



Future of Westmoreland Agriculture

Farmer "Let's Talk" Meetings Summary Document

Draft – December 8, 2004

October 28, 2004
Loyalhanna Watershed Office
Ligonier

November 3, 2004
First United Church of Christ
Mt. Pleasant

November 9, 2004
Washington Township Fire Hall
Apollo

November 16, 2004
Donohoe Center
Greensburg

A key first step in the Future of Westmoreland Agriculture program is gathering input from farmers across the county to identify the challenges and opportunities they see in farming today and in the future.

Four informal discussion sessions called Farmer "Let's Talk" Meetings were held in the above locations. 154 total people attended these meetings.

The following information is a collection of information gathered at these meetings. This information will assist in developing the survey that will be used during the Farm Visit Interviews. An agricultural action plan and action steps will then be created to help strengthen and support the Westmoreland agricultural industry.

Q: What are the opportunities (good things) about farming/agriculture in Westmoreland County?

Ag Economics

- Occasional peaks in milk prices
- This spring's milk prices
- This past spring milk prices were good – Canadian border closed
- Beef prices are up – limited opportunity
- Feed prices are down
- Use internet for marketing and sales

Community

- Countywide desire to keep agriculture and open space
- Neighbors like the scenic beauty that farms provide
- Some neighbors are very supportive
- County Comprehensive Plan meetings showed that residents want to maintain agriculture and rural atmosphere
- Increased population = more consumers
- Let folks on your farm and educate them on reasons why they cannot drive ATV's through fields, litter, or damage the land. Opens his farm to hikers, mountain bikes (no motorized vehicles).

Education

- Education is KEY
- Extension can help to educate both farmers and non-farmers
- Community members should attend municipal meetings; attend Smart Growth meetings and workshops

Environment/Natural Resources/ Land Use

- Good Climate – moderate, rainfall, temperature
- Abundant rainfall, water resources, moderate climate (not too hot, not too cold)
- Older people like rural areas
- Farms provide wildlife preservation
- Farms increase water quality
- Farms add scenic beauty
- The key is land use
- Transfer of Development Rights

Farmland Preservation

- Is a good thing – could use more money – cut taxes
- Good land basis of preserved farms
- Big believer in preservation plan

Locally Grown Foods

- There is consumer concern now about where their food comes from – local
- Local food producers are someone you know and trust
- Quality of Product - Quality of Life - Freshness of Product
- Westmoreland Branding of products
- Labeling opportunities (Western PA beef)
- Label of origin on agricultural products
- If people want to see fields, trees, and enjoy the view, they need to support local agriculture
- Farm product vending machines (milk)
- Health conscious consumers
- Huge opportunity to educate about where food comes from
- Place your produce on a wagon, and have a tractor nearby, people are more receptive to wagons and tractors than a pick-up truck. Believes that they reason that it must have come from the farm, if it's still on the wagon.

Location

- Access to good roads/rivers/railroads
- Westmoreland County is in a good location – proximity to markets – not just Pittsburgh, but D.C. and New York – we are 500 miles from 50% of US population, 75% of Canadian population
- Concentrated population in the region provides a ready market

Non-Traditional/Diversification Opportunities

- Opportunity for diversity
 - Must be able to widen opportunity for marketable goods
 - Be willing to broaden market
- “Agritainment” (corn mazes, farm tours, hay rides, pick your own...)
 - Agritainment may not be covered by insurance – hay rides too much of a liability risk – State Farm insurance will not insure
- Work on a Farm program
- Farm Bed and Breakfast
- Direct marketing
- Wholesale marketing

- Organic farming
- Grass feed verses grain finished beef
- Value-added farming – eliminate the middleman
- Organic markets and niche markets
- Pasturing
- Hogs
- Angus beef
- Brown eggs
- Raw milk
- Horse boarding
- Decorative hay bales
- Fall decorations: pumpkins, corn stalks
- Sweet onions
- Raspberries
- Berries
- Flowers
- Cut flowers
- Deer farming
- Herbs
- Equine
- Free range chicken
- Organic milk
- Grape tomatoes are a good crop
- Elk farming
- Buffalo farming
- Niche Farming
- The way farming will survive is to specialize
- Niche markets – natural products
- Community Kitchens – for value-added products
- Switch grass project as alternative energy source/animal feed
- Alternative fuel production
 - Biomass
 - Ethanol
 - Corn heaters
 - Bio-diesel
 - Switchgrass
 - Wind Power
 - Gasohol plant in Butler

Personal Opportunities/Quality of Life

- Love of the land
- Time with family
- Great way to raise children
- Good lifestyle

- There's a great deal of pride in farming
- Like their job
- Great way of life – children want to stay on the farm
- The biggest strength is the “farm-life” quality of life in the county
- Make your own schedule
- Your own business
- Tax write off (70% lifestyle – 30% tax)

Support Services/Businesses/Programs

- Multiple Farm markets in the county
- Dairy cooperative
- Ag Land Preservation
- Ag Security
- Good assembly of Farm support offices at the Donohoe Center complex
- CREP – Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program – enhances water supply, wildlife
- CREP (with adjustments)

Q: What are the challenges (bad things) about farming/agriculture in Westmoreland County?

Ag Economics

- Need to come up with a plan of action
- Lack of profit
- Trying to make a living and make money
- Some farmers are not good at marketing products
- Income is not keeping up with prices/costs
- Commodity prices stay low – input costs go up
- Size is needed for profit margins
- Uncertain market
- Cyclic markets
- Cyclic markets for beef and grain
- Continued prices for milk for many years
- Finding and keeping market niches
- Prices not kept even like gas
- Need economic incentives
- Government price supports – hard to plan
- After World War II – decline of farmers – young men went to work in factories
- Hard to find land to rent
- Farmers need to be smart businessmen
- Selling versus keeping farm
- Farmers need to work together more
- At least one person has to work off the farm
- Store prices go up, farmers' profit does not
- Meat packers – set prices when they buy beef cows
- Meat grading system – animals over 2 ½ years are not considered as prime
- Many do not see agriculture as Economic Development - but it is!
- Other County Economic Development Groups help farmers to get government grants

Community

- Farmer/Non-Farmer relationships
- Vandalism of farm property
- People on property without permission – quads, hunters, neighbors
- Cars, quads, and motorcycles trespassing
- ATVs and other off-road vehicles create liability issues, crop damage
- Quads – are a nuisance, ruin your fields, don't respect what you have
- Hunters – destructive to property (littering)
- Trash/litter from cars
- Brain Drain
- Neighbors' dogs

- Neighbor relations
- Misinformed consumers
- People complain about the smell, noise, dirt and spray from farms
- The “new” neighbors don’t like the smell from farms
- No public perception of what farming is about
- Educate the public on the real cost of cheap food
- Stereotypes
- Non-farmers have no idea how little money farmers get for products
- Homeland Security
- Agri-terrorism; bio-security

Competition

- Competition from big farms
- Competition from corporate farms
- Competing with bigger farms out west
- Foreign competition
- Farm imports
- Competing against cheap foreign labor and lack of regulatory oversight
- Centralized “factory farms” and slaughterhouses are squeezing out the little farmer, little slaughterhouses.
- Loss of US jobs to immigrant/migrant labor
- Some farms hire Hispanic workers because they cannot afford anyone else

Development/Zoning

- Biggest problem for farming is people encroaching on land
- Development pressures and residential neighbors
- Urban sprawl
- Don’t want sprawl, want limited development
- Sprawl is taking over – Murrys ville used to be all farms
- Development is making farms smaller
- No way to expand your operation with the surrounding homes and increased land prices
- Land values get too high for farmers (both buying land and taxes) as development moves out
- Housing separates land used for farming – makes access difficult
- Once land is split up, it is very hard or impossible to go back to farmland
- To get to fields you must drive equipment on the roads – other drivers are rude, do not want you on the roads
- Working around housing
- Developers and sanitary lines
- Any land taken for sewage lines has a big impact to farm
- Utilities encourage development
- Sewage promotes development

- Sewage forces land prices up
- Beaver Run used to be beautiful farmland – now covered up with water for reservoir
- Keep houses off of farmland
- Shrinking land base
- Losing 4000 acres of farmland a year in this county
- Zoning issues are a challenge
- No zoning, no planning, putting homes in the middle of best fields → *Prime ag land
Need to target it
preserve*

Education Needs

- Non-farmer education
 - Need more ag education in schools
 - Need to include farmers in job fairs/Career Days
- Farmer education
 - Marketing
 - Estate Planning

Environment

- Need better weather predicting; less sensationalizing of the weather
- Wildlife pressures
- Deer – eating soybeans, corn – 95% of crop damage is done by deer
- Forest seedling destruction by deer and wildlife
- Coyote
- Rabbits
- Allow hunters to hunt on farm – help control wildlife
- Open Beaver Run for hunting
- Have to spray pesticides since it saves time but don't want to

Future Farmers/New Farmers

- Generations of knowledge lost if no one continues to farm
- Children can't afford to farm – cost of social security, insurance, retirement
- Keeping youth interested
- No one to take over the farm
- Sons/Daughters not going into farming
- Kids don't care, not interested in farming
- Profitability needed to maintain incentive for future farmers to get into farming
- Farmers need to have a special drive and work ethic. Younger generation does not seem to have.
- Hard for younger generation to see the real rewards
- Hard to keep kids in farming

- No next generation
- Who is the next farmer?
- Young people must have a viable income to keep them in the farming business

Input Costs

- Input costs are too high
- Investment costs, high capital
- High input/low margin/maintaining
- High machinery costs
 - Custom hire
 - Share equipment
 - Liabilities
- High cost of maintaining and repairing equipment
- Equipment is oversized and overpriced for the small farmer
- Being young with no available capital to help buy farms – takes TOO long – needs simplified
- High cost of young people getting started, especially dairy – need a lot of cash to get started in the business
- Cost of land
- Land prices are up – everyone is waiting for the developers
- Hard to find help – employees
- Available labor (cost & liability)
- Can't pay \$10 an hour for farm help
- Insurance costs
 - Tort reform – insurance industry trends, litigation is a real challenge, cost
 - Protection form liability injury lawsuits
- Insurance liability
- Cost of health insurance
- Rising fuel costs
- Prices of diesel fuel
- Can't make it in dairy anymore – priced out

Locally Grown Foods

- Buying local is not in the consumer's mind
- Customers come to their market and expect 'flea market' prices for a pack of tomatoes.
- A certain number of customers will not be willing to pay more for locally grown and locally produced products. But others will. Our products are not the cheapest product, they are the best product.
- People want to eat locally but its more convenient to just go to Wal-Mart or Giant Eagle for everything in one step
- Convenience is the driving force

- Knowing where food comes from could be a turn off to some people (meat, milk) – ignorance is bliss
- Lack of local processing
- Need local processing operations

Personal Challenges/Family Relations

- Interpersonal family issues
- Family relationships – spouse must be supportive
- Family is not big enough to run farm
- Must have another job to support farm
- Wife complains about the long hours involved with farming
- Can be difficult to find a partner/spouse who is willing to farm (Farmer Dating Service suggestion)
- Getting older
- Farming is hard work
- Time required
- Some farmers do not have the time to advocate for themselves
- Do not get vacation time as a farmer

Regulations

- Rules and regulations by government
- Environmental regulations
- Government regulations - septic
- More and more regulations – creates added cost – can't pass cost along
- More regulation = greater cost
- Regulations add overhead
- Federal inspections add costs
- Each regulation adds to the cost
- State control

Support Services/Businesses/Programs

- Need year-round farmers market
- County needs more farm markets
- Need more cooperatives
- Some farm services are hard to find (large animal vet)
- Don't know about programs, confusing
- Need clarity on all the programs and how they work
- Government programs – take land out of production
- CREP – problem is if whole farms are being enrolled in program
- CREP – tool for farmers but can be harmful if prime farmland is accepted into program

- CREP – a problem because government pays more to rent land than farmer can
- Need more money for farmland preservation

Taxes

- Taxes keep going up
- Real Estate Taxes
- Property taxes
- Local Taxes
- Local taxes are prohibitive to farms
- Taxes are too high, should be breaks for farmers
- Taxes are killing us – moving agriculture to Armstrong County
- Ability to pay the taxes on the farm
- Could taxes be lowered on farms?
- Governor Rendell started tax relief – need more of this and ACRE program
- IRS – saying you have to make a profit 3 out of 5 years

Q: How optimistic or pessimistic are you about the future of farming/agriculture in Westmoreland County (and why)?

Optimistic Comments

- Farmers are optimists – they go back at it every spring
- If you love the land, you'll do whatever it takes
- It's in your blood to farm!
- There is pride in farming
- You have to be optimistic
- If you're a farmer it is what you want to do, always wanted to farm
- Most feel that the public wants farming to be successful
- There are farmers who love the land more than the dollar
- Enough of the community feels that we should retain the rural atmosphere
- Farming is a family tradition
- Overall optimistic
- Optimistic because I'm willing to work!
- Countywide desire to keep agriculture and open space in county
- Optimistic because of the FWA meetings
- When you are making money you are optimistic
- Things will work out
- Cautiously optimistic
- Optimistic about the future
- Optimistic because of Future of Ag meetings and the opportunities that will come up because of these meetings
- A positive attitude is important!!
- Thinks people out there are optimistic about the future of farming – if they can find a niche market
- Both optimistic and pessimistic – won't get rich, but can provide for family
- Optimistic because of youth interest (4-H)
- We will always need food
- Keep ag here!!
- There are many successful role models that encourage other farmers

Pessimistic Comments

- Pessimistic but happy
- Farming is lots of work
- Better opportunities off the farm
- Pessimistic about Westmoreland county Dairy farms
- Not optimistic
- Westmoreland County is set up to develop – big challenge
- No one to take over the farm
- May be short-term hope but not 20 years from now

- Pessimistic
- Hope springs eternal but evidence seems to show we're losing it – pessimistic unless things change
- Impossible situation for small farms
- Impossible for young people to make it
- Farm life is hard work
- Pessimistic because of:
 - Regulations
 - Building Codes
 - Development is moving in
 - Long hours, hard work
 - Price of commodities aren't increasing but the prices of inputs are rapidly

Suggestions to Strengthen and Support Westmoreland Agriculture

- Education is key for both farmers and non-farmers
- Student Internship Programs on Farms
- Encourage the revitalization of High School ag education programs (FFA)
- Make the public aware of the repercussions of a loss of farmland, psychological value of farmland
- Make farm property accessible to the consumer, so that they appreciate the land and the work that is involved in producing food

- Buy local!
- Local Labeling/Branding of products
- Need to teach the benefits of buying local
- Need to develop a more complete and attractive promotional program for farm markets, from berries to Christmas trees and nurseries

- Need a directory connecting farmers who need land to farm with vacant land

- Farmers need to diversify
- Make people aware that you CAN make money on a farm
- Farms need to specialize
- Need to find a niche that is profitable
- Establish grower's co-ops
- Teach farmers to work together
- Need to change with the times
- Provide marketing education for farmers
- Provide educational workshops on Farm Family Estate Planning
- Helping each other is the only way to stay in existence
- Farmer dating service!!!