decline, however the opening of River North Correctional Facility in 2014 resulted in a "population spike" due to the new inmate population. Deaths exceed births resulting a natural population loss each year; however, most recent population estimates show population gains in 2021 and 2022 of 0.3% and 0.1%, respectively. The recent population stability is the result of in-migration that started around the COVID pandemic. Anecdotally, 2023 is expected to show the impact of further in-migration with continuation of significantly more new housing starts. Interactions with new residents has also increased dramatically in the last year.
- Median age in 2021 is 48.4 years old compared to 48.1 years in 2017. Grayson is tied for 15th in Virginia for highest median age.
- 18.8% population is 65+ in 2021 compared to 14.5% in 2010, while the population under age 20 was 23.1% in 2021 compared to 24.9% in 2010.
- 57.6% of the population is in the primary wage-earning years between ages 20-64 in 2021 compared to 59.9% in 2010.
- 87.5% of population is white, non-Hispanic, 6.3 % African-American, and 4.3% Hispanic population in 2022. From 2010 to 2022, the percent of population that is white, non-Hispanic has decreased while the percent of African American, Hispanic, and Multiracial individuals have all increased.

Business/Economy

- Grayson County generated \$253 million in economic activity in 2021 compared to \$223 million in 2010.
- Grayson County has an unemployment rate of 2.6% as of October 2023 compared to 2.7% for Virginia and 3.9% for the U.S. based on US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Aside from a brief spike in unemployment due to the COVID pandemic, Grayson County's unemployment rate peaked in March 2010 at 14.7% and has trended ever lower to a consistent 2.0 to 2.5% since fall of 2019. (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, n.d.)
- Local businesses state that they struggle to find employees, particularly "quality" employees. This is in part due to the local drug epidemic.
- Adding employment opportunities is difficult because of the lack of an available workforce. As noted previously, there is a trend toward fewer individuals in the typical working age between 20-64 years old, and very few job seekers actually without employment.

- Government jobs including the public-school system and public/government services are the largest employers in Grayson County.
- Agriculture, manufacturing, health care, and retail are the top non-government employers.
- 3,469 workers travel outside of the county for employment while 850 commute in to Grayson to work. Workers commuting on average of 26 minutes, particularly outside the county, to and from work presents a significant social strain on the family as well as limits civic engagement.
- 16.6% of Grayson residents are in poverty in 2021, compared to 9.6% in Virginia and 12.7 in the US
- 24% of children live in poverty compared to 13% for Virginia, and Grayson has limited child-care facilities. 25.1% of families receive Food Stamps/SNAP benefits compared with 14.6% for Virginia and 19.3% for the US
- Median household income of \$43,022 compared to \$80,963 for Virginia.

Education

- All public schools are Level One accredited by the Virginia Department of Education. Level One accreditation is the highest level a school can receive in Virginia.
- Strong Career and Technical Education program with multiple opportunities for youth to gain industry-recognized credentials
- High school students can complete Associates Degrees with many opportunities for Dual Enrollment with Wytheville Community College. High school on-time graduation rates have met or exceed 98.18% each of the last five school years with 100% graduation rates for both 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 academic years.
- Overall educational attainment still lags state and national averages, and likely reflects an older population that may have left public school before graduating. As time goes by, the trend is for Grayson to have a greater portion of the population with at least a high school diploma due to strong graduation rates. Grayson only has 15.6% with at least a Bachelor's degree compared to 41.8% for Virginia and 35% for the US. Grayson has a higher percent of the population with an Associate's degree compared to state and national averages.
- 75.4% of households with broadband access compared to 87.6% in Virginia and 87% nationally.
- Public school enrollment for 2023/2024 school year is 1,576 compared to 1,950 in 2010/2011 based on Virginia Department of Education statistics. Home instruction increased to 128 currently compared to 44 in 2010/2011 school year.

Health/Well-Being

- Grayson County has better health metrics for cancer diagnosis, sexually transmitted diseases, and severe housing problems than national averages.
- CDC data reports 18.7% of population reports poor mental health compared with 15.4% and 15.2% for Virginia and the US, respectively. CDC also reports that 13.5% of population reports poor physical health compared to 10% and 10.3% for Virginia and the US, respectively.
- 41% adult obesity compared to 32 % of Virginia and U.S.
- 26% physically inactive compared to 22% of U.S.
- Limited access to health care professionals with one Primary Care Physician (PCP) per 5160 people in 2020. In 2010, Grayson had one PCP per 1,940 people. While state and national trends have remained flat, Grayson County citizens have significantly lost access to PCP's over the last 10 years. The ratio of dentists to population is very similar, with a trend to fewer dentists serving Grayson residents. Mental health providers are almost 5 times fewer than the average Virginia locality.
- 28 births per 1,000 females ages 15-19 (19 teen births in U.S)
- Rural drug epidemic with methamphetamine and opioid addiction is a prominent local issue
- Less knowledge of food preparation, cooking, proper dietary habits, etc.
- Family types are categorized as 70.3% married couples compared to 66.2% for Virginia and 63.3% nationally. The next most prominent family type in the county is 20% female householder with no spouse or partner present.

Agriculture

- Based on the most recent Census of Agriculture data (2017), Grayson farmers sold \$40.8 million in raw goods. Using the economic multiplier effect of 1.93 times the value of goods sold (Rephann, T. J., 2022), the total economic impact of agriculture and forestry to Grayson's economy is \$78.7 million.
- Grayson County hired an Agriculture Economic Development Director in June 2021 to support agriculture economic development, specifically around industry recruitment and marketing.
- Lost 48 farms (6.3%) from 2012 to 2017.
- In 2012, Grayson County had 11 licensed Grade A dairy farms. That number is now at 3. In comparison, Grayson County had 1,660 registered dairy farms producing all classes of milk in 1959. The number of dairy farmers had fallen to only 100 by 1987. (US Census of Agriculture)
- Burley tobacco production, much like dairy, was once an industry of strength. Burley tobacco is no longer grown in the county.
- Timber production continues to be a strong component of the local economy with \$5.1 million in stumpage value in 2020, and \$1.4 million in 2021, the decline in which being largely due to the COVID pandemic. Timber values are mostly evenly split between pine and hardwood stumpage values. A significant amount of timber products manufactured in Grayson County pre-pandemic were exported out of the US, and some of that still occurs today.
- Seasonal/part-time labor is hard to find, and largely filled by Hispanic laborers via the federal H2A program. Much of this labor is directed to pumpkin and Christmas tree production in Grayson County. Seasonal Hispanic labor is present at least ten months of the year, with the highest numbers during the fall harvest season.
- Few changes are expected short-term relative to agriculture sectors with beef cattle and Christmas trees dominating Grayson agriculture landscape. Pumpkin acreage has increased in the last five years. Small ruminants and horses continue to be significant contributors to the local agriculture economy.
- There is continued demand for greater access to processing capacity for farmers to add value to meat and produce.
- Farmers are exploring high-value, niche production and marketing such as the highly successful Independence Farmer's Market, online sales, non-conventional production practices (organic, grass-fed) and agritourism.
- Invasive species, emerging pests and diseases, and wildlife continue to pose significant challenges to agriculture and forestry development.

Community and Resident Perspectives

Community and resident perspectives were collected a number of ways. The Grayson County Comprehensive Plan uses community survey data to prioritize issues, and is used to direct funding priorities during annual county budget development. The Comprehensive Plan is the guide for strategic investments of county funds and staffing resources to address county needs.

Through the development of the Comprehensive Plan, common themes emerged that were deemed critical to the future of Grayson County. Grayson County leaders identified the county's needs in the Comprehensive Plan, which include:

- Support life-long learning opportunities
- Educate and prepare tomorrow's youth for the regional workforce
- Protect the natural and cultural assets of the county
- Improve infrastructure throughout the county
- Strengthen the local economy and increase job growth
- Improve citizens' quality of life and promote healthy lifestyle choices
- Continue efforts to provide safe communities
- Establish reasonable, predictable, and sustainable land-use policy and tools
- Prepare for issues relating to dynamic shifts in population demographics

- Promote a responsible and efficient use of government resources
- Utilize local and regional partnerships.

Interviews with key stakeholders and county leaders provided additional insights to these broad needs. Additional items mentioned included strategic investments in communication infrastructure to expand broadband throughout the county to support education, business development, and emergency services. Providing greater connectivity for first responders is one of multiple investments the county is making to bolster Emergency Services given declining participation in volunteer fire and EMS services. Leaders also mentioned the need to support more diverse educational opportunities, particularly around vocational trades. Finally, local informants and leaders echoed the desire to include agriculture business preservation as a key economic development strategy.

The Grayson Extension Unit used the template survey provided by Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) and used across the Commonwealth as a way compare local input to statewide data to further supplement needs outlined in the county's Comprehensive Plan and stakeholder interviews. The survey was posted on social media, shared at events, and hard copies were distributed as well. The response rate was low at only 30 completed surveys, but it was used to supplement other means of data collection to provide more specifics or clarity to the broader issues outlined previously.

Those who completed the citizen survey were familiar with Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, VCE, and Virginia 4-H. Those completing the survey tended to be users of Extension, with 73.3% participating in or receiving information from the local Extension office in the past year. Many (76.7%) have lived in the county for 10 years or more, trended toward a higher degree of educational attainment, more affluent, and less representative of minority populations when compared to the overall population of the county. Respondents did represent a wide age range and gender diversity.

Six major themes emerged from the survey regarding priority areas that citizens thought Extension should be focused on in Grayson County. They are broadly categorized as:

Natural resource protection and preservation including maintaining or improving water quality, farm and forest land preservation, assisting businesses and local government with land use decisions, control of invasive pests, reducing the misuse and overuse of pesticides and fertilizers, and improving environmental literacy.

Agricultural business development, retention, and profitability including building capacity for Farm-to-School programming, strengthening the local food system, and promoting alternative agriculture.

Food security and safety by providing education on safe food handling practices to prevent foodborne illness and ensuring access to safe, high quality food.

Enhanced opportunities for the county's youth beyond athletics including leadership development, citizenship, life skills development, recruiting adult mentors for youth, and promoting scientific literacy in the county's youth.

Economic development, particularly around small business entrepreneurship.

Community development such as supporting quality of life and strengthening families.

These six primary areas of need aligned very well to those expressed in the statewide assessment, particularly when compared to other rural areas.

Some areas that these citizens felt were outside of Extension's primary roles included social issues such as substance abuse recovery, dependent care, or marital counseling; physical education; and growing capacity of non-profit organizations.

Community Issues

Threats to natural and cultural assets.

People are often concerned about water quality at the local, state and national level. That has remained consistent through the years. Locals are also concerned about the effects of foreign diseases whether in people or domestic animals. Recent issues with introduced tick species, and the diseases they carry, have brought pest management and public health together to battle common foes. Invasive species can be in the form of diseases, insects, plants, and organisms that are introduced accidentally or intentionally with potentially devastating effects. Yet, with pest management comes ongoing concerns over pesticides, and the possible implications of their use/misuse, particularly for water quality and human health.

Preservation of natural assets, such as having clean, available water supplies, is clearly important to many citizens. There are other assets such as cultural norms and community identity that exist within a county and region. Grayson County is seeing an influx of new residents. Data tends to lag reality such as changing demographic trends including possible accelerated in-migration. Record numbers of new building construction permits received by the Grayson County Building Official, requests for information regarding alternative energy projects, and numerous contacts with new residents all point to a growing number of folks that are new to the county. The county is trying to balance growth and progress with possible implications of shifting land uses away from traditional agriculture, forestry and recreation. Farm and forest land preservation is important to many local residents, and local government seeks assistance as it weighs the benefits and consequences of major land use changes. Local leaders are recognizing the need to develop reasonable, predictable, and sustainable land-use policy and tools.

Lack of available and prepared current and future workforce and volunteer civic leaders.

Demographic data clearly shows that Grayson County is an aging community with a trend toward fewer and fewer youth and more older adults aging out of the workforce. Similar trends exist for declining availability and voluntary participation in civic activities. Data indicates that virtually all people who want employment can find it locally. Growing the local economy is always a priority for local government, but it is not as simple as adding a new employer. There must be employable, willing workers available to new businesses.

Businesses in every sector, whether public or private, are actively looking for employable workers. Two of the biggest challenges seen by employers is the lack of employability for a number of reasons, particularly substance abuse and the lack of “soft skills” such as effective communication, effective time management, and teamwork. Business and government leaders express the importance of more trades-based education to fill a growing need for these highly trained and skilled positions.

Not only is the locality in need of a growing, skilled workforce, but also of civically-minded individuals to volunteer their skills and talents for the good of the entire community. Fire and rescue services largely depend on volunteers. Volunteerism and civic engagement are crucial for community empowerment and resiliency. These are skills that can be nurtured and grown from within a locality in both youth and adults.

Greater inclusion of farm and forest-based businesses in the county’s economic development efforts.

Agriculture and forestry are Grayson’s primary non-government economic sectors, but have historically been treated separately within local economic development efforts. Grayson County has already made significant strides toward this goal by investing in a dedicated staff position focused on Agriculture Economic Development, and the formation of an Agriculture Advisory Committee that reports to the Board of Supervisors. For farms and forests to be sustainable and resilient, they must be profitable and good stewards of their land, water, animals, and people.

Agriculture and forestry continue to face evolving challenges as food and fiber production is global in nature, yet local in impact. The COVID pandemic brought to light unanticipated infrastructure and supply-chain breakdowns that placed significant burdens on many farm and forest owners. Farm and forest owners have recognized a greater need for risk management, strategic planning and investing, flexibility and innovation so they can be more resilient and nimbler when major world events occur. Agriculture and forestry have many of the same challenges as other industries, but also unique factors as well. Specialized expertise in alternative agriculture, agritourism, and agricultural technology will only grow in importance.

Experts have also recognized more stress and poor mental health impacts for farmers and forest owners navigating recent industry challenges. Recruiting, retaining and growing this economic sector will be supported by a holistic approach from traditional education in farm business management and production advancements, to improving mental health, to sound policy-making, and other non-traditional economic development efforts.

Ensuring a safe, secure and reliable local food supply

Food safety and security begins at the farm level and continues throughout the food production, distribution, and consumption chain. Needs for commercial agriculture production have been addressed elsewhere. This issue is centered on having local access to healthy, affordable food options.

People's health is impacted by food consumption in many ways. Preventing food-borne illness was stated as an important issue for residents of the county, whether the food is prepared at home or as part of the food service industry. COVID-19 led a resurgence in interest in home food production, preparation, and preservation while some of those skills had been lost pre-pandemic with a greater shift to "eating out". Food safety is critical in the food service industry, and serves as a model for teaching home food safety through proper food handling practices.

Additionally, statistics for obesity rates and other metabolic or cardiovascular diseases that are impacted by poor diet choices point to the need for continued efforts to help citizens make healthier meal and snack choices. A contributor to poor food choices is limited incomes and abundance of convenience items relative to healthier alternatives. Grayson residents have only one full-service grocery store in the county. They also have access to as many as four food banks that offer regular food distribution services to low income households. Organizers of these foodbanks have told local leaders about the need to educate their clients on how to best use, and not waste, the more nutritious components. Grayson County has a commercial kitchen that could serve as a focal point for home cooking and food preservation classes. Currently, that resource has been underutilized. Local farmers markets offer fresh, seasonal produce, and at least one will accept SNAP payments for goods. Raising the awareness of these offerings would support both the farmers and the consumers.

There has also been interest in exploring how to get more locally grown food into schools. Institutional barriers continue to present challenges to progress in this area.

Future Programming to Address Community Issues

Preservation of natural and cultural assets

Extension will continue and expand efforts to help citizens evaluate surface and ground water quality as private water sources are controlled by individuals, not municipalities. Education should extend beyond the possible negative impacts of development, deforestation, chemical misuse, and others on water quality to include the responsibilities of private well owners to properly care for their private systems so as not to contaminate underground water supplies of multiple households. Partners include USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, New River Soil and Water Conservation District, Virginia Department of Health, Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Virginia Department of Forestry, Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, private and commercial pesticide applicators, New River Conservancy, Preserve Grayson, Grayson LandCare, and others.

Extension will promote and demonstrate agricultural and forestry best management practices such as maintaining ground cover; rotational grazing; Integrated Pest Management and maintaining highly trained, qualified pesticide applicators; SHARP (Sustainable Harvesting and Resource Professionals) Logger training, Virginia Forest Landowner Education Program, and other technologies to support environmental stewardship.

Extension will offer programs to promote greater adoption of estate and legacy planning, and farm and forest business transition. Extension will partner with accountants, attorney's and other professionals to share tools to assist landowners make appropriate asset transfer decisions.

Extension will continue to support local government efforts to effectively anticipate and plan for changing land uses such as alternative energy and/or residential and commercial development. Extension will educate leaders on the tools available to them to meet their objectives to build a sustainable, reasonable, and predictable land-use policy.

Prepare youth and adults for current and future workforce opportunities, volunteerism, and community leadership.

Extension will prepare youth for future careers through internships, mentoring and career exploration programs. Reality Store is a branded program that will be reintroduced to the county's youth to raise their awareness of career options as well as improve their financial literacy. Extension Agents will collaborate with local resources such as Matthews State Forest, Matthews Living History Farm Museum, and New River Hill Farm to develop programs in support of the potential workforce, whether youth or adults.

Traditional 4-H programs such as camp and in-school curriculum enrichment will continue and expand. All chartered 4-H clubs, regardless of subject matter emphasis, will incorporate youth civic engagement and soft skills development such as interviewing, public speaking, time management and others. 4-H programming will also emphasize extracurricular opportunities such as hands-on education and career readiness beyond athletics. Extension will explore collaborations to enhance after-school program offerings that will appeal to a more diverse set of youth interests.

Extension will seek ways to engage families in programming. That could be in partnership with existing programs such as Strengthening Families, or through existing community groups such as the Grange, Ruritans, faith-based organizations, and the Twin County Chamber of Commerce. Extension should revisit the Community Club model for ways to engage entire families in volunteerism and community betterment projects.

Leadership, conflict resolution and facilitation skills are needed among individuals whether those skills are deployed in the home, in youth and adult peer groups, in civic clubs, or in business environments. Extension will continue programs such as the Twin County Leadership Initiative and 4-H Day at the Capital.

Recruitment, retention and expansion of farm and forest-based businesses as a component of Grayson County's overall economic development strategy.

Extension has traditionally supported agriculture and forestry business development, and has decades of expertise in this field. Extension will collaborate with Grayson County's Agriculture Economic Development Director and the Agriculture Advisory Committee to advance policies and initiatives in support of these industries. Specific efforts include non-traditional or value-add opportunities such as local and regional foods, agritourism, and value-added processing of fruits and vegetables. Extension will build on their leadership in value-added cattle marketing programs for Grayson farmers.

Extension will partner with state and federal conservation partners to provide technical assistance for the adoption of new, research-based innovation and best farming and forestry practices that are both profitable and environmentally sustainable.

Extension will be involved in raising awareness regarding the obstacles of developing and sustaining farming and forestry businesses, and offer up solutions to overcome those obstacles. Education in risk management strategies such as insurance, revenue protection, and cost control will be used. This type of education became even more important as a result of the COVID pandemic. Additionally, local Extension will explore offering mental health awareness education for the farming community using proven curricula used in other parts of Virginia and the US.

Ensuring a safe, secure and reliable local food supply

Extension will continue to provide education and resources to support food safety education from farm to table. Extension will partner with VDACS, industry representatives, and third-party certifiers to educate farmers on how to comply with produce safety regulations on the farm.

Extension will continue efforts such as ServSafe training for food service managers and their employees. Extension will teach safe food handling to youth and consumers as part of broader food preparation, culinary arts, and food preservation classes. The high school culinary arts classes will be an important partner in this effort along with local food service establishments.

Extension will partner with local food banks and the GATE Center commercial kitchen to deliver education on how to best use healthy foods that are part of regular distribution efforts. Strategies include proper and safe food handling, cooking, and preservation. Extension should also assist with education that focuses on how lifestyle changes such as exercise, avoiding unhealthy habits, and proper dietary selections work together to strengthen the whole person.

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