

# Swain County Farmland Protection Plan for 2013-2016 and Beyond



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## Executive Summary

With this plan, we are taking positive action to protect, maintain, and enhance the future of all forms of agriculture in Swain County, including crops, livestock, trout, trees, shrubs, and more.

While farming activity in the area dates back many hundreds of years, agriculture in Swain County declined significantly in the last century. By one measure, the county lost 96% of its available farmland from 1910 to 2007. Public land purchases contributed to most of the early losses, while development is responsible for most of the recent losses. Much of the remaining private land is hilly or steep, thus restricting its agricultural potential. Swain County's tobacco and dairy operations have disappeared. Swain County farmers today face rising prices for feed, fertilizer, and other inputs, as well as higher-than-average transportation costs to access farming supplies and customers. As a result of these and other factors, Swain County ranked last of all 100 North Carolina counties in the most recent ranking of total farm receipts.

While agriculture is down in Swain County, it is certainly not dead. At least 1,000 people in the county – out of a population of roughly 14,000 – own, rent, manage, or work on Swain County farmlands and forestlands. Farm operators are grossing at least \$1.5 million per year through sales of vegetables, berries, Christmas trees, trout, flowers, timber, honey, and more. The number of active farmers in the county is actually increasing.

Agriculture also positively impacts thousands of people in Swain County who don't own or manage any farmland at all. Swain County's croplands, hayfields, and pastures provide scenic views to the surrounding mountains that attract hundreds of thousands of tourists to the county each year – and millions of dollars in annual tourism-related revenue. These agricultural lands also support and diversify the local economy; provide fresh, local food, which in turn helps reduce obesity and improve individual health; maintain open floodplains that help absorb heavy rains and floodwaters; provide wildlife habitat; minimize the infrastructure burden and related support services provided by local government; and maintain the county's rich cultural heritage, both Cherokee and pioneer. For all of these reasons, nearly everyone in Swain County can benefit from a strong agricultural economy.

We have selected eight key strategies to help maintain and enhance agriculture in Swain County:

- Improve the local economics of farming
- Develop local markets for local farm products
- Cultivate local community support for farmers and farming
- Make the most of available forest lands
- Protect agricultural land from development
- Add value to basic farm products
- Encourage young and beginning farmers
- Diversify farm crops and income.

Among these strategies, we will focus our efforts on eight key action areas over the next three years. These actions – and related benchmarks and partners – are summarized on the next page.

<b>Key Action Areas</b>	<b>Milestones &amp; Measures of Activity &amp; Success by June 2016 (Key Partners)</b>
1. Utilize cooperative efforts to reduce farming expenses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a working group to learn about, promote, and study the feasibility of creating a cooperative to orchestrate group purchases of fertilizer, lime, etc. with a goal of 20+ farmers in the working group and a completed feasibility study (Farmers, Extension)</li> <li>• Purchase, rent out, &amp; maintain shared equipment (i.e., lime spreader, weed wiper, no-till drill), with each piece used by 30+ Swain Co. farmers each year (Swain &amp; Jackson SWCDs, farmers)</li> </ul>
2. Increase local purchases of local farm products.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize marketing and facility improvements to double the number of active vendors at the Bryson City and Cherokee farmers markets (Extension, farmers, Chamber, ASAP)</li> <li>• Promote and purchase Swain County farm products, with a goal of buying 10% of farm-related goods (e.g., food, hay bales, pumpkins) from Swain Co. sources (Swain County government, businesses, Chamber, media, and residents; ASAP; Extension; everyone)</li> <li>• List 20 Swain County farms and businesses (vs. 7 in 2013) in the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project’s marketing programs (ASAP, farmers, chefs/restaurants, and other Swain businesses buying local farm products)</li> <li>• Process and market local beef, with 5+ Swain farmers processing a total of 20+ cows locally per year (K&amp;B Meat Processing, ASAP, livestock producers, local restaurants)</li> </ul>
3. Establish a one-stop agricultural center.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secure property and funding, and then build and operate a consolidated agricultural resource center (Swain SWCD, Swain Co., EBCI, Extension, USDA, FSA, NCDA)</li> </ul>
4. Increase revenue from livestock production.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase Swain’s total livestock revenue by 25% from 2011 to 2016 by providing Beef Quality Assurance training and marketing support to 20 livestock producers; improving pasture health on 20 farms; and establishing a satellite pick-up location for sales at the WNC Livestock Center (Mtn. Cattle Alliance, Extension, Swain SWCD, USDA, farmers)</li> </ul>
5. Increase public understanding and interest in local agriculture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide one educational program to every K-12 student every year (Swain &amp; EBCI schools, Swain SWCD, NC Forest Service, USDA, NCDA, Extension, others TBD)</li> <li>• Provide 4+ programs or events per year for general adult audiences, incl. Friends of Farming talks, farm tours, healthy eating initiatives, etc. (Swain SWCD, EBCI, NC Forest Service, USDA, NCDA, Extension, others TBD)</li> </ul>
6. Make the most of available forest lands.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct two educational efforts per year for forest landowners with a goal of doubling Swain’s annual timber harvests (NC Forest Service, NC Forestry Assn., landowners)</li> <li>• Utilize technical assistance and grants to double the acreage of forest-based crops such as ginseng &amp; goldenseal (Extension, NCSU, EBCI, farmers, landowners, USDA, Swain SWCD)</li> </ul>
7. Protect agricultural lands from development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote Present Use Value with a goal of 1,000 more acres in PUV in 2016 than in 2013 (Swain County, Swain SWCD, landowners, farmers)</li> <li>• Promote Voluntary Agricultural Districts with a goal of 500 total VAD acres (Swain SWCD, landowners, farmers)</li> <li>• Establish Swain County’s first working land conservation easement (Swain SWCD, Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, willing landowners)</li> <li>• Develop a formal way to recognize EBCI agricultural lands, and designate 500+ acres through that program (EBCI, Extension, EBCI land managers)</li> </ul>
8. Utilize shared-use kitchen facilities for value-added production.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct a feasibility study for improving shared-use kitchen facility options in Swain County to convert basic farm products into value-added goods (Extension, EBCI, Swain EDC, potential value-added producers, NCDA)</li> <li>• Provide two local trainings per year to support local value-added production and related certifications (Extension, ASAP)</li> </ul>

For this plan to succeed, many people, groups, and agencies must work hard and work together. Fortunately, Swain County already has many committed farmers and other interested citizens, as well as a strong support network of government agencies and non-profit organizations to help implement this plan; many additional resources are also available to help implement our priority strategies. We look forward to turning this plan into reality and to having a county that supports, utilizes, and benefits from diverse and robust agricultural activities for decades to come.

## Chapter 1 – The Past and Present of Agricultural Activity in Swain County

*Notes on the data in Chapter 1: The USDA Censuses of Agriculture (currently conducted every five years) provide much of the data that appears in this and other countywide farmland protection plans. The Censuses' uniform categories and methodology over time and space are quite useful for indicating overall trends and county-to-county comparisons. However, this data is also far from complete, due to substantial underreporting of farm-level data and the total lack of accurate data on "non-farm" forestland. Where possible, we have supplemented the USDA Census of Agriculture data with additional information that provides a better or more comprehensive assessment of different aspects of agricultural activity in Swain County.*

### Agricultural Land

Swain County's available farmland has shrunk dramatically in the last century. In 1910, the county could claim 127,138 acres of farmland and 1,383 farms. As of 2007 (the year of the most recent statistics available from the US Department of Agriculture), Swain County was down to 5,587 acres of farmland and 85 farms. These are declines of 96% and 94%, respectively.

While the majority of these reductions relate to substantial land purchases by government agencies (e.g., the Tennessee Valley Authority and the National Park Service), they do not explain all of the declines in farmland, especially over the last 25 years – a time of relatively little public land acquisition, but much greater urban, suburban, and second-home development.

Since 1987, total farmland acreage and average farm sizes in Swain County have seen inconsistent but overall declines, especially from 2002 to 2007. Meanwhile, the number of farms has edged up slightly, indicating a minor but important increase in local interest in agriculture. As a result of all of these changes, Swain County now ranks 98<sup>th</sup> in the state in total farm acreage, ties for 94<sup>th</sup> in the number of farms, and ranks 91<sup>st</sup> in average farm size.

Table 1 - Total Acreage of Farms in Swain County, 1987-2007  
(USDA Census of Agriculture Statistics)

1987	1992	1997	2002	2007	% change 1987-2007
7,258	5,897	6,624	7,121	5,587	-23%

As explained in the Map 1 note on page 6 and as shown in Map 1 on page 7, total farmland acreage in the county may be closer to 47,226 acres.

Table 2 - Average Farm Size (in acres) in Swain County, 1987-2007  
(USDA Census of Agriculture Statistics)

1987	1992	1997	2002	2007	% change 1987-2007
92	74	86	86	66	-28%

For comparison, the average farm size in North Carolina in 2011 was 169 acres and the average farm size in the United States was 420 acres (2012 North Carolina Agricultural Statistics).



*Photo by Christy Bredenkamp, NCSU Extension*



*Photo by Amanda Buchanan, Swain SWCD*

*It's difficult to find accurate statistics regarding Swain County's total farm acreage and average farm sizes, especially when trying to account for land available for forestry activity.*

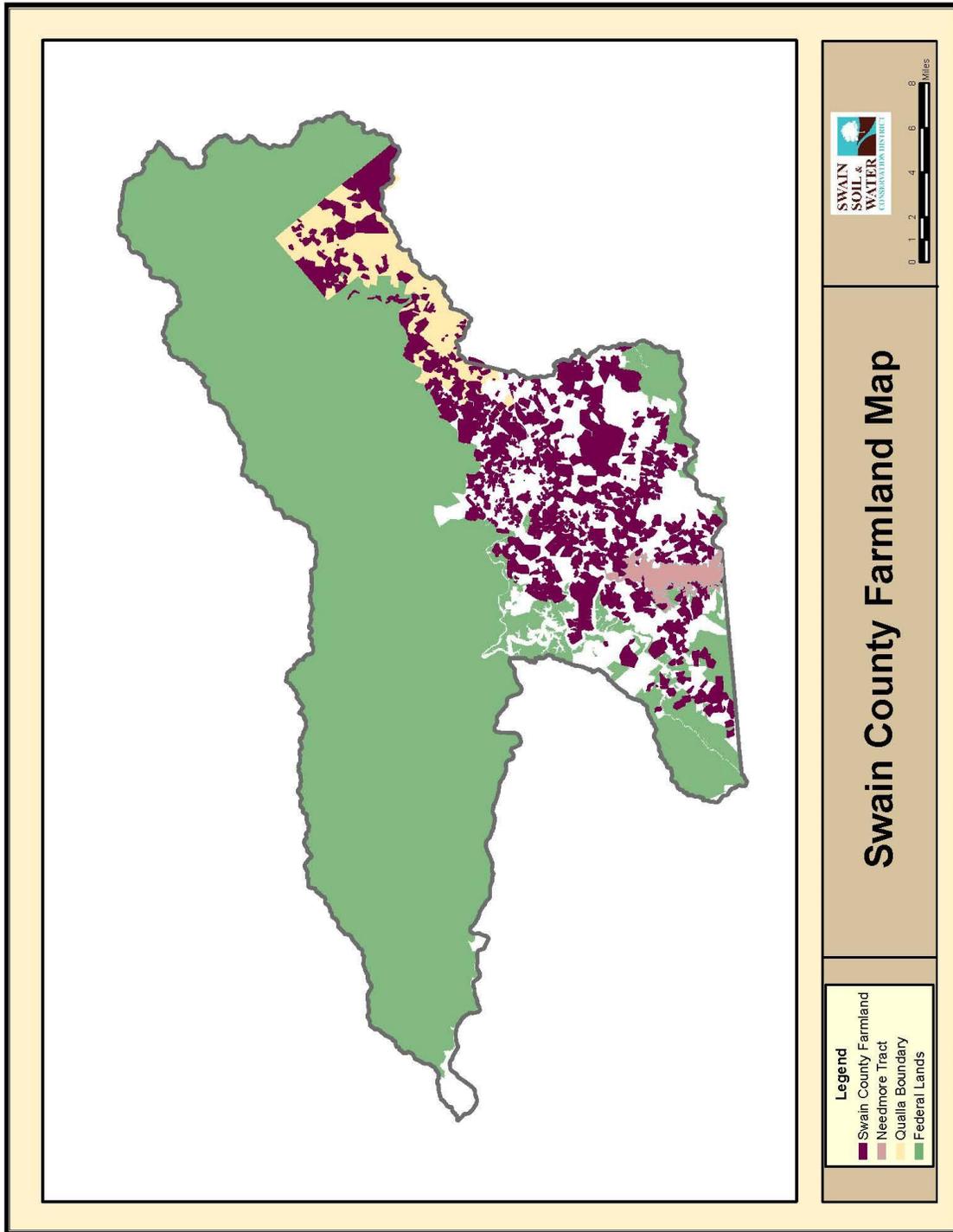
Although no clear statistics exist on the issue of farm ownership versus farmland rental, several people interviewed as part of the planning process estimated that 50 to 60 percent of Swain County farmers rent some or all of their farm land for their row crop, pasture, hayfield, and other agricultural operations. Of course, some farmers both own and rent.

Table 3 - Number of Farms in Swain County, 1987-2007  
(USDA Census of Agriculture Statistics)

1987	1992	1997	2002	2007	% change 1987-2007
79	80	77	83	85	+8%

While the 2007 USDA statistics indicate 85 farms in Swain County, the county currently has 168 parcels enrolled in the Present Use Value program (which recognizes agricultural lands meeting certain acreage and activity requirements), and Farm Service Agency statistics from 2011 show a total of 2,389 farms. It should be noted, however, that each farm owner or farm operator may own or manage more than one PUV parcel or oversee farming operations on more than one FSA "farm." Therefore, the true number of farms in Swain County lies somewhere in the middle of the USDA and FSA figures, depending in large part on how a person defines a "farm."

*Map 1 - The map on page 7 attempts to illustrate the locations and extent of Swain County's active agricultural lands. The parcels in dark purple are (a) registered as farming units with the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA); (b) enrolled in the county's Present Use Value (PUV) program, which includes 168 qualifying parcels used for forestry, agriculture, horticulture, or aquaculture; and/or (c) enrolled in the county's Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) program. Together, these tracts total 47,226 acres. However, they do not fully represent all of the land in the county that is used for agricultural purposes, since many other private lands and Qualla Boundary lands used for forestry and farming have not been enrolled in the FSA, PUV, or VAD programs for one reason or another. Also, among the county's vast public lands, portions of the Needmore, US Forest Service, and TVA lands could or do host haying or forestry activity, but we have no current means to accurately map those areas. These undetermined private, tribal, state, and federal agricultural lands likely total many thousands more acres throughout Swain County.*



Map 1 – A partial representation of active farmland in Swain County (see explanation on page 6)

## Farmers

From 1987 to 2007, the principal farm operators in Swain County have actually gotten a little younger in terms of average age. White men still dominate the demographic mix of Swain County farmers, but more women and more American Indians (i.e., members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians) have taken charge of Swain County farms. Despite these various changes, the mix of full-time and part-time farm operators has remained virtually the same over this timeframe.

- As of 2007, the primary operators of Swain County's 85 farms were 56.7 years old on average, only slightly younger than North Carolina's overall average of 57.3 years old. In 1987, Swain County farmers were 58.1 years old on average.
- In 2007, 86% of Swain County's farmers were male, 14% female; in 1987, only 4% were female.
- In 2007, 87% were white, and 13% were American Indian; in 1987, only 5% of primary farm operators in Swain County were American Indian. Few North Carolina Counties can boast such a high percentage of American Indian farmers, and this difference might present a unique marketing advantage, especially among tourists in the summer and fall.
- In 2007, 38% considered farming their primary occupation, with the other 62% considering agriculture a part-time activity; these full-time/part-time statistics are almost identical to 1987.

While the 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture indicates a total of 125 farm operators on these 85 farms, that figure does not fully represent the number of permanent, part-time, and/or seasonal farm workers in Swain County, nor the number of family members who depend in whole or in part on farm income earned by all of those farm-related workers. Farm Service Agency statistics indicate that Swain County has approximately 1,000 people closely involved in agriculture, including 704 producers on non-EBCI lands in Swain County and another 409 producers on EBCI lands in Swain and Jackson Counties (FSA is not able to provide county-specific data on EBCI lands; we are estimating that roughly half of the Swain/Jackson EBCI producers are in Swain County). Since not every producer is registered with FSA and since forest landowners and operators are not fully represented in the FSA statistics, we feel confident that the rough estimate of 1,000 agricultural producers is much closer to reality than the 125 indicated in the 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture.

## Farm Products

Swain County farmers are utilizing their agricultural lands to grow and support a wide variety of farm animals and other farm products, including everything from beef cattle to chickens to vegetables to Christmas trees, as shown in Tables 4 and 5 below.

The mix of farm activities and farm products has changed over the years. A few traditional elements of farming can no longer be found in Swain County. In particular, in 1987, at least 18 Swain County farms grew tobacco, and seven farms had milk cows; both tobacco and dairy operations have since disappeared from Swain County. Meanwhile, Swain County farms also

include a large amount of forestland, though most of the county's private forestland is owned by non-farmers (see note following Table 5).

*Additional notes on the data: The data in Tables 4 and 5 are not comprehensive (e.g., trout are not listed); we have presented data only for the categories for which USDA has provided publicly available data.*

Table 4 - Livestock in Swain County (number of each animal)  
(USDA Census of Agriculture Statistics)

	1987	2007	% Change 1987-2007	Statewide Rank in 2007
Cattle (both dairy and beef in 1987; only beef cattle remain by 2007)	1,034	583	-44%	90
Horses and ponies	29	105	+262%	91
Chickens	240	97	-60%	95
Colonies of bees*	163	39	-76%	81
Mules, burros, and donkeys	No data available	27	N/A	70
Pigs and hogs	No data available	22	N/A	Not available
Turkeys	42	0	-100%	Not available

\* - Regarding the "Colonies of Bees" data in Table 4 above, NC Cooperative Extension currently knows of at least 62 beekeepers in Swain County that have at least 200 hives – much more than the figures indicated in the USDA Census of Agriculture data for 2007.

Table 5 - Acreage in Swain County utilized for different farm products  
(USDA Census of Agriculture Statistics)

	1987	2007	% Change 1987-2007	Statewide Rank in 2007
All Harvested Cropland	877	715	-18%	Not available
- Forage crops (hay, etc.)	502	541	+8%	87
- Vegetables, sweet corn, and melons	No data	50	N/A	92
- Corn for grain	35	40	+14%	90
- Cut Christmas trees	No data	25	N/A	26
- Nursery and greenhouse crops	74	22	-70%	Not available
- Orchards	0	4	N/A	Not available
- Tobacco	39	0	-100%	No ranking
All Pastureland	2,647	1,681	-36%	Not available
Woodland, non-pastured* (excludes Christmas trees)	3,143	2,558	-19%	Not available

\* - It's important to recognize that this "woodland" data includes only the woodland acreage owned by USDA-recognized farmers according to their Census of Agriculture data. It does not include all the other woodland acreage owned by non-farmer individuals, corporations, or the US

Forest Service. According to “Forest Statistics for North Carolina, 2002,” published by the US Forest Service, Swain County has 87,900 acres of available timberland, including 21,800 acres of national forest, 5,600 acres owned by the forest industry, and 60,500 acres in non-industrial private ownership. Many of these timberland acres have potential for agriculture-related income, from harvesting of trees to gathering and sales of forest-related crops, including everything from ginseng to pine straw.



*Cropland photo by Amanda Buchanan, Swain SWCD; all others by Christy Bredenkamp, NCSU Extension*

*Swain County farmers produce a wide range of products, including beef cattle, honey, and many different fruits and vegetables.*

### Farm Product Sales

According to NC Department of Agriculture statistics, Swain County ranked last among all 100 North Carolina counties in total farm receipts in 2011, as detailed in Table 6 below.

In large part, this low ranking results from the fairly small amount of private land available in the county and a relatively small farming community. However, several other North Carolina counties fared better despite having less land in farming, fewer farmers, and/or smaller farms. These county comparisons alone suggest that Swain County is not tapping its full agricultural potential.

Table 6 – Cash Receipts from Farm Operations in Swain County  
(USDA Census of Agriculture Statistics, 1987, and North Carolina Agricultural Statistics, 2012)

	1987	2011	% Change 1987-2011	Statewide Rank in 2011
All Livestock, Dairy, and Poultry	\$1,592,000	\$464,000	-71%	98
- Cattle and calves	\$162,000	\$207,000	+28%	Not available
- Other livestock & poultry, including dairy products	\$1,430,000	\$257,000	-82%	Not available
All Crops	\$457,000	\$964,000	+111%	99
- Greenhouse and nursery	\$228,000	\$570,000	+150%	Not available
- Vegetables, fruits, nuts, and berries	\$134,000*	\$330,000	+146%	Not available
- Other field crops	\$95,000*	\$64,000	-33%	Not available
Government Payments (federal farm programs)	\$2,000	\$58,632	+28,316%	99
Total Farm Cash Receipts	\$2,050,000	\$1,486,632	-27%	100
Average Farm-Related Cash Receipts per Farm	\$25,949	\$17,490	-33%	Not available

\* - Approximate data; not all data fields were available to the public in 1987.

Within this data, we see the effects of the loss of dairy and tobacco operations from 1987 to 2011, as well as large relative increases in sales of cultivated crops. However, the figures in Table 6 are not adjusted for inflation. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, total inflation from 1987 to 2011 was 98%, which indicates that some gains above are much smaller than they first appear; other gains are actually losses; and the losses shown above are actually much worse.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to look at this data and conclude that all agriculture in Swain County is doomed. We see several positive trends in the data above, as well as other encouraging signs in more specific crop categories and more recent comparisons of 2010 and 2011 data:

- Livestock-related cash-receipts jumped from \$244,000 in 2010 to \$464,000 in 2011, a 90% increase, with a large increase in cattle and calf sales (a \$207,000 increase) accounting for most of that difference.
- Sales of vegetables, fruits, nuts, and berries increased from \$274,000 in 2010 to \$330,000 in 2011, a 20% improvement. As of 2007, Swain County ranked 60<sup>th</sup> in the state in sales of “vegetables, melons, potatoes, and sweet potatoes.”
- From 1987 to 2007, greenhouse and nursery crop sales grew 52% after adjusting for inflation, despite a 70% decline of related acreage, from 74 acres to 22 acres.
- North Carolina Division of Forestry statistics indicate \$18,000 in forest-product sales in both 2010 and 2011, a figure that may not provide a complete picture of actual timber harvest activity during those years, and a figure which would likely grow by a large percentage if available timberlands were managed more actively.

- As of 2007, Swain County ranked 20<sup>th</sup> in the state in sales of cut Christmas trees and other short-rotation woody crops, with \$43,000 in sales, thanks at least in part to Swain County's higher elevation relative to most of the rest of North Carolina.
- Thanks to cool mountain waters that make trout production possible, Swain County ranked 30<sup>th</sup> in the state in aquaculture sales in 2007, with \$61,000 in reported sales – and the current annual total of trout sales in the county is likely much higher.
- Few, if any, North Carolina counties can match Swain in terms of its Cherokee heritage and the number of active Cherokee farmers. This situation may present an undeveloped marketing advantage, especially in terms of the production and marketing of heirloom varieties of traditional Cherokee food crops, basket-making materials (e.g., river cane, white oak, hickory, black walnut, butternut, and bloodroot), fall decorations (e.g., multi-colored corn and pumpkins), and more.



*River cane, photo courtesy of RTCAR*

### Farming Expenses and the Non-Farm Impacts of Farms

Of course, those cash receipts from farming aren't anywhere close to being 100 percent profit. Before, during, and after production, harvesting, and sales, farmers must pay for feed and seed, livestock and poultry, fertilizer, lime, tractors and other equipment, parts and repairs, fuel, electricity, farm labor, property taxes, motor vehicle registration and licensing fees, supplies, and much more. Through these expenditures, Swain County farmers support a wide variety of local retail businesses, including everything from farm supply stores to hardware stores to gas stations. They also contribute to state and local tax receipts.

In 2007, Swain County farmers spent \$1,125,000 on all of these farm-related expenditures, which averages out to \$13,237 of expenses per farm. That left Swain County farmers with a grand total of \$415,000 in net income, which averages out to \$4,881 in net income per farm. Together, those farm production expenses and net cash receipts translate into roughly \$1.5 million each year that helps to diversify and support the local and regional economy.

Beyond these economic impacts, Swain County's farms and forests provide many other community benefits. Open, roadside croplands, hayfields, and pastures provide the expansive views to the county's mountain landscapes, in turn help to attract hundreds of thousands of tourists to the county every year – and millions of dollars in tourism revenue. Both farms and forests provide important wildlife habitat, while also helping to absorb heavy rains and floodwaters, thus protecting developed areas further downstream. This beneficial water-management service is especially true for agricultural lands located in the floodways and floodplains of the Tuckasegee and Little Tennessee Rivers. Fruits and vegetables grown on Swain County farms provide local residents and visitors with a great source of healthy eating options that can in turn improve fitness and reduce obesity and related health concerns. Many people and visitors also value these farms and forests for helping to reduce noise and congestion and maintaining a more peaceful way of life, as well as key aspects of Swain County's Cherokee and pioneer heritage. In all of these ways, Swain County's farmlands provide benefits to nearly everyone living in or visiting the area.

## **Chapter 2 – Challenges to Agriculture in Swain County Going Forward**

At a public meeting held on January 31, 2013, in Bryson City, an audience of about 70 farmers and agency staff listed many different challenges facing family farming and agriculture in Swain County, many of which are detailed below. Through additional one-on-one and group interviews during the planning process, other individuals added their thoughts on the topic. The top challenges are summarized below.

### The Economics of Farming

The largest group of challenges relates to the economics of farming, including the high costs of farmland, grain, fertilizer, fuel, and equipment; taxes; the time and expense of government regulations; and low returns on product. While farmers throughout the United States confront many of these same issues, Swain County farmers face an additional economic disadvantage due to longer-than-average transportation distances and related costs in order to access agriculture-related infrastructure, such as farming equipment and supply businesses, canning/kitchen facilities, lumber mills, and other aggregation and distribution facilities. These added transportation costs make it especially difficult for Swain County farmers to compete with farmers in other areas who have easier access to agricultural support systems. Vandalism and theft of certain crops, especially ginseng, provide additional challenges to turning a profit, as do non-payments for goods by various produce buyers. Overall, these issues related to the economics of farming can be difficult to overcome, but several strategies included in Chapter 3 of this plan are specifically designed to help farmers reduce costs and increase income.

### The Environment

Another group of challenges centers on environmental factors. Those challenges include the lack of available flat land (due to substantial public land ownership in the county, the generally hilly topography of the county, and prior conversion of other agricultural lands to development), the weather, erosion, flooding, predators on livestock, and invasive plants. Some of these issues, such as the weather, are certainly beyond our control, while others, such as invasive plants, can be addressed.

Meanwhile, one of these natural challenges – the lack of available flat land – can actually serve as the basis for several strategies going forward. Since most of the hilly and steep land is in forest, it makes a lot of sense to utilize these lands more fully as forest resources, including more active production of forest-based crops like ginseng, goldenseal, and ramps, as well as more active timber harvesting to support sustainable, forestry-related economic activity. At the same time, the area's tall mountains and substantial public lands attract hundreds of thousands of tourists, which creates great opportunities for agritourism and additional sales of local farm products. These ideas are all explored further in Chapter 3.

### Market Access and Marketing

The difficulty of accessing markets presents another key challenge for Swain County agricultural producers, including long distances to aggregators/distributors and other wholesale markets, as

well as the need for greater use of marketing tools like labeling. While some local farmers are able to beat the odds and sell their products to clients many miles away, most producers lose time and/or money in trying to achieve these distant sales. Those attending the public meetings in January and March embraced a campaign to improve local marketing and sales as one of their key strategies to support local farms, and that strategy is detailed in Chapter 3 of this plan.

### Divisions of the Farming Community

While we can be encouraged that many members of the local farming community are interested in developing cooperative approaches to support agriculture in Swain County (e.g., a farmers co-op, shared equipment, and a combined agricultural resource center), a fair number of farmers and agencies in Swain County are also creating or perpetuating just as many divisions of the farming community.

Examples include separate USDA staffing for tribal and non-tribal lands and residents; separate NC Cooperative Extension offices for the tribal and non-tribal areas and residents; numerous references by different people to “the farmers market” (singular), when the county actually has two farmers markets – one in Bryson City and one in Cherokee; comments from several people with smaller farming operations suggesting that “commercial” (i.e., larger-scale) farmers should be excluded from some of these efforts to support agriculture in Swain County; and resistance among larger landholders to including smaller farms in agricultural benefit programs like Present Use Value and Voluntary Agricultural Districts.

While different people and agencies may have a number of ways to justify these non-inclusive attitudes, practices, and institutions, the question must be asked if maintaining these divisions is more important than finding ways to be more inclusive and to work together in order to be more effective. It’s unlikely that these divisions can be solved quickly, but some of the strategies in this plan may help encourage a trend of more cooperative thoughts and actions. Even simple efforts, such as quarterly Friends of Farming gatherings, can encourage all farmers – and others – to gather and talk on a regular basis, and regular and open communication often helps break down both real and perceived barriers.

### Other Challenges

Additional concerns mentioned at different group and one-on-one meetings include the fact that any future increase in local population (i.e., additional local customers) will likely also result in additional losses of farmland to development – especially the flatter lands; the general lack of community enthusiasm for farmers – and occasional hostility toward farmers; and the difficulty in finding adequate farm labor. These issues are all legitimate concerns, but they did not rise to the top of the list of challenges to address, as compared to the other key issues listed above.

## **Chapter 3 – Opportunities to Maintain and Enhance Agriculture in Swain County**

Based on input provided during our public meetings, as well as other one-on-one interviews and various issue research and analysis, we have selected eight key strategies for maintaining and enhancing family-owned farms and a viable agricultural community and economy in Swain County over the next three to five years. Under each strategy, we have also listed more specific action items. Several of these opportunities complement each other, which should in turn make them more effective. Chapter 4 of the plan identifies a more specific subset of these tasks for different people, groups, and agencies to focus on over the next two to three years.

### **A – Improve the Local Economics of Farming**

As detailed in Chapter 2 regarding Challenges, Swain County farmers need to find ways to lower costs, increase yields, and secure higher sales prices. Some economic factors are beyond local control, such as the rising cost of fuel, but there are other areas where we can make a difference. Several of the most promising ideas are detailed below.

#### Form a Cooperative

At the January meeting, farmers chose a co-op as their top priority. The group in March confirmed a high level of interest in developing a co-op. Indeed, through bulk purchasing power, a cooperative can help reduce input costs for members of the cooperative.

Launching a cooperative can be a time-consuming and expensive task – especially in terms of establishing the necessary capital to launch and sustain a cooperative. However, USDA and NC Cooperative Extension both offer grants and technical assistance to help guide such efforts. Interested Swain County farmers should form a group to explore these options, present them to other farmers, and try to secure enough buy-in to move forward. For starters, those interested in creating a co-op should explore these websites:

- [www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP\\_Coop\\_StartingACoop.html](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_Coop_StartingACoop.html)
- [plantsforhumanhealth.ncsu.edu/extension/programs-resources/cooperative-development/cooperative-resources/](http://plantsforhumanhealth.ncsu.edu/extension/programs-resources/cooperative-development/cooperative-resources/)
- [www.rurdev.usda.gov/bcp\\_rcdg.html](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/bcp_rcdg.html)

Those interested in starting a co-op should also consult with Blake Brown, who specializes in these issues for NC Cooperative Extension, 704-250-5404 or [blake\\_brown@ncsu.edu](mailto:blake_brown@ncsu.edu). Local extension staff may also be able to facilitate these discussions.

Should this Swain-County-based co-op idea prove unfeasible, Swain County farmers might want to consider the Farmers Co-Op in Jonathan Valley in Haywood County as a viable alternative.

#### Share Equipment

A new piece of farm equipment may last for years or even decades, but its initial cost can create a substantial burden for a farmer, especially for anyone with a relatively small farming operation.

Leasing out shared equipment, on the other hand, can give a farmer access to the necessary equipment without the same up-front capital expense. This sort of leasing/rental system has been used very effectively in many areas, and it is one of the most practical ways that the Swain Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and other agencies can help reduce the overall costs of farming for area farmers. As an added bonus, grants can often fund the initial equipment purchases (as long as the equipment is available to an entire community and not just for a specific farmer), and grant-funded equipment of course makes this approach even more feasible. Last but not least, active use of this equipment can often reduce on-farm costs related to field preparation and maintenance, while also increasing potential profits by ensuring proper soil health and weed control, which helps increase yields. For all of these reasons, the Swain SWCD should continue to acquire and rent out costly farming equipment like no-till drills, weed wipers, tractors, and lime and fertilizer spreaders.

### Increase Revenue from Livestock Production

Livestock can provide a viable source of income for many Swain County farmers. The new WNC Regional Livestock Center in nearby Haywood County has given a recent boost to livestock producers in the region by establishing a convenient location within Western North Carolina to buy and sell cattle, sheep, and goats. Additional efforts are now underway to make that facility even more cost-effective for area farmers, and Swain County livestock producers should take advantage of these programs.



*Photo by George Ivey*



*Photo by L. T. Ward, WNC Communities*

*The WNC Regional Livestock Center in Haywood County provides a local option for buying and selling cattle, sheep, and goats, as well as education and marketing programs to help farmers earn more from their livestock sales.*

The WNC Regional Livestock Center is also working to establish satellite drop-off/pick-up locations that will allow farmers to drop off their livestock closer to where they live, and a driver will then haul the livestock to the market for the weekly sale. This system can help reduce the time and expense of taking the livestock to market, and interested Swain County livestock producers should take advantage of this offer, especially if they have only a small number of head to sell at any particular time. It's another great way to reduce the costs of livestock production and sales.

Also, the Mountain Cattle Alliance offers Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) training to help producers utilize some low-cost herd management practices, such as castration and de-horning, to help producers earn a marketplace premium for their cattle, often around 10-15% above the value of non-BQA cattle. The Mountain Cattle Alliance (MCA) also helps arrange truckload lot sales that can boost sales prices. Swain County farmers should utilize these MCA programs if they aren't already doing so, because earning more per head obviously improves the economics of livestock production.

Various pasture management practices, such as rotational grazing, can also improve the bottom line, as can proper attention to lime, fertilizer, and weed control. The shared equipment idea detailed above should make it easier to implement some of these pasture health efforts. Livestock producers should consider and implement these options whenever possible.

As mentioned in Section H – Diversify Farm Crops and Income, livestock producers may also benefit from diversifying their farm animals to include everything from fish to ducks to rabbits to pigs.

#### Utilize the Region's Agricultural Research Stations

The region's two agricultural research stations in Waynesville and Mills River (often referred to as "test farms") provide a wealth of data on livestock, new production methods, and new crops that can help farmers find more cost-effective ways to produce livestock and grow both traditional and alternative farm products – and yield more profit. Swain County farmers should take advantage of field days at these research stations and other options to learn the latest results and apply that information to their farms as appropriate. Farmers should also share their challenges with the researchers working at these stations to encourage experimentation and solutions, such as the idea of converting dead fish from local trout farms into fish meal, which is a traditional Cherokee fertilizer – thus providing both economic and cultural reasons to convert a farm waste product into a beneficial soil amendment.

#### Apply for Grants

As detailed in Chapter 5 of this plan, many grant programs are available to help farmers reduce their costs, including grants to help pay for the costs of experimenting with new crops, new production methods, and new value-added products; grants to reduce the costs of marketing initiatives; and grants to reduce the use and expense of electricity on the farm. Other grant programs help farmers address resource management issues like soil erosion. Non-profit and agency staff should make sure to publicize these grant programs with individuals and farmer groups, and Swain County farmers should review these options and pursue them as appropriate.

#### Utilize Other Strategies in this Plan

Many of the other strategies and action items listed in this plan will also help farmers reduce expenses, increase yields, and/or increase income.

For example, several of the options listed under Strategy E, “Protecting Agricultural Lands from Development,” can help address farm income and expenses. Enrolling in the Present Use Value program can substantially reduce property taxes on qualifying agricultural land, and enrolling in the Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District program qualifies a farmer for 90% cost-share for certain programs, rather than the usual 75%. Meanwhile, conservation easements can reduce property, income, and/or estate taxes, and/or provide a possible one-time payment for retiring unused development rights.

Meanwhile, other strategies in this plan suggest other possibilities, such as alternative crops and more active utilization of forest resources, to help farmers earn more from their farming operations. Anyone interested in finding ways to reduce expenses and increase income from their farming operations should be sure to continue reading this plan for additional ideas.

## **B - Develop Local Markets for Local Farm Products**

Nearly everyone participating in this planning process sees both the potential and the need to develop stronger local markets for local farm products. Developing these local markets helps ensure that local expenditures on food support the local economy, and it also greatly reduces farmers’ time and expenses compared to delivering and selling products to more distant markets.

### Launch a Buy Local Campaign

Farm-related agencies and farmers need to launch a campaign to encourage local businesses, governments, and individuals to “buy local.” This effort should first include training to help farmers learn how to promote and maintain sales in the local area. The campaign should then include a major marketing effort to encourage local consumers to buy and use local agricultural products. This marketing effort should focus on restaurants, bed and breakfasts, the Swain and EBCI school systems, the Southwestern Community College Culinary Arts Program, the Chamber of Commerce, grocery stores, summer camps, hospitals, nursing homes, produce stands, local produce distributors like Carolina Mountain Produce in Cherokee, and others who buy and sell substantial volumes of food or other agricultural products (e.g., hay bales and ornamental corn for fall decorations). This Buy Local effort should also participate in and promote the “NC 10% campaign” ([www.ncsu.edu/project/nc10percent/index.php](http://www.ncsu.edu/project/nc10percent/index.php)), which provides online tools and resources to encourage individuals and businesses to buy at least 10 percent of their food from local sources. A farm map or local farm product guide could also help both locals and tourists identify where and when they can buy local farm products. Labels can also help develop awareness and support for local farm products.

Any such “Buy Local” effort should think beyond Swain County. Stopping sales at the Swain County line would eliminate many other potential customers in the area, so it is best to consider neighboring counties as “local,” too. These customers could potentially include Harrah’s Cherokee Casino, Western Carolina University, the Jackson County school system, Harris Regional Hospital, local restaurants, and food distributors like Marvin’s Produce ([www.marvinsproduce.com/](http://www.marvinsproduce.com/)) and August Produce ([www.facebook.com/AugustProduce](https://www.facebook.com/AugustProduce)).

While businesses that are locally owned and operated may be most receptive to the “Buy Local” pitch, the effort should also include regional companies with locations in Swain and Jackson Counties, such as Ingles and Food Lion.

Also, no one should forget that tourists make up a meaningful percentage of those who may be buying local farm products through restaurants, farmers markets, Christmas tree farms, and other sales venues, especially in the summer and fall. To that end, special efforts must be made to educate visitors to Swain County about their options to “buy local” while in the area.

### Develop and Promote Farmers Market Facilities

Farmers markets exist in both Bryson City and Cherokee. These markets have probably not realized their full potential in terms of the numbers of farmers selling and the numbers of customers buying at these markets. It may be possible to secure grants to support basic facilities and promote these markets, which will in turn help expand the numbers of sellers and buyers. Efforts should also be made to encourage more farmers to sell at these markets, so that they offer enough products with enough consistency that more consumers view the markets as desirable shopping options. Other efforts listed above to promote the “Buy Local” idea should also help encourage more use of the farmers markets as one of the most convenient ways for farmers to access many customers at once, and vice versa.



*Photos by Christy Bredenkamp, NCSU Extension*

*Swain County has lots of potential to grow its two farmers markets in Bryson City and Cherokee as part of a “Buy Local” program to help more local farmers sell more farm products.*

### Secure Marketing Support

The Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP), based in Asheville, offers a wide variety of programs and materials to help promote local food products and to connect food producers with food buyers, including their “Local Food Guide,” their smartphone app listings; the Mixing Bowl, which connects growers and chefs; “Appalachian Grown” certification and labels, stickers, bags, tags, and rubber bands; business planning; marketing guidance; farmer profiles; guidance on sourcing local products; and their annual Business of Farming conference each February. Currently, only seven of 700 listings in ASAP’s “Local Food Guide” for Western

North Carolina originate in Swain County. ASAP is ready to help grow that number substantially. Swain County farmers and chefs just need to let ASAP know they are interested.

Also, as suggested earlier, some of these marketing efforts should highlight Cherokee heritage seeds and other farm products produced by Cherokee farmers, because Swain County's rich Cherokee heritage presents a comparative marketing advantage over every other county in the state. The Cherokee Preservation Foundation might be a logical partner for such efforts, with additional guidance provided by the Sequoyah Fund and ASAP.

### Support GAP Certification

A growing number of schools, restaurant and grocery chains, and larger business facilities are demanding that the farmers they work with have Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification and substantial liability insurance to help minimize the possibility and consequences of food-borne illness. Many farmers don't have the time, money, and/or interest to achieve and maintain GAP certification, and the property management systems and practices on the Qualla Boundary provide an extra obstacle to addressing key GAP standards related to controlling access to fields and crops.

For these reasons, the quest for GAP certification is best suited to larger farming operations that can more readily cover the costs of GAP programs and liability insurance policies. For those farmers who are committed to achieving GAP certification, NC Cooperative Extension and other agriculture agencies should be able to help coordinate the necessary training. The GAP program at the NCSU Plants for Human Health Institute can also serve as a good resource for training.

## **C – Cultivate Community Support for Farmers and Farming**

Most of the strategies listed in this plan focus on specific activities to address fairly specific issues facing Swain County farmers and land managers. To complement those ideas, we must also have a supportive community culture for agriculture, where farmers have the support network necessary to share ideas and work together to solve individual and shared problems, and where people of all ages and professions understand and appreciate family farms, farmers, and local farm products. Many farmers and agency staff in Swain County see a definite need to strengthen Swain County's community culture for agriculture. We have included several strategies below.

### Establish a One-Stop Agricultural Resource Center

Currently, agriculture-focused resource agencies are scattered all around the county, and many farmers and agency staff would prefer a one-stop-shop where farmers can access the latest information, programs, training, and technical assistance all at once. Agency staff would also benefit from more frequent interactions and discussions of their efforts with their colleagues, which should lead to increased collaboration and greater efficiencies of effort. Such a facility might also provide meeting space, as well as storage facilities for the shared-use equipment detailed in Strategy A above. This strategy of course also comes with a high price tag in terms of

possible land acquisition expenses, building construction or renovation expenses, and building maintenance costs. If adequate funds can be identified, however, it should be a worthwhile way to support Swain County agriculture for many decades to come.

### Educate the Local Community and Key Decision-Makers

Farmers attending the public meetings in January and March emphasized the need to educate non-farmer children and adults about farming and farm products, including such topics as where milk comes from, how far our food travels on average before we eat it, how local food can improve your health, and why it can be environmentally beneficial to cut down a tree.

Several agriculture and forestry agencies already offer educational programs in the local schools, the Swain County school system has an agriculture teacher on staff, and the EBCI offers some agriculture and forestry classes in their schools, as well as related afterschool programs. These efforts should continue. If gaps in educational coverage currently exist in Swain County, other resources may already be available, such as the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project's Growing Minds program ([growing-minds.org/](http://growing-minds.org/)) or the NC Farm Bureau's Ag in the Classroom program ([ncagintheclassroom.com/](http://ncagintheclassroom.com/)). A simple effort to catalogue and coordinate available agriculture educational programs can maximize these resources, while perhaps identifying specific issues or age groups that require new attention. It may be most appropriate for the local school systems to take the lead on making the most of these possibilities.

Non-farmer adults may prove more difficult to reach than schoolchildren. For that reason, farmers and farm-related agency staff may want to focus particular attention on reaching out to key decision-makers rather than general adult audiences. For instance, agency staff and farmers may want to provide periodic oral or written progress reports about this farm plan to the county commissioners and other agency and elected officials, and seek their assistance as necessary. Local farmers may also want to meet with utility companies to discuss ways to reduce the use of herbicide sprays in power line corridors going near or through local farms. Also, the Friends of Farming programs detailed below should help raise the visibility of farming with key members of the general public.

Other events, such as farm tours, can help local people of all ages learn first-hand what their neighbors are doing in the agricultural arena. Also, local programs to promote healthy eating in order to address obesity, diabetes, and other concerns should emphasize the value of eating more fruits and vegetables raised on local farms. These are just a few examples of ways to reach out to non-farming audiences to encourage greater understanding and support for agriculture in Swain County.

### Create a Friends of Farming Group

Haywood, Buncombe, Polk, and other WNC counties have recently started "Friends of Agriculture" breakfasts to help convene farmers, government officials, and other interested citizens for a combination of education and networking. The hour-long events usually take place on a quarterly basis. Guest speakers highlight a particular agricultural issue each time; various agencies announce upcoming grant programs and trainings; and farmers and non-farmers alike

enjoy an opportunity to get to know each other better, share stories and ideas, make deals, and build a stronger agricultural community. Local farms often donate food for these meals, and agriculture-related businesses often cover some of the other costs, while farmers and agency staff all help prepare and serve the food. Many attendees also contribute a few dollars to support these efforts.

Swain County should adopt a similar program to bring together Swain County “Friends of Farming.” Many ideas for featured topics are included throughout this plan. Agency staff will probably be best positioned to coordinate these events. Meanwhile, farmers must attend, and they must invite non-farmers – from chefs to elected officials to the people they buy their goods and services from.

To further support the “Friends of Farming,” agency staff may also want to set up an information-sharing website, listserv, and/or electronic newsletter to announce upcoming meals and speakers, as well as to share other timely information that may be of interest between events. While not every farmer utilizes electronic communications, most do, and electronic communications has become the only cost-effective method for most agencies to spread the word about their various programs and services.

#### Support Hunger/Poverty Relief Programs

One key to attracting community support involves *providing* community support. Most farmers aren’t raking in money hand over fist, but they may be able to provide some additional food to local food banks and related efforts in order to help those who are less fortunate. Gleaning programs at the end of each crop season have become one popular way to enable such donations. Flash-freezing of overabundant crops would also allow for the distribution of any excess harvest by food programs outside the growing season, so any value-added kitchen ideas (See Strategy F) should also investigate the possibilities of flash-freezing, bagging, and storage of suitable crops.

Also, as part of Chief Michell Hicks’ Cherokee Family Garden Project, the Eastern Band provides 700 garden starter kits to tribal members each year (including everything from seeds to recipes), which helps address immediate food needs, while also encouraging greater understanding of farming and agriculture. Veteran farmers can support these efforts by helping these families cultivate their personal gardens.

#### Fill Out Farm Data Requests from Government Agencies

Both federal and state agencies utilize data from the USDA Census of Agriculture and other federal and state surveys to calculate how much of their funds to allocate to different states and counties – including funding of agency staff and local grant program allocations. For that reason, it is very important that *every* Swain County farmer fills out these reports and surveys, so that this data presents a more complete picture of all of the farm-related activity occurring in the county. Many Swain County farmers do indeed fill out these surveys, and we are grateful for their efforts.

On the other hand, whenever anyone fails to complete a form or underreports any of their data, Swain County looks less significant in the larger agricultural landscape. That data deficiency in turn causes these agencies to conclude that Swain County is much less active in farming activity than it really is, and therefore, that Swain County does not need or require as much technical or financial assistance.

To avoid shortchanging ourselves and our ability to support our agricultural community, we must encourage all Swain County farmers to fill out these government forms and surveys promptly and completely so that Swain County can secure its fair share of resources, staff, and grant funds.

Having more complete agricultural data for the county also helps demonstrate to local community leaders and other local residents just how much agriculture impacts Swain County.

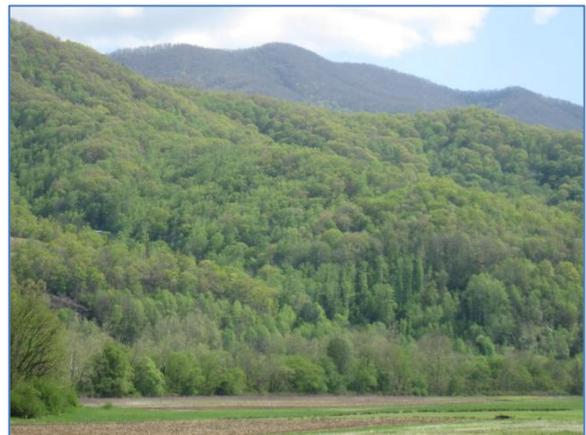
### Ensure Supportive County, Tribal, and Municipal Ordinances

The North Carolina General Assembly routinely modifies different laws related to agriculture. County and municipal officials should compare these revised statutes with their existing local ordinances and then update their ordinances, rules, and regulations as appropriate to strengthen Swain County's agricultural community. Recent examples include S.L. 2011–363 (H 168) which affords additional protections to certain agricultural lands and S.L.2011–219 (H 406), which amends certain Voluntary Agricultural District qualification standards.

At the same time, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians may want to explore these new state laws, the county ordinances, and related legislation from other tribes for possible agriculture-friendly ordinances to help protect and promote farming on tribal lands.

### **D – Make the Most of Available Forest Lands**

According to the US Forest Service statistics in Chapter 1, Swain County has more than 60,000 acres of forestland that is in private or corporate ownership. Most of these forested lands are not flat, and forest is probably their best agricultural use. However, most of these lands rarely see any timber harvest activity, even those properties that are getting a large property tax break for being enrolled as forestry lands through the Present Use Value program. No one expects forestry activity on every parcel of forestland every year, but many people participating in this planning process believe that Swain County has tremendous potential to grow its agricultural economy by utilizing these forest lands more actively. At the same time, these efforts must be sustainable: short-term income goals must be balanced with resource protection and long-term income potential.



*Photo by George Ivey*

*Forests cover much of the hilly and steep land in Swain County. Landowners can increase the positive economic impact of these lands by utilizing their forests more actively for well-managed timber harvests and forest-based crops.*

It is also worth noting that Swain County has a key role to play in North Carolina's Forest Action Plan ([www.ncforestassessment.com/PDF/NC%20Forest%20Assessment%20Complete.pdf](http://www.ncforestassessment.com/PDF/NC%20Forest%20Assessment%20Complete.pdf)). Many areas of Swain County show up prominently on the statewide plan's priority maps related to conserving working forest lands; protecting forests and communities from wildfire risk; forest health; and rural forest priority landscapes. Various goals, objectives, and strategies in the statewide plan focus on many topics relevant to Swain County, such as sustainable management of forestlands for both economic and environmental purposes, restoring shortleaf pine habitat, and various educational programs. It's encouraging to know that statewide planners see many of the same forest-related needs and opportunities as do local citizens and local agency staff.

To support these various forest management goals, North Carolina Forest Service staff and consulting foresters should continue to work to help establish and/or update forest management plans for private landowners in order to encourage thoughtful management of all of the private forestlands in Swain County.

At the same time, a broad program of educational activities will serve as a cost-effective strategy for encouraging more active implementation of both new and existing forest management plans. The NC Forest Service, the NC Forestry Association, private consulting foresters, and other interested partners should work together to increase landowner awareness of key forest management and stewardship issues, such as the following:

- How to access technical, free, and cost-share assistance through state and federal agencies, such as assistance with creating forest management plans, tree plantings, and forest fuels reduction
- Best practices in timber harvesting and forest management
- What a professional consulting forester does and how paying a consulting forester can earn the landowner more money, while also helping to protect streams, other key natural resources, and long-term income potential
- Why tall trees aren't the best trees for every creature in the world
- The value and how-to of establishing early successional habitat to support certain rare birds and other species
- The value and how-to of re-establishing shortleaf pine habitat
- The value and how-to of proper stand re-generation
- The role of prescribed fire in managing forest resources and wildfire threats
- The value and how-to of forest disease management

One-on-one contact, mailings, newspaper articles, Friends of Farming presentations, and other public programs can all provide inexpensive ways to educate people about the possibilities. Most of these educational efforts should focus on forest landowners and those involved with timber harvesting, but other programs may be designed for general adult audiences and younger audiences (i.e., school children) in order to promote broader community understanding of why well-managed timber cuts can be good for both the economy and the environment.

If a proper location can be provided at a low cost, a demonstration forest might also prove effective in showing people of all ages how effective forestry practices look on the land and how they earn the landowner money while also protecting creeks and certain types of wildlife habitat.

Also, as detailed below in Strategy H, “Diversify Farm Crops and Income,” many crops with income potential in Swain County are ideally grown in forest shade, including ginseng, goldenseal, bloodroot, and ramps. Any landowners looking to maximize the income potential of their forestlands should be open to opportunities to cultivate these and other forest-based crops and to manage their forests in ways that support these opportunities. NC Cooperative Extension, at both the state and county level, has been and will likely continue to provide training on producing and managing non-timber forest products. Information on these forest-crop options should also be included as part of any forestry education programs in Swain County. At the same time, law enforcement officials must step up efforts to reduce trespassing and poaching of these forest crops, since some of them, like ginseng, are often targets for thieves.

## **E – Protect Agricultural Land from Development**

Productive agricultural land serves as one of the key ingredients to nearly every successful farming enterprise. As noted in Chapter 1 of the plan, Swain County has already lost tens of thousands of acres of farmland to a national park, a large lake, various forms of development, and other non-agricultural activities. In order to maintain and enhance Swain County’s agricultural economy, landowners and agencies must work harder to safeguard the remaining agricultural lands.

During the planning process, several individuals and groups showed a growing amount of interest in supporting programs to protect agricultural lands from development. Current participation in these programs is fairly low, with only 168 parcels currently enrolled in the Present Use Value (PUV) program; only a handful of parcels included in Swain County’s relatively new Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) programs; no working land conservation easements; and no current means to recognize or permanently protect the EBCI’s best agricultural lands.

However, because 76 percent of the county is already in public or tribal ownership, development pressures in the future are certain to focus on the relatively few acres of private farms and forests that remain, especially the flatter lands. And without these lands – especially the very fertile river bottoms, agriculture in Swain County simply cannot sustain what it has now, much less grow. This reality dictates that Swain County landowners, land renters, and resource conservation agencies must more actively encourage and pursue farmland protection tools in order to ensure that future farmers actually have good places to make a living through agriculture.

Further, as noted above, these farmland protection tools can also help with Strategy A, “Improve the Economics of Farming,” by reducing property, income, and/or estate taxes; by qualifying landowners for higher rates of assistance through the state’s agricultural cost-share programs; and/or by producing a possible one-time payment for retiring unused development rights. These possible financial benefits provide valuable incentives for protecting these important lands.

Below we have highlighted the best tools for protecting farmland from development for as little as 30 days to as long as forever.

## Short-Term Farmland Protection Tools

“Protection” can take many forms, and we are fortunate to have several low-cost and voluntary tools available to help initiate land protection discussions and activities. Swain County, private landowners, renters of land, and other partners must make or encourage maximum use of these low-cost, voluntary, short-term land protection tools:

- Present Use Tax Valuation – This program, often referred to as “land use,” defers or eliminates a large percentage of the property taxes due on lands that support agriculture. Four categories of land (agricultural, forestry, horticultural, and aquacultural) have specific criteria for the Present Use Value tax break.
- Voluntary Agricultural Districts – VADs are county-based programs that allow farmers to voluntarily keep their farms as part of a local agricultural district in exchange for certain benefits that mostly address possible development pressures. Lands in “basic” VAD status are enrolled for 10 years, but the landowner can withdraw the land from the program with a simple 30-day written notice. VAD eligibility was previously based on Present Use Value standards, but due to a recent change in state law, Swain County may now set different standards for VAD, including lower acreage thresholds, which would allow many more agricultural parcels to be eligible for VAD enrollment.
- State and Federal Resource Conservation Programs – Through a variety of cost-share programs, government agencies will pay landowners to implement and maintain certain best management practices on their farmlands and forestlands. The length of the agreement can vary, from only a few years to 15 years or more.

One disadvantage of these tools is that they are generally very short-term in nature. Landowners may be able to leave each of these programs with as little as a 30-day written notice, although they may incur some sort of financial expense for doing so (e.g., having to pay several years of maximum property taxes at once (for withdrawal from the PUV program) or having to reimburse some of the agency expenses of certain cost-share practices). However, when a developer offers a high price to purchase such land, the sales price will likely dwarf these “early withdrawal” penalties.

On a more positive note, though, these short-term tools encourage landowners to think about the future and to give land protection a trial run. Whereas moving from no protection to permanent protection may seem like too much change too fast, these short-term tools can serve as stepping stones to longer commitments. A few months can turn into a few years, and then the idea of a permanent conservation commitment is not as daunting.

These short-term measures offer two other primary benefits. First, they are voluntary. The landowner is not forced to accept any of these measures. Therefore, when landowners choose one of these options, they have done so because they think it’s a good idea, not because

someone forced their hand. And if they choose short-term protection, they are more likely to consider longer-term solutions.

Second, these voluntary, short-term protection tools provide time for partner agencies and organizations to identify other resources for longer-term solutions. Even when the landowner is interested in long-term solutions, it can take months or years to find the necessary funds to protect a particular piece of land through a conservation easement. These short-term tools can help stabilize the land use while the other pieces fall into place.

### Mid-Term Farmland Protection Tools

Two land protection tools, one short-term and one long-term, have been modified to create mid-term options. As with the short-term options, these are voluntary, not permanent, and do not require a lot of money to implement. Also, these mid-term options help stabilize land use while the landowner considers permanent approaches and while partner organizations and agencies search for funding and other resources for permanent protection. As with the long-term options, these mid-term tools require the landowner to make a longer time commitment.

- Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural Districts – Enhanced VADs are similar to the basic VADs, except that EVADs have a few additional benefits, and the 10-year commitment is irrevocable.
- Term Agreements (also called Term Easements) – Similar to conservation easements (discussed below), term agreements are voluntary and legally binding agreements that limit certain development on a property for a certain number of years in exchange for a cash payment (either annual or lump-sum). Term agreements can be designed to maintain the landowner's right to use the land for agricultural or forestry activities. Payment for a term agreement is much less than the payment for a permanent conservation easement. For example, a 20-year term agreement may be valued at only 20% of a permanent conservation easement, a 30-year term at 30%, and so on. Unlike conservation easements, term agreements offer no potential tax breaks.

Local and state agencies and non-profit organizations should give greater attention and priority consideration to lands enrolled in these Enhanced VAD and term-easement programs, because these landowners are clearly interested in long-term protection. In the case of the Enhanced VAD program, the landowners are willing to go so far as to voluntarily restrict development on their land without any cash compensation for at least 10 years. These sorts of commitments merit higher consideration over others who have taken no such voluntary action. As a matter of fact, North Carolina law encourages state grant-making agencies to give priority consideration to landowners participating in EVAD programs (North Carolina General Assembly, 2005).

### Long-Term Farmland Protection Tools

Since landowners and land regulations can and will change over time, the most effective strategy to protect agricultural lands involves acquiring a legal right to those lands in order to

ensure very limited development – or no development at all. To meet these goals, the best and most cost-effective tool is a working land conservation easement:

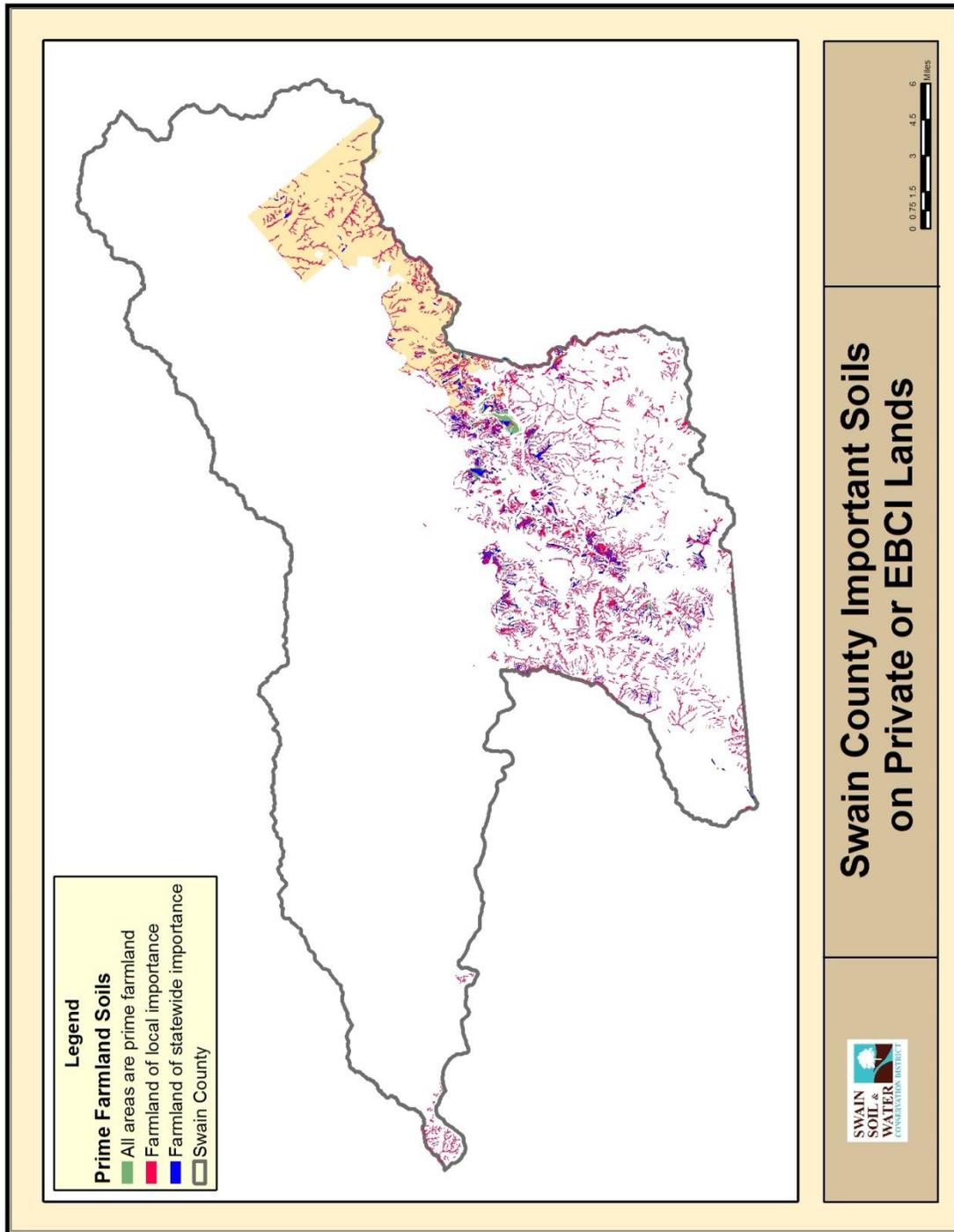
- Working Land Conservation Easements – A conservation easement is a voluntary, legally-binding, and permanent agreement that limits certain development on a property in exchange for certain federal and state tax benefits and/or cash. Conservation easements can be tailored to suit the landowner’s present and future needs. Through a “working land” easement, for example, a property owner still owns the land and can continue activities related to farming and forestry. Possible sources of funding to help pay for these working land conservation easements include the USDA Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) and the NC Agricultural Development and Farmland Protection Trust Fund.

Since funding for some of these tools is limited and fairly competitive (especially for working land conservation easements), the Swain Soil and Water Conservation District, the Swain County Farmland Preservation Board, the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, and other entities may want to select some key criteria to help rank and prioritize Swain County agricultural lands for voluntary protection activity. For example, it might be most effective in the long run to give funding priority to river bottoms and other lands with prime soils, which offer the greatest potential for productive agricultural activity. Also, some property ranking systems, such as the one used by the USDA Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, give bonus points to proposed easements that would protect archeological resources; given our area’s rich cultural history, Swain County might want to adopt a similar approach.

Once the priority factors are selected and applied, the Swain County Farmland Preservation Board and others can focus on reaching out to owners of the highest ranking lands to encourage their voluntary protection.

*Map 2 – The map on the next page highlights the private and EBCI lands in Swain County with prime soils (1,038 acres), farmland of statewide importance (2,494 acres), and farmland of local importance (14,372 acres). These lands are generally the most productive and most versatile for farming operations. For those reasons, most farmers prefer to farm land with these soils. For all those same reasons – as well as the overall shortage of funding to help purchase working land conservation easements, many farmland protection programs place a higher priority on lands with these highly productive soils, including the USDA Farm and Ranchland Protection Program and the North Carolina Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund.*

*This soils map provides just one example of how Swain County could use different criteria to prioritize its farmland protection efforts. It is included here only as an illustration, not as a specific recommendation of this plan. Other factors for prioritizing farm and forest lands for protection could include floodplains, archeological areas, trout streams, or anything else that farmers and the local community place value on. Of course, the ultimate condition for this work is to have landowners who volunteer to participate in these programs. Without willing landowners, these farmland protection efforts simply don’t work.*



Map 2 – Important Soils on Private or EBCI Lands in Swain County

Given the currently low levels of use of the various farmland protection tools in Swain County, it makes sense for everyone to focus on the short-term protection tools over the next three to five years. Doing so will help build a stronger base for additional farmland protection in the future. If any landowners are willing to pursue mid-term or long-term protection tools during that time, such activities will provide positive examples for other landowners and for the future, but no one should expect a rush of Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District signups and working land conservation easements or related estate planning until the agricultural community first embraces the short-term tools more completely.

To that end, the county's farmland preservation board should consider reducing the acreage requirements for Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) enrollments. While the VAD acreage standard in each county generally follows the Present Use Value standards (i.e., 20 acres for forest land, 10 acres for agricultural land, and five acres for horticultural or aquacultural operations), state law now allows each county to set different VAD standards. Neighboring Macon County has already adopted a one-acre farm standard, along with other standards related to recent farm income. By adopting a lower acreage standard, Swain County can encourage greater levels of enrollment in the county's relatively new VAD program, while also becoming more supportive of the entire farming community, not just those with more land.

Also, it is important for people renting farmland to make sure that the landowners they rent from are aware of all of these farmland preservation programs and to encourage landowners to participate in them as appropriate. Since these landowners are oftentimes not as actively engaged in agriculture as their renters, they may be unaware of these programs and how they can benefit from them. Armed with this new knowledge, they may take additional steps to protect their lands, and that is a positive step for farmers and non-farmers alike.

Additional resources regarding farmland protection are included in Chapter 5 of this plan, "Funding Assistance and Other Resources."

#### Designate, Protect, and Manage the Best Tribal Farmlands

The lands of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians are managed under entirely different circumstances than the private lands elsewhere in Swain County. To oversimplify some very complex legal and cultural issues, these EBCI lands are managed communally, so individuals can lease those lands, but they lack the individual ability to control the fate of different farm fields and forests in perpetuity. If tribal leaders are interested in protecting the tribe's agricultural potential for the future, they might want to consider establishing a way to formally recognize and/or permanently protect their best agricultural lands (such as the fertile river bottoms and other areas with prime farmland soils) – and perhaps even acquire additional land for agricultural purposes. Tribal leaders might also want to consider adopting policies to try to steer future development activity away from these key agricultural areas. Finally, tribal leaders might also want to develop a program to work with tribal members to encourage active use and stewardship of these important agricultural lands.

## **F – Add Value to Basic Farm Products**

For the most part, Swain County farmers are producing and selling basic farm products. For example, they are selling tomatoes rather than salsas, berries rather than jams, and whole cows rather than select cuts of meat. Several people see more potential for farmers and entrepreneurs in Swain County to take these basic farm products and make more money by converting them into value-added products. To facilitate such production, agency partners should work to explore the possibility of creating and operating relevant infrastructure; offering training and technical assistance; and encouraging interested farmers and entrepreneurs to apply for grants to aid in value-added processing and sales.

### Improve Shared Use Kitchen/Canning Facility Options

A fair number of people have expressed interest in improving shared-use kitchen and canning facilities in Swain County to make it easier for local residents to produce and sell value-added food products. A complete shared-use kitchen facility meeting all regulatory requirements is not currently available in Swain County, so some aspiring value-added producers are utilizing other facilities elsewhere in Western North Carolina, and others are simply putting off their ideas until the desired facilities are available closer to home.



*Photo by George Ivey*

Improving kitchen/canning facilities in Swain County will take capital funds for a building and/or related equipment and storage space, as well as ongoing income to support facility staffing. It may be possible to receive grant funds to support some of the initial costs. Before seeking any grants for construction or equipment, however, Swain County and the EBCI may first want to undertake a feasibility study to more clearly analyze what equipment and capacity to establish locally, start-up costs, operational costs, local levels of interest and intended use of the facilities and equipment, and likely income from those levels of use. If that research indicates a high likelihood of positive outcomes, that information will prove crucial to securing grants and other support to establish the improved facilities.

### Process and Market Local Meats

Several people in Swain County – and throughout Western North Carolina – have shown an interest in promoting local options for processing and sales of meat from livestock, poultry, and small animals raised in the region. Swain County is fortunate to have K&B Meat Processing available within the county to process local livestock for sales anywhere in North Carolina. Local livestock producers, especially those with grass-fed beef cattle, should take full advantage of this local facility, because it presents a comparative advantage unavailable in many other WNC counties. For poultry and small animals, it may be most cost-effective for local agencies to help farmers secure periodic access to a regional mobile processor.

At the same time, more work must be done to help farmers market these local meat products, especially to local customers. Both NC Choices and the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture

Project are actively working to promote sales of local meats in Western North Carolina, and interested farmers should connect with them. Both groups are listed in Chapter 5 of this plan.

### Provide Training and Technical Assistance

NC Cooperative Extension offers training in several areas related to value-added food production and sales and related certifications. These offerings provide both the know-how and the qualifications for people to produce items that individual consumers and local businesses will want to buy, whether they are using a facility in Swain County or elsewhere in Western North Carolina. NC Cooperative Extension should continue to offer such programs, especially those that involve products being grown in Swain County.

Also, resource experts from the NC Department of Agriculture and the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project are available to help with the business planning side of these new ventures. Farmers and entrepreneurs should seek out this assistance in order to make sure that they are on a path to profitability with any new value-added products they are considering.

### Pursue Grants and Loans

The USDA, the NC Department of Agriculture, WNC AgOptions, Golden LEAF, and the Cherokee Preservation Foundation all offer grants to help develop value-added products through individual and/or community-level assistance (each grantor has slightly different approaches). Meanwhile, the Sequoyah Fund and Mountain BizWorks offer training and loans to support business planning and development, including, but not limited to, value-added products. These grant and loan programs are very competitive, but any funds that they provide can help move an idea from concept to production, sales, and profitability. More information on these grant, loan, and training programs is included in Chapter 5. Non-profit and agency staff should make sure to publicize these programs with individuals and farmer groups, and Swain County farmers and entrepreneurs should review these options and pursue them as appropriate.

## **G - Encourage Young and Beginning Farmers**

This idea attracted a high level of interest at the public meeting on January 31, 2013, and a much more moderate level of support at the March 19 meeting. While statistics suggest that Swain County's farming population is slightly younger than the rest of North Carolina, the difference is minor, and at nearly 57 years old, the average Swain County farmer is not exactly young. Every strategy in this plan is designed to help farmers, which of course includes young and beginning farmers, but we have listed below a few of the specific ways that different programs and agencies can be especially helpful to young and beginning farmers.

### Provide Educational Programs

Educational programs in the schools (also mentioned in Strategy C) can create greater awareness, understanding, and interest in farming among the next generation, in turn encouraging some of those students to consider careers in agriculture. The Swain County School System already offers

agricultural education programs for its students and hosts a local chapter of the Future Farmers of America at Swain County High School; these efforts should continue – and possibly be strengthened. EBCI schools feature a few in-school programs on agriculture and forestry, as well as after-school programs; these efforts provide a good base of farm-related school programming, as well as room to grow. Meanwhile, NC Cooperative Extension offers educational programs for new farmers (and seasoned veterans too), and their programs should continue as well.

#### Provide Government Agency Programs and Technical Assistance

Several government agencies offer helpful programs to encourage young and beginning farmers. For instance, the USDA Farm Service Agency offers a loan contract guarantee program to support sales of farmland to beginning or socially disadvantaged farmers and producers. FSA programs like that, as well as FSA's new micro-loan program, can make it much easier for young and beginning farmers to get established. Meanwhile, other agencies, including USDA-NRCS, NCDA, NC Cooperative Extension, and the Swain Soil and Water Conservation District, can also provide helpful technical assistance, cultural/production expertise, and access to cost-share programs to support these new farmers; many of their programs are specially designed to give additional support to new and beginning farmers. A new farm incubator in the county could also help encourage new farmers by providing a concentrated location for land access and learning. The Swain County farming community – from agencies to non-profits to individual farmers – must promote and utilize these and similar programs as much as possible to help newer farmers get off to a strong start.

#### Create a Friends of Farming Group

The Friends of Farming events and website/listserv/e-newsletter (detailed previously in Strategy C) can support young and beginning farmers in a much less formal way than classroom instruction, by helping them meet older and more experience farmers who can in turn advise them on a wide number of matters, and by making sure that the new farmers are fully aware of different programs and opportunities that might benefit them. Some of these conversations may lead to more intensive mentoring relationships, and older and more experienced farmers should be open to taking on such a mentoring role when presented with the opportunity.

#### Connect with Supportive and Transitioning Landowners

Landowners can help by renting out land to these young and beginning farmers, so that they can have less expensive access to farmland until they are able to build up enough capital for a down payment for an actual land purchase. Friends, family, other farmers, and word of mouth lead to many of these introductions and connections. Also, WNC AgriVentures (listed in Chapter 5) is currently providing staffing support to help build a database and program to help link WNC farmers looking for land and landowners with available farmland; both groups should utilize this new service as needed.

On a related note, landowners who are giving serious thought to the question of who will manage their farmlands in the future should consider setting up and implementing farmland transition plans. These documents create a deliberate plan to transition the farmland to a farming-focused

descendent or another younger farmer so that the land stays in farming and is in capable hands when the current owner passes away or sells the land at some point in the future. In reality, these transition plans involve a mixture of estate planning, farmland preservation, and encouraging and mentoring young and beginning farmers. The farmland transition planning idea and process might best be promoted initially through a Friends of Farming presentation.

## **H - Diversify Farm Crops and Income**

As noted above, while all farmers throughout the country wrestle with the increasing costs of fuel, fertilizer, and other farming expenses, Swain County farmers face several additional disadvantages in bringing crops to market, including longer transportation distances and related costs for farm-related purchases, services, aggregation and distribution, and sales. These added costs make it difficult for Swain County farmers to compete with other farmers who don't have these infrastructure and distance handicaps. Some Swain County farmers are still able to turn a profit with traditional farm products, including everything from livestock to fruits and vegetables to horticultural offerings, but they are working at a disadvantage. Of course, if farmers can make it all work, they certainly don't need to abandon what they are currently doing; after all, traditional crops like beef cattle and tomatoes still help diversify the full range of farm crops and sources of income produced in any one farming community.

### Diversify Crops and Growing Practices

For many farmers, however, it makes sense to diversify and to try to produce something less common in the wider marketplace. Many Swain County farmers are already experimenting with new farm products, or new ways to bring those products to market, from goldenseal to Shiitake mushrooms. Participants at the January 2013 planning meeting showed strong support for such diversification efforts, including eight votes for sustainable and diverse crops, three for botanical crops, and one for organic farming. Attendees at the March 2013 meeting showed particular interest in forest-based crops. In interviews, various resource experts in the county and region also specifically suggested the following as good choices for crop diversification and profit potential in Swain County: culinary and medicinal herbs, ramps, mushrooms, cut flowers, blueberries, blackberries, strawberries, apple trees, organics, stevia, grapes, trout, tilapia, catfish, ducks and duck eggs, rabbit meat, pasture-raised pigs, fiber animals, heritage craft supplies (e.g., river cane and dyes for basket-making), as well as square straw bales, pumpkins, and ornamental corn for fall decorations.

It is also worth emphasizing that any efforts to utilize diverse and more profitable agricultural crops and growing practices will complement Strategy A, "Improve the Economics of Farming," while efforts to produce forest-based crops, like ginseng, goldenseal, and ramps, will complement Strategy D, "Make the Most of Available Forest Lands."

### Emphasize Natural and Cultural Heritage

Swain County's geography and cultural heritage also provide several distinctions that give it an advantage in producing some well-known and very marketable crops. These advantages include

having the high elevations and native range of Fraser fir, the country's most popular Christmas tree; the tremendous biological diversity of the Southern Appalachian mountains, including showy, native plants like flame azaleas; cool mountain waters to grow rainbow trout; and the area's rich Cherokee heritage, which includes many heirloom varieties of otherwise common plants, as well as a wide number of naturally sourced fibers and dyes for basket-making, including river cane, white oak, and black walnut. Swain County farmers and landowners should make the most of these advantages as they consider what products to grow and sell.



*Photo by Christy Bredenkamp NCSU Extension*



*Photo by George Ivey*

*Farm products like Fraser fir Christmas trees and trout take advantage of Swain County's high mountains and cool waters.*

### Promote Agritourism

Agritourism can take these ideas a step further by capitalizing on the hundreds of thousands of tourists who already visit the area each year to enjoy and learn about the area's natural and cultural resources. The Mountain Farm Museum at the Oconaluftee Visitor Center in Great Smoky Mountains National Park provides a great local example of how much interest visitors have in learning about local history and agriculture, and several local farmers are already tapping into this market by providing everything from trout fishing opportunities to hayrides to pick-your-own options. It's safe to say that this agritourism market still has plenty of potential to grow, including such possibilities as tours focused on traditional Cherokee farming practices, other heritage-based tourism, petting zoos, and corn mazes. Restaurants can also take advantage of this tourist market by featuring and advertising local farm products on their menus. These are just a few possibilities, with sound business planning and marketing often providing the keys to launching successful new agritourism operations.

### Secure Technical Assistance and Support

For all of the reasons stated above, the stage is set for farmers, landowners, agencies, and non-profit organizations to utilize a wide variety for crops and activities to help diversify Swain County's family farms and forests and – hopefully – help farmers earn more from their labors.

Some of the key entities who can help farmers and landowners implement these efforts include NC Cooperative Extension, NC Department of Agriculture, WNC AgOptions, the Center for Cherokee Plants, the state's agricultural research stations in Waynesville and Mills River, NC State University researchers (in particular the ones located at Mills River), and the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project. These agencies and organizations can help with everything from research on the best ways to cultivate different crops to grant programs, technical assistance, and other advice for crop production, agritourism, and marketing. Additional information on these groups is included in Chapter 5 of this plan, "Funding Assistance and Other Resources." Non-profit and agency staff should make sure to actively publicize these assistance options with individual farmers, and farmers in turn should review these options and pursue them as appropriate.

## **Chapter 4 – Moving Forward – Our Short-Term Action Plan**

While all of the strategies in Chapter 3 will help maintain and enhance family farms and other agricultural operations in Swain County, we must focus our limited resources on a more selective set of activities over the next three years.

Based on input provided during the March 19 public meeting and other feedback and recommendations, we will focus our time and resources on eight key action areas over the next three years (i.e., 2013 to 2016). For each of the eight priority areas, we have identified very specific measures of success or milestones to achieve during that time, as well as a specific list of key partners to implement each effort. These actions, benchmarks, and partners are summarized in the chart on the next page.

At least nine strategy ideas included in Chapter 3 are not included in this short-term implementation plan (e.g., “Ensure Supportive County, Tribal, and Municipal Ordinances”). It may still be appropriate to conduct some level of work on those nine action areas in the short term and/or the long term. However, such activities on non-priority tasks should not be pursued at the expense of the eight priorities listed in this short-term implementation plan/chart.

This chart does not attempt to detail every possible task that might be related to each action area. Instead, it focuses on outcomes and key partners, in hopes that the key partners will work together to develop and implement relevant plans to achieve those outcomes. By limiting the document to one page, we also make the plan easy to post or carry around, which in turn should increase its visibility, use, and effectiveness.

This implementation plan should be reviewed at least semi-annually in order to measure progress on each action area. It may be appropriate to amend this plan periodically, and we recommend establishing an entirely new short-term implementation plan every three years in order to respond to changing circumstances and opportunities.

## Swain County Farmland Protection Plan – Short-Term Implementation Plan, 2013-2016

<b>Key Action Areas</b>	<b>Milestones &amp; Measures of Activity &amp; Success by June 2016 (Key Partners)</b>
1. Utilize cooperative efforts to reduce farming expenses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a working group to learn about, promote, and study the feasibility of creating a cooperative to orchestrate group purchases of fertilizer, lime, etc. with a goal of 20+ farmers in the working group and a completed feasibility study (Farmers, Extension)</li> <li>• Purchase, rent out, and maintain shared equipment (i.e., lime spreader, weed wiper, no-till drill), with each piece used by 30+ Swain Co. farmers each year (Swain and Jackson SWCDs, farmers)</li> </ul>
2. Increase local purchases of local farm products.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize marketing and facility improvements to double the number of active vendors at the Bryson City and Cherokee farmers markets (Extension, farmers, Chamber, ASAP)</li> <li>• Promote and purchase Swain County farm products, with a goal of buying 10% of farm-related goods (e.g., food, hay bales, pumpkins) from Swain Co. sources (Swain County government, businesses, Chamber, media, and residents; ASAP; Extension; everyone)</li> <li>• List 20 Swain County farms and businesses (vs. 7 in 2013) in the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project’s marketing programs (ASAP, farmers, chefs/restaurants, and other Swain businesses buying local farm products)</li> <li>• Process and market local beef, with 5+ Swain farmers processing a total of 20+ cows locally per year (K&amp;B Meat Processing, ASAP, livestock producers, local restaurants)</li> </ul>
3. Establish a one-stop agricultural center.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secure property and funding, and then build and operate a consolidated agricultural resource center (Swain SWCD, Swain Co., EBCI, Extension, USDA, FSA, NCDA)</li> </ul>
4. Increase revenue from livestock production.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase Swain’s total livestock revenue by 25% from 2011 to 2016 by providing Beef Quality Assurance training and marketing support to 20 livestock producers; improving pasture health on 20 farms; and establishing a satellite pick-up location for sales at the WNC Livestock Center (Mtn. Cattle Alliance, Extension, Swain SWCD, USDA, farmers)</li> </ul>
5. Increase public understanding and interest in local agriculture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide one educational program to every K-12 student every year (Swain &amp; EBCI schools, Swain SWCD, NC Forest Service, USDA, NCDA, Extension, others TBD)</li> <li>• Provide 4+ programs or events per year for general adult audiences, incl. Friends of Farming talks, farm tours, healthy eating initiatives, etc. (Swain SWCD, EBCI, NC Forest Service, USDA, NCDA, Extension, others TBD)</li> </ul>
6. Make the most of available forest lands.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct two educational efforts per year for forest landowners with a goal of doubling Swain’s annual timber harvests (NC Forest Service, NC Forestry Assn., landowners)</li> <li>• Utilize technical assistance and grants to double the acreage of forest-based crops such as ginseng &amp; goldenseal (Extension, NCSU, EBCI, farmers, landowners, USDA, Swain SWCD)</li> </ul>
7. Protect agricultural lands from development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote Present Use Value with a goal of 1,000 more acres in PUV in 2016 than in 2013 (Swain County, Swain SWCD, landowners, farmers)</li> <li>• Promote Voluntary Agricultural Districts with a goal of 500 total VAD acres (Swain SWCD, landowners, farmers)</li> <li>• Establish Swain County’s first working land conservation easement (Swain SWCD, Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, willing landowners)</li> <li>• Develop a formal way to recognize EBCI agricultural lands, and designate 500+ acres through that program (EBCI, Extension, EBCI land managers)</li> </ul>
8. Utilize shared-use kitchen facilities for value-added production.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct a feasibility study for improving shared-use kitchen facility options in Swain County to convert basic farm products into value-added goods (Extension, EBCI, Swain EDC, potential value-added producers, NCDA)</li> <li>• Provide two local trainings per year to support local value-added production and related certifications (Extension, ASAP)</li> </ul>

## Chapter 5 – Funding Assistance and Other Resources

Fortunately, many organizations and agencies offer funding, technical assistance, and more to individuals, businesses, groups, and other agencies who are working to implement different elements of this plan to maintain and enhance family farming in Swain County. Some of these resources can be found within Swain County, such as the technical and educational assistance offered by North Carolina Cooperative Extension and the financial resources of the Cherokee Preservation Foundation. Other potential partners can be found in Asheville, Raleigh, Washington, D.C., and many other locations throughout the state and country.

The lists below include more than 45 potential sources of financial, technical, educational, and other assistance. It is by no means a complete list, but it should help provide some realistic options for people to investigate as they work to maintain and grow their agricultural operations and to implement various elements of this plan. Since the details of various assistance programs change over time, most of these listings include only a name, a brief summary, and/or a website address to guide further exploration.

### Resources for Individual Farmers, Farm/Forest Landowners, and Related Businesses

The following groups, agencies, organizations, and programs provide direct financial, technical, and/or educational assistance to individual farmers, farm/forest landowners, and related businesses:

- Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project – ASAP offers a variety of programs to help with business planning, marketing, connecting sellers and buyers of food-related farm products and value-added products, and more. [www.asapconnections.org](http://www.asapconnections.org)
- Federal Conservation Easement Tax Deductions – The federal government currently offers landowners possible income tax deductions for voluntary donations of conservation easements. [www.landtrustalliance.org/policy/tax-matters/campaigns/the-enhanced-easement-incentive](http://www.landtrustalliance.org/policy/tax-matters/campaigns/the-enhanced-easement-incentive)
- Handmade in America – This Asheville-based group has many initiatives focused on small towns and rural areas, including new efforts to connect WNC suppliers and buyers of wood products and natural fiber-related products (e.g., wools and dyes). [www.handmadeinamerica.org/](http://www.handmadeinamerica.org/)
- K&B Meat Processing – This Swain County business can process livestock to create select cuts of meat, ground beef, sausage, etc., for sale within North Carolina. 828-488-2533.
- Mountain BizWorks – This Asheville-based organization offers small business development training, consulting, and lending, including agriculture-specific training and activities. [www.mountainbizworks.org/rural-entrepreneurship](http://www.mountainbizworks.org/rural-entrepreneurship)
- Mountain Cattle Alliance – This livestock producer group coordinates training, marketing, and group sales to help producers maximize the prices paid for their cattle sold in Western North Carolina. [wncregionallivestockcenter.com/Cattle\\_Alliance.html](http://wncregionallivestockcenter.com/Cattle_Alliance.html)
- NC Choices – This initiative is working to connect North Carolina livestock producers and meat processors and to improve the supply chain, processing, and marketing of pasture-based meat products. [www.ncchoices.com/](http://www.ncchoices.com/)

- North Carolina Agricultural Cost-Share Program – This program, administered locally through the Swain Soil and Water Conservation District, provides partial funding to help farmers implement practices to protect their soil and other important farm resources. [www.ncagr.gov/SWC/costshareprograms/ACSP/index.html](http://www.ncagr.gov/SWC/costshareprograms/ACSP/index.html)
- North Carolina Alternative Crops and Organics Program – This particular program with NC State University is based out of Mills River and concentrates on medicinal herbs, non-timber forest products, new crops, and organics for Western North Carolina. [ncherb.org](http://ncherb.org).
- North Carolina Conservation Easement Tax Credit – This program enables landowners to receive possible state income tax credits for their voluntary donations of conservation easements. [www.onencnaturally.org/pages/CTC\\_Overview.html](http://www.onencnaturally.org/pages/CTC_Overview.html)
- North Carolina Cooperative Extension – This state agency offers a wide variety of educational programs, technical guidance, and other assistance to support farmers, landowners, and agriculture-related businesses. Swain County has two local extension programs:
  - Swain County Extension Office - [swain.ces.ncsu.edu/](http://swain.ces.ncsu.edu/)
  - EBCI Extension Office - [ebci.ces.ncsu.edu/](http://ebci.ces.ncsu.edu/)
- North Carolina Forest Service – Through their local staff and an information-rich website, this state agency offers a wealth of resources for forest landowners, including technical assistance and cost-share programs. The website for their Swain County office also offers lists of consulting foresters and timber buyers who work in Swain County. [www.ncforestservice.gov/Managing\\_your\\_forest/managing\\_your\\_forest.htm](http://www.ncforestservice.gov/Managing_your_forest/managing_your_forest.htm) and [www.ncforestservice.gov/Contacts/swain.htm](http://www.ncforestservice.gov/Contacts/swain.htm)
- Research Stations of NC Department of Agriculture and NC State University – The research stations carry out dozens of experiments every year on new crops, new varieties, and new cultivation practices, and they share the results with anyone who is interested. Two research stations in Western North Carolina provide the most geographically relevant research for Swain County farmers:
  - Mountain Research Station, Waynesville - [www.ncagr.gov/research/mrs.htm](http://www.ncagr.gov/research/mrs.htm)
  - Mountain Horticultural Crops Research and Education Center, Mills River - [www.ces.ncsu.edu/fletcher/](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/fletcher/)
- Sequoyah Fund – This Cherokee institution provides training and low-interest loans to tribal members who want to start or expand their businesses. Their previous clients include a variety of agriculture-related businesses. [www.sequoyahfund.org/](http://www.sequoyahfund.org/)
- Swain County Soil and Water Conservation District – This local government agency provides a wealth of information and services to help landowners and land managers find and utilize the resources they need to manage their agricultural and natural resources. [www.swaincountync.gov/SWCD.html](http://www.swaincountync.gov/SWCD.html)
- Swain County Tax Office – This office evaluates and approves applications for the Present Use Value program, which can significantly reduce property taxes on agricultural lands meeting certain requirements. [www.swaincountync.gov/tax.html](http://www.swaincountync.gov/tax.html)
- Swain County Voluntary Agricultural District Program – This program promotes two voluntary agricultural district options to help landowners protect their agricultural lands from development pressures. [www.swaincountync.gov/VoluntaryAgLinks.html](http://www.swaincountync.gov/VoluntaryAgLinks.html)
- USDA Farm Service Agency – FSA manages a wide number of programs to support local farming operations. [www.fsa.usda.gov](http://www.fsa.usda.gov)

- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service – This federal agency offers farmers a wide variety of financial and technical assistance, including support for farmland conservation easements (i.e, the USDA Farm and Ranchland Protection Program), resource conservation (through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and other initiatives), and much more. [www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/)
- USDA Rural Energy for America Program – Their Renewable Energy System and Energy Efficiency Improvement Guaranteed Loan and Grant Program may help local farmers reduce their electricity costs. [www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP\\_ReapResEei.html](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_ReapResEei.html)
- USDA Value-Added Producer Grants – This grant program can help farmers and small businesses develop new value-added products. [www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP\\_VAPG.html](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_VAPG.html)
- WNC AgOptions – This program (funded by the NC Tobacco Trust Fund, managed by WNC Communities, and coordinated through NC Cooperative Extension) provides grants to help farmers and others test innovative ways to grow, harvest, process, and/or market various farm products in Western North Carolina. [www.wncagoptions.org/](http://www.wncagoptions.org/)
- WNC Regional Livestock Center – This facility in nearby Haywood County is dedicated to effective sales, marketing, and education to increase the economic well-being of family farmers and producers throughout Western North Carolina. They offer a convenient location to buy and sell cattle, goats, and sheep, and their website offers many helpful links and other resources for livestock producers. [www.wncregionallivestockcenter.com/](http://www.wncregionallivestockcenter.com/)

#### Resources for Individuals, Groups, Businesses, and/or Agencies

Individual farmers, landowners, businesses, non-profit organizations, and local government agencies may all find potential support from the following agencies, groups, and resources:

- “Building Sustainable Farms, Ranches, and Communities: Federal Programs for Sustainable Agriculture, Forestry, Entrepreneurship, Conservation and Community Development” – This document provides a very useful 118-page summary of federal grant programs. It was written in 2009, so some of the information is dated, but overall, the document compiles lots of great information in one place. Available online at [www.sare.org/Learning-Center/Books/Building-Sustainable-Farms-Ranches-and-Communities](http://www.sare.org/Learning-Center/Books/Building-Sustainable-Farms-Ranches-and-Communities).
- Land Trust for the Little Tennessee – This land conservation organization may be able to help individual landowners and agencies implement farmland conservation easement activities and other farmland protection efforts within Swain County. Also, LTLT produced a planning document entitled “The Upper Little Tennessee River Basin: A Conservation Assessment and Strategy;” this report includes valuable analysis and helpful suggestions on several topics relevant to this plan, including land conservation and sustainable forest management. [www.ltl.org/](http://www.ltl.org/)
- North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services – This state agency offers everything from grant programs to market data to business planning assistance to support the state’s diverse agricultural community, including small-scale and large-scale farmers, value-added producers, entire segments of North Carolina’s agricultural sector (e.g. tomato growers or Christmas tree growers), local government agencies, and non-profit organizations. Virtually anyone involved in farming or farm products in Swain

County should be able to find helpful guidance and assistance when turning to NCDA's staff and programs. [www.ncagr.gov/](http://www.ncagr.gov/)

- North Carolina Forestry Association – This group actively promotes healthy, productive forests by supporting the efforts of landowners and forestry-related businesses and organizations who responsibly manage or use forests. They offer very helpful resources for forest landowners, and they may be especially helpful in assisting with training and education programs to encourage more active but sustainable timber harvesting on Swain County forestlands. [www.ncforestry.org/](http://www.ncforestry.org/)
- North Carolina Specialty Crop Block Grant Program – This program focuses on efforts to promote sales of fruits and vegetables and other select farm products, including horticultural products. [www.ncagr.gov/markets/scgrant/index.htm](http://www.ncagr.gov/markets/scgrant/index.htm)
- USDA Rural Development – This agency provides a wide range of grants, loans, and technical assistance to support agriculture-based businesses, including cooperatives. [www.rurdev.usda.gov/AboutRD.html](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/AboutRD.html)
  - Rural Cooperative Development grants - [www.rurdev.usda.gov/bcp\\_rcdg.html](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/bcp_rcdg.html)
- USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) – This wide-ranging program focuses on agriculture-related research, education, and outreach; researchers, agricultural educators, students, and farmers are all eligible for different SARE grant programs. [www.sare.org/Grants/Apply-for-a-Grant](http://www.sare.org/Grants/Apply-for-a-Grant) or [www.southernsare.org/Grants](http://www.southernsare.org/Grants)
- WNC Communities – This non-profit organization supports a wide number of initiatives to support the agricultural economy of Western North Carolina, including the WNC Regional Livestock Market and its various commissions (e.g., the WNC Beef Cattle Commission). [www.wnccommunities.org/](http://www.wnccommunities.org/)

### Resources for Groups and Agencies

Government sources (i.e., Swain County, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, the State of North Carolina, and the United States government) serve as the only likely sources of recurring funds to support basic needs like ongoing staffing of the agricultural and natural resource agencies, including the Swain Soil and Water Conservation District, EBCI Environment and Natural Resources, North Carolina Cooperative Extension, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency. These resources serve as an important base on which to build everything else.

Most other funding sources for groups and agencies tend to focus on providing short-term funding for new projects and initiatives. Non-profit organizations and local government agencies are usually the only entities eligible for these sources of support, including those listed below. The programs funded through these sources must usually focus on helping several farmers at once; therefore, individual farmers would not apply directly to these sources, but multiple farmers should benefit from each project funded through these groups.

- Appalachian Regional Commission – This agency funds numerous initiatives to support economic development in Appalachian counties. [www.nccommerce.com/cd/arc/about-arc/documents](http://www.nccommerce.com/cd/arc/about-arc/documents)

- Cherokee Preservation Foundation – This foundation funds numerous efforts to support economic development, cultural preservation, and other initiatives relevant to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. [www.cherokeepreservationfdn.org/](http://www.cherokeepreservationfdn.org/)
- Community Foundation of WNC – CFWNC’s Food and Farming focus area may provide an opportunity for one-time grant funds to support agriculture in Swain County. [www.cfwnc.org/OurInitiatives/CommunityInvestmentFocusAreas/FoodandFarming/tabid/403/Default.aspx](http://www.cfwnc.org/OurInitiatives/CommunityInvestmentFocusAreas/FoodandFarming/tabid/403/Default.aspx)
- Duke Energy Soil and Water Conservation Funds – As part of Duke Energy’s FERC re-licensing agreement, the company is providing \$40,000 to the Swain Soil and Water Conservation District for improvement of soil and water conservation programs.
- Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians – The government of the Eastern Band provides funding, including general funds, to support various ongoing efforts related to agriculture, forestry, education, and more. [nc-cherokee.com/](http://nc-cherokee.com/)
- NC Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund – This agency can support general agricultural development programs, as well as conservation easements to protect individual farms from development, but all grant applications must be submitted by non-profit organizations or government agencies. [www.ncadfp.org/aboutus.htm](http://www.ncadfp.org/aboutus.htm)
- NC Tobacco Trust Fund Commission – This agency provides grants to non-profit organizations to help farmers transition from tobacco and create a sustainable agricultural economy. [www.tobaccotrustfund.org/](http://www.tobaccotrustfund.org/)
- Golden LEAF – Agriculture and job creation serve as two of three priority areas for this North Carolina foundation. Golden LEAF’s Community Assistance Program provides an especially important short-term opportunity to identify projects to enhance agriculture-related activity as part of a possible \$2 million grant package to support economic activity in Swain County. Work on this Community Assistance Program has taken place simultaneously with this farm plan. Golden LEAF’s Open Grants program provides another opportunity for grant support. [www.goldenleaf.org/](http://www.goldenleaf.org/)
- National Scenic Byways Program – Grants may be available to protect farmland and forestland that enhances the viewsheds of the two scenic byways that pass through Swain County – the Nantahala Byway and the Indian Lakes Scenic Byway. [www.bywaysonline.org/grants/](http://www.bywaysonline.org/grants/)
- North Carolina Value-Added Cost-Share Program – This program provides funding to help develop value-added farm products. [plantsforhumanhealth.ncsu.edu/extension/programs-resources/cost-share](http://plantsforhumanhealth.ncsu.edu/extension/programs-resources/cost-share)
- Southwestern Commission/Region A – This regional agency provides guidance and manages grants to support economic development and other activities in Swain and neighboring counties. [www.regiona.org/](http://www.regiona.org/)
- Southwestern NC Resource Conservation and Development Council – This regional non-profit organization helps support a wide variety of projects to help family farmers conserve their farmlands, protect their resources, and market their products. [www.southwesternrcd.org/](http://www.southwesternrcd.org/)
- Swain County Community Foundation – This community fund provides small grants to support a wide range of non-profit activities. [www.nccommunityfoundation.org/section/swain](http://www.nccommunityfoundation.org/section/swain)
- Swain County Government – The local government of Swain County provides funding to support various ongoing efforts related to agriculture, forestry, education, and more.

These funding sources include general funds, Tourism Development Authority funds, and other county funds. [www.swaincountync.gov/](http://www.swaincountync.gov/)

- Tennessee Valley Authority Settlement Funds – These funds may be available annually through 2017 to support various agriculture and forestry projects in Western North Carolina counties, including Swain. Two separate pots of grant funds are administered through WNC Communities and the NC Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Funds.
  - WNC Communities - [www.wnccommunities.org/](http://www.wnccommunities.org/)
  - NC ADFP Trust Fund - [www.ncagr.gov/environmentalprograms/docs.htm](http://www.ncagr.gov/environmentalprograms/docs.htm)
- USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program – This program provides grants to support farmers markets. [www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/fmpp](http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/fmpp)
- USDA Sustainable Community Innovation Grants – This program provides grants to demonstrate and encourage wider adoption of innovative agricultural practices. [www.southernsare.org/Grants/Types-of-Grants/Sustainable-Community-Innovation-Grants](http://www.southernsare.org/Grants/Types-of-Grants/Sustainable-Community-Innovation-Grants)
- WNC AgriVentures – This new initiative focuses on growing WNC’s agricultural economy. Its efforts are usually regional in scope, but Swain County should benefit from their initiatives. [www.landofsky.org/agriventures.html](http://www.landofsky.org/agriventures.html)

By partnering with these various foundations, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and others, Swain County can bring in some of the necessary resources to support existing agricultural operations and catalyze new ideas and areas of focus, as outlined in this plan. Together, Swain County, its people, and its partners can turn these ideas into reality, and achieve the primary goal of this plan: sustaining and enhancing agriculture in Swain County for many years to come.

## **Appendix 1 – North Carolina Statutes Regarding Countywide Farmland Protection Plans**

While we have many good reasons to establish a countywide farmland protection plan (as detailed in both the Executive Summary and the final section of Chapter 1), it's worth noting that this plan will also help Swain County qualify for a reduced amount of required match for grants made by the North Carolina Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation (ADFP) Trust Fund. By establishing this plan, Swain County, as a Tier 1 County, will move from a current requirement of 30% matching funds to no requirement for matching funds. Therefore, as a result of establishing this plan, Swain County will face one less obstacle in trying to secure NC ADFP Trust Fund grants to help protect the future of agriculture in Swain County.

Below we have excerpted the relevant sections of North Carolina General Statute 106-744 (as of January 3, 2013) regarding countywide farmland protection plans:

General Statute 106-744 (c2) - A county that is a development tier two or three county, as these tiers are defined in G.S. 143B-437.08, and that has prepared a countywide farmland protection plan shall match fifteen percent (15%) of the Trust Fund monies it receives with county funds. A county that has not prepared a countywide farmland protection plan shall match thirty percent (30%) of the Trust Fund monies it receives with county funds. A county that is a development tier one county, as defined in G.S. 143B-437.08, and that has prepared a countywide farmland protection plan shall not be required to match any of the Trust Fund monies it receives with county funds.

General Statute 106-744 (e) - As used in subsection (c2) of this section, a countywide farmland protection plan means a plan that satisfies all of the following requirements:

- (1) The countywide farmland protection plan shall contain a list and description of existing agricultural activity in the county.
- (2) The countywide farmland protection plan shall contain a list of existing challenges to continued family farming in the county.
- (3) The countywide farmland protection plan shall contain a list of opportunities for maintaining or enhancing small, family-owned farms and the local agricultural economy.
- (4) The countywide farmland protection plan shall describe how the county plans to maintain a viable agricultural community and shall address farmland preservation tools, such as agricultural economic development, including farm diversification and marketing assistance; other kinds of agricultural technical assistance, such as farm infrastructure financing, farmland purchasing, linking with younger farmers, and estate planning; the desirability and feasibility of donating agricultural conservation easements, and entering into voluntary agricultural districts.
- (5) The countywide farmland protection plan shall contain a schedule for implementing the plan and an identification of possible funding sources for the long-term support of the plan.

We believe that the content of this plan addresses all of the required elements listed above in General Statute 106-744(e), while also including complementary content that will help address the primary goal of protecting the present and future of agriculture in Swain County.

## Appendix 2 – Planning Process and Acknowledgements

Approximately 100 people participated in the creation of this plan. Local residents and agency staff from Swain County and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians provided the vast majority of the input, while subject experts located in neighboring counties and throughout the region also made valuable contributions to the plan. Nearly everyone offered ideas and suggestions regarding challenges, solutions, and short-term priorities. Others assisted by providing data, maps, photographs, and other supporting information and materials. We sincerely appreciate all of the effort and thinking that went into creating this plan, and we thank the following for their contributions:

- Approximately 70 people who participated in our public planning meeting on January 31, 2013, to assess current challenges to farming in Swain County and to brainstorm opportunities and strategies to maintain and enhance Swain County family farms going forward
- Approximately 40 people who participated in our public planning meeting on March 19, 2013, to review the draft plan and to help develop the short-term action plan
- Christy Bredenkamp, NC Cooperative Extension-Swain County
- Shermon Colvard, Swain County farmer
- Jeff Darnell and family, Darnell Farms
- Jeanine Davis, North Carolina State University
- Dennis Desmond, Land Trust for the Little Tennessee
- Bob Ferguson, Swain County farmer
- Mike Glover, Swain County farmer, Bryson City farmers market manager, and incoming chairman of the Swain County Chamber of Commerce
- Rob Hawk, NC Cooperative Extension-Swain County
- Kayla Hudson, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Bridget Kennedy, Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project
- Johnny McCoy, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Sarah McClellan-Welch, NC Cooperative Extension-Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
- Ken Mills, Swain County Economic Development Commission
- Benji Reece, NC Forest Service
- Ruth Ann Sitton, Swain County
- Debra Sloan, NC Department of Agriculture
- Lynn Sprague, Southwestern NC Resource Conservation and Development Council
- Swain County Farmland Preservation Board
- Swain County Soil and Water Conservation District – board and staff
- Becky Williamson, USDA-Farm Service Agency
- Jason Winchester, NC Forest Service
- Bill Yarborough, NC Department of Agriculture