

Bladen County Working Lands Protection Plan

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Prepared By
Grace Lawrence



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Acknowledgements

The Bladen County Working Lands Protection Plan was prepared and written by Grace Lawrence. Ms. Lawrence has a master's degree in education and has worked in the environmental field for more than 15 years. The plan was researched and edited by Sandy Maddox, Ed.D. Dr. Maddox is the associate director of the Lois G. Britt Agribusiness Center at Mount Olive College. She has more than 30 years of experience in agriculture.

The Bladen County team reviewed and made recommendations to the plan. The team was composed of:

N.C. Cooperative Extension

Dalton Dockery, Becky Spearman, Ryan Harrelson

Bladen County Planning Department

Greg Elkins

Bladen County Voluntary Agricultural District Board

Dan Ward, Joyce Walters

Bladen County Soil and Water Conservation District

Dean Morris

Bladen County Economic Development

Linda Clark

North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

Thomas Padgett, Benjy Strobe

Bladen County Farm Bureau

Ray Allen

Cape Fear Farm Credit

Brandon Strickland

N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Agronomic Division

Rick Morris



Executive Summary

Agriculture has a long history in Bladen County dating back to the early 1700s. Historically, turpentine, lumber, and cotton were the major agricultural products of the county. Both the county and the crops grown in the county have diversified over the past 300 years. This diversification has served to strengthen the agricultural economy of the county and the region. The bucolic setting of Bladen County reflects the vigorous agricultural background that has made Bladen County what it has become today.

Bladen County has experienced population growth, but the growth has not adversely impacted the continued growth of the agriculture industry as has been noted in other counties across the state where farmland has been lost to development. Thus, agriculture still is a prominent part of the community and is recognized for its economic impact on the county. Bladen County and the agriculture community within have not been static. Both have developed effective ways to promote and support agriculture. Expansion into value-added products, diversification of commodities, and multiple marketing venues has allowed landowners and operators in Bladen County to weather the ups and downs of the economy. This growth and diversification have additionally allowed families to keep their lands in agricultural production.

A number of challenges face producers in Bladen County. Among these are an aging farming population, growing competition for land, increased input costs, and others that will be investigated within this document. Concurrently, a comparable number of opportunities exist to educate, support, and expand the agriculture industry with the support of the citizenry and local leadership of the county. Agriculture remains imperative to the continued economic prosperity of Bladen County. The impact of agriculture in Bladen County is noted:

- Agriculture and agribusiness represent the number-one industry in Bladen County.
- Agriculture and agribusiness contribute \$581,492,406 total income.
- Bladen County is ranked as the eighth best place to farm in the United States.
- Bladen County is sixth statewide for farm cash receipts from poultry and livestock and seventh for total farm cash receipts.
- Bladen County is third in the state in farm cash receipts from hogs, 16th for broiler production, and 47th for beef cattle.
- Bladen County is fourth in farm cash receipts for vegetables, fruits, and nuts, and third in grape production.
- Bladen County is first in the state in blueberry production.
- Peanut production ranks third in the state.
- Bladen County ranks 21st in the state in corn, 33rd in soybeans, 49th in wheat, and 42nd in flue-cured tobacco.
- The nursery, floriculture, and greenhouse growing industry in Bladen County ranks 36th statewide.

- In forestry, Bladen County ranks seventh in the state for income of timber harvested.
- Wildlife contributes tens of thousands of dollars to the Bladen County economy.

The recommendations provided herein will serve as a plan of action to ensure the preservation of agriculture and concurrently the preservation of economic opportunity and growth in Bladen County. Recommendations are formulated from findings and are structured to ensure that agriculture and agricultural producers are encouraged to retain their working farms while providing strength and growth to the local economy. These recommendations are as follows:

- Support and adopt farm-friendly, county-based, land-use policies and programs.
- Expand county land preservation programs.
- Promote an appreciation of agriculture to all public audiences.
- Through training and educational efforts, develop a strategy for retaining and expanding agriculture and agribusiness.

Statement of Need for Action

Agriculture remains the number-one industry in the state, reporting more than \$70 billion in economic impact. At a distant second, contributing \$20 billion to the state's economy, is the military. Fort Bragg and its associated activities have always had some impact on the region surrounding the base. While Bladen County is not directly adjacent to the base, expected personnel growth and increased training activities are certain to have an impact on resources and services in the region. Ft. Bragg has identified working lands, farms and forests, as compatible uses for its operations. With the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) program, the base will experience an influx of 40,000 people as Forces Command and U.S. Army Reserve personnel and families move from Atlanta to the Ft. Bragg region. This relocation will require counties surrounding Ft. Bragg to plan for changes to accommodate the growth. Planning includes the preservation of farms, forests, and open space, which the military values for its operations. The Ft. Bragg BRAC Regional Task Force was cooperatively created by the military and the state to help the region recognize needs, strategize to adapt to changes, and capitalize on opportunities associated with this growth. Agriculture is uniquely positioned to benefit from this growth through education and awareness of the value of the industry to this potential partnership with the military.

The population of Bladen County is reported as 32,312, indicating a static growth rate of 0.1 percent from 2000 to 2008 (U.S. Census, 2008). Bladen is defined as rural and is a Tier I County according to the N.C. Department of Commerce in 2008. This designation is a description of the economic well-being of the county and indicates that the county is considered economically distressed. This also is representative of the commitment of efforts to encourage economic activity and incentives for economic growth. The county has 18 townships. Elizabethtown, the county seat, has the largest population with 3,773 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). White Lake is an incorporated town surrounding the lake with 500 year-round residents and up to 200,000 tourists in the summer (Town of White Lake).

The county population's average age is 40 years, and the gender of the population is almost evenly divided. The average age of farmers both statewide and in Bladen County is 57 years (NCDA Census of Agriculture 2008). While the general population is relatively young, the aging farmer population presents a challenge to the future of farming statewide and in Bladen County.

The Working Lands Protection program conducted through Ft. Bragg's BRAC Regional Task Force and funded through the Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund is charged with the development of Working Lands Protection Plans (WLPP) for 11 counties. These plans address the opportunities and challenges facing agriculture. Agriculture in these WLPPs is defined in the broadest sense to include horticulture, farming, and forestry productions. The WLPPs follow the definition of agriculture that is set by the N.C. General Assembly General Statute: G.S. 105-277.2 through 105-277.7:

- Minimum acreage of production land:
10 acres for agricultural use
Five acres for horticulture use
20 acres for forest use
- Production must follow a sound management plan.
- Agricultural and horticultural land must have at least one qualifying tract that has produced an average gross income of at least \$1,000 for the three years preceding the application year.
- Forest land must be following a forest management plan.

To cover all the issues that face agriculture, a county team was established. The team was comprised of the Bladen County manager, the Bladen County planner and representatives from the Bladen County Cooperative Extension, the Bladen County Soil and Water Conservation District, Bladen County Economic Development, the N.C. Division of Forest Resources and the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. These team members have advised and contributed to this plan.

Interviews and surveys were distributed to three target audiences – farmers, agribusinesses, and non-farm residents – to determine the threats and opportunities to working lands and to frame the current state of agriculture in the county. The surveys were distributed in hard copy and electronically at www.SurveyMonkey.com. Links to the on-line survey were featured on the county teams' websites, and the team distributed paper surveys to the populations they served. The resultant data from all audiences serves as a representative snapshot of the state of agriculture as well as the potential future opportunities and threats to agriculture in the county. These results are incorporated in the WLPP to shape the views of agriculture, the challenges and opportunities facing agriculture, and recommendations to help keep farms and forest land viable for the future.

Attributes of Bladen County

The county is rich in natural resources with a series of lakes, state parks and forests that attract users from around the region. The county's several water bodies provide vibrant recreational activities in the region. Singletary Lake, Bay Tree Lake, and Jones Lake are state parks that represent recreational water resources in the county. Jones, Singletary, Salter, Baytree, and White Lakes are part of the unique Carolina Bays that dot the southeastern part of the state. Jones Lake is the one of the longest (8,000 feet) and shallowest (8.7 feet) of the Carolina Bays in the region (N.C. Parks and Recreation). White Lake is fed by springs, and it is 1,200 acres in size, which makes it the largest lake and bay in the county (Town of White Lake).

The Suggs Mill Pond Game Lands are a popular place to hunt and fish. Singletary Lake and Jones Lake are both state parks where citizens can enjoy fishing, hiking, horseback riding, and other recreational activities. Bladen Lakes State Forest allows hunting in addition to a wide range of other recreational activities. The state forest is a popular location with star gazers and astronomy clubs to explore the night sky. The military uses the forest as a training site periodically during the year. The Turnbull Creek Educational State Forest provides educational programs on forest activities for schools and other groups.

Land Use and Water

Figure 1 is a representation of the land cover or present land use of Bladen County. Primary land uses denoted are forest, farmland, wetland, water body, pavement or rooftop, pasture, grassland, or lawn. Developed areas are recognized around the Elizabethtown area. Cultivated areas are extensive in the southwestern part of the county, forests are interspersed in the primarily agricultural areas, and much of the county east of the Cape Fear River is made up of wetlands and lakes. The Carolina Bays are clearly distinguished as wetlands and lakes.

Water is prevalent in surface structures across the county. However, the majority of water provided by the county through Public Works is pulled from groundwater from the Black Creek Aquifer and the Upper Cape Fear Aquifer. East Arcadia provides its own water from the Pee Dee Aquifer, and the Smithfield Foods plant in Tar Heel gets water from the Upper Cape Fear and Black Creek Aquifers. (Lumber River Council of Government). To reduce dependency on these aquifers, a surface water treatment plant, Bladen's Buff, is under construction near Tar Heel to be used initially by the Smithfield Foods facility and ultimately by other users as well. Private wells still supply water for approximately 50 percent of the citizens in Bladen County.

Land Cover, Bladen County

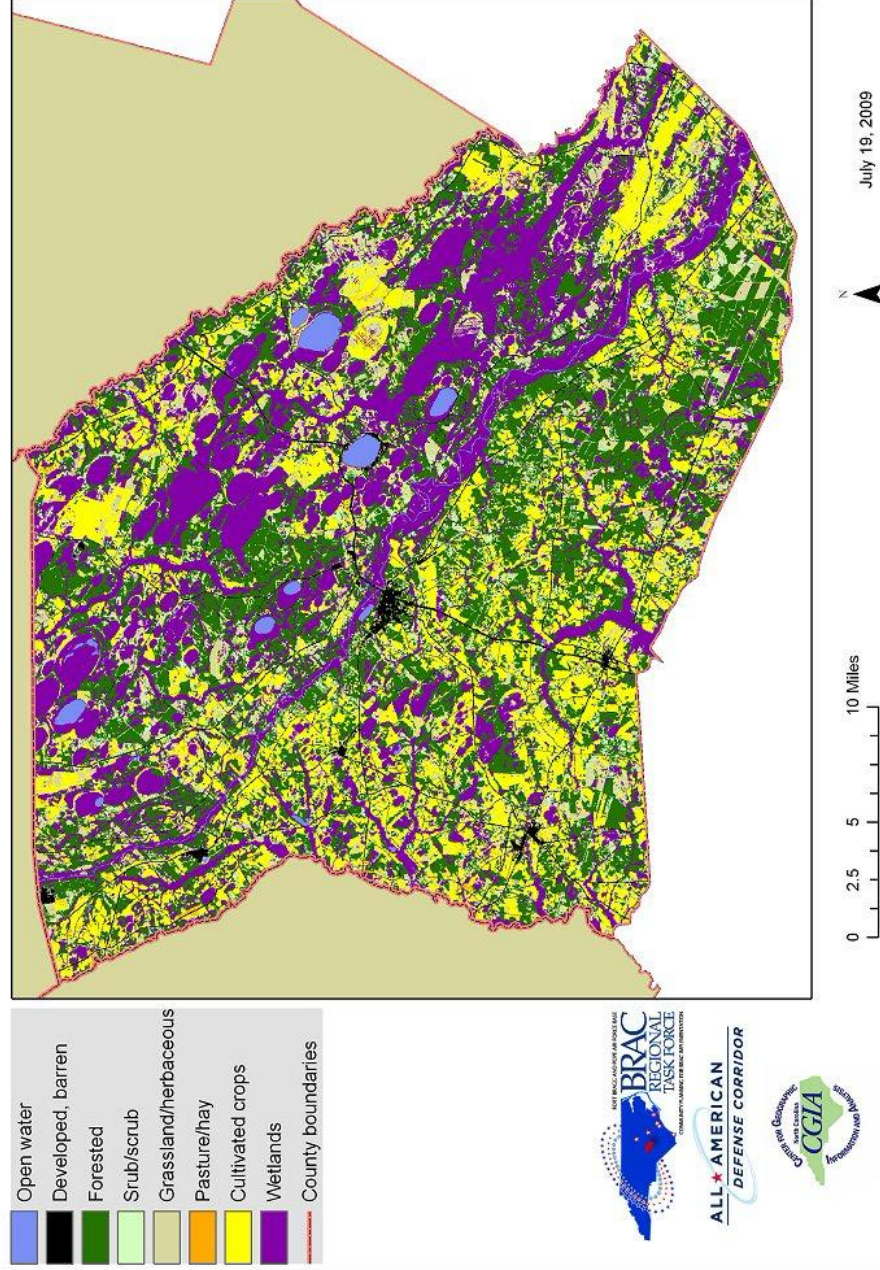


Figure 1. Land Cover by Type. Source: U.S. Geological Survey

Overview of Agriculture in Bladen County

Bladen County is one of the most southern counties of the BRAC region, and it is the third largest in the state consisting of 879 square miles. It is part of both the Cape Fear and Lumber River basins, which create the boundaries with Robeson, Sampson, and Pender counties. The county is part of the Coastal Plains of North Carolina and is relatively flat with small rolling hills. Annual precipitation is 49.5 inches, and the monthly mean temperature is 61.6 F (N.C. Climate Office, 2000).

There are a total of 560,000 acres in Bladen County. Of that, 127,100 acres are in farms (NCDA Agricultural Statistics 2007). The N.C. Division of Forest Resources (NCDFR) states that 393,100 acres are in forestry production with the majority in private ownership. Commercial forestry has 36,400 acres, and private landowners have 324,800 acres. The remainder of land is located in the 18 municipalities and townships.

Soil is a primary ingredient for healthy, valuable crops. Soil scientists have identified the types of soil that are most productive for crops. Soil types are classified, rated, and mapped to reveal the pattern of capability shown in Figure 2. Soil capability is higher in the western part of the county. Soil types and acreages present in Bladen County are noted in the table found in Appendix A. Percentages are also provided in this table. The diversity of soils in Bladen County ranges from muck soils to flooded soils to well drained to excessively drained soils. The utility of these vary widely as well.

Soils are also important for forest management decisions. Bladen County is recognized for large stands of pine plantations. Longleaf establishment has been a priority for a number of years. Soils are productive for loblolly production in much of the county and productive for longleaf in upland areas and along the rims of the Carolina Bay formations. Soil types are classified, rated, and mapped to reveal the pattern shown in Figures 3 and 4.

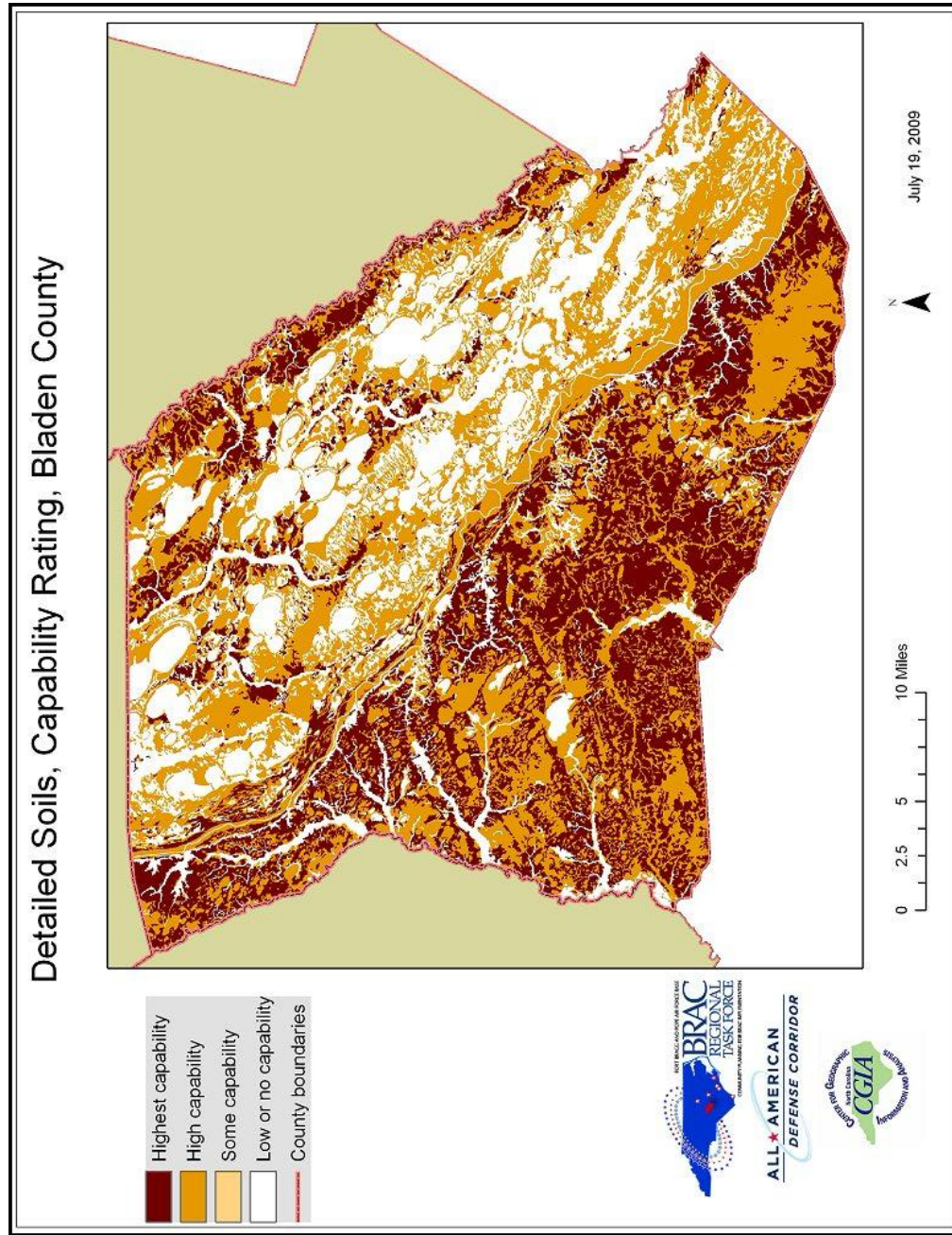


Figure 2. Crop Capability Rating From Detailed Soil Survey. Source: Natural Resources Conservation Service

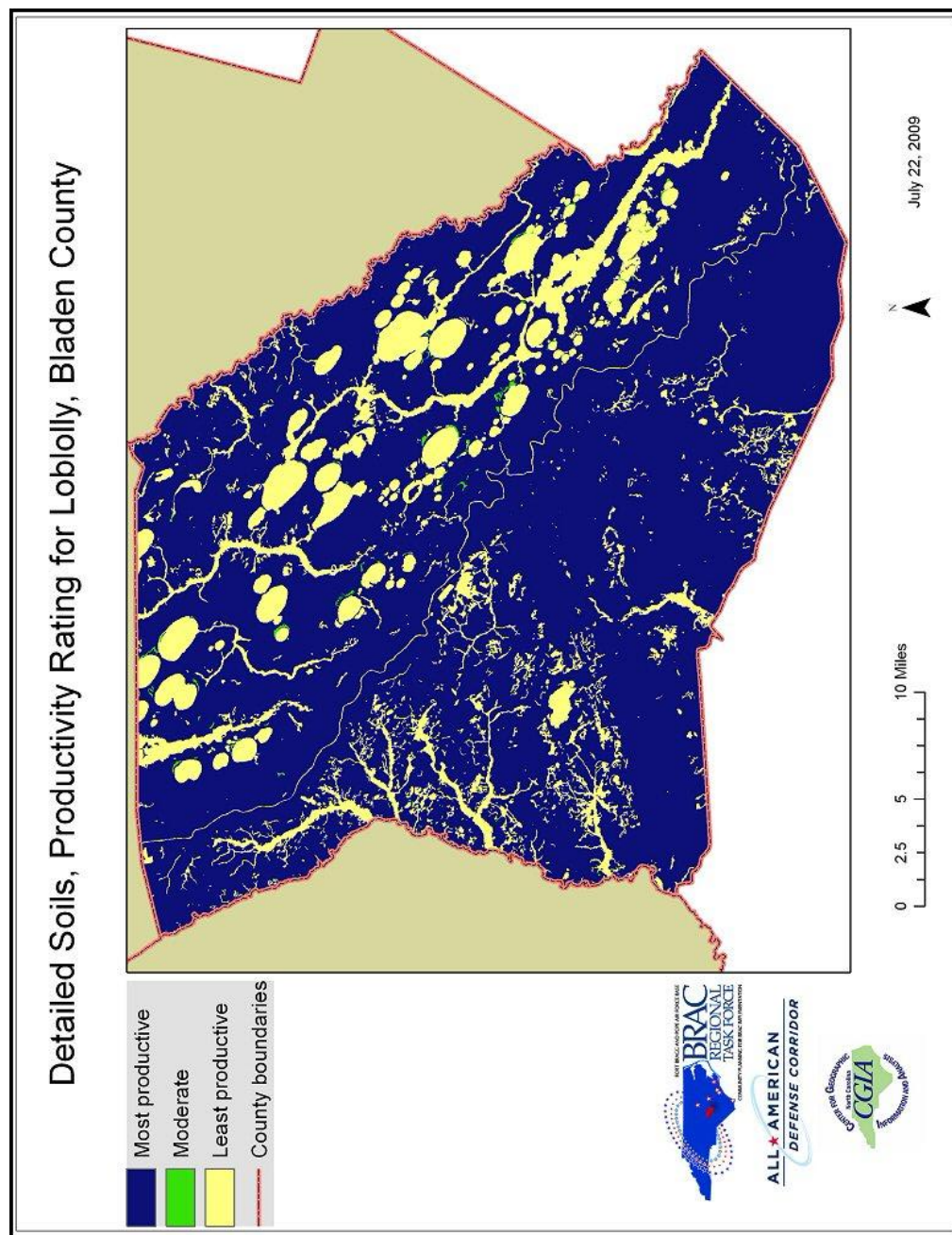


Figure 3. Detailed Soils, Rating Based on Site Index for Loblolly Productivity

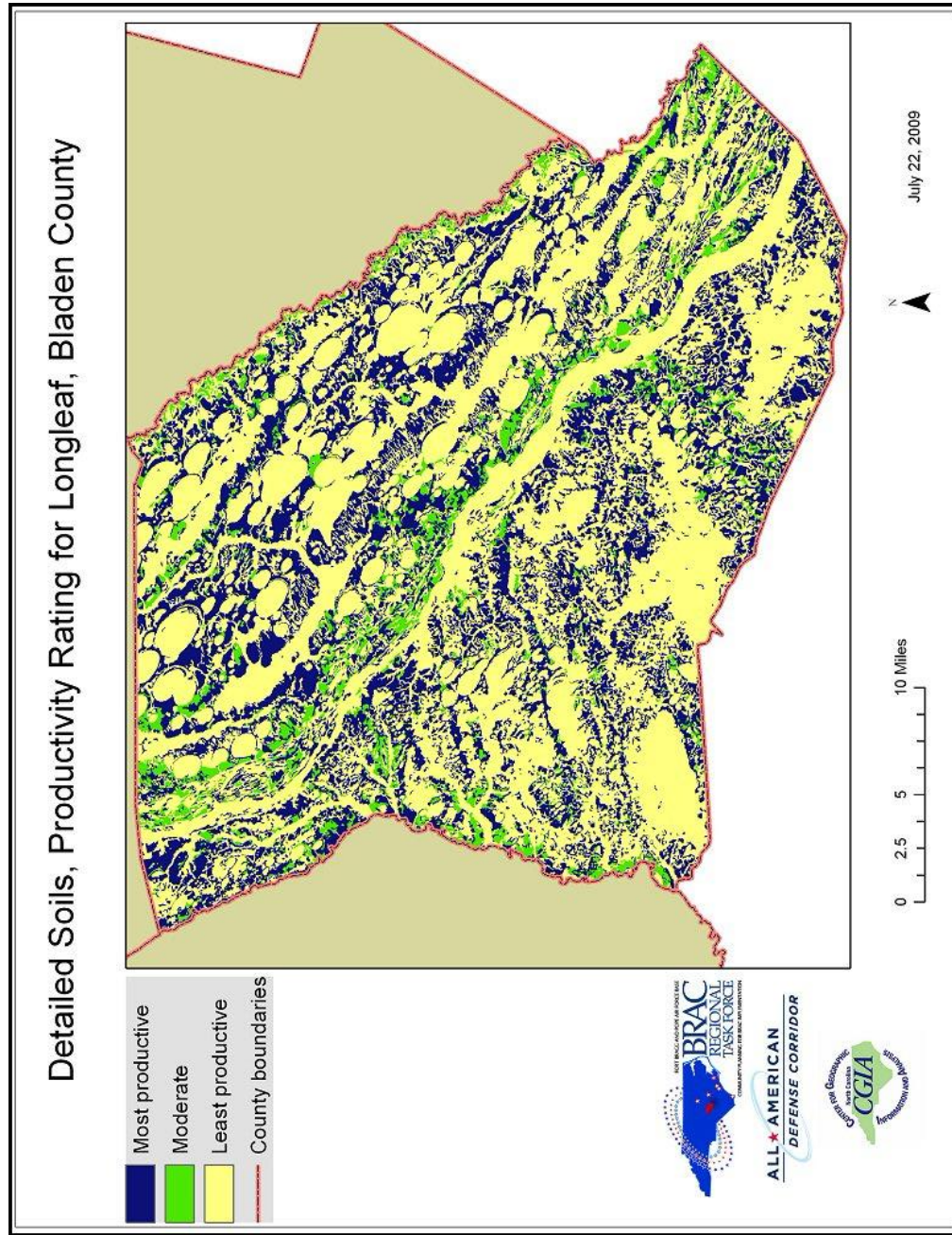


Figure 4. Detailed Soils, Rating Based on Site Index for Longleaf Productivity

Bladen County Rankings in Agriculture

Agriculture, Agribusiness: Bladen County's Number-One Industry

In 2007, the market value of agricultural products sold was \$338,494,000, which was a 33 percent increase from 2002. In 2002, the average net cash income for a farm in Bladen County was \$103,423, and in 2007 it was \$150,496 (USDA Census of Agriculture, 2002 and 2007). This is counter to the net income from farm production for the state, which went down from \$3,255,741 in 2006 to \$2,806,927 in 2007 (<http://www.ers.usda.gov/StateFacts/NC.htm>). These income figures are clearly indicative of the highly productive farming that is taking place in the county.

Bladen County Ranked as the 8th Best Place to Farm in the U.S.

In the 2005 Farm Futures Magazine, Bladen County was ranked as the eighth-best place to farm in the United States out of over 3,000 counties nationwide. Rankings were based on information from the Census of Agriculture data from years 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2002. Profitability was the driving factor behind these rankings with net profits, sales growth, asset growth and profit growth as indicators for determination of ranking. This is indicative of the importance of agriculture to Bladen County and eastern North Carolina.

Top Commodities Reported in Bladen County

When assessing the composition of agriculture in Bladen County, the diversity of commodities produced must be noted. However, livestock is clearly the largest contributor to the agricultural economy of the county. In Table 1, the top commodity contributors are listed. Values provided for 2007 and 2008 are compiled and reported by the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Agricultural Statistics 2008 and 2009 annual reports. Information in Table 1 provides commodity trends and economic impacts of the commodities on the economy of Bladen County. Income increases and decreases are evident and are consistent with market price fluctuations and federal program support changes or losses.

Commodity	2007	2008
Swine	\$161,801,000	\$185,423,000
Poultry	\$38,088,000	\$54,096,000
Blueberries	\$29,941,000	\$27,976,000
Corn	\$7,346,000	\$5,236,000
Tobacco	\$3,157,000	\$2,778,000
Soybeans	\$2,291,000	\$5,180,000
Beef Cattle	\$1,220,000	\$1,256,000
Peanuts	\$2,919,000	\$4,838,000
Cotton	N/A	\$1,788,000

Table 1. Top Commodities reported in Bladen County

Bladen County Sixth Statewide for Farm Cash Receipts From Poultry and Livestock and Seventh for Total Farm Cash Receipts

Bladen County ranked sixth in the state for total farm cash receipts from poultry and livestock production in 2008 with Bladen County producers reporting \$260,643,000 in farm cash receipts. This figure, coupled with cash receipts from all crops, places Bladen County in the top 10 counties in the state for total farm cash receipts, ranking seventh, and reporting \$326,334,000 in 2008. Livestock receipts account for more than 80 percent of the total cash receipts reported in Bladen County. (NCDA Agricultural Statistics 2009).

Bladen County Third in the State in Farm Cash Receipts From Hogs, 16th for Broiler Production, and 47th for Beef Cattle

Bladen County ranked third in the state in farm cash receipts from hogs, reporting in 2008 \$185,423,000 up from 2007 figures of \$161,801,000. Bladen County producers grew 10,000,000 broilers in 2006, which increased to 12,000,000 in 2007. This represented a farm cash receipt of \$38,088,000, which further increased in 2008 to 16,000,000 broilers and cash receipts of \$54,096,000. Turkey production has increased in Bladen County with 614,373 turkeys produced in 2008, representing an income of \$6.4 million dollars added to the economy. Cattle numbers in January 2009 were reported at 5,400 with beef cows making up 2,600 of this number. Cash receipts from cattle were reported in 2008 to be \$1,256,000, slightly up from the 2007 report of \$1,220,000 (NCDA Agricultural Statistics 2009).

Agriculture, Agribusiness Contribute \$581,492,406 Total Income

Agriculture and agribusiness contribute \$581,492,406 total income to the county's economy (Walden, NCSU Agribusiness Values, 2006). It is apparent in these numbers that livestock is integral to the economy of Bladen County. While Bladen County farmers are diversified in production areas, livestock production is unequivocally the foundation of the agricultural economy in Bladen County. This is consistent with statewide trends.

Bladen County - Fourth in Farm Cash Receipts for Vegetables, Fruits, and Nuts, Third in Grape Production

Bladen County farmers grow a variety of crops ranging from tobacco to row crops to specialty crops or small fruits. The impact of each is important to the economy of the county and state. Declines in income have occurred over the last decade in many crop areas, but others have seen expansion and growth. Bladen County ranks fourth in the state from farm cash receipts for vegetables, fruits, and nuts with blueberries (3,523 acres total). Grapes account for most of this reported income. Bladen County ranks first in blueberry production and third in grape production. In 2008, there were 26 farms producing grapes in Bladen County on approximately 400 acres, ranging from one acre to 26 acres (NCSU Extension, Bladen). The grapes are primarily used for wine production with the remainder going to jelly, jam, and juice production. Vegetables, fruits, and nuts contributed \$28,693,000 in cash receipts in 2008.

Blueberries - Bladen County Ranks Number One Statewide

Blueberries are important to the farm gate income reported, and Bladen County ranks first in blueberry production statewide. A slight decline in cash receipts for blueberries was reported

from \$29,941,00 in 2006 to \$27,976,000 in 2007. The majority of berries produced are marketed through fresh market channels.

Tobacco Acreage Declines, Bladen County Ranks 42nd in Flue-Cured

Tobacco from 1997 to 2007 has seen a steady decline in cash sales reported. In 1997, reported cash receipts equaled \$14,009,000; in 2002, \$8,205,000; and in 2007, \$3,157,000 with much of this decline attributed to the uncertainty associated with the future of tobacco and the subsequent buyout as well as normal farmer attrition. (U.S. Census of Agriculture 2007, 2002)

Peanuts – Bladen County Third in the State

Peanuts, which also experienced programmatic changes and the loss of the quota system during the decade from 1997 to 2007, have actually noted an increase in acres harvested from 2,424 in 1997 to 3,473 in 2007. Bladen County ranked third in the state in production in 2008, reporting 25,600,000 pounds of production, and a cash receipts increase from 2007 to 2008 of \$2,919,000 to \$4,838,000 respectively (NCDA Agriculture Statistics 2009).

Corn – Bladen County 21st in the State

Sales of corn for grain in 2007 were reported to be \$7,346,000. Harvested acreage has varied over the last decade and reflects the impact of commodity price fluctuations and drought. In 1997, 20,562 acres were harvested with a decline to 17,719 reported in 2002 and an increase to 25,687 noted in 2007. This stayed relatively stable in 2008 with 22,600 acres reported harvested. Bladen County ranked 21st in the state in corn production in 2008 (U.S. Census of Agriculture 1997, 2002, 2007; NCDA Agricultural Statistics 2009).

Soybeans – Bladen County 33rd in the State

Soybeans remained a stable crop selection over the last decade with acres harvested reported as 15,091 in 1997, 19,007 in 2002, and 15,020 in 2007. However a marked increase in acres harvested to 23,600 was reported in 2008 with this increase attributed to increasing commodity price impact. Bladen County ranked 33rd in the state in soybean production, and the impact from cash receipts increased from \$2,291,000 in 2007 to \$5,180,000 in 2008. (NCDA Agricultural Statistics 2009).

Wheat Acreage Increases – Bladen County Ranks 49th in the State

Wheat production increased from 5,000 acres planted in 2007 to 7,500 acres planted in 2008. Production increased over this same time from 93,000 bushels to 254,000 bushels with yield per acre increasing from 23 bushels up to 42.5 bushels. This increase, while noted because of acreage, is more attributable to yield per acre increases and the more favorable growing conditions of the 2008 season. Cotton, however, decreased in acreage harvested from a high of 10,400 acres in 2002 to 4,090 acres in 2007. Cotton prices paid to farmers have fallen from a high of \$0.669 per pound in 2008 to \$0.531 per pound in March 2009 (NCDA, Agricultural Statistics, 2009).

Nursery, Floriculture, and Greenhouses Growing Industry in Bladen County Ranks 36th Statewide

Nursery, floriculture, and greenhouses contributed \$5,669,000 to the cash receipt total from vegetables, fruits, and nuts, including area sod producers. Additional horticultural operations are limited in the county as static growth has not demanded these products. Existing wholesale and retail operations are meeting demand and creating a difficult environment for growth of these industries due to competitive pricing, transportation costs, and capital costs (NCDA Agricultural Statistics, 2009).

Forestry – Bladen County Ranks Seventh in the State for Income of Timber Harvested

Forestry represents another large agricultural sector in the county. According to the N.C. Division of Forest Resources, Bladen County has 324,800 acres of forestland in private ownership, which is 71percent of the acres in the county.

Bladen County ranks seventh in the state for income of timber harvested and delivered in 2008 with a delivered value of \$26,963,711 (Bardon and Jeuk, 2008). Forest industries, which include farm and commercial forestry, manufacturing, and wholesale/retail, bring \$30,260,926 in value-added income to the county (Walden, Agriculture and Agribusiness, 2006). NCSU Forestry Extension reports the price paid to forest owners for standing timber was \$12,696,241 in 2008. The price paid to timber buyers upon delivery to the mills was \$20,891,073 in 2008 (Ibid).

According to NCDA's Forestry Statistics 2007, forest products brought in \$37,070,000 to Bladen County in 2005 and \$35,300,000 in 2006. The global economic downturn has affected the forest industry, and the numbers for 2007 and 2008 are anticipated to be much lower.

Many landowners/producers manage both agronomic crops and timberland, increasing their diversity of products. According to a 2006 USDA survey of woodland owners, the forest acreage in the state was split evenly between being part of a farm or standing alone (Figure 5). In Bladen County, many forest landowners have forestland that serves as wildlife habitat as well as timber production acreage.

Just over 28 percent of the forested acres in North Carolina reported having a current forest management plan (USDA, National Woodland Owner Survey, 2006); therefore over 70 percent did not have a current plan for landowners to effectively manage their forests. (<http://fiatools.fs.fed.us/NWOS/tablemaker.jsp>). However, the N.C. Division of Forest Resources in Bladen County has made an intensive effort to get landowners to initiate new or renewed forest management plans. On average, 100 plans are made or renewed each year. This has also been done in concert with a strong reforestation program, which results in an average of 2,500 acres reforested every year (Bladen DFR, 2010).

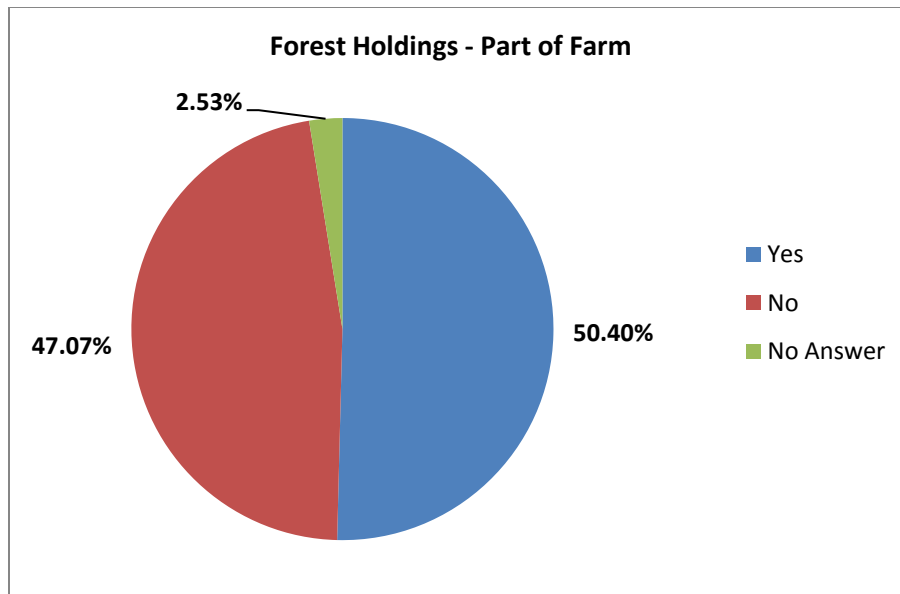


Figure 5. USDA Woodland Owners Survey 2006

There are several consulting foresters, sawmills, and wood dealers in Bladen County, which represent more agribusinesses that need to be cultivated and supported. Twenty consulting foresters work in Bladen County. There are two sawmills in the county and more than 35 timber buyers in the region (NCDNR Bladen County).

Farms and forests perform ecological services by absorbing rain, reducing runoff and sedimentation, and require less water than other land uses (NCDA Water Survey June 2009). These ecological services are important features in preserving the working lands in the region. Farms and forests provide pervious surfaces, which result in less runoff entering streams and rivers. These working lands also provide habitat for species unique to the area as well as provide recreational opportunities such as fishing, hunting, and hiking. Landowners often lease the land to hunt clubs, which helps keep certain animal populations under control and provides income to the landowner.

Wildlife Contributes Tens of Thousands to Bladen County Economy

Wildlife-associated recreation contributes significantly to the Bladen County economy. Many Bladen County residents and non-residents benefit from the abundant wildlife and fish resources in the county. These individuals spend thousands of dollars on wildlife-associated recreation at county stores, gas stations, motels, and other businesses.

The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) manages more than 43,000 acres of game lands in the county where residents and non-residents can hunt big game, small game, and waterfowl and trap furbearers. Kayaking and canoeing, primitive camping, fishing, and other recreational opportunities are also available on some of these game lands. The NCWRC manages and sponsors six boat ramps in the county. Three ramps are on the Cape Fear River,

two are on the South River, and one is on the Black River. These areas provide free waterway access for a variety of water-related recreational activities.

The Bladen Lakes State Forest, managed by the N.C. Division of Forest Resources, comprises 32,363 acres of the game lands in the county. Suggs Mill Pond, which is managed by the NCWRC, is a tract of 10,760 acres spilling over into neighboring Cumberland County. The NCWRC has recently purchased additional tracts along the Cape Fear River that will be a part of the Bladen County Game Lands system in the future.

In addition to providing game lands, the NCWRC currently has 14 employees stationed in the county. These employees spend money and pay taxes in the county contributing unknown but significant revenue to the local economy.

There are many hunt clubs and individuals in the county that spend significant money on hunting leases for private lands. Many other North Carolina residents come to Bladen County to hunt and fish. Table 2 shows the amount of money spent just by Bladen County residents on hunting, fishing, and trapping licenses for fiscal year 2008-2009. It is difficult to estimate non-resident expenditures, but with the large acreages of game lands in the county, these are likely significant.

The 2008 NCDA & CS Agricultural Statistics reports that there are 500 farms in Bladen County, which is down from 551 in 2002. According to the 2007 U.S. Census of Agriculture, farm sizes are decreasing as well. The average-size farm was 254 acres, down from 264 acres in 2002. Table 3 illustrates the decline in farm size and numbers from 1997 to 2007. While very small farms (one to nine acres) have steadily declined in number, farm operations of 10-49 acres have increased in number. Very large farms (1000+ acres) increased in number from 1997 to 2002 and then decreased between 2002 and 2007. Other farm-size delineations report a decline in number. This is a common trend toward larger more efficient farm operations and toward smaller acreages with production diversifying to remain viable. According to the N.C. Rural Center, 93.3 percent of the farms in 2006 were family owned (<http://www.ncruralcenter.org/databank/search.asp>).

The inclusion of farm and forest lands in the county's Present-Use Tax Value Program was deemed to be of immense importance to survey respondents or interviewees (87 percent) and should be pursued by farm and forestland owners. As documented in other more urban counties of the state, the cost of services for residential development versus agricultural/forested land use is significant. Thus agricultural landowners whose agricultural land uses generate revenue yet do not require services such as schools, water, sewer, or security should be enrolled to take advantage of this reduced cost of services.

Bladen County has developed and enacted a Voluntary Agriculture District (VAD) program. The ordinance was passed by the county commissioners in June 2007, and the advisory board was activated in September 2007 (VAD Ordinance, Appendix B). Enrollment by landowners is voluntary and minimal in cost. The \$65 enrollment fee provides VAD signage to the landowner and covers the costs associated with recording fees to the Register of Deeds office. Currently, there are 3,156 acres enrolled in the VAD program, which represents 0.66 percent of the total land in production (Figure 6). Additional enrollment is expected with continued landowner awareness efforts.

Bladen County Resident Sales for Fiscal Year 2008-2009

License Items	Term	Sold	Sales
Combo	Annual	954	\$36,890
Combo	Lifetime	55	\$6,165
Fishing Combo	Annual	42	\$1,470
Hunt	Annual	279	\$5,320
Hunt	Lifetime	2	\$500
Hunt	Short-term	19	\$810
Inland Fish	Annual	1,187	\$15,590
Inland Fish	Lifetime	27	\$405
Inland Fish	Short-term	103	\$870
Trap	Annual	28	\$430
Total		2,696	\$68,450

Table 2. Sales Associated with Recreational Licenses. Source: N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission

Bladen County Farms by Size

Acreage	Number of Farms in 1997	Number of Farms in 2002	Number of Farms in 2007
1-9	46	31	26
10-49	146	167	179
50-179	190	174	153
180-499	97	110	72
500-999	50	38	42
1,000 or more	24	31	28

Table 3. USDA Census of Agriculture 2007 Farm Acreages



Figure 6. Bladen County Voluntary Agricultural District Parcels. Source: Bladen County

Bladen County Agricultural Producers

Over 60 percent of the economy in Bladen County is attributable to agriculture and agribusiness. In 2007, there were 685 farm operators in the county, down from 731 in 2002. The diversity of farm ownership may also be noted with the number of white farm operators decreasing by 7 percent from 654 to 607 from 2002 to 2007 respectively. During the same time period, the number of female operators increased from 141 in 2002 to 180 in 2007, and black operators followed a similar trend with a 9 percent increase noted. (U.S. Census of Agriculture 2002, 2007)

The average age of farmers in Bladen County is 57 years . The average age of survey respondents and interviewees was 56 years. Farmers participating in the survey represented 8,780 of the farmed acreage in the county and represented woodland owners, and row crop, peanut, sweet potato, and small fruit growers.

Forest landowners tend to be predominately white males. Statewide, 90 percent of woodland acres are under white ownership, and 0.9 percent are under black ownership (USDA National Woodland Owner Survey, 2006). These percentages reflect the demographic ownership in Bladen County as well.

The current global economic crisis has been felt throughout the state. In December 2009, the state unemployment rate was 11 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/lau/home.htm#data>). In Bladen County, unemployment rates reported at this same time were at 12.7 percent. Bladen County lost only two industries in the 2008-2009 downturn, but virtually every industry has experienced significant layoffs. Many Bladen County residents worked outside the county and faced unemployment as industries in surrounding counties suffered layoffs or closures.

Agriculture and agribusiness are important employers in Bladen County. Bladen County reported 2,177 farm workers on farms in 2007. This was a 6.2 percent increase in hired labor from 2002 to 2007 (USDA Census of Agriculture, 2007). This figure represents 523 workers working more than 150 days per year with the remaining 1,654 working fewer than 150 days. Thus 76 percent of the workers hired are seasonal workers. Figure 7 illustrates the distribution of worker numbers hired. Twenty-eight percent of farms with hired labor hired one worker, and 28 percent hired two workers. The remaining farms (44 percent) employed three or more workers.

Data provided by producers surveyed provides insight into the trends and issues facing agriculture in Bladen County. While representative of attitudes and opinions, this information is in no way intended to be all-inclusive, but it is felt to adequately represent the audiences targeted.

Sixty-two percent of the farmers/forest landowners responding were full-time farmers, while 63 percent report income coming from off the farm. Of those surveyed, 75 percent indicated their operation was a family farm and that other members of the family were involved in the operation and day-to-day activities of the farm. Eighty-seven percent responding used migrant labor and reported to be very satisfied with this labor force. While 75 percent indicated that they

were not a part of a cooperative, 100 percent indicated that there is a need for education and implementation of both buying and selling cooperatives.

Agricultural producers felt that local governments had responded to their needs in a number of areas important to their continued operation. Respondents (75 percent) felt that local government has been somewhat supportive of keeping taxes reasonable and providing needed services, and had considered planning and zoning to protect agriculture. However, that same percentage did not think that local government had done enough to encourage and provide access to grants and loans related to agriculture and its preservation and expansion in Bladen County.

A majority of agricultural operators (60 percent) responding indicated that they had not increased in size of operation primarily due to environmental and governmental regulations that were prohibitive of this expansion. One of the noted areas of restriction was related to regulations governing pond construction. This was noted as a limiting factor to continued expansion for irrigated crops and for frost protection in high-value crops. Seventy-five percent of the respondents noted that if they did expand it was because they had diversified into additional farm ventures.

Farmers expressed a need for additional technical training in:

- Woodlot management,
- Business planning,
- Niche market development,
- Development of new markets,
- Agritourism and
- Developing local markets.

Farmers also indicated that they were knowledgeable of and interested in preserving cost-share programs, right-to-farm laws, Voluntary Agriculture District programs and labor programs.

Half of the farmers responding indicated that they intended to farm for an additional 20 years, and 75 percent indicated that when they did transfer the farm it would go to a family member to farm as well. This same percentage reported a need for farm transition and estate planning information and expressed concern over retention of land values, property taxes, and estate taxes.

Producers surveyed received their information from traditional sources: extension, newspapers/magazines, the Farm Service Agency, NCDA & CS, and others (Figure 8). Other sources of information were the internet, agricultural businesses, and of course, other farmers. Bladen County farmers are utilizing the internet and embracing an important diversification tool for direct markets and consumer awareness of local products.

Education and training were noted as important components to farmers' continued viability. Education was recognized as being important to audiences other than just farmers. Farmers believe and support the education of farm neighbors, youth, and consumers. They expressed support of this education and felt that agritourism and other opportunities may exist where

farmers can become a part of this process. Farmers in Bladen County are progressive and see many opportunities for continued growth and expansion of their operations ensuring the viable transition of the working family farm.

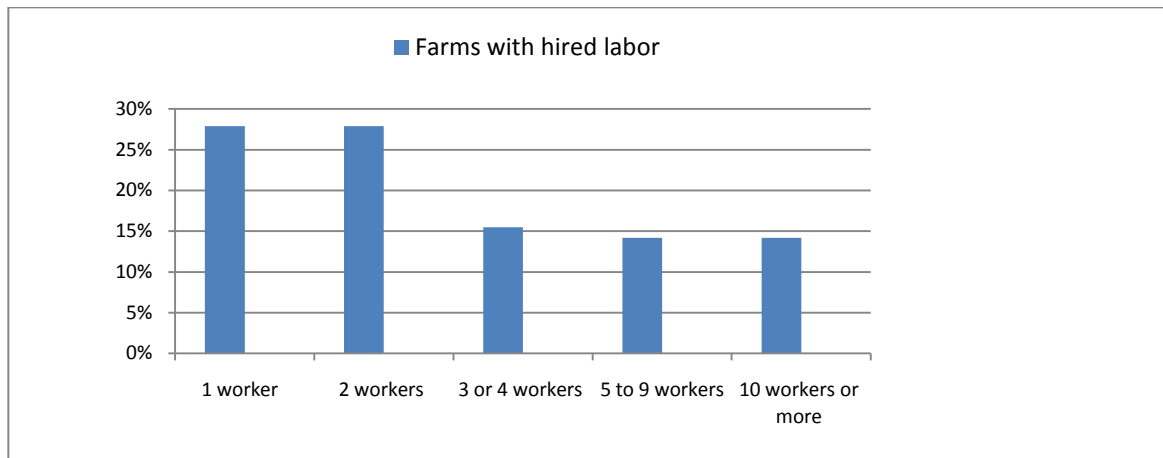


Figure 7. USDA Census of Agriculture 2007

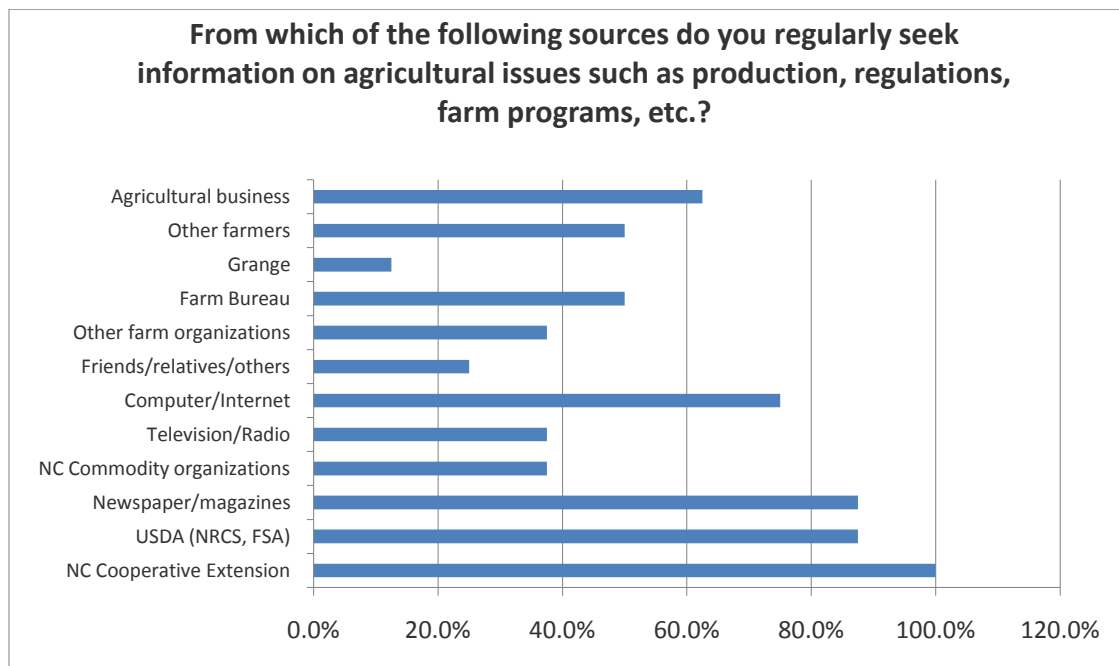


Figure 8. BRAC RTF Survey of Producers

Bladen County Agribusiness

The Merriam Webster definition of agribusiness is “an industry engaged in the producing operations of a farm, the manufacture and distribution of farm equipment and supplies, and the processing, storage, and distribution of farm commodities.” Agribusinesses support local agriculture with the necessary services and products that help keep a farm operation in business. These businesses include processing facilities, accounting services, repair services, and other operations that would not be quickly identified as agribusinesses. However, these businesses do help support the local farming community. The symbiosis of these two industries is critical to the success of each. Without a cadre of landowners and operators in the county, these businesses would not continue to function.

Bladen County has a solid agribusiness sector which, in turn, reflects its strong agricultural roots. The county realizes the vital role agriculture plays in its economy and supports the industry in as many ways as possible. The county economic development commission is one of the few in the BRAC region that acknowledges, promotes, and supports agriculture and its many attributes. The far-reaching aspects of agricultural businesses in a community have major impacts on the economy of that community. According to Mike Walden at the N.C. State University Department of Agriculture and Economic Resources, agriculture and agribusinesses bring \$581,492,406, or 69.9 percent, of total value-added income to Bladen County (IMPLAN, Mig, Inc., 2006).

Smithfield Foods has been in operation in the county since 1992 and is the largest employer countywide. In 2009, they averaged 5,184 total employees with 4,833 involved in production. Their annual payroll before deductions is reported as \$141,279,000. With fringe benefits for health insurance, pensions, and other benefits added, this number rises by another \$53,078,000. The facility processes about 32,000 hogs a day and is the largest facility of its kind in the state. The value of products produced is \$1,877,594,000, and exports are reported to value \$121 million. They also contribute to the revenue of the county with \$788,359 paid in property taxes.

Peanut processing is big business in Bladen County. Birdsong Peanuts opened a new buying and drying facility in Bladenboro in 2006 to capitalize on this expansion. The facility is a 10,000 ton warehouse facility, which allows the company to buy peanuts from regional growers, dry the peanuts, and then ship them to a Birdsong facility in Virginia to process (Chuck Huestess, Bladen Economic Development Commission 2009). It buys and processes about 46 million pounds of peanuts annually. The plant has four full-time employees and 25 seasonal employees. E. J. Cox/Sachs Peanuts processed 25 million pounds of peanuts in Bladen County in 2009 while employing 45 full-time workers. Peanut Processors/Southern Peanut also processed 50 million pounds of peanuts and employed 32 full-time workers in 2009 in Bladen County. The presence of the peanut industry represents one of Bladen County’s best opportunities for agricultural expansion.

A number of other agribusinesses exist in Bladen County that add value to the local economy. Among these is Pineland Grain, which buys and stores grain in Dublin. Murphy Brown operates a feed mill in Bladenboro. Clarkton Cotton Company operates a gin in Clarkton that ginned 5,557,000 pounds of cotton during the 2009 season and employed eight full-time workers. Can Am Yarns operates a yarn manufacturing company, and J.C. Pallet Company is a

forest products company. Hog Slat agriculture equipment supplier and Pioneer Equipment Company are suppliers for the forestry industry. Numerous blueberry processing facilities and smaller agribusinesses and support businesses exist in the county. The trucking industry provides a large support industry responsible for the transport of commodities, goods, and products to the region and the nation.

Sue Bee Honey/Sioux Honey Association is a 40,000-square-foot facility located in the Elizabethtown Industrial Park. Sue Bee blends and ships honey to industrial clients (Bladen Economic Development Commission). Sue Bee Honey/Sioux Honey Association has six employees. The company buys limited amounts of local honey with most honey used shipped into Bladen County. It is blended in the facility in the Elizabethtown Airport Industrial Park then shipped out in 60-pound containers.

Lu-Mil Vineyards is located in Dublin in Bladen County and has more than 50 acres in muscadine grape production. The vineyard produces a variety of wines and has expanded into jams, jellies, and juice. The vineyard has also expanded into processing and labeling other farms' produce (www.lumilvineyards.com). With the growing demand for local products, the vineyard and its processing plant, Divine Foods, help producers grow their markets by offering the processing and labeling service. The farm also has cabins for rent and offers its land as a setting for weddings, family gatherings, and other social events.

Forestry consultants and forest industries are agribusinesses, and 20 registered consulting foresters serve landowners in the county. There are two sawmills that continue to operate in the county. The area is also served by other regional mills and buyers of timber. The forestry industry contributes \$30,260,928 to the economy in Bladen County (Walden, Agriculture and Agribusiness in Bladen County, 2006).

There are a number of hunting preserves and sport shoots in the county. These facilities offer a variety of services including bird hunting and clay shooting, lodging and both guided and unguided hunting opportunities. Hunting preserves focus on a wide variety of avian species. Two of the six preserves in the county reported that 90 percent or greater of those using their facilities come from out of county. Employment varies seasonally and with demand. More than 3,300 visitors were reported to have used just two of the available preserves in the county. This type of enterprise represents the opportunities that exist for agritourism in the agricultural economy. Only 37.5 percent of the producers surveyed leased out their land to hunt clubs or for fishing. This illustrates additional opportunity for diversification (BRAC RTF Survey of Producers, 2009).

Agribusinesses that participated in surveys and interviews represented businesses that ranged from veterinarians, feed dealers, supply and repair shops, processors, financial institutions, and forestry. The majority of the businesses have full-time employees, with one company employing 5,000. Forty percent of the businesses have been in operation for more than 20 years, but 30 percent have started in the past five years (Figure 9). This gives a good indication that agribusinesses see a future in Bladen County.

These businesses closely observe agriculture in the county so that they can adapt to serving customers and maintaining their operations. Seventy-one percent reported that they increased their business operations in the last five years, and 61.5 percent anticipate increasing their

business in the next five years. That increase in business means changing what they offer to customers. Fifty percent reported that in the last five years they added new product lines for non-farm customers. In the next five years, 37.5 percent will add more product lines for farmers, and 37.5 percent will add more product lines for non-farm customers. These businesses also saw their profit and customer numbers increase in the past five years and anticipate these numbers to increase in the next five years (BRAC RTF Survey of Agribusinesses, 2009).

In order to provide the right products for farmers, the businesses have seen new trends in agriculture in Bladen County. More sophisticated farm operations and a change to new types of farming operations are the top trends noted by agribusinesses in the county. The agribusiness community also sees a move to more diversification among farmers in the county (Figure 10).

Agricultural businesses understand the importance of agriculture to the county and to their businesses. There is a pressing need to help these businesses serve the producers currently in the area. There is also a need to work with these businesses to determine potential growth markets that they can meet with their products and services.

When asked about the importance of local government support of farmland preservation and support of agriculture, the majority responding felt this was very important to the continued growth of agriculture in Bladen County. Protection of farm/land values and retention and expansion of cost-share programs were indicated as being of greatest importance.

When asked about farm management and tax issues, agribusiness owner respondents indicated the following to be areas of concern:

- Financing availability (80 percent)
- Estate planning and farm transition (78 percent)
- Immigration and skilled labor (60 percent)
- Capital gains and estate tax reform (73 percent).

When asked what additional educational opportunities exist in the county, a majority (more than 56 percent) indicated the following areas to be of interest for support and awareness through education:

- Direct marketing of products,
- Development of new products and markets ,
- Commodity market education,
- “Buy Local” consumer education ,
- Youth agricultural education ,
- Farm neighbor education and
- Product liability education.

Agribusinesses noted the importance of continued education for farmers and businesses in identifying niche markets. Incentives for new agribusinesses interested in pursuing growth in Bladen County were important to agribusinesses as well. Of the respondents, 100 percent

supported local government funding of farmland preservation and clearly recognized the importance of support of family farms as critical to the economic stability of the county.

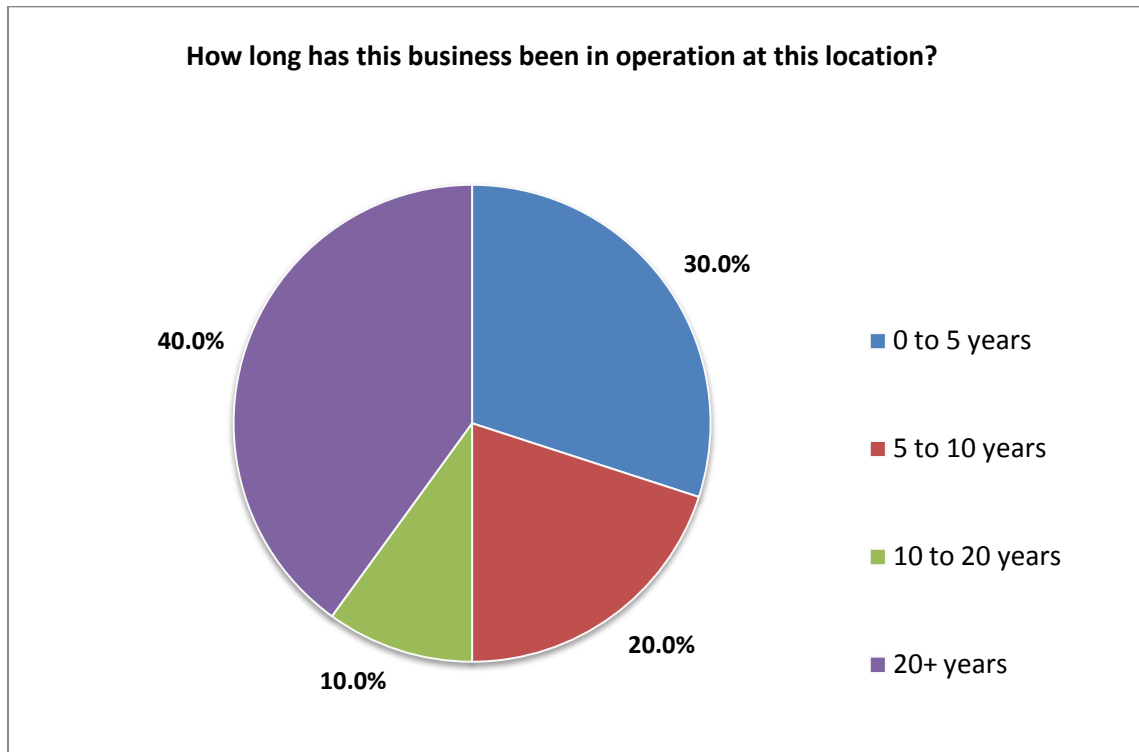


Figure 9. BRAC RTF Survey of Agribusinesses 2009

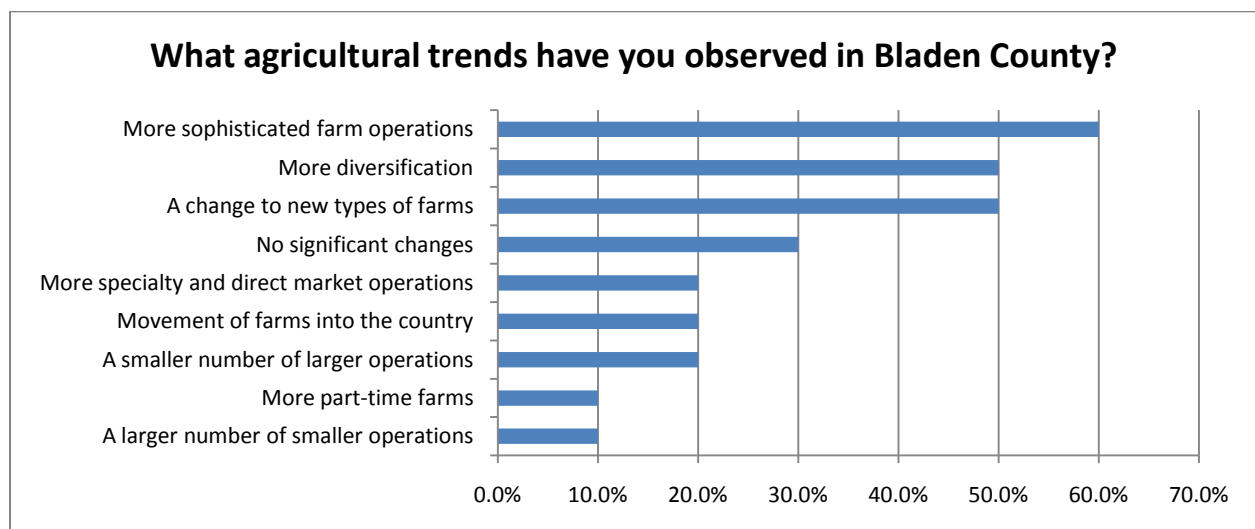


Figure 10. BRAC RTF Survey of Agribusinesses

Bladen County Non-Farm Residents

Since agriculture is such a large part of the fabric of life in Bladen County, the general public recognizes the important role it plays in the county. In the surveys and interviews conducted, various communities were represented – Dublin, Bladenboro, White Oak, Tar Heel, Bethel, Clarkton, Bay Tree, Bluefield, Elizabethtown, White Lake, East Arcadia, Brown Marsh, Colly Tower, and Cumberland.

The citizens of Bladen County who completed the survey were well aware of the importance of agriculture in the county. Over 81 percent lived next to a farm or timber operation, and over 97 percent stated that the farmer or landowner was a good neighbor. When asked, 83 percent indicated that they had visited a farm in the past year. Those surveyed supported agriculture through purchasing locally-grown products. Eighty percent bought from roadside stands, and almost 70 percent went to stores that featured local produce (Figure 11). These citizens felt that agriculture benefited Bladen County. Over 93 percent stated that agriculture enhanced the scenic beauty of the county, and over 87 percent felt that local farmers delivered high-quality products.

In survey comments, several of the general public expressed concern over the need to preserve family farms. Diversity was seen as a need to help farmers stay competitive and viable. Those surveyed also noted that estate planning was necessary for farms to stay in production. Comments were also made about the need to get more local produce out in the county through a farmers' market and promotion of the NCDA "Goodness Grows in N.C." program to encourage branding.

Elizabethtown has purchased a vacated grocery store for use as a farmers market. Vendors from all over the county will have access to the facility beginning in the spring of 2010. The outer area will be used for vendors. A bakery and meat market will be permanently housed inside the facility. Bladenboro additionally has a farmers market that operates on Fridays and Saturdays by the well-known railroad tracks. It is open year round when possible. The "Boost the Boro" initiative, which was instrumental in supporting this effort, is an example of the county's commitment to agricultural growth and opportunity.

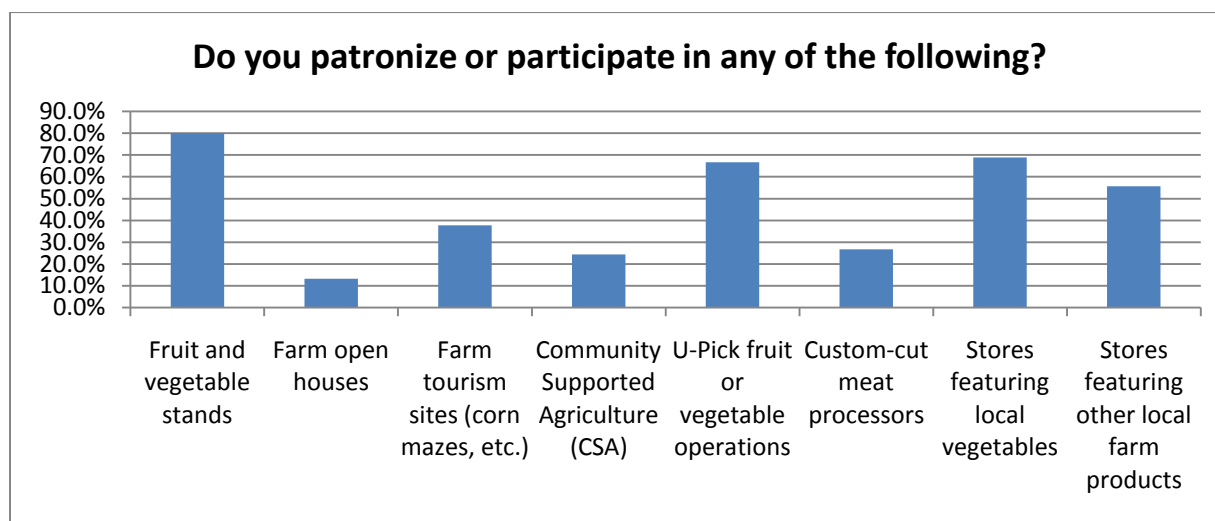


Figure 11. BRAC RTF Survey of Non-Producers

Challenges and Opportunities Facing Agriculture

Bladen County citizens face challenges and opportunities that affect the general community as well as the agricultural community. According to the N.C. Department of Commerce, the county is a Tier 1 County, which is the most economically disadvantaged. While Bladen County is designated a distressed county, it is full of opportunities in agriculture and agribusiness that can and will support the future growth and prosperity of the county.

In December 2009, the Employment Security Commission listed Bladen County with a 12.7 percent unemployment rate. In 2006, employment through agriculture and agribusiness accounted for 8,195 or 41.9 percent of the county's total employment (IMPLAN, Mig.Inc.). However, a decrease in farms using migrant workers was noted in 2007. There were 38 farms reporting use of migrant workers in 2002 and only 24 farms in 2007 (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007). Of the top industries in the county, many are agribusinesses such as Smithfield Foods, Carolina Cold Storage, Can Am Yarns, Peanut Processors, Taylor Manufacturing, Clarkton Cotton Company, and Interior Wood Specialties.

Much of the tourist industry in Bladen County centers around White Lake, which attracts more than 200,000 people during the summer months. Development has blossomed around the lake. There are currently more than 870 homes ringing the lake. There are nearly 70 businesses around it as well.

With development, comes the need for infrastructure to provide services to the populations. That infrastructure, specifically public water and sewer systems, is likely to change the pattern of farmland in the region. While farms are not reliant on public water and sewer systems, as systems extend beyond municipal areas, farmland becomes more suitable for development. Areas identified as having planned public water are shown in orange hatching in Figure 12. About half of the county is served by public water.

The average age of a farmer/ landowner in Bladen County is 57 whereas the county average age is 40 (N.C. Dept. of Commerce, EDIS, April 2009). This presents a challenge to agriculture as the producers and landowners age. In Bladen County surveys and interviews, producers/landowners noted that it is cost prohibitive for young farmers to go into the business. Land costs, equipment costs, and other costs associated with agriculture contribute to the difficulty young farmers face with regard to lack of capital to begin to farm or plant timber. Younger people need encouragement, assistance, and training to go into agriculture as well.

In the BRAC RTF surveys of farmers, 40 percent anticipated that they would continue to farm for another five to 10 years. When asked what will happen to the land once the farmer retires, 60 percent said they plan to transfer the land to family to continue farming, and 40 percent plan to sell to other farmers (Figure 13). There is an obvious and expressed need for transition planning to ensure that the working family farms can be kept in production. Additional training in estate and financial planning is necessary to better equip younger farmers in planning for the future.

Bladen County reports limited development pressure, but farmers face numerous other pressures that challenge their economic viability.

Estate planning and farm transfer were identified by all target audiences as the top farm management topics that need to be addressed for the future of agriculture in Bladen County. In interviews, estate taxes were cited as having an impact on land's remaining in production. The general public was also cognizant of the importance of issues related to estate planning and its impact on keeping farms in the area. The need to identify and develop niche businesses and new markets was noted by all target audiences as well. Agritourism in the county was also seen as a strong marketing opportunity, and there is strong consumer awareness of agriculture in the county (BRAC RTF Survey of Producers, 2009).

Agencies that assist farmers and preserve open space (NCDNR, Extension, Soil and Water Conservation, Farm Service Agency and other similar agencies and organizations) need to do more outreach to landowners about available services and programs. All target audiences expressed a lack of knowledge about the services that these agencies provide to smaller farmers, smaller woodlot owners, and younger landowners. Outreach will ensure that landowners can make educated decisions about efficient and profitable use of all the tools and programs available.

The farmers surveyed identified three primary issues to assist farmers in keeping their lands in agriculture. A majority of landowners and operators surveyed said that profitability was the key to land's remaining in agriculture. Property taxes, the ability to sell or lease development rights and equity release of land were prominent issues for farm viability (Figure 14).

Currently, rent for agricultural land in Bladen County varies between \$59.40 per acre for highly productive land to \$43.30 per acre for medium productive land to \$29.70 per acre for low productive land. This is an increase in rent costs from 2006 when highly productive land was \$49.50, medium productive land was \$37.60, and low productive land was \$29.70 (NCDA Cash Rents, 2008). Rising rental costs present a challenge to producers in areas where agricultural land use is competing with residential development prices. Residential development is limited to areas in the county adjacent to municipalities in neighboring counties such as Gray's Creek. Soil types additionally pose limitations to development as marginal lands for agriculture are considered marginal for development as well. While growth in the county is limited at this time, these competing factors will present challenges to producers in the future and should be recognized to ensure agriculture is considered in future planning.

A growing trend expressed by landowners and by those renting lands for agricultural use is land stewardship. Reports of land being rented for a number of years and abandoned after the soil is depleted have risen. Landowners who are renting land find as they attempt to rent to other potential users that it is more difficult, and land rental prices are reduced. The continuation of this trend will adversely impact the desire of landowners to continue to rent and will encourage non-agricultural uses in the future.

Agricultural land prices have gone up as much as 50 percent since 2002, depending on location in Bladen County. However, counter to the N.C. Department of Agriculture's Census of Agriculture reports of a reduction in farm growth in 2007, 62.5 percent of the producers/landowners surveyed said they had purchased more acreage in the past five years,

(Figure 15) and 28 percent were planning to purchase more acreage in the next five years (Figure 16).

The producers surveyed also noted that in the next five years, they anticipate increasing their profits as well as their sales dollar and sales quantity volumes. Interviews with local lending institutions and the county economic developer also revealed a trend toward an increase in larger higher-efficiency farms using more technology and mechanization. Smaller family farms are still prevalent but indicate rising input costs to be a major impediment to continued profitability. Larger farms can sustain these rising costs longer due to economy of scale for input costs and other expenses.

Farmers are also anticipating change in the next five years. Over 70 percent expect to purchase additional equipment, and 42.9 percent expect to construct new buildings. The diversification trend noted by agribusiness is echoed in the surveys. Over 40 percent expect to diversify into additional farm ventures in the next five years. Adding additional acreage and new technology are also in the future for Bladen farmers (Figure 16). This information will provide county agencies the opportunity to offer educational support to farmers who wish to diversify their operations. It will also challenge economic development to offer incentives that foster continued growth in agriculture.

When considering these changes, landowners also desire assistance in marketing and consumer awareness. Identifying and developing new markets, niche markets, and agritourism were the top three marketing issues identified by those surveyed. They also identified nutrient management, environmental management, and woodlot management as the top technical assistance and practical training needs (BRAC RTF Survey of Producers, 2008). Market development and agritourism are areas of growth statewide. Through education and programmatic support from agencies able to provide these services, Bladen County will uniquely position itself in the region to become a leader in new agricultural product production, marketing, and profitability much like it has in the blueberry and peanut industries. Agritourism is an area of interest to producers who recognize the impact this can have on consumer education, which is noted to be of great importance to the agricultural community in Bladen County.

Water continues to be an issue for the region and the county. Groundwater withdrawals have been of concern, and the Lumber River Council of Governments (LRCOG) has worked with various agencies to estimate usage and capacity since 1992. Bladen County currently has water services available through the county Public Works Department for the western part of the county and will have some expansion of water service in the eastern part. The remainder of the county water usage comes from private wells. This includes homeowners as well as industry. These wells pull from the Upper Cape Fear and Black Creek Aquifers, which have had water level declines since the early 1990s (N.C. Division of Water Resources, 2003). The past droughts of 2002 and 2007 have raised awareness of water capacity and have caused strain on the aquifers that serve the county. Initial studies show that water is available and potable; however, a shift in views on water use and rights is on the horizon. The past droughts and growth in the coastal plain of North Carolina has put significant pressure on water in Bladen County. Although agriculture accounts for only 1 percent of the water usage statewide (NCDA Water Survey, 2008), it is critical that agriculture be at the table when water rights or use are discussed.

With the impact of agriculture on Bladen County's economy, county leaders should recognize the importance of this natural resource to the future economic viability of the county.

Agriculture has a strong presence in Bladen County, and the majority of the general population indicated that they understand the importance it plays in the county's economy. Sixty percent of non-farm residents in Bladen County responded that they supported local government funding for farmland preservation, and 85 percent felt that Bladen County should take steps to preserve farmland.

Over 87 percent of the non-farming public surveyed by the BRAC RTF for the WLPP disagreed with the statement that Bladen County "isn't a farm area anymore and that to encourage agriculture was pointless" (BRAC RTF Survey of Non-Producers, 2009). These responses from the non-farming community are critical to the success of local programs to support farmland preservation.

When asked to comment on the issues that would help Bladen County farmers remain viable and encourage retention of family farms, non-farm residents provided the following responses:

- Exempt estate taxes for farms to allow for the next generation to hold on to farms.
- Encourage more "micro-farming," micro-loans for small farms.
- More P.R. on the "new age of farming" showing hi-tech possibilities and bio-agri options for potential farmers.
- Residential/business lots (acreage) should pay the higher tax rate. That's where the services from government are required, i.e. law enforcement, fire protection, social services.
- Promote "Raised in N.C." type stands. Co-ops might be good-community based programs. Preserve farm land now
- Marketing, farmer's market, education about organics, pesticides, etc.; and encourage purchases of local produce.
- More needs to be done with youth to promote their interest.

The responses and comments of the non-farm citizenry of Bladen County indicate that this audience is well versed in the impact that agriculture makes on Bladen County and supports opportunities to encourage and financially support farmer's efforts and intentions to remain viable. This support also should encourage local government officials to consider policies and programs to support farmers and to encourage their growth and stability in the county.

Bladen County's geographical location offers excellent transport options, which industries are using efficiently. The county is within a half hour of Interstate 95, an hour of the Port of Wilmington, and within 45 minutes of Fayetteville and Fort Bragg. Highway 87 is currently undergoing expansion to a four-lane highway to expedite traffic to Fayetteville, Wilmington, and the Port of Wilmington. Highway 74 is four lanes and is also undergoing an upgrade to interstate status to connect Interstates 73, 95, and 40 (North Carolina Southeast Partnership). Additionally, a major rail line operated by CSX transects Bladen County. This allows for possible access to rail for commodity distribution. While possibly not utilized fully, this is an opportunity for transportation for the future that may not avail other counties in the region.

Close proximity to a major port and to the Interstate highway system is crucial to the shipping of products to the region and the country. This places Bladen County in a unique situation to not only focus on opportunities for the development of local markets, but to look toward developing other medium to large market potentials for farm products.

As the population grows and new trends emerge, demands for farms and forest products have and will continue to shift. As noted there is an increased interest in locally produced goods and products, and citizens are realizing the importance of green space and the need to plan growth so that farms and forests are preserved. Ninety-four percent of the non-farm residents surveyed agreed that farming enhances the scenic beauty of Bladen County. Eighty-five percent of this same population agreed that steps should be taken to preserve farmland, and 61 percent felt that agriculture is holding its own and may have significant growth potential in the future in Bladen County.

Bladen is also one of seven counties in the BRAC region that has a Voluntary Agriculture District, which indicates the county's support for agriculture and recognition of agriculture as its economic engine. By encouraging more farmers to participate in the VAD program and expanding into the Enhanced Voluntary Agriculture District, the county can continue the recognition and support of the local producers and landowners.

Agritourism is gaining a foothold in Bladen County as the recognition of consumer education is more apparent to farmers now than in past years. Agritourism is built around farm-related activities that help expand farm income and provide education and resources to the public about the agricultural heritage in North Carolina. Currently, Lu Mil Vineyards exemplifies the expanded definition of agribusiness and value-added products. The farm offers cabins for lease, serves as a unique site for weddings and parties, and hosts various festivals to promote the products produced on site. The company also has a food processing facility that local producers can use to expand their product offerings.

Farmers are also anticipating change as they continue to farm. They recognize, as do agribusiness and non-farm residents, the importance of farming to Bladen County. Agritourism, direct market training, new market development, youth education, consumer and neighbor education, policy and taxation education and its impact on farm viability, environmental and water regulation interpretation, farm transition and estate planning, woodlot management, and diversification opportunities and business planning training are just a few of the opportunities that exist to strengthen the farming community of the county. It is clear that the farming community is supported by its citizens, and continued support is necessary to aid local leaders in planning for the future growth and agricultural stability in Bladen County.

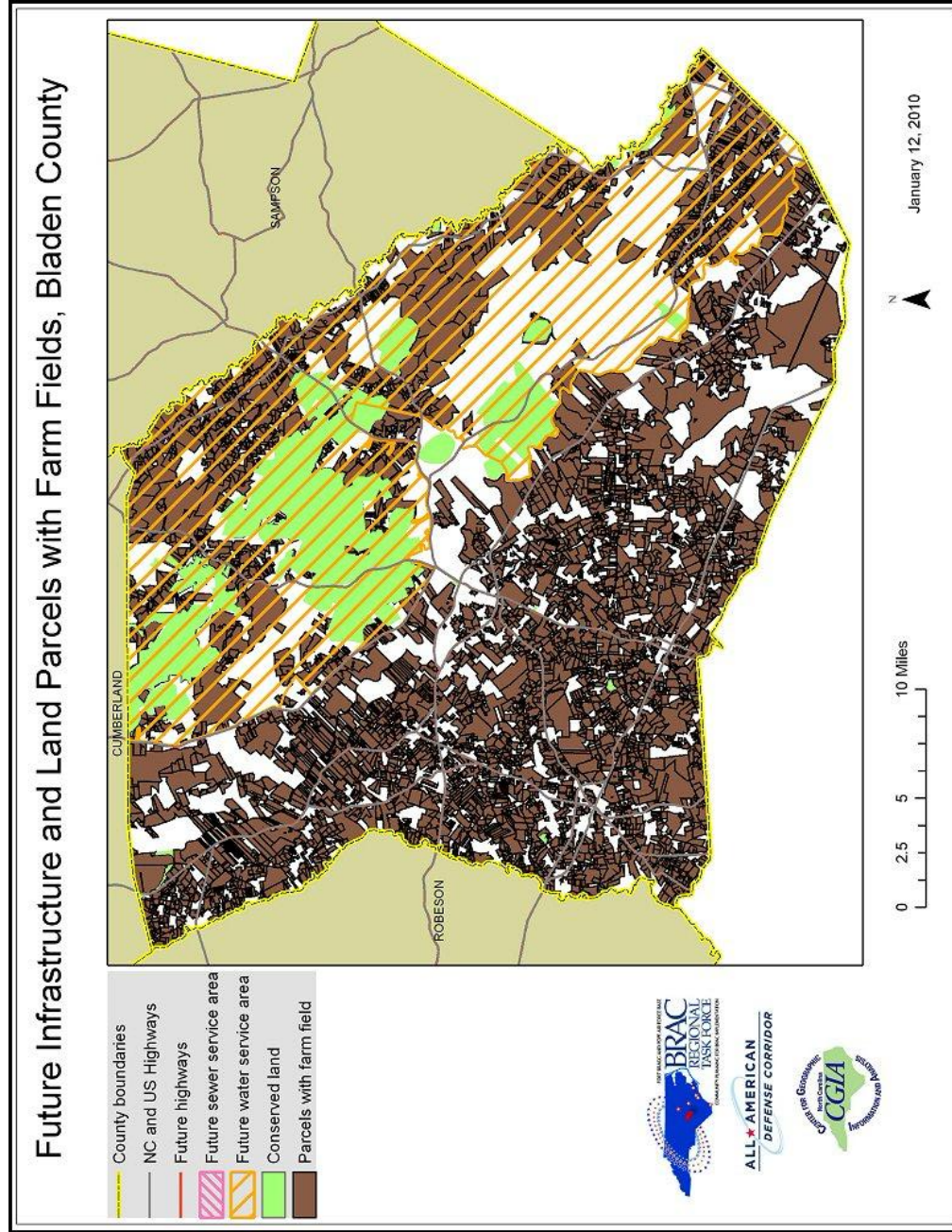


Figure 12. Infrastructure in Bladen County. Sources: N.C. Rural Economic Development Center, CGIA, and N.C. Department of Transportation

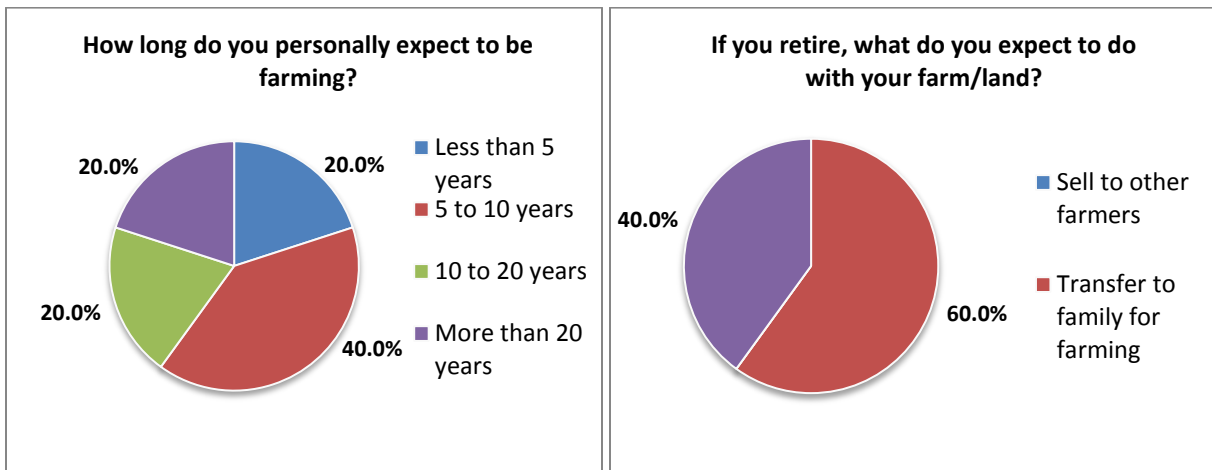


Figure 13. BRAC RTF Producer Survey 2009

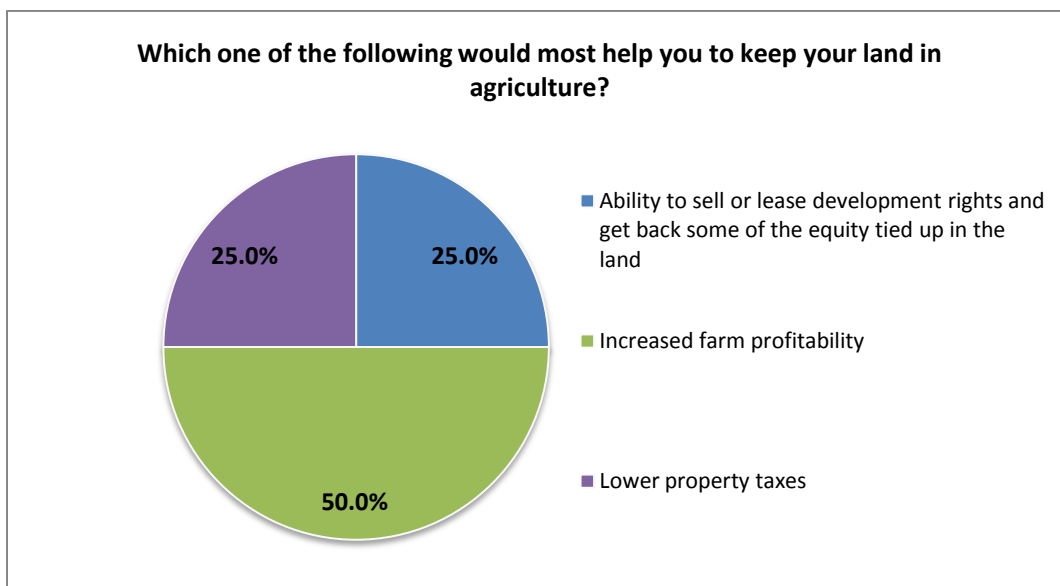


Figure 14. BRAC RTF Producer Survey 2009

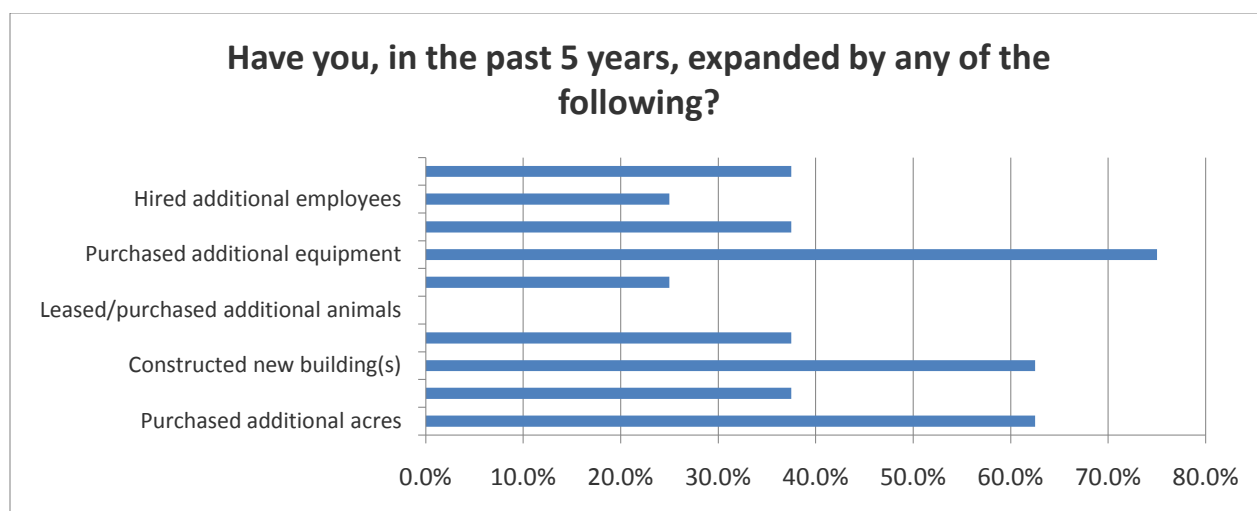


Figure 15. BRAC RTF Producer Survey 2008

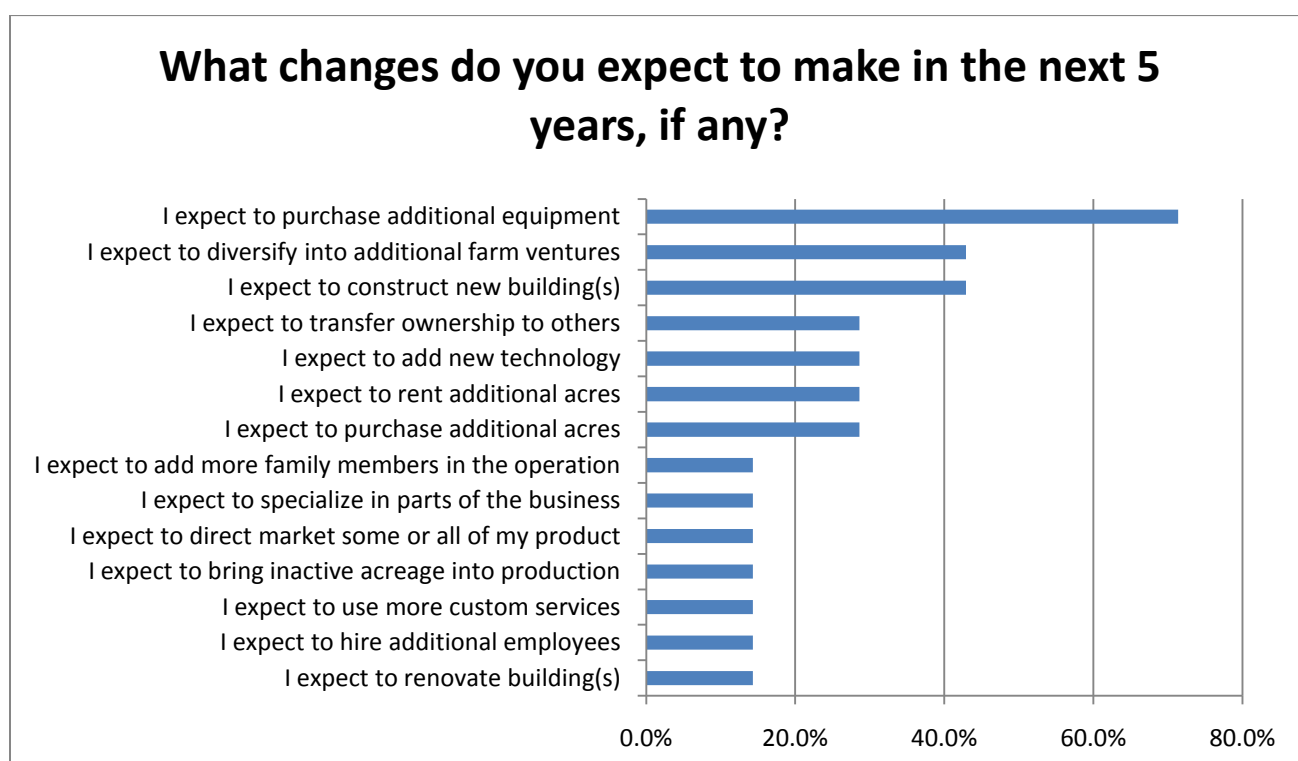


Figure 16. BRAC RTF Producer Survey, 2008

Existing Efforts and Agricultural Protection Tools

Farmland Protection Programs (compiled by John Bonham, 2009)

Present-Use Value Tax Program (PUV)

This is a program established by N.C.G.S. §§ 105-277.2 to .7 and administered by the county assessor through which qualifying property can be assessed, for property tax purposes, based on its use as agricultural, horticultural, or forest land. The present-use value is the value of the land based solely on its ability to produce income. Qualifying property is assessed at its present-use value rather than its market value. The tax office also maintains a market value for the land, and the difference between the market value and the present-use value is maintained in the tax records as deferred taxes. When land becomes disqualified from the program, the deferred taxes for the current and three previous years, with interest, will usually become payable and due.

Basic Requirements

- Minimum acreage of production land:
 - 10 acres for agricultural use
 - 5 acres for horticulture use
 - 20 acres for forest use
- Production must follow a sound management plan.
- Agricultural and horticultural land must have at least one qualifying tract that has produced an average gross income of at least \$1,000 for the three years preceding the application year.
- Forest land must be following a forest management plan.

Benefits

Protection from increasing land values that are based on development potential, and the potential increase in property taxes.

More information can be found at:

<http://www.dor.state.nc.us/publications/property.html>

Wildlife Land Conservation Program (WLCP)

This new program was established by the General Assembly (N. C. G.S. 105-277.15) in 2008 to encourage landowners to conserve land for wildlife. It is administered by the county tax assessor's office through which qualifying property can be assessed for property tax purposes based on its use as wildlife habitat for protected species. The new assessed rate will be equal to

the agricultural Present-Use Value. Although legislation was initiated in 2008, landowners could not begin receiving benefits until January 1, 2010 as the legislation requires that lands enrolled in the program are proven to be a suitable habitat or able to provide support for the protected species for three years. A landowner must provide evidence of the species or habitats (depending on how they qualify) being in place for the three years prior to the year in which they would qualify. The present-use value is the value of the land based solely on its ability to produce income. Qualifying property is assessed at its present-use value rather than its market value. The tax office also maintains a market value for the land, and the difference between the market value and the present-use value is maintained in the tax records as deferred taxes. When land becomes disqualified from the program, the deferred taxes for the current and three previous years, with interest, will usually become payable and due. Landowners can enroll land currently receiving a reduced tax rate for agricultural, horticultural, or forestry land as wildlife conservation land provided the landowner meets all other requirements related to wildlife conservation land. In any county of the state, no more than 100 acres of a landowner's land can be enrolled in the WLCP (Wildlife Resources Commission, 2010).

Basic Considerations

- Consist of at least 20 contiguous qualifying acres managed under a written wildlife habitat conservation agreement.
- Land must be owned by an individual, a family business entity, or a family trust and must have been owned by the same owner for the previous five years.
- Must meet one of two qualifying requirements:
 - One or more protected wildlife species live on the land and the landowner manages the land to protect the species.
 - The landowner conserves one or more priority wildlife habitats, such as longleaf pine forest, bat cave, small wetland community, riparian zone, etc.

Benefits

- Protection from increasing land values that are based on development potential
- Protection from the potential increase in property taxes
- Increased protection of protected species and their habitats

More information can be found at:

<http://ncwildlifefederation.org/Docs/Taxation%20of%20Wildlife%20Conservation%20Land%20Program.pdf>

Voluntary Agricultural Districts (VAD)

Established by N.C.G.S. §§ 106-737 to 743 and administered at the county level, Voluntary Agricultural Districts are designated areas where commercial agriculture will be encouraged and protected. The purposes of the districts are to increase identity and pride in the agricultural community and to increase protection from nuisance suits and other negative impacts on properly managed farms.

Requirements

- Land must be enrolled in the Present-Use Value program or otherwise be determined to meet the qualifications of the program.
- The landowner must enter into a revocable agreement to limit development for a 10-year period.

Benefits

- Notification to buyers of nearby property that they're moving into an agricultural area
- Abeyance of water and sewer assessments
- Public hearings on the condemnation of farmland
- Stronger protection from nuisance suits
- Representation by an appointed board regarding concerns on threats to the agricultural sector

Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural Districts

Established by N.C.G.S §§ 106-743.1 to .5, an Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District is a VAD formed of one or more farms that are subject to an IRREVOCABLE 10-year agreement to limit development. In return for the condition of irrevocability, the landowner receives the added benefits of being able to receive 25 percent of gross revenue from the sale of non-farm products and still qualify as a bona fide farm, and being eligible to receive up to 90 percent cost-share assistance from the Agricultural Cost-Share Program.

Conservation Easements

A conservation easement is a written agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization or public agency under which the landowner agrees to keep the land available for agriculture and to restrict subdivision, non-farm development and other uses that are incompatible with commercial agriculture.

Basic Requirements

- Permanently foregoing the right to subdivide or develop the land being conserved. There will be other limitations on activities to preserve the land's productivity, environmental values, and rural character.
- Cash payments in the range of \$20,000 to \$40,000 are needed to cover the costs of the transaction. These costs are for legal services, a survey, an appraisal, long-term stewardship services provided by the conservation partner and other miscellaneous activities. In some cases grant funds will cover these costs.

Other Information

- A portion of the property can be left out of the easement, thereby providing an area for future homes and other non-farm activities.

- Agricultural activities, including forestry, are allowed under the agreement.
- Despite the term “easement,” access to the public is not provided by the agreement.
- The value of a conservation easement is determined by a licensed land appraiser and is typically between 25 percent and 75 percent of the land’s market value.
- A periodic inspection of the property is required to ensure that development does not occur. This provision will be included in the agreement.
- The agreement is recorded on the county’s land records and runs with the title. All future landowners must comply with the terms and conditions of the agreement.

Financial Benefits

If the conservation easement is donated then the landowner will likely qualify for a federal income tax deduction and a state income tax credit. The value of these benefits depends on the appraised value of the easement and the income tax situation of the landowner.

A conservation easement can also be sold by the landowner through a transaction commonly referred to as a Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) or Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE). Funds to purchase a conservation easement can be raised from private and government sources. North Carolina and the federal government have programs to purchase agricultural conservation easements. Funding through these programs is very competitive and will generally amount to a percentage of the easement’s value. The tax benefits described above can be claimed for any of the easement’s value above the purchase price.

Term Conservation Easements

Also called Agricultural Agreements, these agreements are similar to conservation easements but apply for a finite period of time agreed to by the landowner and conservation partner.

Transfer of Development Rights

A program set up by local units of government that utilize conservation easements to preserve farmland by providing incentives to increase development density in designated area. The program identifies the “sending area” where conservation is being encouraged and the “receiving area” where development is preferred. A landowner in the receiving area can purchase a conservation easement on a property in the sending area and receive additional density allowances. In North Carolina, counties must receive authorization from the General Assembly to develop and implement a TDR program.

Farm Transition Planning

Making careful plans for the transfer of ownership of farm property and assets from the current owner to the next can be enough to preserve a farm for decades. Many options are available when planning an estate or land transfer. Farm owners can increase the likelihood of a successful transition that maintains the viability of the farm by obtaining professional assistance

early in the process. The N.C. Farm Transition Network provides educational and technical resources to professionals and landowners.

Right-to-Farm Law

North Carolina has a state right-to-farm law (N.C.G.S. §§ 106-700 to 701(2006)) protecting farm and forestry operations from being declared a nuisance as long as they have been in operation for at least one year and are operated properly and without negligence.

N.C. Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund

N.C.G.S. § 106-744(c) established a trust fund to be administered by the Commissioner of Agriculture. The purpose of the trust fund is to provide monies to purchase agricultural conservation easements and to fund programs that promote the development and sustainability of farming, and the transition of existing farms to new farm families. Counties and nonprofit conservation organizations can apply for grants for these purposes. The General Assembly appropriated \$8 million to the trust fund for the 2008 fiscal year and \$4 million for the 2009 fiscal year.

Recommendations

The purpose of the Working Lands Protection Plan is to outline the challenges and opportunities for agriculture in Bladen County. In order for those challenges to be dealt with and the opportunities capitalized on, recommendations are made. It is imperative that these recommendations be carefully considered and followed. Collaboration between agencies must be taken advantage of to assure success of the recommendations that are selected. A concerted and sustained effort needs to be made to reach producers, landowners, heirs, agribusinesses, and the general public. This will allow citizens to see the unified and continuous effort to protect working lands and will provide a greater pool of resources for landowners to make decisions about their lands.

Recommendation 1

Support and Adopt Farm Friendly County-Based Land-Use Policies and Programs

Bladen County has always supported agriculture, and that is reflected in the diversity of agricultural products produced and agribusinesses operating in the county. Bladen County will continue to rank as one of the top agricultural counties in the state as this support continues. Information compiled to develop this document strongly indicates support for working lands from the general public, agribusinesses, and of course, the producers. This support should be considered when decisions are made that affect working lands.

Adoption of a Working Lands Protection Plan can accomplish this goal as it requires the efforts of all county departments. The adoption of the recommendation of formal implementation of the Working Lands Protection Plan by the Board of Commissioners and its integration into the county land-use plan will ensure stability of the agricultural economy.

Adoption and advocacy for the plan will ensure sensible policy and regulation adoption to protect the interests of agriculture and agribusinesses in the county.

Actions:

- Adopt the Bladen County Working Lands Protection Plan and include in the County Land-Use Plan.
- Conduct updates and reports for all officials, agencies and others involved in decisions on land-use laws and best practices in planning as related to agriculture and forestry.
- Provide education on the Present-Use Value program to encourage enrollment of farms and forests. Tie to the Voluntary Agricultural District program to expand that program.
- Support agriculture through regulation, reviewing and modifying housing densities, and county land-use plans.
- Utilize available resources to outline location of productive farmland, agricultural districts, and other agricultural resources to better integrate agriculture's interests in all planning.

- As infrastructural needs expand throughout the county, local planners should be encouraged to consider the impact of utility placement on agricultural operations and inform the Voluntary Agricultural District Advisory Board and property owners of proposed options for placement, i.e. agricultural impact statement.
- Coordinate efforts to seek state and federal funding for agricultural enterprise development and protection.
- Investigate and support alternative energy strategies that support the expansion and diversification of farming operations.
- Evaluate the impact of regulatory restrictions on farming and forest operations.

Implementation Responsibility:

Bladen County Planning Department, Bladen County Soil and Water Conservation District, N.C. Cooperative Extension Bladen County Center, Bladen County Voluntary Agricultural District Advisory Board, Bladen County Board of Commissioners, N.C. Division of Forest Resources, N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, USDA Natural Resource Conservation District, USDA Farm Service Agency, Bladen County Board of Commissioners.

Timeline:

During the summer of 2010, county agencies will begin the process of educating and providing information to target audiences upon adoption of WLPP. Agencies will create a network to continually review progress. Agencies involved will review this recommendation annually with a county network for communication in place by the end of 2010.

Recommendation 2

Expand County Land Preservation Programs

Bladen County Board of Commissioners established a Voluntary Agricultural District program, which has enrolled 3,156 acres. In the county, support exists for more working land preservation and agricultural land-use programs.

Action:

- Develop and continue programs to educate the general public about the benefits of working lands preservation and the agricultural industry.
- Develop outreach programs for landowners and producers such as forestry landowner associations and annual workshops that pull together various agencies with a common interest in working lands preservation.
- Educate landowners about PUV, Wildlife Land Conservation Program, and other incentive programs.
- Evaluate funding to support preservation programs.
- Engage officials in promoting Voluntary Agricultural Districts and explore developing an Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District program.

- Evaluate county financial support through general funds.
- Provide face-to-face assistance by appropriate agency staff to landowners to ensure VAD enrollment is understood and encouraged.
- Encourage integrators to promote enrollment in VAD for contract growers.

Implementation Responsibility:

Bladen County Voluntary Agricultural District Advisory Board, Bladen County Board of Commissioners, Bladen County Planning Department, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, N.C. Cooperative Extension Bladen County Center, Bladen County Soil and Water Conservation District, USDA Farm Service Agency, Bladen Economic Development Commission, USDA Rural Economic Development, N.C. Division of Forest Resources Bladen County, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, and other agencies as needed

Timeline:

Efforts begin immediately upon adoption of WLPP in summer 2010. Share information through existing communication channels, including meetings, media, and publication distribution throughout the remainder of 2010 and into early 2011. Initiate a VAD enrollment campaign beginning early in 2011. Committee will review progress periodically.

Recommendation 3

Promote an Appreciation of Agriculture to All Public Audiences

Although the citizens of Bladen County understand the importance of agriculture and how it relates to the overall standard of living, the attributes of agricultural production and business must remain at the forefront of the public's mind. Efforts must be made to continue to advocate for the agriculture industry and encourage all residents to remind their representatives of agriculture's importance in the county.

Actions

- Expand programs to further promote public awareness of agriculture in the county and encourage funding of such efforts as the Ag 'Em Up third-grade outreach effort, Ag appreciation day, environmental field days, Enviro days for fifth graders, peanut festival, and blueberry festival.
- Develop an agricultural awareness committee that will develop a website and community awareness brochure. Promote agribusinesses and agritourism via Bladen OnLine by including and maintaining a factual county agriculture and livestock site. Link to other agricultural information websites to include NCDA & CS's N.C. Farm Fresh and Farmers Market.
- Identify contact agencies for questions and issues.
- Hold countywide meetings in all districts to promote agriculture and develop community awareness.

Implementation Responsibility:

Bladen County Planning Department, Bladen County Voluntary Agricultural District Advisory Board, N.C. Cooperative Extension Bladen County Center, Bladen County Soil and Water Conservation District, Bladen County Economic Development Commission, Bladen County FFA programs, Chamber of Commerce for Elizabethtown/White Lake, N.C. Division of Forest Resources, Bladen Online, N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, Bladen County Farm Bureau and other organizations

Timeline

Identify and appoint agriculture awareness committee comprised of county agency staffs and Bladen OnLine representatives by summer 2010. Committee will initiate a strategic plan to determine priority of actions by early 2011 with efforts to implement actions starting in the winter of 2011.

Recommendation 4 Through Training and Educational Efforts, Develop a Strategy for Retaining and Expanding Agriculture and Agribusiness

With a strong agricultural background, Bladen County is poised to capitalize on the increasing interest in agriculture. Currently, there is no formal plan to retain and expand agriculture and agribusinesses in the county. Strategies and goals for growth and transition that focus on the agricultural industry are becoming increasingly important. A major emphasis must be placed upon education and training in the agricultural industry if it is to survive the demands placed upon it today. Agriculture, its products, its equipment, its tools, and its services have evolved, and qualified people must be available to help sustain the agricultural efforts and innovations that are ongoing.

Actions

- Develop a countywide agricultural marketing plan by identifying key marketing partners and by creating strategies to attract additional agriculture producers and businesses.
- Continue to evaluate incentives and economic development programs and encourage additional opportunities.
- Conduct training to educate landowners and producers on topics related to estate and business planning, transition planning, taxes and land-use regulations, policy changes, agency agricultural programs and other relevant topics and programs.
- Develop outreach program specifically targeted to forest landowners to educate on good forest management, policy changes, and other relevant forestry topics.
- Encourage local farmers and landowners to utilize the N.C. Department of Agriculture's "Goodness Grows" program and its "Farm Fresh" and "North Carolina General Store" programs.

- Develop outreach programs utilizing agricultural producers and agribusinesses to generate public support and understanding. Create “Tour the Farm” programs and tools of this nature to increase interaction of farmers with non-farm residents.
- Conduct training for producers to encourage and educate them on the potential for value-added agriculture, the development of niche markets for local commodities, and agritourism as a method to extend their growing season and reach a wider audience.
- Partner with colleges and secondary schools to develop youth education and workforce training programs with a focus on agriculture to encourage youth to pursue agricultural careers.
- Develop a Speakers Bureau comprised of agriculture producers and agribusinesses to educate and encourage support through public outreach to civic and religious organizations.
- Develop youth leadership organizations with a focus on agriculture.

Implementation Responsibilities:

Bladen County Voluntary Agricultural District Advisory Board, Bladen County Economic Development Commission, N.C. Department of Commerce, Bladen County Soil and Water Conservation District, Bladen County Planning Department, N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, N.C. Division of Forest Resources Bladen County, N.C. Farm Transition Network, N.C. Cooperative Extension Bladen County Center, and other organizations as needed

Timeline

Efforts to prioritize actions will start in the summer of 2010 with a planning strategy completed by the summer of 2011. Action steps will begin in the fall of 2011. Some of these actions are currently underway and will be revisited and revised to meet the needs assessment determined during strategic planning efforts.

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Appendixes

Appendix A

Acreage and Proportionate Extent of the Soils

Bladen County, North Carolina

Map symbol	Map unit name	Acres	Percent
AaA	Altavista fine sandy loam, 0 to 3 percent slopes	3,804	0.7
At	Augusta sandy loam	1,265	0.2
AuA	Autryville loamy sand, 0 to 3 percent slopes	10,109	1.8
AyB	Aycock very fine sandy loam, 1 to 4 percent slopes	2,034	0.4
BnB	Blanton sand, 2 to 7 percent slopes	2,895	0.5
BuA	Butters fine sand, 0 to 2 percent slopes	8,013	1.4
By	Byars loam	1,176	0.2
Ca	Cape Fear loam	4,397	0.8
Ce	Centenary sand	25,009	4.4
Ch	Chewacla and Chastain soils, frequently flooded	6,351	1.1
Cn	Congaree silt loam, frequently flooded	7,967	1.4
Co	Coxville loam	6,188	1.1
Cr	Croatan muck, rarely flooded	10,697	1.9
CT	Croatan muck, frequently flooded	8,047	1.4
DgA	Dogue sandy loam, 0 to 3 percent slopes	1,599	0.3
DO	Dorovan muck, frequently flooded	8,905	1.6
Dr	Dunbar fine sandy loam	2,485	0.4
DuA	Duplin sandy loam, 0 to 3 percent slopes	2,303	0.4
DyF	Dystrochrepts, steep	8,748	1.5
ExA	Exum very fine sandy loam, 0 to 3 percent slopes	10,053	1.8
Fo	Foreston loamy sand	11,410	2.0
GbA	Goldsboro sandy loam, 0 to 3 percent slopes	28,750	5.1
GdA	Goldsboro-Urban land complex, 0 to 3 percent slopes	695	0.1
Gh	Grantham very fine sandy loam	6,368	1.1
Gm	Grifton-Meggett complex, occasionally flooded	7,045	1.2
GrB	Gritney fine sandy loam, 2 to 7 percent slopes	5,777	1.0
GrD	Gritney fine sandy loam, 7 to 15 percent slopes	758	0.1
Jh	Johns fine sandy loam	2,711	0.5
JO	Johnston mucky loam	17,468	3.1
KaA	Kalmia loamy fine sand, 0 to 3 percent slopes	498	*
KeA	Kenansville sand, 0 to 3 percent slopes	7,819	1.4
KuB	Kureb sand, 1 to 8 percent slopes	1,181	0.2
LaB	Lakeland sand, 1 to 7 percent slopes	22,354	3.9
LeA	Leon sand, 0 to 3 percent slopes	36,605	6.4
Ln	Lynchburg fine sandy loam	16,355	2.9
Ly	Lynn Haven and Torhunta soils	47,871	8.4
M-W	Miscellaneous water	96	*
Na	Nahunta very fine sandy loam	7,238	1.3
NoA	Norfolk loamy fine sand, 0 to 2 percent slopes	23,290	4.1
NoB	Norfolk loamy fine sand, 2 to 6 percent slopes	8,948	1.6
NuB	Norfolk-Urban land complex, 0 to 6 percent slopes	561	*
Oc	Ocilla loamy sand	5,126	0.9
Pa	Pamlico muck, rarely flooded	34,034	6.0

Appendix B

Bladen County Voluntary Agricultural Districts Ordinance

ARTICLE I

TITLE

This program, adopted by the Board of Commissioners of Bladen County, North Carolina, shall be known as the **Bladen County Voluntary Agricultural Districts Ordinance**.

ARTICLE II

AUTHORITY

The articles and sections of this program ordinance are adopted pursuant to the authority conferred by N. C. General Statutes 106-735 through 106-743.

ARTICLE III

PURPOSE

The purpose of this program ordinance is to promote the health, safety, rural agricultural values, and general welfare of the County, and more specifically, increase identity and pride in the agricultural community and its way of life; encourage the economic and financial health of agriculture; increase protection from non-farm development; and increase the protection of farms from suits and other negative impacts on properly managed farms.

ARTICLE IV

JURISDICTION

There will be four areas from which Voluntary Ag District Board members will be selected. Each will be composed of approximately one-fourth of the county and will follow the lines/boundaries as indicated on the attached map. These areas will cover all unincorporated land within the County.

ARTICLE V

DEFINITIONS

Agricultural Board: The Bladen County Agricultural Board.

Board of Commissioners: The Board of Commissioners of Bladen County, North Carolina.

Chairman: Chairman of the Bladen County Agricultural Board.

District: A voluntary agricultural district established under the terms and conditions of this program by the Board of Commissioners.

ARTICLE VI

QUALIFICATIONS AND CERTIFICATION OF FARMLAND

Section 600. Requirements

In order for farmland to qualify for participation under the terms of this program, it shall meet the following requirements:

- (1) The farmland shall be real property;
- (2) The farm property shall be participating in the farm present-use-value taxation program established by G.S. 105-277.2 through 105-277.7, or is otherwise determined by the County to meet all the qualifications of this program set forth in G.S. 105-277.3;
- (3) The property shall be certified by USDA FSA and reviewed by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Bladen Cooperative Extension Service, and the Bladen SWCD as being a farm on which at least two-thirds of the land is composed of soils that:

have good farming qualities.

are favorable for crops, livestock, ornamentals, Christmas trees or timber common to Bladen County.

- (4) The property, if highly erodible land exists on the farm, is managed in accordance with the Natural Resources Conservation Service defined erosion control practices that are addressed to said highly erodible land; and

- (5) The property is the subject of a conservation agreement, as defined in G.S. 121-35, between the County and the owner of such land that prohibits non-farm use or development of such land for a period of at least ten years, except for the creation of not more than three lots that meet applicable County watershed and subdivision regulations, or the regulations of any municipality which apply to the farm property. The property owner may voluntarily revoke this conservation agreement by submitting a written request to the Board in accordance with

Article VIII.

Section 601. Certification

The owner of the farm seeking to qualify his property for participation in the farmland preservation program ordinance shall submit written evidence that the property conforms with the requirements of Section 600 of this program. This written information shall be submitted to the Chairman of the Agricultural Board or the designated staff person on forms provided by the Board. The certification shall be submitted at the same time the owner applies for inclusion in a district.

ARTICLE VII

APPLICATION, APPROVAL AND APPEAL PROCEDURES

FOR VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICTS

Section 700. Creation of Voluntary Agricultural Districts

In order to implement the purposes stated in Article III, this program provides for the creation of voluntary agricultural districts which shall meet the following standards:

(1) The landowner(s) requesting inclusion in the district shall execute an agreement with the County to sustain agriculture in the district in accordance with Section 600 (5) of this program. Said agreement shall be in a form which is reviewed and approved by the Agricultural Board; and

(2) For each district created under the terms of this program, one of the existing Agricultural Board members shall be assigned to represent the district.

Section 701. Application to Participate

A landowner may apply to participate in the program by making application to the chairman of the Agricultural Board or to a designated staff person. The application shall be on forms provided by the Agricultural Board.

Section 702. Approval Process

Upon review by the technical review committee of the written certification and application submitted by the property owner, the Board shall meet within 180 days to review or approve the application. The Board or representative thereof shall notify the applicants by first class mail of said approval or disapproval of participation in the district.

Notification of new Ag Districts shall be sent to the County Tax Assessor quarterly.

Section 703. Appeal

If an application is denied by the Agricultural Board, the petitioner has 30 days to appeal the decision to the Bladen County Board of Commissioners. Such appeal shall be presented in writing. The decision of the Board of Commissioners is final.

ARTICLE VIII

REVOCATION OF CONSERVATION AGREEMENTS

By written notice to the board, a landowner of qualifying farmland may revoke the preservation agreement formulated pursuant to Section 600 (5) of this program, or the board may revoke same preservation agreement based on noncompliance by the landowner. Such revocation shall result in loss of qualifying farm status, and consequently, loss of eligibility to participate in a voluntary agricultural district and the benefits thereof. Revocation by a landowner of a

preservation agreement and the resulting loss of qualifying farmland status for the purpose of participation in a voluntary agricultural district shall in no way affect the eligibility of the land to be taxed at its present use value as provided in N.C.G.S. 105-277.2 through N.C.G.S. 105-277.6. If a portion of a district is removed for any reason after being established by this program, the remaining qualified farms may remain in the program, provided they meet all other requirements except the minimum area requirements of Section 700 (1).

ARTICLE IX

AGRICULTURAL BOARD

Section 900. Creation

In accordance with N.C.G.S. 106-739, the Board of Commissioners hereby establishes an Agricultural Board to implement the provisions of this program ordinance.

Section 901. Appointments and Memberships

The Agricultural Board shall consist of five members appointed by the Bladen County Board of Commissioners.

(1) Requirements. Each Board member shall be a County resident or land owner of Bladen County.

(2) Membership

The Agricultural Board shall consist of no less than five members which will be appointed by the Bladen County Board of Commissioners. All members will be actually engaged in farming. One shall be appointed from each of the four quadrants of the County as defined in Appendix 4 and one will be an at large member. In addition there will be a non-voting advisory Technical Review Committee with one member each appointed by the Bladen Soil and Water Conservation District, the Bladen County Cooperative Extension Service, the Bladen Planning Board and the Bladen County Farm Service Agency Board.

The five members actively engaged in farming may be selected for appointment by the Board of Commissioners from the names of individuals submitted to the Board of Commissioners by the Bladen Cooperative Extension Service, the Soil and Water Conservation District, the Farm Service Agency Committee, Bladen County Planning Department, Farm Bureau and any other farm related agencies, with an effort to have the broadest geographical and commodity representation possible.

(3) Tenure. The initial five farming members of the Agricultural Board shall consist of one member appointed for a term of one year, two members appointed for a term of two years, and two members appointed for a term of three years. Thereafter, all appointments to the Agricultural Board will be for a period of three years with reappointment permitted for no more than two consecutive terms. The terms for the appointment of the initial Agricultural Board will be determined by lottery.

(4) Vacancies. Any vacancy on the Agricultural Board is to be filled by the Board of Commissioners for the remainder of the unexpired term following the same procedure as for the initial appointment.

(5) Removal for Cause. Any member of the Agricultural Board may be removed for cause by the Board of Commissioners upon written charges and after a public hearing.

(6) Funding. *Appropriations for Performance of Duties*. Funds **may** be appropriated by the Board of Commissioners to the Agricultural Board to perform its duties. **As needed**, a budget request will be presented to the County Commissioners annually.

Section 902. Procedures

The Board shall adopt rules of procedure which are consistent with the enabling legislation and other applicable statutes.

(1) Chairperson. The Board shall elect a chairperson and vice-chairperson each year at its first meeting of the fiscal year. The chairperson shall preside over all regular or special meetings of the Board. In the absence or disability of the chairperson, the vice-chairperson shall preside and shall have and exercise all the powers of the chairperson so absent or disabled. Additional officers may be elected as needed.

(2) Jurisdiction and Procedures: Supplementary Rules. The jurisdiction and procedures of the Board are set out in this article, except that the Board may adopt supplementary rules of procedure not inconsistent with this article or with other provisions of law.

(3) Board Year. The Board shall use the County fiscal year as its meeting year.

(4) Meetings. Meetings of the Board, following such notice as required by this article, shall be held at the call of the Chairperson and at such other times as the Board in its rules of procedure may specify. A called meeting shall be held at least semi-annually. A quorum shall consist of a majority of the members of the Board.

(5) Voting. The concurring vote of a majority of the members of the Board shall be necessary to reverse any order, requirement, decision, or determination of any administrative official or agency to decide in favor of an applicant or to pass upon any other matter on which it is required to act under this article.

(6) Records. The Board shall keep minutes of the proceedings showing the vote of each member upon each question, or if absent or failing to vote, indicating such fact, and shall keep records of its examinations and other official actions all of which shall be immediately filed in the office of the Board and shall be a public record.

(7) Administrative Services. The Cooperative Extension Service Office shall serve the Agricultural Board for recordkeeping, correspondence, and application procedures under this article together with such other services the Board needs to complete its duties.

Section 903. Duties

The Agricultural Board shall:

- (1) Review and approve applications for qualified farmland and voluntary agricultural districts;
- (2) Advise the Board of Commissioners on projects, programs, or issues affecting the agricultural economy or activities within the County and that will affect agricultural districts;
- (3) Perform other related tasks or duties assigned by the Board of Commissioners;
- (4) Review and make recommendations concerning proposed amendments to this ordinance;
- (5) Develop a county-wide farmland protection plan as defined in N.C.G.S. 106-744(e)(1) for presentation to the Board of Commissioners; and
- (6) Study additional methods of farmland preservation and make recommendations to the Board of Commissioners.

ARTICLE X

LAND USE INCENTIVES TO VOLUNTARY

AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT FORMATION

Section 1000. Purpose

The purpose of this section is to help meet the needs of agriculture as an industry and prevent conflicts between voluntary agricultural district participants and non-farm landowners in proximity to districts. **Nothing in this document should be viewed as a change in the status of the numerous non-farm landowners currently located throughout the county. Those landowners retain the same rights and standing held prior to the enactment of an Agricultural District.**

Section 1001. Public Notification

- (1) Upon certification of qualifying farmland and designation of real property as an agricultural district, the title to that qualifying farmland and real property, which is contained in the Bladen County Land Records System, shall be changed to include a notice reasonably calculated to alert any person researching the title of a particular tract that such tract is located within one aerial mile of a Voluntary Agricultural District.
- (2) The Agricultural Board, in cooperation with the County, shall take measures as set forth below to provide notification to property owners, residents, and other interested persons in and adjacent to any designated agricultural district with a goal of informing all current and potential residents and property owners in and adjacent to an agricultural district that farming and agricultural activities may take place in this district any time during the day or night.
 - (a) Members of the Agricultural District will place signs on their individual farms denoting their agricultural district membership in a way calculated to reasonably notify the public and adjoining landowners of the presence of the farm property.

(b) Information identifying approved districts shall be provided to the Register of Deeds Office, the Bladen Soil and Water Conservation District, the Cooperative Extension Service Office, the Farm Service Agency, the Bladen County Planning Department, and the Bladen County Tax Department.

(c) The following notice shall be displayed in a prominent position in the Office of the Register of Deeds and the public access area in the Bladen County Tax Department:

NOTICE TO REAL ESTATE PURCHASERS IN BLADEN COUNTY

BLADEN COUNTY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICTS

Bladen County has established agricultural districts to protect and preserve agricultural lands and activities. These districts have been developed and mapped to inform all purchasers of real property that certain agricultural activities, including but not limited to pesticide spraying, manure spreading, machinery and truck operations, livestock operations, sawing, and similar activities may take place in these districts any time during the day or night. Maps and/or information on the location and establishment of these districts can be obtained from the Cooperative Extension Service Office, County Planning Department, Register of Deeds, Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Farm Service Agency Office, and the County Tax Department.

(3) Limit of Liability -- In no event shall the County or any of its officers, employees, or agents be held liable in damages for any misfeasance, malfeasance, or nonfeasance occurring in good faith in connection with the duties or obligations imposed by this ordinance.

(4) No Cause of Action -- In no event shall any cause of action arise out of the failure of any person, including a person researching the title of a particular tract, to report to any person the proximity of the tract to a qualifying farm or voluntary agricultural district as defined in this ordinance.

Section 1002. Expenditure of County Funds for Non-Farm Uses

Prior to expending any monies which would convert land in a voluntary agricultural district to non-farm uses, the County or any other local unit of government shall submit to the Agricultural Board detailed information showing that said governmental unit has considered alternatives.

Section 1003. No Districts in Designated Growth Corridors

Agricultural districts will not be permitted in designated growth corridors as delineated on the official County planning map without the approval of the Board of Commissioners. **Upon request**, districts located in growth corridors designated after the effective date of this program may **be allowed to remain**. **Upon request**, districts located in growth corridors designated after the effective date of this program may **be allowed to** expand to include adjoining property purchased by a landowner presently participating in the Bladen County Voluntary Agricultural District Ordinance. **Any requests made under this Section, should be made through the planning board.** The approval of the Board of Commissioners will be on a case by case basis.

Section 1004. Waiver of Water and Sewer Assessments

(1) Purpose of Section. The purpose of this section is to help mitigate the financial impacts on farmers by some local and state capital investments unused by such farmers.

(2) Procedure. The waiver procedure shall be as follows:

(a) Landowners belonging to voluntary agricultural districts shall not be assessed for, or required to connect to, water and/or sewer systems.

(b) Water and sewer assessments shall be held in abeyance, without interest, for farms inside a voluntary agricultural district, until improvements on such property are connected to the water or sewer system for which the assessment was made.

(c) When the period of abeyance ends, the assessment is payable in accordance with the terms set out in the assessment resolution.

(d) Statutes of limitations are suspended during the time that any assessment is held in abeyance without interest.

(e) Assessment procedures followed under G.S. 153A-185 et seq. shall conform to the terms of this article with respect to qualifying farms that entered into preservation agreements while such article was in effect.

(f) Nothing in this section is intended to diminish the authority of the County to hold assessments in abeyance under G.S. 153A-201.

ARTICLE XI

SUBDIVISION ORDINANCE AND ZONING ORDINANCE REVIEW

Developers of major subdivisions or planned unit developments shall designate on preliminary development plans, the existence of the agricultural districts within one aerial mile of the proposed development.

ARTICLE XII

PUBLIC HEARINGS

A. Purpose

Pursuant to N.C.G.S. §106-740, which provides that no state or local public agency or governmental unit may formally initiate any action to condemn any interest in qualifying farmland within a District until such agency or unit has requested the Advisory Board to hold a public hearing on the proposed condemnation.

B. Procedure

1. Upon receiving a request, the Advisory Board shall publish notice describing the proposed action in the appropriate newspapers of Bladen County within five (5) business days of the request, and will in the same notice notify the public of a public hearing on the proposed condemnation, to be held within ten (10) days of receipt of the request.

2. The Advisory Board shall meet to review:

a. Whether the need for the project has been satisfactorily established by the agency or unit of government involved, including a review of any fiscal impact analysis conducted by the agency involved; and

b. Whether there are alternatives to the proposed action that have less impact and are less disruptive to the agricultural activities of the District within which the proposed action is to take place.

3. The Advisory Board shall consult with the County Agricultural Extension Agent, the Natural Resources Conservation Service District Conservationist, and any other individuals, agencies, or organizations deemed by the Advisory Board to be necessary for its review of the proposed action.

4. Within five (5) days after the hearing, the Advisory Board shall make a report containing its findings and recommendations regarding the proposed action. The report shall be made available to the public prior to its being conveyed to the decision-making body of the agency proposing the acquisition.

5. There will be a period of ten (10) days allowed for public comment on the report of the Advisory Board.

6. After the ten (10) day period for public comment has expired, the Advisory Board shall submit a final report containing all of its findings and recommendations regarding the proposed action to the decision making body of the agency proposing the acquisition.

7. The total time period, from the day that a request for a hearing has been received to the day that a final report is issued to the decision making body of the agency proposing the acquisition, shall not exceed thirty (30) days. If the agency agrees to an extension, the agency and the Advisory Board shall mutually agree upon a schedule to be set forth in writing and made available to the public.

8. Pursuant to N.C.G.S. §106-740, the Board of Commissioners shall not permit any formal initiation of condemnation by local agencies while the proposed condemnation is properly before the Advisory Board.

ARTICLE XIII

NORTH CAROLINA AGENCY NOTIFICATION

Section 1200. Consultation with N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and Other Agencies

The Board may consult with the Cooperative Extension Service Office, the Natural Resources Conservation Service Office, the Farm Service Agency Office, the N. C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and any other such agency the Board deems necessary to properly conduct its business.

Section 1201. Recording the Program Ordinance

An official copy of this program ordinance shall be recorded with the North Carolina Commissioner of Agriculture's Office after adoption. At least once a year, the County shall submit a written report to the Commissioner of Agriculture, including the status, progress and activities of the County's farmland preservation program and voluntary agricultural districting information regarding:

- (1) Number of landowners enrolled;
- (2) Number of acres applied;
- (3) Number of acres certified;
- (4) Number of acres denied; and
- (5) Date certified.

ARTICLE XIV

LEGAL PROVISIONS

Section 1300. Severability, Conflict with Other Ordinances and Statutes, and Amendments

(1) Severability. If any article, section, subsection, clause, phrase or portion of this ordinance is for any reason invalid or unconstitutional as determined by any court of competent jurisdiction, such decision shall not affect the validity of the remaining portions of this ordinance.

(2) Conflict with other ordinances and statutes. Whenever the provisions of this ordinance conflict with other ordinances of Bladen County, **the Board of Commissioners shall determine which ordinance shall govern**. Whenever the provisions of any federal or state statute require more restrictive provisions than are required by this ordinance, the provisions of such statute shall govern.

(3) Amendments. This ordinance may be amended from time to time after a public hearing, notice of which shall be sent to program participants by first class mail 30 days prior to the hearing, and in consultation with the Agricultural Board to the Board of Commissioners.

ARTICLE XV

ENACTMENT

The Bladen County Board of Commissioners hereby adopts and enacts the preceding articles and sections of this ordinance.

Adopted this the ____ day of _____, 200_

Bladen County Board of Commissioners

Attest:

, Clerk to the Board

Approved as to form:

, County Attorney

Appendix C

Agricultural Producer, Agribusiness and Non-Farm Surveys

Surveys and interviews were conducted in the county to account for the trends, issues and opportunities the community as a whole identifies for agriculture. The populations targeted were: producers/landowners, agribusinesses, and the general non-farm public.

The county team distributed the surveys through their meetings, to their advisory boards, and on their websites. The team also provided names of key people in the county to interview. All survey and interview responses were compiled to determine the response.

Copies of the three surveys are below.