



Orange Unit 2023 Situation Analysis Report

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Summary of community issues and Extension office response

Priority Issue	Planned Unit Response
Building Future Skills in Youth	Conduct programming related to record keeping, food sourcing and preparation, teamwork, communications and public speaking, career exploration and workforce readiness, time management, etc.
Increased Population of Beginning Farmer Operations	Host workshops with hands-on instruction related to soil health, farm business management, animal handling, farm and garden crops, etc.
Lack of Financial Management Skills	Offer basic budgeting lessons for families and youth, incorporate scenarios and simulations to model real life financial matters.
Need for Safe Home Food Supplies	Coach stakeholders through canning and freezing and food dehydration workshops with safe take-home supplies for their efforts.
High Frequency of Convenience Eating	Conduct programs for meal planning, freezer meals, use of small kitchen appliances, food budgeting, family dinners, and including all household members in the preparation and consumption of meals.

Introduction

Orange County Extension staff and Extension Leadership Council (ELC) members conducted a comprehensive situation analysis during Summer and Fall 2023. The process included input from county residents, Extension stakeholders, elected officials, and Extension volunteers. The unit profile was developed with data from the 2021 U.S. Census, 2017 Agricultural Census, 2021 Virginia Works data, and 2023 Orange County Public Library Strategic Plan & Survey.

Statistical data, residents' perspectives from personal interviews, and results of an online survey were available to ELC members as they prioritized issues and made recommendations for any additional Extension efforts. The online survey was offered via Qualtrics and based on questions made available at the state VCE administration level. Survey opportunities were promoted on social media by Orange VCE and Orange County government, via email to current stakeholders, and through printed materials distributed at meetings such as the Orange Farm Bureau annual meeting for more than 200 attendees.

Identification of local needs is ongoing and not limited strictly to the Situation Analysis period. Extension staff regularly meet with 4-H leaders, Central Virginia Cattlemen's Association board members, and administrators of Orange County Public Schools, to name a few. ELC members represent all four Extension program areas - Agriculture, Youth Development, Family & Consumer Sciences, and Community Viability - and serve as key informants for the changing educational needs of local residents. In addition, ELC members represent wide geographic areas of the county and share needs of their smaller communities in the context of the greater Orange County community.

Unit Profile

Orange County is located in the northern central part of Virginia's Piedmont, 70 miles west of Richmond and between the more populated areas of Charlottesville and Fredericksburg. Comprising 341 square miles (218,240 acres), Orange County is home to 36,001 residents, a level trend, in nearly 14,000 households. The median household income is \$79,211, an 18% increase since 2018. Public school enrollment remained steady at 5,498 students K-12. Senior citizens (age 65 and older) comprise nearly 20% of the county population (7,126). There are nine schools and nearly 5,500 students in Orange County Public Schools. Private institution Grymes Memorial School serves an additional 150 children from Orange and surrounding counties, and the number of homeschooling families is increasing. Head Start early education programs are available in three areas of the county, and several private preschools also operate. Germanna Community College is located in the far eastern end of the county (Locust Grove campus), and Orange residents are also served by Piedmont Virginia Community College in Charlottesville.

The largest employers in the county represent government, manufacturing, and horticulture. Commuters most frequently travel to neighboring Culpeper, Albemarle, and Spotsylvania counties. Agriculture and forestry industries employ 4.4%, more than twice the national average and more than 14 times the state average. Unemployment rates remain fairly consistent at 3%.

Orange ranks 6th in the state for total ag receipts (\$113M) and first in the state for nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, and sod industry (\$77.5M). The 2017 USDA Ag Census shows 417 farms, a loss of 25% since 2012, with total farmland of 95,246 acres (39,802 in crops). Cattle, poultry (turkeys), and equine are the most abundant livestock species. New and beginning farmers are increasing, and 94% of Orange County operations are family farms.

**New agricultural census data was collected in 2022 and is expected after the due date for this report. Comparative data provided is from the 2012 and 2017 Census results.*

Community and Resident Perspectives

Electronic surveys asked respondents how much effort VCE should spend on a variety of issues, with answers ranging from no effort (score of 1) to very high effort (score of 5). Issues with a mean score of 4 or greater were:

1. Helping youth develop leadership, citizenship, and other life skills (4.22)
2. Promoting scientific, agricultural, and environmental literacy among youth (4.16)
3. Strengthening the local food system (4.06)
4. Teaching beginning farming practices to new landowners (4.02)

Issues averaging a score between 3.5 and 3.99 include:

1. Getting more adults involved in mentoring youth (3.9)
2. Assisting farmers and forest landowners in production & profitability (3.86)
3. Supporting residents' home horticulture practices through education (3.86)
4. Reducing misuse and overuse of pesticides and fertilizers (3.86)
5. Controlling invasive pests: plants, animals, insects (3.78)
6. Facilitating civic engagement/working to make a difference in the community (3.74)
7. Preserving foods for home use (3.7)
8. Helping consumers make healthy food choices (3.64)
9. Strengthening workforce readiness skills (3.59)
10. Building healthy families (3.53)

Written responses to the open-ended question of “what do you think is the most pressing issue for VCE to address in Orange County” covered a variety of topics. Most frequent responses included maintaining the rural nature of the county, accessing and consuming healthy foods, and empowering youth as future leaders and employees. Food knowledge, nutrition education, and knowledge of food production were repeated often.

Locally identified issues aligned with statewide results 40% of the time (food production, food handling, local food systems, hunger). Issues in the statewide top ten that were not included locally were water and air quality, suicide, freshwater resources, the marine environment, and managing habits and ecosystems. Of the state's “consensus issues”, Orange most closely aligned with getting more adults involved in youth mentoring, helping youth develop leadership and citizenship skills, and strengthening the local food system. Maybe not surprisingly, one of Orange's top 5 issues was financial management, while youth financial habits and teaching people to manage their money were two of the state's most controversial issues in terms of responses. This is likely due to strong personal opinions about money, and either firmly believing Extension (government) does not have a responsibility regarding money management or that it's a very important topic that Extension should devote a great deal of effort to.

Community Issues

The unit Extension Leadership Council met November 14, 2023, to determine the top issues Orange Extension programming should address for the next five years. Using survey data, key informant interviews, and working knowledge of and personal experience in our community, they determined five most pertinent issues.

Issue: Building Future Skills in Youth

Empowering youth as leaders, workforce readiness skills, career exploration, engaging activities that prevent risky behaviors, connecting with local agriculture, collaboration between existing youth-serving organizations

Issue: Increased Population of Beginning Farmer Operations

Lack of knowledge and skills related to plant and animal production, yet strong and growing interest in the locality

Issue: Lack of Financial Management Skills

Pertinent for all age groups, differentiation between needs and wants, budgeting for basic living expenses, making the most of government and private organizations' assistance, understanding and creating business plans, planning for retirement

Issue: Need for Safe Home Food Supplies

Increasing interest in food preservation without proper training, using old equipment or traditional familial methods rather than modern approved processes

Issue: High Frequency of Convenience Eating

High rates of obesity, increased expenses, poor nutritional value, lack of knowledge and abilities regarding home meal planning and preparation

Future Programming to Address Community Issues

Addressing the Issue of Building Future Skills in Youth

VCE Orange 4-H staff will continue to expand programming efforts to youth ages 5-18 with the support of volunteers. Specific life skills to be targeted include: community service volunteering, leadership, communication, marketable skills, critical thinking and healthy lifestyle choices.

Partners will include the Healthy Community Action Team (HCAT), Office on Youth, Orange County Public Schools, and the Juvenile Court Advisory Council. Interdisciplinary Extension programming will be supported by Agriculture and Family & Consumer Sciences agents by serving as coaches for competition teams and instructors during school enrichment programs, plus food handling and cooking lessons.

Efforts will be made to expose youth to a variety of careers and skills while connecting them with the local community and local opportunities. Partners for this include the high school counseling office (Germanna Community College Career Coach and the College Advisor), FFA, and Orange Farm Bureau. Staff will also make themselves available for inclusion in the community conversation regarding Career & Technical Education needs in Orange County.

Expected outcomes would be that local youth could identify and promote personal interests and skills, gain employment in their preferred field, and be productive, contributing members of society. Youth will demonstrate subject-matter knowledge and skills, such as cooking, raising animals, caring for the environment, public speaking, working as a team, and setting and achieving goals.

Addressing the Issue of Educating Beginning Farmers

An Agriculture Extension Agent will begin employment in January 2024 after a one-year vacancy in the position. The new agent will connect local new farmers with VCE, Virginia Tech, and Virginia State University resources such as the new and beginning farmers coalition. Virginia Tech's Northern Piedmont Center will be a physical resource for food production plots and farm demonstrations.

The local agent will conduct evening and weekend programming to accommodate the schedules of small farmers whose full-time position is off-farm. New markets and opportunities will be explored, both for direct-marketing to consumers as well as assisting smaller operations in partnering for larger markets and greater profitability. Interdisciplinary programming will include 4-H youth populations learning to manage small farm enterprises and grow their own food. FCS will be included through safe food preservation and financial management.

Expected outcomes would be that new farmers would safely produce, market, and consume their own foods. They will make sound decisions that grow and develop their farm businesses and exemplify productive, well-managed land and resources.

Addressing the Issue of Financial Management Skills

Financial education programming will transcend all Extension program areas, whether reducing expensive inputs in farm operations, helping families eat well on a budget, or teaching youth to manage funds raised from the sale of 4-H animals. Financial programming will address impulse buys, money management, and distinguishing between needs and wants. Residents will be taught to plan for retirement, build and maintain emergency savings funds, and understand how credit scores are built and maintained.

Programming will be conducted in small and large groups as well as individually for those who need extra coaching. Partners will include a VCE Family Financial Management Extension Specialist, neighboring counties' Extension agents, local financial institutions, Department of Social Services, and civic organizations such as Love Outreach Food Pantry.

Expected outcomes include families and businesses demonstrating stronger financial management and decreasing worry and anxiety related to finances. Business owners, including farms, operate within budgets and understand financial implications of changes they make.

Addressing the Issue of Safe Home Food Supplies

All three program areas (4-H, FCS, ANR) will partner to teach food safety, from growing to harvesting to preparing and consuming foods. This includes all ages, from youth to parents to elderly citizens. The office's new teaching kitchen will be utilized for hands-on cooking demonstrations and safe food handling practices.

Instruction will focus on correcting unsafe learned or traditional behaviors and promoting safe, proven methods for food handling and preservation.

Education in the form of workshops will cover topics such as canning, food dehydration, freezing, and safe cooking. Partners will include the Love Outreach Food Pantry, daycare sites, senior center, 4-H youth, and community residents.

Expected outcomes include increased persons preserving their own food, reduced incidents of foodborne illness, and decreased evidence of food insecurity. Education participants will demonstrate safe handling of produce, meat, and dairy products.

Addressing the Issue of Convenience Eating

Extension programming will employ a variety of delivery modes to teach healthy eating, and easy, quick recipes. Target audiences will be families who play sports or have extracurriculars that make dinner preparation difficult. Additionally, farmers who work long, seasonal hours, persons who commute outside of the county, and senior citizens who have difficulty preparing multi-step meals will be targeted.

Workshops such as freezer meal preparation, meal planning, eating seasonally and locally will be featured, plus take-home materials such as recipes and easy to understand written resources. All ages will be targeted, as even children can play a role in meal preparation.

Partners will include local produce and meat producers, food pantry, Parks & Recreation, faith based organizations, and civic groups. Master Gardeners and Master Food Volunteers will be recruited to teach their peers, and 4-H Food Challenge team members will expand their efforts.

Expected outcomes include families who plan their meals weekly and persons who report decreased purchases at convenience eateries such as fast food or takeout locations. The outcomes intertwine with the issue of family financial management, as eating home-prepared foods will save money.

Conclusion

Orange Extension staff, volunteers, and Extension Leadership Council members will annually review the progress being made on these key programmatic initiatives. Additional programs will need to be developed, plus evaluation tools to measure and report the impacts of the work.

The focus will be on long-term, meaningful contact with participants and furthering relationships with and among stakeholders to create a community support system. These issues are community-wide, so residents will benefit from reassurance that they're not the only ones dealing with an issue and the camaraderie that comes with group programming.

Naturally, these top five issues are not the only programming that Extension will conduct. Meaningful and relevant traditional programming will continue and staff will continue to respond to requests for information and training, regardless of issue. Staff will also continue to refer clients to agencies who can also serve their needs, such as Soil & Water, Farm Service Agency, Virginia Department of Health, Social Services, etc.

Readers of this document may not see support for traditional commercial agriculture, but the unit's commitment to supporting farmers is unequivocal. Orange Extension remains the educational partner to the Central Virginia Cattleman's Association and is committed to providing support to small and large, full-time and part-time farmers. Currently, the largest operators/producers hire consultants for professional guidance, and Extension will continue to be a connection to the latest research available.

The 2023 Situation Analysis provides current data at the time of issuance and a forward looking plan through 2028. It remains a roadmap that serves as the basis for key programming, but can always be updated and adapted depending on current/emerging community needs.

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