

# Community Farm and Food Project Phase I - Assessing Needs and Building Partnerships

## Final Report for CS11-086

Project Type: Sustainable Community Innovation

Funds awarded in 2011: \$10,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2011

Region: Southern

State: North Carolina

Principal Investigator:

[Allison Kiehl](#)

Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy

## Project Information

### Abstract:

The purpose of this grant was to initiate Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy's (SAHC) Community Farm and Food Project in Buncombe County, North Carolina. SAHC accepted the donation of a 100 acre working farm in 2010, which will serve as the site for this new exciting program. SARE grant funds were utilized to assess the needs of agricultural and rural communities in Buncombe County that this farm could serve, evaluate the feasibility of three potential community farm models for this particular property, and build partnerships with the appropriate people and organizations to support the project.

## Introduction

SAHC's initial development of this Community Farm and Food project was based on three issues facing the local community of our region:

- 1) There is high interest in sustainable farming among young adults throughout Buncombe County and the western North Carolina area (WNC). Additionally, there are several institutions in the area offering programs or courses of study in sustainable agriculture and horticulture, as well as many sustainable farms hosting a large number of apprentices. The demand for locally and sustainably grown food in WNC continues to grow, even in hard economic times. Buncombe County's Agricultural Development and Farmland Protection Plan stated in 2007 that the average county farmer is over 58 years of age, and the conversion of farmland to other uses is rapidly expanding. Due to all of these factors, there is an increasing need for a generation of new farmers in Buncombe and WNC. However, out-of-reach land prices in WNC, high-cost of farm equipment and capital, and the lofty risk involved in starting an agricultural business often prevent prospective farmers from embarking new agricultural enterprises. An incubator farm in the region could provide access to land, equipment, and business training at reduced cost to potential farmers who otherwise lack resources necessary to begin farming. This would allow the new farmer to build his/her business in the start-up phase and

eventually afford to continue the venture off-site with the skills necessary to sustain it.

2) Despite the growing interest in and availability of sustainably and locally grown food in the WNC region, this fresh food is still not reaching certain communities in the area. A recent study by MANNA FoodBank and Feeding America (“Map the Meal Gap: Child Food Insecurity 2011”) revealed that 29.9 percent of children under the age of 18 in WNC and 27.5 percent in Buncombe County were food insecure in 2009. A study released in March of 2011 by the Food Research and Action Center rated the Asheville metropolitan statistical area (comprising Buncombe, Haywood, Henderson and Madison counties of WNC) as the seventh worst in the country in terms of people's basic ability to put food on the table. Based on other successful models in the country, SAHC's farm property could serve as an educational center for youth and young adults of rural, low income communities to build job and life skills through paid agricultural work. Participants can also gain skills through marketing the bounty produced at the farm back to their own communities (at subsidized rates), expanding access to fresh local foods and helping to expand a new consumer market for other farmers to reach.

3) Buncombe County's 2007 Agricultural Development and Farmland Protection Plan recognized that an initiative to preserve farmland against development will only be successful if there is a corresponding effort to sustain farm profitability, and this was made one of the county's top priorities for agriculture. Because of the topography of the mountainous WNC region, local farms cannot compete on the large commodity markets dominated by larger, flatter farms. Therefore, it is essential for WNC farms to continue to diversify, find innovative ways to remain profitable, and to be able to sell products directly to local markets. Community supported initiatives to find new, profitable agricultural markets for local farmers (such as value-added processing) have proven to be successful in the region. SAHC's farm property could build upon that success by serving as a model site for production of an innovative product, opening up a new market for the benefit of local farmers.

#### Project Objectives:

1) Assess the needs of agricultural and rural communities in Buncombe County: In order for SAHC's farm and food project to be supported by the community, it must benefit local farmers and citizens of the surrounding rural area. A needs assessment will engage farmers, partners, and rural citizens with the project, determine how the project can best aid participants in solving community issues, and guide SAHC in consideration of the three different community farm project models.

2) Evaluate the feasibility of three potential community farm projects to be hosted at the property: SAHC must perform further research into what it will actually take to operate each of the three potential community farm projects. This may best be accomplished by evaluating existing successful examples of each of the three projects. Also, certain existing conditions on the property will guide what can actually be accomplished on the ground at the property. SAHC will need to evaluate all of the physical characteristics of the farm in order to determine which community farm project would be most suitable for this particular property. This will also help to determine future farm improvement and infrastructure needs, to create a farm plan, and to create a financial budget for farm operations.

3) Build sound partnerships with appropriate people and organizations to gain support for the community farm project: As SAHC has already made preliminary contact with potential partners for each of the three possible community farm projects, more effort is needed to further develop these partnerships and to gain community support for the project. Partnership development will help to guide the

project in the right direction, and SAHC can proceed with the community farm project model that gains the most partner support.

4) Pursue one of the three community farm projects at the property (based on outcomes from the first three objectives): Based upon the needs of the local agricultural and rural communities, the physical suitability of the property, and the partnerships developed along the way, SAHC aims to have the tools and support necessary to pursue one of the three community farm project models at the end of this grant cycle. At this point, it is expected that the project will be guided by working partnerships with local organizations and members of the sustainable agriculture and rural communities.

## Cooperators

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## Research

### Materials and methods:

During the term of this grant (January - December 2012), SAHC's project manager was responsible for the following tasks under each objective:

1) Assess the needs of agricultural and rural communities in Buncombe County:

A) Perform research on important issues that rural and agricultural communities in Buncombe are facing and that are related to this project. This research will aim to determine which rural communities within Buncombe are most affected by food insecurity, which communities might have the least amount of access to fresh and local food, and which communities are facing the highest rates of unemployment. The research will also aim to identify local organizations that might already be working on some of these issues. In relation to agriculture, the research will help determine where the most opportunity exists for farmers to reach certain underserved communities. It will also identify what potential opportunities exist in the region to create a new product/market for farmers. The research will also look into what other agricultural support organizations are currently doing to address farm viability issues and if there are opportunities to partner.

B) Engage stakeholders and gain input on the project at the WNC Farmland Access and Preservation Forum. Attendees at this forum include a vast array of people and organizations involved in agriculture in the WNC region - local farmers, local rural citizens, local, regional, state and federal agricultural agencies, members of the Buncombe County agricultural advisory board, other regional land trusts, local colleges and universities, and cooperative extension staff, among others. This forum

is a gathering place to build a strong network across organizations and counties in support of agriculture and to develop an action agenda for improving access to and preservation of western North Carolina's farmland. It provides the perfect opportunity to gain input on the issues of utmost concern to rural citizens and farmers in Buncombe that a community farm and food project would help satisfy – issues such as availability and proximity of fresh and local food sources, unemployment, farm profitability, farm succession, land use values/taxes, availability of loans for land and capital, the needs of beginning farmers, etc...

2) Evaluate the feasibility of three potential community farm projects to be hosted at the property:

A) Perform research on the three community farm project models under consideration, including existing successful projects in North Carolina or other states. Make contact with existing community farms to explore what it takes to operate each one. Potential contacts include: Breeze Farm (an incubator in Orange County), the Elma C. Lomax Incubator Farm (Cabarrus County, NC Mountain Mushroom Cooperative, Foothills Family Farms Cooperative, Echoview Farm Community Fiber Mill project, the University of Vermont Cooperative Extension's Youth Agriculture Project, and the SEEDS DIG program in Durham.

B) Perform site visits to existing successful community farm projects to assess infrastructure, staffing, and other operational needs for each.

C) Perform an analysis of the land features on SAHC's property that will affect the community farm project. Analyze soils, topography, availability of tillable land, water availability, existing infrastructure, and other factors. Determine farm improvement and infrastructure needs that each community farm project will require.

D) Create a draft farm and financial plan for each potential community farm project. This will be based on the information acquired from the previous three steps. Plans for each potential project will summarize the infrastructure, staffing, operational, and financial requirements for each and will guide SAHC during the implementation phase of the project.

3) Build sound partnerships with appropriate people and organizations to gain support for the community farm project:

A) Continue to develop potential partnerships with contacts that SAHC has already made at certain organizations. SAHC has already begun working with staff of the NC State Cooperative Extension Buncombe office (NCCE), the local USDA NRCS office, the Buncombe County Soil and Water Conservation District (BCSWCD), Haywood Community College (HCC), Organic Growers School (OGS), BRF partners, and NC State's NC Choices program on preliminary development of this project. More resources are needed for SAHC to develop these relationships further, to solidify support of this project, to assess what roles these organizations might fulfill, and to clearly define those roles in moving forward.

B) Perform research on other potential partners for each community farm project. This will include research into the organizations and agencies that are working on similar agricultural and rural issues in the region and how they might benefit from assisting with this project.

C) As a leader of the WNC Farmland Access and Preservation Forum, make contacts with other potential partners for each project. These might include: the NC Rural Economic Development Center, Buncombe Farm Bureau office, Buncombe County Agricultural Advisory Board, local rural community centers, Echoview Farm Community Fiber Mill project, Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, Warren Wilson College, Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, local established and beginning farmers

D) Develop clear language and materials for introducing the project to potential partners. This step will correspond with the outreach aspect of the grant

requirements – both will aid in building strategic partnerships for support of the project.

4) Pursue one of the three community farm projects at the property (based on outcomes from the first three objectives): By the end of this grant period, SAHC aims to have the tools and resources necessary to implement one of the three community farm projects. First steps for implementation will include:

A) Finalize the farm, financial, and operations plans for the chosen project. These plans will guide the implementation process of the chosen project.

B) Assess additional staffing needs to implement the project. Can current staff and existing partnerships fulfill the requirements to get the project off the ground, or is additional staff needed?

C) If possible, convene a committee of all the partners to guide the implementation process.

D) Create an action plan for implementation of the project. The action plan will guide the next phase of the project.

#### Research results and discussion:

Funds from this grant enabled SAHC and the project manager to effectively assess the proper role that its farm property could fulfill to serve the local agricultural and rural community in Buncombe County and Western North Carolina. Extensive research was performed during this grant period on the needs of the local agricultural and rural community, on existing successful community farm models, on the features of SAHC's farm, and on the accomplishments of local partners working on similar issues.

The project manager's research into the needs of local farmers determined the following: Among farmers and farmer support groups – an incubator farm as well as a type of land-linking tool between new and retiring farmers were identified as a high priority for the area. Research also found that the development of a demonstration farm for a niche product or to open up a new market would also be very helpful to local farmers as competition within farmers' markets and for CSA shares continues to increase. However, there are already several organizations with demonstration farms working to develop new local markets for farmers including hops and other brewers' grains, shiitake mushrooms, winter greens, and biodiesel crops among others.

Research on existing successful community farm models and the feasibility of each to be hosted at SAHC's property revealed the following:

1. An incubator farm would require large support from county government or other local entity and/or significant grant funds, educational programs at the incubator would require at least one half to full-time Extension agent, there would need to be at least a half-time farm manager, and the incubator would require a fairly extensive irrigation system plus large equipment.

2. In speaking with representatives of organizations already working to develop niche products and markets, the largest need was not necessarily a new product, but the facilities to process beef products or other value-added products for local distribution.

3. In speaking with staff of a job skills training farm for disadvantaged youth in Vermont, it was found that a similar such project at SAHC's site would require at least one full-time coordinator, one full-time farm manager, several interns, consistent grant funding from year to year, at least one acre of food production, and some support from NCCE. From other research into this type of community farm, the PM found most examples to be run either by an Extension office or by a non-profit organization dedicated just to the farm and fundraising for its youth education

programs, not by an organization that runs the farm as one of its many programs or projects.

4. Mapping of SAHC's farm has shown that most of the soils and topography on the property are ideal for grazing, orchard or berry production, hay production, and some row crop production. The small amount of flat land on the property may make it difficult for larger-scale production of row crops, although there is some gently sloping land that could be utilized. There would need to be an addition of an irrigation system for row crops as well.

During this grant period, the project manager was able to build upon existing partnerships and to develop new partnerships with organizations that will be essential to implement the community farm project. Significant partnerships developed during this period include North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Organic Growers School, and Green Opportunities – an organization that provides job and life skills training to disadvantaged youth and young adults. Funds from this grant period also allowed the project manager to secure additional funding for the implementation phase of the project, beginning in 2013. SARE grant funds gave SAHC the staff capacity to embark on this large project and served as a stepping stone to secure more funding to be able to actually implement the project.

## **Participation Summary**

### Educational & Outreach Activities

#### **PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:**

Education/outreach description:

Funds from this grant allowed SAHC to create outreach materials to promote the project to the community. The SAHC website was updated to include a whole new section on the subject of farmland access and to highlight the Community Farm and Food Project. The website updates can be found here:

[http://appalachian.org/protected/farmland\\_andersonFarm.html](http://appalachian.org/protected/farmland_andersonFarm.html)

[http://appalachian.org/protected/farmland\\_access.html](http://appalachian.org/protected/farmland_access.html)

An informative brochure was also created to describe the project and was distributed at several agricultural events including regional conferences and workshops. Two articles were also included in SAHC's quarterly newsletters to introduce the project to the general public and organizational members. The project manager was able to attend high-profile agriculture conferences to perform outreach about the project – including the 2012 WNC Farmland Access and Preservation Forum, the Organic Grower's School, and the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association Sustainable Agriculture Conference. Outreach and partnership building was also performed during visits to the farm with partner organizations including North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Organic Growers School, Buncombe Soil and Water Conservation District, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and local farmers.

This grant allowed for the initiation of SAHC's farm as a training and teaching center based on sustainable agriculture. Thanks to this initial support, SAHC was able to secure additional funds for 2013 to implement the project, which will include several opportunities for outreach and education. We also submitted a proposal for the project to NC Department of Agriculture. This support will further our work at the site on sustainable agriculture practices and will allow SAHC to

impart knowledge about these practices to more people in the future. This additional funding will also support construction of an interpretive trail through the farm and will allow for the improvements necessary to establish the farm as a business incubator for beginning farmers, having a lasting impact on the community.

- [Program Brochure](#)
- [Newsletter Article 2](#)
- [Newsletter Article 1](#)

## Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

Based on all of the research and partnership building performed during this grant period, SAHC was able to determine the best role for its Community Farm and Food Project and to clearly define the vision for the farm. Because of the funds provided by this SARE grant, SAHC is now in the position to move forward with the project and has secured funding for implementation.

The farm will include several facets developed in stages that will address the needs of the region's agricultural and rural communities. One of the first stages that will initiate in 2013 is to establish the property as an incubator farm for new and beginning farmers - providing access to land and equipment at reduced rates for multiple new farmers. The first year will be a pilot phase of the incubator farm and will support a small, focused group of farmers. As funding allows, potential future development stages of the incubator will include a post-harvest processing & storage facility, value-added processing facility, housing for the farmers, and an educational gathering space. This will allow the farm to reach other producers in the area through rental of the processing space and equipment as well as educational courses. With this project, SAHC also wishes to engage local youth of low-income communities to provide an on-farm educational experience on how food is grown - increasing the quality of life for at-risk youth in the region. This aspect of the project will begin with the establishment of a farm trail to provide full access to the farm for visitors. Healthy food produced on the farm will also eventually be provided to citizens of these communities at little or no cost by collaborating with partners that already work in these communities.

Recommendations:

## Potential Contributions

The long-term goals for this project include establishing an incubator farm for beginning farmers, creating a value-added processing facility to innovate agricultural businesses, and providing agricultural-based skills training for disadvantaged citizens. This project will help strengthen the agriculture industry of Western North Carolina by training our future farmers of the region to take the place of those reaching retirement age - creating new enterprises for the agricultural economy. We estimate new activity created at the farm during the first phase has the potential to add \$200,000-\$400,000 to the sector over five years. This project is

ongoing and is expected to serve additional beginning farm enterprises in future years over the long-term. The value-added processing facility will also provide opportunities for innovation to new and established farmers to keep agricultural businesses viable. Education and training based on sustainable farming practices will also be a large focus of the farm – promoting environmentally compatible farming methods.

Additionally, the \$2-billion WNC tourism industry depends heavily on scenic landscapes created by local farms. This project will train new farmers, which will sustain farming as a viable industry and prevent loss of farmland to development – preserving scenic views for the tourism industry. New agricultural businesses and new successful farmers supported by this project will help keep our valuable farmland productive, preserve our scenic rural areas, support the local food economy, and sustain the local farming heritage – all invaluable to Western North Carolina agriculture and rural communities.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or SARE.



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