

What Is the Future of Agriculture in Your Community?



A Community-Based Program to Address the Needs and Future of Farming

PENNSTATE



College of Agricultural Sciences
Agricultural Research and Cooperative Extension

Introduction

Farming is a rich part of Pennsylvania's history and future. It provides Pennsylvanians with a wide variety of benefits, including jobs, income, and healthy foodstuffs. In addition, farming maintains a significant portion of the Commonwealth's land area in open space, providing major environmental benefits (groundwater recharge, habitat for wildlife, and storm water management) as well as quality of life benefits for residents.

Yet farming's future in many Pennsylvania communities is unclear. Current conditions in the farm economy, including relatively low prices and higher competition, are making it difficult for farmers to make a living in agriculture. (Indeed, many Pennsylvania farm families must have a family member work at an off-farm job to make ends meet.) Technological change in farming creates pressures on farmers to either "get bigger or get out." Residential development and the loss of farmland increases the likelihood of conflicts between farmers and their non-farm neighbors over normal agricultural practices. Development also makes it more difficult for new farmers to purchase land, for existing farmers to expand, and for important local farm-support businesses to remain in operation.

Pennsylvania farmers may grow uncertain about the future of farming in their own communities, and whether their own land will still be farmed in 10 years. Such uncertainty can itself be a self-fulfilling prophecy if farmers hesitate to make the investment decisions they need to remain competitive in the future. Furthermore, these uncertainties, problems, and conflicts can create divisions in the community between those who farm and those who don't. The two groups may not fully understand one another, weakening the community's ability to identify their problems and work toward solutions together.

The future of farming in Pennsylvania communities is not necessarily dim, however. Some community members are actively responding to these challenges in an effort to help sustain and strengthen their local farming economy. They recognize farming's vital contributions to their community and view the challenges to farming as challenges for the entire community rather than as problems solely for farmers to solve. They are working together to build a clear vision for farming in their communities and are taking steps to bring that vision into reality.

What is the "Future of Agriculture in Our Community" program?

The Future of Agriculture in Our Community program brings community members together to understand and address the challenges facing farming in their community. The program helps the community identify the concerns and barriers to survival and growth facing local farmers, then helps them develop and implement a community-based action plan for sustaining farms and farming in the community. The program demonstrates clearly that communities care about farming.

The Future of Agriculture program uses a broad-based, community-wide coalition to create and put into action an economic development plan for sustaining and strengthening local agriculture. It helps community members gather information about local farmers' needs, concerns, and opportunities, and then uses that information to craft and implement appropriate strategies.

Farmers' needs and concerns are collected by means of informal discussion (called farmer "Let's Talk" sessions), and through a written questionnaire administered to randomly selected local farmers by teams of community volunteers (called farm visitors). The "Let's Talk" comments and questionnaire responses are analyzed by a team of Penn State faculty and staff, and are used by the community coalition (called the "task force") to identify strategic directions and action plans addressing agriculture's future in the community. Subcommittees within the community task force implement these action plans over the following year or two.

The Future of Agriculture (program) is a good thing. It gets people talking.

Farmer interviewed in Cumberland County

Farmers don't turn their land into K-Marts when they are able to enjoy their work and make a reasonable living at it. How can the community help agriculture be economically viable?

Farmer interviewed in Cumberland County

Developed by Penn State Cooperative Extension, the Future of Agriculture program is based loosely upon the programs, “Business Retention and Expansion” (focusing on economic development) and “Charting the Future of Our Community” (community strategic planning).

Short- and long-term objectives

Short-term program objectives:

- Provide community support for local farms
- Solve immediate, individual farm concerns
- Increase the public’s appreciation for and understanding of agriculture’s role in the local community

Long-term program objectives:

- Increase the competitiveness of local farms and agribusinesses
- Sustain a healthy farm economy and create an improved business climate
- Establish and implement a strategic action plan to ensure the future of farming in the community
- Improve the community’s ability to respond to future challenges

What are the program’s specific components?

The Future of Agriculture program is designed to encourage community involvement, which is important for ensuring that the strategic plan and implementation steps are broadly supported, appropriate, and sustainable over the long run. This strategy widens the available expertise, increases the number of ideas brought forth, and spreads the work among a large number of people.

Ideally, the program should start during the late fall and winter to ensure that farmers can freely participate (and have time to be interviewed), something that may not be possible during the planting, growing, and harvesting seasons. Suggested times for conducting each part of the program appear in parentheses below.

Farmer “Let’s Talk” sessions (November):

These sessions consist of three public meetings in which farmers share and discuss the issues, challenges, and opportunities they face. The sessions provide a forum for gathering ideas and questions that should be explored further in the survey. They are beneficial for recruiting volunteers to help conduct the program and providing useful publicity about the program and its goals.

Farm visits (January and early February):

Community leaders and volunteers receive training on how to conduct farm interviews. They then call on randomly selected farmers and interview them. A survey tailored for the county is used for interviewing, pinpointing farm needs and concerns, and formulating development plans. Individual farm data are kept confidential.

Immediate follow-up (January and early February):

Task force members review the surveys during the farm visit process and respond as needed to any immediate needs that farmers express.

Strategic planning retreat (March):

University faculty and other experts computerize the information from the “Let’s Talk” and farm visit surveys and prepare an initial draft report for the task force. The report provides an analysis of the data and suggests recommendations for improving the local business climate. The task force uses this report, its knowledge of the community, and a strategic planning process to develop an action plan addressing agriculture’s future in the community. Action teams are created to begin working on and implementing specific parts of the strategic plan.

“Commencement” meeting (March):

The task force formally announces its action plan with a public meeting and celebration. The meeting includes invited guests, such as elected officials and other community leaders.

Implementation (April and beyond):

The action planning process fosters the creation of local action teams, which work together to achieve the goals set forth in the action plans. Farms, agribusinesses, other local businesses, and a variety of agencies may be drawn into the process.

Why is a community-wide approach important?

It is vitally important that the Future of Agriculture program be carried out by a community-wide coalition of groups and interested individuals to ensure that the proposed implementation steps are broadly supported. The proposed steps need to reflect the concerns of everyone in the community, or they may inadvertently create local political opposition that slows or delays action. Many potential action steps typically involve nonfarmers, such as local government officials, financial institutions, Chambers of Commerce, and others; so it is better to involve them from the start so they feel some ownership of the process rather than try to bring them in later once important decisions have already been made.

The broader the coalition of groups and individuals involved at the program's start, the stronger and more politically acceptable the results. Broad-based involvement makes it easier to sustain implementation of the action steps. If others in the community perceive the program as solely an initiative and concern of farmers, it will inevitably fail.

A major benefit is that the program significantly increases nonfarmers' awareness of the agricultural community's needs. The farm visits, in particular, help nonfarmers to understand better because they actually visit several farms and talk directly with farmers about farm concerns. The Future of Agriculture program can play a vital educational role in the community by helping nonfarmers understand that the future of agriculture should be *everyone's* concern.

Who carries out the program?

A broad coalition of community members implements the Future of Agriculture program. As discussed previously, it must have a balance of farmers and nonfarmers if it is to gain community-wide acceptance. Typical participants include the local Chamber of Commerce; county and municipal government officials; planning commission members; economic development agencies; industrial development authorities; the County Conservation District; local conservancies and land trusts; groups such as the Farm Bureau, Farmers Union, and Grange; agricultural lenders; farm input businesses; local ag processors; natural resource groups (such as Trout Unlimited and watershed associations); farmers; and interested citizens. General organization, facilitation, and implementation support (including survey development and analysis) is provided by Penn State Cooperative Extension.

Participants from these groups are organized into several different program teams, based on their interests, skills, and available time. The teams include:

Leadership team

The leadership team introduces and promotes the program in the community, coordinates task force meetings, and organizes immediate follow-up to issues raised in the survey results. The leadership team serves on the task force and arranges training for the volunteer farm visitors. Ideally, the team has four to six members who are highly committed to the program.

“ What was new and positive about the Future of Agriculture program was that we started a process of community engagement with farmers and nonfarmers both. It was very exciting, and the best part was seeing things from the farmer's perspective. This kind of dialogue is what has to happen if farming is to be sustainable, especially on the East Coast where there's so much development pressure. ”

Robert Amsterdam, task force chairman, Cumberland County

“ The Future of Agriculture program offered a wonderful way to get back to farmers at the grassroots to find out what they need. With the surveys completed, the volunteers face the important challenge of figuring out ways to meet those needs to help improve agricultural conditions in the community. ”

Cheryl Cook, concerned resident and program participant, Cumberland County

Task force

The task force is a group of 25 to 35 community leaders who represent the broad diversity of groups and individuals involved. The task force helps set overall program policy, participates in farm visits (each member visiting two to four local farms), assists in immediate follow-up when necessary, and sets priorities on other Future of Agriculture projects.

During the strategic planning part of the program, task force members are expected to attend six to eight meetings and visit two to four farms. These activities require a total of about 20 hours (or two to five hours per month, depending on how fast the program progresses).

Volunteer visitors

Volunteer visitors assist with the farm visit survey; they are organized into farm visitation teams of two persons per team. Each team visits two to four farms. Volunteer visitors include task force members, educators, business people, retirees, and others who want to support the program but may not have enough free time to serve on the task force. About 40 to 60 volunteer visitors are needed, depending on how many farmers are interviewed.

Before visiting the farms, volunteers attend a two-hour orientation session that provides an overview of the process and the survey, and gives tips on conducting an effective interview with farmers. One member of each volunteer visitor team contacts his or her farmers to arrange for the interviews. Ideally, the team completes the interviews within two weeks of the training session. One team member asks questions while the other records the answers on the survey form provided by the leadership team. Each visit typically takes one hour.

Action teams

Action teams implement the strategies identified through the Future of Agriculture program process, turning the strategic plan into a reality. These teams are created at the retreat, but they draw in other people and groups from within the community as appropriate.

How long does the Future of Agriculture program take?

The initial strategic planning phase takes about four or five months (November to about March), although if the program is to be successful, much prior work is necessary to ensure that the process is understood and embraced by a wide variety of groups in the community. The most important phase is implementation, during which the action steps are carried out. This phase can take a year or more, depending on the action step. During this phase, implementation teams are working hard to carry through on their action steps. In addition, the full task force and all the subcommittees should meet together periodically (once every three to six months or so) to update each other on their progress and keep on track.

Why do people volunteer to help?

Citizens and local leaders who have participated in similar programs in other states cite the following reasons for being active in them:

- **It demonstrates that “we care about farming.”**
Just visiting farms shows that your community cares about its farmers and appreciates their contributions to

the area. It is surprising how many farmers feel unappreciated and who have not been personally told that the community values them.

- **It is fun!**
People enjoy socializing with other key community leaders and participating in and influencing important community decisions.
- **It is a learning experience.**
Participants learn about their local economy's strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of local farms and businesses; they gain insights on how their community is likely to develop in the future. They learn about new options for working with existing farms and ways they can shape their local destiny.
- **It brings the community together.**
In many communities, citizens and local leaders are thinking about their future, but they are not working together to affect the future. This program brings the community together. Business persons, farmers, local government officials, education officials, and interested citizens all work together for the future of existing farms and the community.
- **It is do-able and it gets results.**
Citizens just like you and your neighbors have conducted this type of program in all sizes and types of communities.

For further information

For more information about the Future of Agriculture in Our Community program, see the listings below; or visit the program Web site at: cax.aers.psu.edu/FutureOfAg.

Community resources

- Economic Role of Agriculture (agimpact.aers.psu.edu)

This Web site provides an overview of the current situation and recent trends in a variety of important local agricultural economic indicators for each Pennsylvania county.

- Pennsylvania County Economic and Demographic Profiles (www.aers.psu.edu/cecd/profile.htm)

This Web site provides detailed information on key economic and demographic indicators over time. Profiles can be customized for a county's economy or the user's interest in specific industries.

Strategic planning resources

- Charting the Future of Our Community, community-level strategic planning program created by Penn State Cooperative Extension. Workbooks include:

Charting the Future of Our Community: Setting Our Course. Penn State Cooperative Extension, 2002 (Catalog no. UA362)

Charting the Future of Our Community: Where We Are. Penn State Cooperative Extension, 2002 (Catalog no. UA363)

Charting the Future of Our Community: Where We Want to Be. Penn State Cooperative Extension, 2002 (Catalog no. UA364)

Charting the Future of Our Community: Making the Trip. Penn State Cooperative Extension, 2002 (Catalog no. UA365)

These workbooks are available from the Publications Distribution Center, The Pennsylvania State University, 112 Agricultural Administration Building, University Park, PA 16802 (telephone: 814-865-6713).

- Business Retention and Expansion Visitation, an intensive, locally controlled economic development program aimed at identifying and addressing the concerns of existing local businesses. Program materials are available through the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development (www.cas.nercrd.psu.edu) and include:

Is It for Our Community? Workbook. Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development.

Initiator's Manual for Starting New BR&E Visitation Programs. Workbook. Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development.

Using the Video to Introduce the Program and Train Volunteers. Workbook. Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development.

Local Leadership Team Manual. Workbook. Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development.

Visitation Coordinator Manual. Workbook. Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development.

BR&E Visitation. Video. Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development.

Prepared by Kathryn Brasier, assistant professor of rural sociology, Timothy Collins, extension educator for community and economic development, and Timothy Kelsey, professor of agricultural economics

Visit Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences on the Web: www.cas.psu.edu

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