

THE FARM PROSPERITY PROJECT: AN INTEGRATIVE PROJECT TO IMPROVE FARM PROFIT WITH FARMLAND PROTECTION AND HIGH VALUE CROPS

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For more information and contacts, please visit our webpage at: ncspecialtycrops.org/farmprosperity



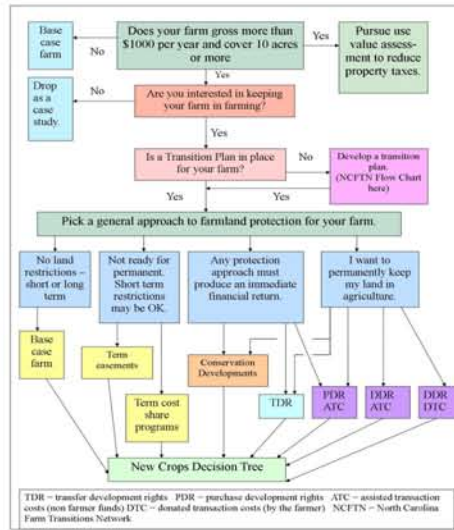
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INTRODUCTION

Western North Carolina is a beautiful rural mountain region with a history rich in culture, farming, and subsistence living. Multi-generational farms are now threatened by development pressure caused by an influx of people moving into the area to enjoy the scenic rural area. This has resulted in rising land values that are forcing many farmers off the land. Traditionally, land conservation efforts in the region focused on large tracts of land, often owned by people with sufficient financial resources to protect the land for the good of all. Most farmers in the region, however, own small tracts and cannot afford to conserve their land unless it can turn a profit sufficient to support their families and pay the increasing taxes. The overall objective of this project is to take an integrative approach to helping farmers identify the best combination of farmland protection techniques and new agricultural opportunities to keep their farms viable.

METHODS

The collaborators on this project include three land trusts, a regional economic development agency, a non-profit farmer support organization, a land grant university, and a private liberal arts college. Funding was provided to two of the land trusts to hire staff members to work solely on farm protection. They and representatives from the other organizations formed three teams focused on new crops, farm protection, and modeling. The new crops and farm protection teams identified high-value agricultural enterprises and farm protection methods most appropriate for the region and created decision-making aids and resource materials for farmers. Thirty-five local farmers volunteered to participate in interviews, surveys, and focus groups in return for free attendance at educational programs, farm publicity, and one-on-one assistance with new crops, farmland preservation, and grant writing. The modeling team identified economic, social, and environmental indicators associated with farmland protection and new crop choices and worked with 23 of the farmers to collect information on factors that affect their decision making. That information was used to select a multi-criteria decision model and tailor it for this purpose.



Example of part of the farmland protection decision tool.

Example of part of the new crops decision tool.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participating farmers have been enthusiastic and supportive of the project. They enjoy talking about their farms and sharing their concerns and ideas with others. The decisions they face concerning the future of their farms and families are often overwhelming and they welcome assistance. Unexpectedly, this has been somewhat of a sociological study. Six of the growers have shared such interesting stories of their farms and situations that we intend to publish them.

We learned that this kind of large, integrative project is challenging. If we had to do it over again, we would schedule six months at the beginning of the project just to get to know each other, become familiar with the different disciplines, and learn how to understand each other's professional "lingo".

The decision model has developed into an engaging three step heuristic do-it-yourself process in which the farmers learn a great deal about themselves. It gives them confidence in making important decisions. The set of decision making tools will need to be updated regularly as economic and local situations change.

Sustainability Indicator Set

Farm Family Well-Being Indicators

- Total Family Income - combined income from all sources
- Total Farm Income - total income from all farm-based enterprises
- Family Contribution to Total Family Income - proportion of total income from farm
- Time Not Supporting - proportion of farm income to farm labor
- Time for Family Activities - time to participate in activities as a family
- Family Health - measure of family health
- Reduction from Insecting - insecticide usage (study a history of insecticide)
- Ability for Farm Expansion - ability to continue operations by family or the labor
- Family Resilience - ability to grow through reduction of family members
- Community Activities - ability to participate in regional/community groups and activities
- Balance of Family/Other Farm Labor - proportion of family members working on the farm
- Balance of Family/Other Farm Labor - proportion of family members living on the farm

Results: Relevance of Indicators (23 respondents)



Example of one set of sustainability indicators and the results showing the relevance of those indicators to the participating farmers. Total farm income and time for family activities were very important to this group.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

The decision model and tools help farmers work through a variety of new crops and farmland protection choices to find the ones that will increase the profitability of their farms and best suit their values and long-term objectives. Also, putting staff dedicated to farmland issues into land trust offices results in more farmland being saved.

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