

## **Michigan Food and Farming Systems**

### **The State of Local Food in Michigan: Challenges and Opportunities for Beginning Farmers**

#### **SARE Professional Development**

Purpose: Issue identification and analysis of cross-cutting issues for the food system and beginning farmers in Michigan, to be used to inform North Central SARE's professional development strategy.

Participants: We attempted to find representation of farmers, educators, and food system leaders from the Upper Peninsula, Northwest, Southwest, South East, East Central, and South Central Michigan. For farmers, we sought out more who were established, opinion leaders in the community. Overall we spoke with farmers with varying size operations, products, methods, ages, some of who farm as a non-profit, some part-time while working off-farm jobs, and others who are full time farmers.

Method: We designed questions that would work well across several information gathering styles, including groups, conference calls, in-person, and one-on-phone phone calls. Each conversation began with an introduction of who MIFFS is, the purpose of the project, and what the results will be used for. The questions then flowed as follows:

1. Please share a bit of your story, including how you became a farmer, and about the kind of farming that you do.
  - a. What do you grow/raise?
  - b. Where are you located?
2. Who are your primary customers/what are your sales channels?
3. What are you most proud of in your work as a farmer/what is one of your greatest strengths?
4. What parts of farming are stressful/more difficult than you think it should be?
5. What have you tried to address these difficulties? What has/hasn't worked?
6. What are the biggest barriers to becoming a successful farmer?
7. Is there anything else you believe SARE, MIFFS, and other organizations supporting beginning farmers should know in order to effectively support you?
8. What topics do you wish ag educators would focus more on/be better experts in/what topics do you want more education on?
9. Is there anything else we haven't covered?
10. Do you have any advice or requests for us as service providers?

There were slight variations on the above questions for educators/experts, most significantly the following:

1. Tell me about your program and your connection to beginning farmers and local food.
2. What types of farmers do you mostly work with in your region/role?
3. What do you hear most often as desired topics farmers want to know more about?
4. Any other farmers you think we should talk to?

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## **Farmer Profiles**

We chose to speak with farmers who we've worked with through our programming and networks, or who was recommended to us by regional educators and other farmers. Our intention was for these farmers to be beginning farmers who are often seen as opinion leaders, and who represent a broad selection of beginning farmers from across the state. The farmers ranged from being very novice beginning farmers without an agriculture education or background, to being third generation farmers or marrying into

farming families. Others got into farming through activism, social justice, wanting a connection to nature, responding to the need of their community for healthy, local food, and having applicable work ethic and skills from other backgrounds, including the military.

The farmers we spoke with farm on rural land from 2 acres to 180 acres, or in urban areas on small lots up to about 7 acres. They primarily produce diversified fruits and vegetables, with some also growing herbs, cut flowers, and grains, and others raising livestock for meat and eggs. Every farmer we spoke to participated either in farmers markets or selling through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). Other common sales channels include wholesale accounts to local restaurants and schools, small stores, distilleries, and distribution through Cherry Capital Foods. Different CSA models include a personal farm CSA and also several multi-farm CSA's. Farmers markets also varied from being on-site, off-site, hosted at businesses such as the Chrysler facility, and also mobile markets.

A successful icebreaker for our conversations was to ask farmers about what they were most proud about as a farmer. The responses here were all aligned with their motivations for getting into farming to begin with. Pride for the farmers we spoke with came from their work ethic, ability to solve complex problems, feeding people, developing programs, maintaining a positive work environment, and being environmentally conscience. Farmers were proud of their soil, and the quality of their product. Some were proud of contributing to healthy food access in places like factories, and others about educating people, particularly their customers who are several generations removed from food production. We heard about pride of the intention that they came to farming with, and of their program that supports agriculture training for veterans. We also heard pride about being a model of African Americans leading and working collaboratively. Several farmers cited their pride about how they manage staff and the team they have built.

## **Our Findings: Top Challenges**

The challenges and areas of stress farmers reported are similar to what is reported nationwide, through surveys such as the findings from a 2017 survey by the National Young Farmers Coalition<sup>1</sup>. Below you can see some of the primary challenges reported to us by farmers separated by category, but note that there are overlaps between categories.

Land: Farmers we spoke with from all corners of Michigan reported challenges around land that they either personally experienced, or that they often hear about from other farmers. A top concern is finding available land that is suitable for the farming they want to do. A major concern is affording to purchase the suitable farmland or access capital to rehabilitate and improve less suitable land for farming. Assessing potential farmland and existing infrastructure for suitability to address the needs of their desired farm is a challenge, especially in the Spanish speaking community. Assessing zoning impacts, flooding risks, water and electric infrastructure, and the condition of existing perennial crop plantings were all discussed as major stumbling blocks or hurdles for new farmers acquiring land. Farmers also reported the preference for having housing onsite with their farmland, which can be a major limitation in urban/peri-urban communities or areas with farmland protection easements that prohibit building housing.

Financial: Many farmers develop stress around financial challenges, just like any other business owner. Farmers' stress around finances, however, are very complex in that it can be very difficult to make a living wage as a farmer, but at the same time it is challenging to find funding or loans for farmers who don't fit the traditional U.S. model. Many farmers have been unsuccessful at obtaining USDA loans or

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youngfarmers.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/NYFC-Report-2017.pdf>

financial assistance due to their inability to demonstrate that they meet the eligibility requirements. This is often tied to inadequate or improper filing of a Schedule F with the IRS, lack of a business banking account that is separate from their family's household account, or lack of adequate accounting practices. Many farmers do not want to rely on taking out operating loans, thus the adoption of CSA models. One reason for not wanting to take out loans is reticence to trust USDA or discomfort understanding eligibility and lending requirements of USDA or other lending institutions. Loans are often seen as high risk to beginning farmers, especially without adequate crop insurance options for specialty crops and diversified farms. Cash flow during the season is a major concern, often prohibiting sales of produce through certain markets due to the turnaround time for payment back to the farmers. This is especially true with Spanish speaking farmers who need cash from the week's sales in order to pay pickers and other farm labor. Many farmers take a lot of pride in not needing to access credit for their businesses and actively choose to avoid it. All of these concerns also lead back to a general need to make capital investments, both at the beginning of the season and especially as a new farmer to get the business up and running. Some large investments given to us as examples include land, processing facilities, equipment, coolers, and infrastructure. Farmers also discussed a lack of qualified financial advisors and accountants that understand farm businesses to hire to manage accounts or access for advice. Setting up record keeping and accounting systems was a major concern as well as the amount of time and skill set that is required to manage those systems.

Markets: Access to and an understanding of markets and sales channels are critical to a farm's success. As noted above, of the farmers we spoke to most participate in a direct to consumer model, often through CSA shares or selling at farmers markets. We began gathering information for this report with an assumption that finding viability in today's market would be a top challenge. Of the farmers we spoke with, many felt they had found their place in the market but understood the difficulty of getting a foot in the door, and the long time it can take for beginning farmers to establish their own markets and customers. Some farmers reported challenges around wholesale options for small-scale farming. These include producing consistent product, quality management, distribution, turnaround time for getting paid for product, lack of needed volume, cost of required 3<sup>rd</sup> party certifications, transportation, lack of crop insurance options, anxiety over understanding and assessing contracts, lack of adequate aggregation and distribution options, lack of adequate storage and transportation for crops, as well as a discomfort with negotiating skills and legal guidance.

Other farmers had issues with the number of farmers markets they were expected to go to, and they believe there are too many farmers markets and not enough farmers to go around. Another concern with the number of farmers markets is that across the board for the very new farmer on just a few acres and the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation farmer on almost 20 acres, the profit margin isn't big enough to send anyone but themselves to the market, so they have to determine the best value of their time – farming or being at the market. Spanish speaking farmers identified not being able to make enough sales at farmers markets, especially those farms that only produce once crop. It is typical for them to attend a market and make under twenty dollars. Ability to assess market viability to project potential success in selling is a barrier, as were marketing and branding businesses, setting up attractive displays, and the need to diversify the crops they produce. Interestingly, many Spanish speaking producers and beginning farmers only prefer to sell at markets or directly from the farm for cash flow reasons. Due to avoidance of credit utilization, these operations often have immediate need for cash from sales in order to pay labor and pickers. Many producers are unable to wait more than a week or two to receive proceeds or reimbursements from buyers.

Education: The farmers we spoke with recognized the concerted efforts of MSU Extension, non-profits, and other entities for providing education to farmers across the state. A common challenge within

education that we heard is that even with the widespread education, it can be difficult to find answers to specific questions. Farmers reported that they can hear big picture information, but it becomes a challenge when they have to figure out how to use it. Many farmers reported that they learn best from other farmers, and found top-down education had its limitations, and that they had challenges finding mentors as well as trusted, free, boots on the ground technical assistance from educators. A commonly discussed challenge in farmers' education was business skills.

Another area of education that farmers found challenging was around food safety. Farmers find it hard to translate what they learn in educational sessions or PSA trainings to actual practices on the farm. They know where they are out of compliance with FSMA but often lack the guidance, technical assistance, or understanding to know how to adjust practices to bring their operation into compliance. Another major barrier in relation to food safety is access to the capital needed to invest in infrastructure upgrades to bring operations into compliance with recommended BMPs. Many are utilizing really old infrastructure, because it is cheaper or can be obtained for free, that requires significant investments to bring into compliance. Wash pack, cooler, and storage spaces were often cited as problem areas needing funding, as well as the condition of farm buildings in relation to pest exclusion.

Challenges around participating and understanding how to navigate USDA programs were also reported. One farmer reported that they faced more challenges than others when obtaining a farm number because her partner is a minority. Other farmers reported challenges in obtaining farm numbers due to the size of their operation or a lack of understanding of their type of farm operations by USDA staff. It was noted that if local field staff don't have experience working with diversified or newer innovative types of agriculture, farmers were told that USDA lacks programs for them and it is hard to obtain a farm number. Producers with small operations and especially those in urban areas frequently felt they were asked to justify why they needed a Farm Number at USDA, which often felt like discrimination and prevented them from wanting to work with USDA in the future. Additionally, producers cited needing to make multiple trips to the FSA field office to obtain a farm number due to not being given all of the forms they needed to fill out on their first visit or not being told to bring necessary documentation.

Labor: Not all of the farmers we spoke with were established or big enough to hire staff, but a common thread when this was discussed as a challenge was the difficulty of finding and training quality employees. We heard from a farmer that more education is needed around how to find labor, then how to legally establish that relationship and the legal requirements of employers. Housing was also discussed as a challenge when it comes to labor as was cash flow to pay labor without tapping into the credit system or operating loans.

Crop Insurance: Several farmers reported challenges around available and affordable crop insurance for a diversified farm. Many producers did not know where to go to access crop insurance, understand what average insurance premiums should be for a similar operation, and there was discussion about the frustrations with filing a claim and properly reporting damage. Many farmers had been discouraged from participating in NAP by local USDA service center staff due to issues with the program. Diversified producers have almost no interactions with crop insurance agents that offer Whole Farm Revenue Protection and felt a huge lack of information on it. They also reported frustration in trying to work with FSA staff to obtain crop insurance for specialty crop farms due to the planting reporting requirements, which are developed based on cash crop planting and not tailored to meet the needs of farms that continuously plant successions of crops throughout the year. Farmers reported being told that current reporting requirements would necessitate them to come in to verify acreage within 15 days every time

they planted a crop. This would mean going to the service center at least once a month which seemed unfeasible to many. There was also considerable frustration with how to report volume and yields to demonstrate eligibility. FSA operates on acreage, so converting that to bed feet or rows to report to FSA was very difficult for producers without technical assistance, and that technical assistance is not readily available at FSA. Another major issue with specialty crops and insurance is that some crops can be harvested and sold as seconds or process, even when damaged, at a significantly lower profit than undamaged crops. Some farmers reported they had claims denied if any harvest had taken place, even if they only received a 10<sup>th</sup> of the value of the crop due to loss in quality. This again is due to insurer's lack of understanding of specialty crop operations and the habit of implementing programs like they would for a cash crop farm.

Cultural Barriers: A very common challenge and source of stress that we heard about from farmers, and continue to hear about within our work, is the lack of awareness about the true cost of food. Many farmers discussed their efforts to build a local food movement, to raise the cultural value on healthy and local food, and even education around why farmers markets are good for communities or how a CSA model can work for the average Michigan resident. We heard from one farmer that, “defending pricing all the time is demoralizing.”

Equipment: For small farmers, both urban and rural, we heard several challenges around equipment. These ranged from finding and affording equipment that is appropriate for small-scale diversified crop farming, to general mechanical problems that require financing to fix or a completely different set of skills to properly maintain or fix.

Water: Both urban and rural farmers we spoke with reported challenges around water. In Detroit, farmers described how they deal with faulty city infrastructure that results in a yearly water main break that floods the access road, leads to no water pressure, and results in delayed transplanting, for example. Beyond that, access to water and affording water can be an issue. In several areas around the state, we also heard about challenges with salty water and the need for more assistance on how to manage that. There are also problems with minerals found in well water in certain areas of the state that are harsh on irrigation equipment or have negative impacts on crops. Farmers report not knowing how to address water quality issues and the lack of proper technical assistance for guidance. This leads to an inability to assess an existing wells' suitability for irrigation, pumping capacity, and interpret water testing analyses. Flooding of fields with increased storm events and lack of adequate drainage were also discussed as challenges, especially given the limited cases of crop insurance.

Regulations and Policy: Several farmers who we spoke with reported challenges around compliance with and navigation of different regulations and policies – from the federal level to local zoning. These included Right to Farm, environmental regulations from the state, federal and USDA, special use permitting requirements in relation to Right to Farm, FSMA, labor policies, and taxes.

Pests: Several farmers discussed ongoing challenges with pests, specifically related to animal pressure. Other issues include a lack of effective pesticides, increased resistance to pesticides among certain pests, and climate variability leading to less harsh winters that kill pests or increase exposure to bacteria and diseases. In particular related to organic production we heard about problems with increased pressure from insects and disease, and with that a lack of understanding of IPM practices or where to go to find resources that are easy to understand, cost effective control solutions, and technical assistance. A lot of organic producers utilize compost and compost tea to treat pest or disease issues despite the lack of

research proving its effectiveness and without awareness of biological control options. Many producers were reticent to utilize any treatments that could be viewed as a pesticide by a consumer, including bacterial treatments, especially if they are utilized but cash crop industry. Protecting stored crops and seeds from pests, especially mammals and birds, were repeatedly discussed. Evaluating effectiveness of control methods was another challenge.

Transportation: This was largely an issue discussed by urban farmers in Detroit and Flint. These farmers discussed challenges around transporting their produce to markets, and also how transportation is a barrier for getting the community to their farm to buy the products. Many producers in urban areas are unable to afford to have a car and pay exorbitant insurance premiums, let alone investing in refrigerated transportation. Without access to transportation producers are usually prevented from being able to access USDA service center. For example in Detroit, producers have to drive all the way to Ann Arbor to access USDA FSA or NRCS and they have to drive even further to Adrian to access RD or loan officers. Adrian is located in a very conservative county and many producers of color do not feel comfortable going there for fear of discrimination. Lack of transportation also prevents a lot of producers from attending educational and outreach events.

Legal Advice: Many farmers cannot afford adequate legal advice and if they can afford it, do not know where to go to access it. Common legal questions farmers needed guidance on included, legal ramifications and obligations when participating in USDA programs, business structure, liability, labor laws, Right to Farm, insurance coverage, and dispute resolution with neighbors and local governments.

Environmental: Farmers across the board care deeply for their land, water, and the planet. Several farmers cited climate change as a concern, and others describe feeling stress about the cost and time needed to manage and use environmentally friendly practices.

## **Farmers' Recommendations**

In our conversations with farmers, we made sure to ask if there are any topics we missed, things that are generally not talked about, or what areas they suggest technical assistance and service providers' focus on. We gained a lot of valuable insight to help inform a professional development plan for agricultural educators, ranging from desired topics for education to be more proficient in for technical assistance, to the structure proposed by farmers that they feel they can learn the best in.

### *Support Requested*

Small-Scale Farming Specific Resources: An overarching theme across most of our conversations was the need for education and templates to be very specific to the small-scale diversified farmer. We overwhelmingly heard that farmers want education on business management, marketing plans, financial resources, and legal topics, and when they've participated in workshops on these previously the templates and framework are often still not as farm-specific as they need. Farmers indicated they felt many educators had a fundamental lack of knowledge about small farm economics that vary by region of the state and day to day challenges of running small or micro farms.

Consultative Services: Many farmers shared with us that broader workshops and presentations are a useful starting point, but that pretty quickly they need more hands-on support that is specific to their own farm and individual needs. Farmers reported that having local support was very helpful, and they appreciate very practical answers. They want to see more educators delivering technical assistance that

primarily work in the field rather than in an office, and more availability of one-on-one assistance or mentorship programs. There is also a need for free/very low cost consultation services that are culturally appropriate, delivered by individuals that understand the dynamic needs and challenges faced by the communities they farm in.

Holistic Approach: Several farmers expressed an interest in having a suite of services available to them that would provide a start-to-finish education. This could potentially include courses on financial management, business planning, and be completed with networking for farmers and funders. Examples of programs in other states include the Cornell Small Farms Program and Farm Beginnings. Current beginning farmer programs only address a portion of management for small scale diversified farms, and those existing resources are scattered.

Case Studies: One method of sharing information that farmers discussed when very personalized support isn't always available is having case studies of successful farms that might be similar to something they are experiencing. For example, a farmer in Benzie County wanted to learn about other farmers who are running businesses in seasonal economies.

Simple Reference Sheets: Another suggestion was to create simple, self-explanatory reference sheets modeled after the Master Gardeners resource, which could be a tangible way to share step-by-step information for various topics. The example given by one farmer was to create this type of sheet documenting the process for finding, hiring, and employing labor, including any laws or other requirements to be successful.

Connections and Networks: Farmers who were both very new and more experienced talked about a missing link in knowledge sharing between older farmers and newer farmers. These connections can lead to not only information sharing, but also to relationships for mentoring, apprenticing, working on the farm, and can eventually even lead to a farm transition plan between generations.

### *Topics Requested*

Business Planning: As mentioned above, it is important to farmers that the education they receive around business management and marketing plans be specific to small-farms. Many farmers recognized a need for help with setting business goals, creating a plan to reach those goals, and also planning for financial stability. We also heard requests for information on how crop planning can turn into business planning. Some farmers felt they could use a business crash course, while others felt they were at a point to benefit from a very comprehensive course.

Marketing: Farmers described some very creative strategies that they have seen or used to market themselves and their products. More resources on sales channels and markets were requested, including more targeted education on how to get into markets. Generally, farmers felt that with the number of farmers markets that exist they are being stretched too thin.

Funding: Because many beginning farmers aren't eligible for certain loans in their first years farming, some farmers are interested in information on more localized funding sources. Also, we generally heard about interest in funding tailored for small businesses, connections to other grants and interest free loans, and questions about how to fund infrastructure investments.

Scaling Up: Many farmers reported having reached their ideal size, while others mentioned that they are interested in scaling up but were unsure about how to do so. Different reasons for scaling up were wanting to access new and different markets. One request was for more information about how to meet regulations as you scale up (like FSMA or GAP).

Soil Health: Urban and rural farmers expressed interest in more education around soil health. This is also where they would like more specialized technical assistance and would benefit from tools for working with different soils and practices like season extension. One urban farmer explained that on their farm and many urban farms the practice of cover cropping is not prevalent, but that she and others have a desire to do more. They requested more resources and trainings on managing soil health in high tunnels, cover cropping on a very small scale, tools to convert recommendations from pounds per acre to small spaces, and technical assistance for planting cover crops without mechanization. There were also requests for more information on building soil with compost and the use of compost tea.

Disease and Pest Management: Pest management was discussed as a challenge, and many farmers also recommended more education around IPM to help reduce crop loss. An urban farmer wanted to know how to combat diseases that may be unique in urban environments without the use of harmful pesticides. Producers want more resources on cultural and mechanical pest controls to avoid pesticides.

Water: As described in the challenges section above, challenges around water range from access to quality. Farmers described topics around water management, water testing, and water amendments (when the water is too salty) as areas they are interested in learning more.

Laws and Regulations: Regulations and policies can be difficult to navigate for a farmer of any experience level. The farmers who brought this up cited specific challenges they had faced around local zoning, or federal regulations, and mostly talked about wanting to understand more how they were affected by the regulations and the steps needed to comply. Many producers simply did not know where to go to find any legal guidance.

Land Access: Farmers wanted more resources to understand how to find available and usable land. There is also a need for resources on how to assess land and infrastructure for risk and suitability to farming, especially water infrastructure. There was also an interest in education around transition plans and the development of a transition network.

Dealing with Stress: A few farmers we spoke with were interested in more education and emphasis on self-care techniques and the connection that “a healthier you makes a healthier business.”

Consumer Education: Farmers, particularly those who relied heavily on their CSA customers and farmers market sales, were particularly interested in broader education to their customers to teach them about CSA’s, cooking from scratch, and generally about supporting your local farmer to access fresh, healthy food.

Information about SARE: Several farmers said they wanted to know about SARE resources, and how they can work together more in the future.

These are other topics that farmers listed they want more resources and educational opportunities around:

- Taxes
- Insurance
- Value added opportunities
- Beekeeping in urban settings
- Equity
- How to use food access programs
- Lists of restricted herbicides and pesticides
- Crop insurance



## Observations from Agricultural Educators

The experts and educators we spoke with represent a broad geographic area and topic expertise. Some of the descriptions they gave for the farmers they work include a range of small to medium size farms, some stated usually less than 100 acres. They are typically vegetable farmers, with some livestock. Sales channels include grocery stores, restaurants, farmers markets, pop up sales, CSA, institutions, and distributors such as Cherry Capital Foods.

### *Strengths of Farmers from the Educators' Perspective*

The agricultural educators and experts had long lists of what they thought the strengths are of the farmers they work with. They describe the farmers as being persistent, passionate, innovative, and being cooperative before competitive. In the Upper Peninsula educators were hugely impressed by the skills of farmers who have taken season extension and really excelled in the cold climate. Elsewhere they are described as being serious about their business, resilient, and hungry for knowledge. In urban areas the farmers are often described through more of a community development framework, being completely dedicated to improving access to fresh food for low-income communities.

### *Challenges Identified*

Many of the challenges identified by the experts and educators overlapped with what the farmers themselves identified. This includes access to land, access to capital, scaling up, labor, housing, climate, consumer perception of the price of food, finding appropriate equipment for small scale farming, infrastructure, logistics, getting into the industry, and the short growing season.

### *Perceived Needs*

Business Management: Educators recognized that classes on business management don't tend to be the most popular, but that they believe there is a growing need and understanding of farmers that this topic is a priority. This includes farm finances, how to be financially viable, taxes, legal issues, and overall business planning.

Scaling Up: Several educators discussed the need for more support for farmers that want to scale up their operations. Many farmers could use guidance and best practices for this process when it all starts happening at once – they need market access, need a buyer, the buyer wants the product right now, but the farmer needs to also increase their growing capacity.

Mechanization: Educators cited a need for increased demonstrations and resources on low cost mechanization options for beginning farmers.

Crop-by-Crop Financials: To assist with things like business planning and financial viability, some experts suggested recording the life cycle of one crop for farmers to see and plan around.

Connecting to Buyers: More resources on how to connect to buyers would be beneficial to many farmers.

Distribution: This was less of a need for education, but more a perceived need of what farmers, in this case farmers in the Upper Peninsula, needed in order to be more successful. The expert in the UP said the farmers they work with need more distribution facilities and a more vast distribution network. This was brought up by educators across the state.

Financing: Experts across the state highlighted a need for more education and resources around accessing financing. They feel that farmers need a better understanding about FSA financing, and other options for

these farmers that don't fit neatly into the traditional system. Resources about financing for infrastructure, and other startup costs would also benefit many farmers.

Training Style: Educators across the state also had ideas about different models that may be helpful for farmers to learn giving their learning styles and time restrictions. Suggestions such as courses needing to be multiple days came up several times, particularly when it came to learning about business management and planning. Others suggested using models, or successful stories, that can share practices by examples of farmers who may be similar to the farming learning.

Culture of Agricultural Leadership: Educators mentioned that small farmers are often not taken seriously by government officials or educators, especially if they work off-farm. They experience a lot of bias about the amount of time and effort they put into farming, size of operations in relation to bigger farms, the amount of labor they put into their farms, their economic contributions to the industry, and credibility. They often find the need to justify whether or not they are a "real farm," which immediately creates a barrier in building trust and relationships with resource providers. The State Department of Agriculture was specifically mentioned as claiming that local food and small farms are not economically viable and are just a trend. They overlook the fact that most of these are beginning farmers that are coming from non-traditional farm backgrounds with very diverse training needs. There is a huge need for leadership in the state to have more cultural awareness and more exposure, interaction, and understanding of the needs of beginning specialty crop producers and small scale diversified agriculture.

## **Conclusion**

The farmers that we spoke with were very appreciative of this project's approach to go directly to them for their input. Many farmers feel that the education that is available to them is developed through a very top down approach, so they thought it was refreshing to share their experience and have their voices heard. Thank you for this opportunity to have so many wonderful and insightful conversations with farmers and agricultural educators from around the state.