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## Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Considerations for the Future of WNC Agriculture

By CED Program Interns & Students

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The family farm as the cornerstone of American agriculture is no more. Since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the U.S. has moved to an industrialized farm system. Mechanization and the increased use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides have wildly inflated the productivity of industrialized operations. With downward pressure on commodity prices, incomes to small and medium sized farmers have eroded. A majority of contemporary family farms now depend on non-farm income to maintain their livelihoods. This decline in the economic viability of lower-intensity agriculture has also put in jeopardy the viability of many rural communities. Where small farmers once purchased most of their inputs from local suppliers and sold most of their products in local or regional markets, the vertical integration of industrial farm operations has now closed off many important linkages in the agricultural value chain. With dwindling access to critical products and services, small farms in rural communities face increasing costs of production, coupled with suppressed commodity prices, endangering their long-term economic stability.

In western North Carolina, farms are typically of smaller than average size and face constraints of geography and climate that further limit their profitability. Some of the highest and roughest terrain in the eastern U.S. is located in the western mountains of North Carolina. Across the region transportation options are limited by the terrain, restricting access to global markets. Steep ridges and narrow valley bottoms limit the cultivatable land area available for farming. This scarcity of fertile agricultural land has limited the applicability of industrialized approaches to agriculture and preserved much of the traditional small farm culture. However, the combined downward pressure on commodity prices and the high profitability of suburban residential development continue to encourage the conversion of the region's prime agricultural land to urbanized, non-agricultural uses.

Concern over the irreversible loss of farmland has sparked considerable controversy as an increasing number of municipalities have chosen to adopt farmland preservation policies. These often authorize the use of preservation easements to legally prohibit the use of farmland for anything other than active agricultural or conservationist activities. From the other side of the spectrum, community organizers and chambers of commerce in many communities are establishing agritourism networks. These are intended to offer supplemental income to farmers through the on-site sale of produce and value-added products. Evidence suggests that few communities have attempted to pursue policies or programs that overcome the various structural challenges to small-farm agriculture, including a lack of infrastructure and support service availability. One likely reason is that farmland preservation and agritourism initiatives cost relatively little compared to what would be required to establish a viable new processing or distribution facility. Despite this relative lack of attention, economic theory, not to mention common sense, suggests that for those concerned with the long term economic sustainability of local agriculture, the promotion and maintenance of a viable system of agricultural support services should remain a core concern.

This is the first in a series of posts that will explore some of the issues and trends surrounding agriculture and agricultural support service provision in the Land-of-Sky region of western North Carolina. Covering the counties of Buncombe, Madison, Henderson, and Transylvania, this region is unique in that it features the city of Asheville as its urban core and boasts a thriving local food culture. However, as we explore the future of agriculture as an industry from an economic sustainability and regional resiliency perspective, we shall see that developments in organic production and local food distribution remain largely peripheral in the economics of food.