

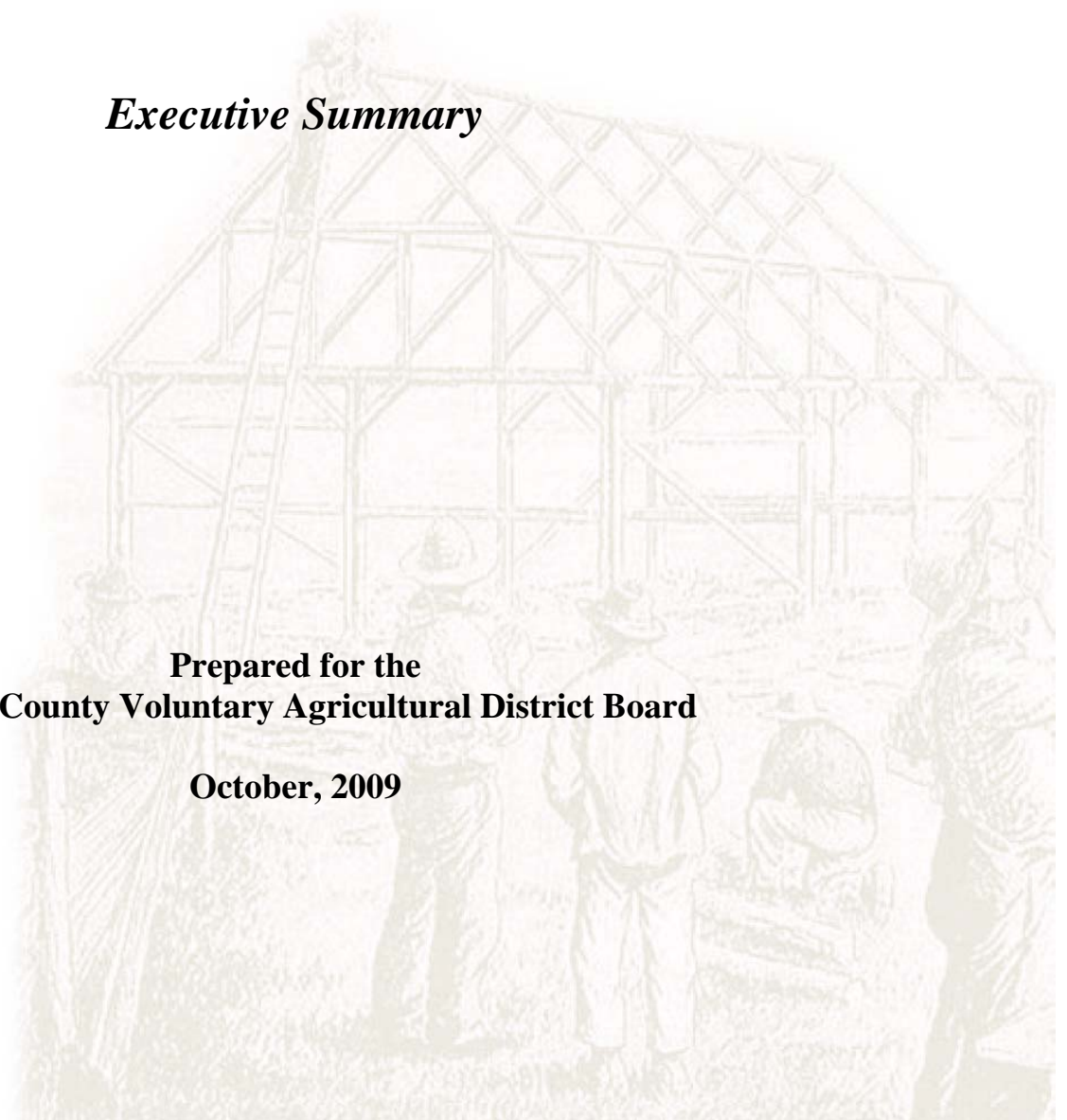


Stanly County, North Carolina Farmland Preservation Plan

Executive Summary

**Prepared for the
Stanly County Voluntary Agricultural District Board**

October, 2009



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project is to analyze and to understand the foundations of Stanly County's agricultural economy and to create a Farmland Preservation Plan that will address a suite of issues facing today's farmers and citizens in the County today as well as set the stage for agricultural growth in the future.

The project output encourages long-term policy formation in support of agriculture while providing a specific short-term framework to guide local programs regarding specific agricultural economic development and land use initiatives. Because the Farmland Preservation Plan addresses so many divergent issues ranging from land planning to industrial development, the plan is broken into two separate, but inter-related sections. These sections are:

1. The Stanly County Agricultural Land Use Plan
2. The Stanly County Agricultural Economic Development Plan

Each component of the Plan is intended to support agriculture as a continuing and economically productive land use. The result of the process is a series of findings relative to agricultural business and land use conditions. Additionally, the study team makes 15 recommendations for action to improve these conditions to advance both the agricultural industry and local communities.

This study uses a broad definition of agriculture to include all aspects of the cultivation and production of plant material and animal products as well as the marketing, processing and distribution of these products, and other secondary on-farm activities (e.g., agricultural tourism, forestry, and aquaculture.)

CURRENT CONDITIONS

In 2007, approximately 41 percent (104,517 acres) of Stanly County's 252,838 acres were in farm ownership or farm use, making agriculture one of the largest land uses in the County. Land in farms in Stanly County includes 58,195 acres of cropland (55 percent), 20,558 acres of pastureland, and 19,712 acres of woodland (See Figure 1).

Farmlands in the County are concentrated mostly in western and southern Stanly County running from Richfield to Locust and Stanfield. Adequate Prime and Productive¹ soils are found in the County, but are widely dispersed. Since development often targets high quality agricultural soils, agricultural operations are similarly dispersed with significant concentrations of agriculture concentrated in areas with high development pressure.

¹ Prime and Productive soils are high productivity soil classifications as defined by Natural Resource Conservation Service.

Stanly County Farmland Preservation Plan

The foundation of Stanly County’s agricultural economy lies primarily in its poultry sector. The sector represents 76 percent of farm market value sold in the County in 2007, up from 74 percent in 2002. If one were to include the soybean sector—which has important linkages to the poultry industry—then the importance of the sector would be even more pronounced.

Between 2008 and 2013, the local population is estimated to grow two percent while the number of households is expected to increase three percent. This indicates growth in seasonal housing likely affiliated with lake oriented developments. Increases in population and income should lead to an eight percent increase in housing occupancy between 2000 and 2008 and a one percent increase between 2008 and 2013. This growth, while providing an opportunity to sustain local food production, will present challenges by mix rural residential growth and agricultural industry operations.

Due to Stanly County’s proximity to major East Coast consumer markets, agricultural producers have the opportunity to benefit from the increasing demand for locally grown agricultural products. Niche markets and opportunities within segments of traditional agricultural sectors offer additional opportunities for growth. Locally produced foods, such as turkeys, are examples of markets seeing increased demand, as evidenced by such national and regional retailers as Whole Foods, Harris Teeter, and Food Lion. These retailers have successfully developed and sustained strong linkages with local food producers to supply their retail outlets.

There are many other factors that influence the direction of agriculture in Stanly County which are summarized in both the land use and economic development elements of the Farmland Preservation Plan. Many of these factors are incorporated within the SWOT Matrix (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). SWOT is a very simple technique that supports strategic decision making by identifying the key trends and leveraging events facing Stanly County agriculture today.

SWOT MATRIX			
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strong production sectors 2. Strong private sector/entrepreneurial interests 3. Proximity to consumer markets 4. Strong government interest and support 5. Good soils and climate resources 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Aging farm population 2. High land values 3. Parcel fragmentation 4. High risk for nuisance suits 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Growth in “local” food consumption 2. Increased institutional “local” food purchasing 3. Rise of niche markets 4. Development of regional biofuels markets 5. Expansion in the use of forest biomass for energy 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Volatile commodity prices 2. Supply chain consolidation 3. Globalization 4. Input costs 5. Labor availability

The matrix provides highlights of the opportunities and challenges facing Stanly County. Managing the balance between community growth and the economic viability of agriculture will be one of the greatest challenges facing the County as it seeks to implement this Plan.

MOVING FORWARD WITH THE PLAN

Agriculture in Stanly County, North Carolina is undergoing significant structural change as its economy changes from a rural, resource and manufacturing based economy to a more suburban, service driven economy. The challenge faced by Stanly County is to successfully manage this transition for the benefit of the agricultural industry, individual farms, and the community at large. Because of this complexity, the Plan's recommendations are divided into two distinct topic areas, land use and economic development. These sections are defined below.

Agricultural Land Use Recommendations

The Land Use recommendations are offered to improve the integration among agriculture, forestry, and suburban land uses in Stanly County. Given the rate of residential growth in Stanly, these traditionally land-dependent industry sectors suffer from neighbor conflict, land fragmentation, transportation limitations, and other challenges to traditional production practices. Many of these limitations are driven by the incompatibility of mixing residential and industrial uses. Because rural zoning typically treats agriculture, forestry, and residential uses as complementary, the conflict has been built into land use regulations.

Beyond issues of inter-sector conflict, Stanly County's proximity to the greater Charlotte metropolitan area, and its robust housing market, have made open land more valuable, often putting its cost beyond its profit-making ability to support commodity agriculture and forestry uses. Land use policies such as zoning, infrastructure development, and subdivision regulations can also detract from agricultural and forestry value while enhancing residential and commercial values.

The land use recommendations fall within three broad focus areas. The focus areas are largely independent, but have some level of interactivity and are briefly described below:

1. ***Working Lands Protection*** – These recommendations target improvements in or development of policies and programs with the sole purpose of protecting the land base that supports the industries of agriculture and forestry. The general purpose is to respect the needs of these industries while providing reasonable protections for all citizens and industry constituents.
2. ***Future County Policy and Planning*** – This area focuses on meeting the needs of modern agricultural and forestry practices and ensuring that future planning and policy support such needs. Therefore it examines a wider array of policies than just land use and includes taxation, health, transportation, and labor that are intended to bring local conditions in line with regional competitors.

3. ***State and Federal Advocacy*** – This category’s recommendations are influenced more heavily by people and groups outside of Stanly County, its local municipalities, agencies, and other entities.

Agricultural Economic Development Recommendations

In order to support agricultural and forest products industry development that fits local conditions and needs, the County should consider a combination of structural economic development programs, such as business retention, expansion, and attraction programming related to primary production sectors; recruitment or internal development of secondary market opportunities; broad based work force development; and infrastructure planning, as well as business development programming that specifically addresses the needs of individual agricultural enterprises. Such activities may include supporting the development of a wood waste aggregation facility to create energy markets from forest residue.

The agricultural economic development recommendations fall within three broad focus areas. The focus areas are largely independent with some level of interactivity as described below:

1. ***Agricultural Development and Marketing*** – These recommendations target improvements in access to local and regional markets at both the wholesale and retail levels. Market development activities look to expand the capability of individual farms to improve market position and access higher value supply chains. The business development support elements of this focus area include counseling, concept development, land access, and financing support with the intent to support growth and transition in the agricultural economy. Beyond individual farm businesses, additional programming is recommended to enhance the agribusiness policy climate and encourage infrastructure development to support industry sector growth.
2. ***Training and Education*** – This area focuses on developing the future human capital needs of agriculture beginning with creating a base of well qualified farm leaders and creating a source of new and renewing farm operators. Recommendations also highlight the need to create a reliable source of skilled and unskilled labor which can meet the needs of modern agricultural practices for the range of industries already present in the County.
3. ***Public Policy and Regulation*** – This area is dedicated to land use, environmental, health, and transportation policy support needs that are intended to bring local conditions in line with industry needs, so that Stanly County producers can compete more effectively in the marketplace.

Successful implementation of these recommendations will involve a multidisciplinary effort supported by the public sector, private industry and agricultural operations as well as state and local agencies. The necessary partnerships will be driven by the specific implementation needs of each recommendation. Funding support for each respective recommendation must also be built independently on the merits of the recommendation and evidenced needs. Key elements of recommendations are presented on the following pages.

Stanly County Farmland Preservation Plan

Figure E-1 summarizes the recommendations and highlights required agency involvement and partnerships. Full recommendations can be found respectively in the Agricultural Land Use Plan and Agricultural Economic Development Plan.

Figure E-1: Agricultural and Farmland Preservation Plan Recommendations								
Recommendation	Number of Major Action Items	Implementation Partnerships						
		County Agencies			External Entities			
		VADB	Planning	Other ¹	Federal	State	Municipal	Private ²
<i>Agricultural Land Use Recommendations</i>								
Strengthen Stanly County Voluntary Agricultural District	4	√		√				
Develop a Strategic Farmland Map	12	√	√	√			√	√
Create a County Supported Farmland Protection Program	9	√	√	√	√	√		√
Update Subdivision Regulations and Zoning Code	7	√	√	√			√	
Formally Adopt the Farmland Preservation Plan as a Policy Guidance Document	5	√	√	√		√	√	√
Develop a Regulatory and Policy Action Program	4	√	√	√				√
Advocate for Farm Friendly State Policies	12	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
<i>Agricultural Economic Development Recommendations</i>								
Facilitate Integration with Broader Financial Markets	8	√		√	√	√		√
Develop an Agribusiness Retention, Expansion, and Attraction Plan	6	√		√				√
Improve Regional Market Access	4	√		√				√
Support Entrepreneurship and On-Farm Skills Development	6	√		√		√		√
Expand Education and Training Programs	4	√		√				√
Support Regional Agricultural Leadership Development	4	√		√				√
Create an Outreach and Public Relations Program	5	√	√	√	√	√		√
Support Farm and Forestry Friendly Land Use Policies.	9	√	√	√	√	√	√	√

Notes:

1. *Other* includes Stanly County Commissioners, Cooperative Extension, the Soil and Water Conservation District, Public Works, and other County departments.
2. *Private* includes the Chamber of Commerce, Foundations, Farm Bureau, The LandTrust for Central Carolina, private businesses, citizen groups, and other private/quasi-governmental entities.

Stanly County Farmland Preservation Plan

Figure E-2 prioritizes the plan’s recommendations and provides a rough timeline for implementation based on the needs and concerns of the industry as expressed during the interview process.

Figure E-2: Agricultural and Farmland Preservation Plan Implementation				
Recommendation	Priority Ranking (1 is highest priority and 3 is lowest)	Implementation Timeline		
		Immediate	Medium Term	Long-Term
<i>Agricultural Land Use Recommendations</i>				
Strengthen Stanly County Voluntary Agricultural District	1	√		
Develop a Strategic Farmland Map	1	√	Ongoing	
Create a County Supported Farmland Protection Program	1	√	√	√
Update Subdivision Regulations and Zoning Code	1	Ongoing		
Formally Adopt the Farmland Preservation Plan as a Policy Guidance Document	1	√		
Develop a Regulatory and Policy Action Program	2		√	Ongoing
Advocate for Farm Friendly State Policies	2		√	Ongoing
<i>Agricultural Economic Development Recommendations</i>				
Facilitate Integration with Broader Financial Markets	1	√	Ongoing	
Develop an Agribusiness Retention, Expansion, and Attraction Plan	2		√	
Improve Regional Wholesale and Retail Market Access	1	√	Ongoing	
Support Entrepreneurship and On-Farm Skills Development	3			√
Expand Education and Training Programs	2		√	√
Support Regional Agricultural Leadership Development	1	√	Ongoing	
Create an Outreach and Public Relations Program	1	√	Ongoing	
Support Farm Friendly Land Use Policies.	2		√	Ongoing