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# Farmland Values Project Measures Economic Importance of Rural Land

by Stacy Kish, CSREES

Past attempts to place value on farmland greatly depended on who was asked. Farmers, developers and residents may have had their own views, but no concrete estimates existed. Now, with funding from USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES), a project at the University of North Carolina (UNC) is working to develop criteria that will put a fair and realistic value to this important national treasure in four counties in western North Carolina. >>

Leah Greden Mathews, an environmental economist at UNC at Asheville, and colleagues started the Farmland Values Project to assess the full value of farmland in Buncombe, Haywood, Madison and Henderson counties. Residents and visitors to the area are asked about the various kinds of benefits they receive from farmland, such as scenic beauty, flood control or wildlife habitat. "What is really clear is that people value farmland for things in addition to the crops that are grown on the land," Mathews said.

North Carolina leads the nation in the rate of lost farmland. Since 2002, the state has lost more than 6,000 farms and 300,000 acres of farmland according to USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service. From 1987 to 2002, the counties in the study experienced a significant loss of farmland. Farmland in Haywood County diminished by 18.9 percent, while Henderson, Madison and Buncombe counties followed at 17.9 percent, 17.1 percent and 8.6 percent, respectively.

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Right: Farming in the Mountains of Western North Carolina.

Credit: Andrea Thompson, Farmland Values Project



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Above (top): Buncombe County North Carolina Farm Landscape.

Above (bottom): Tobacco Field in Madison County North Carolina.

Credit: Anne Lancaster, Farmland Values Project

The survey results will be compiled with existing data to develop a better understanding of the economic value of rural settings. This information will be used to develop mapping software tools that will help policymakers, environmentalists and developers to measure the value of farmland in rural North Carolina.

This project is an important first step to assess the value of farm loss in rural North Carolina. Since the project is asking respondents how much they are willing to pay to preserve farmland, policymakers will have the opportunity to use this information to provide programs that can protect farmland in North Carolina. In particular, the results of the Farmland Values Project could lead to new programs that would allow farmers to benefit directly from the scenic beauty and ecological services provided by their farms.

Developers are also aware of the growing tension between preserving the scenic beauty of farmland and the need to accommodate western North Carolina's growing population. The allure of the rural setting lies in the scenic beauty, which can be a reminder of a simpler way of life or a sense of community and heritage. Unfortunately, the beauty of the rural region is in danger of disappearing as more people partition the area.

Focus groups were held throughout the region in 2006 and surveys were

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mailed to over 3,000 people in an attempt to quantify these ideas. In addition, the surveys were distributed at many locations, including local festivals, the western North Carolina Farmers Market, regional visitors' centers and chambers of commerce in order to hear from the region's visitors about the kinds of values they have for farmland.

The USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) funded this research project through the National Research Initiative Agricultural Prosperity for Small and Medium-Sized Farms program. CSREES advances knowledge for agriculture, the environment, human health and well-being, and communities by supporting research, education and extension programs in the Land-Grant University System and other partner organizations. For more information, visit <http://www.csrees.usda.gov>.