



BRYAN ANDERSON | News Editor

Smith is among a rapidly declining group of North Carolina small farmers.

Acreage and profits

Noble said some farmers have a misconception that land expansion will allow them to easily generate additional profits because they can increase production.

In reality, land expansion often creates deeper problems, he said, because farmers may not know how to effectively harvest their new land and address new problems as they emerge. This ultimately sacrifices time and attention that could be better spent on existing land holdings.

"When it comes to volume, small farmers are normally at a disadvantage," Noble said. "A small farmer with limited acreage might try to work more land and then lose money. We work to show him how to get more money per unit and per commodity unit."

Government and farmer disconnect

Michael Shuman, expert in economics and longtime supporter of the local food movement, helped President Barack Obama draft the Jobs Act in order to stimulate economic growth and increase jobs. But the Jobs Act has faced significant opposition from the Republican Party. Shuman says the deep political division in Washington, D.C., has led to federal programs that are often ineffective at addressing small farming issues.

"State laws are going to be better and more effective than the federal laws because federal law allows long-distance relationships," Shuman said.

According to Noble, national politicians have become increasingly distanced from agriculture as the United States has become more urbanized.

"When our grandparents were around, a lot of people who were in the legislative branch actually had farm backgrounds," Noble said. "You had real farmers participating in making rules and regulations for farmers. In this country today about 1.5 percent of us are feeding 98.5 percent. We have farming rules mandated by people who aren't farming."

"Their intuition may not be as great. Their understanding is not great. We face challenges because the people who are making decisions for farmers have no idea what farming is like. The disconnect is from the move away from rural areas and into cities."

Government actions carry significance

While most farmers argue there is too much government regulation, Gerald Dorsett, adjunct professor in environmental science, says it is unfair to categorize regulation as a binary issue.

"A lot of government agencies would have a tendency to say there aren't enough regulations," Dorsett said. "The typical farmer is going to tell you that there are. All regulations are not good and all regulations are not bad."

Redbud Farm underwent an extensive application process to become certified organic, but Smith and Joyner agree regulation of some form is necessary to establish uniform rules and establish reliable small-farm support programs.

"Because we are certified organic, we undergo an annual four-hour inspection to verify that we're doing what we say we do," Smith said. "I appreciate that because it gives integrity to the term 'organic.' I don't really have trouble with government regulations. If you're doing the things you need to be doing, you're not going to have problems with those."

Encouraging the public to buy local

The disconnect for farmers extends beyond the government.

Dorsett says one of the first questions he asks students in his community agriculture courses is, "What is farming?" and most people say a farmer's primary role is caring for livestock. Many students enter his courses unaware of the struggles small farmers face and unaware of the impacts consumers' behaviors have on agriculture and the people working in the industry.

"If we want to help out the small farmer, we need to become a much more educated society," Dorsett said. "We have to go back to a philosophy that was strong here until the 1960s: buying local."

Employees at the Company Shops Market in Burlington work to provide healthy, fresh and local products to customers. The co-op opened in June 2011 with the hope of generating increased revenue for local vendors and changing consumer behaviors to encourage healthy practices.

Company Shops has experienced steady growth since opening its doors, but its progress in competing against local grocery chains such as Harris Teeter, Lowe's and Food



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Nancy Joyner packages tomatoes for the Elon's farmers market. Government assistance has helped Redbud increase efficiency.

Lion and big discount stores such as Walmart and Costco has been gradual.

Company Shops' 2014 annual report noted a "drawdown on our cash while our current liabilities continue to increase slightly" and concluded: "Both of these trends need to be and can be reversed by increasing sales."

The co-op's managers are aiming for additional owners and increased involvement from existing owners. The report noted a disappointing increase in owner spending from 2013 to 2014. In 2013, owner purchases increased \$157,956 over 2012. In 2014, owner purchases increased by only \$8,351 over 2013.

Megan Sharpe, community outreach coordinator for Company Shops, has relied heavily on social media to increase awareness. But she admits there are too many people the co-op has yet to reach.

"We have people living in the apartment building right down the street who still haven't heard about us," Sharpe said. "We're trying to do everything we can to increase awareness. We'll blast social media and we'll do emails, flyers and posters. It's slowly getting out there."

While Sharpe looks to reach potential customers through visuals, interim general manager Ben Wright relies on interpersonal communication.

Wright and Sharpe argue it is virtually impossible to compete with fast food chains. McDonald's Dollar Menu currently features a fruit and yogurt parfait, double cheeseburger and chicken nuggets along with much more, whereas the Company Shops deli menu features a variety of sandwiches starting around \$8.

"People eat with their eyes and they eat with their wallet," Wright said. "It's a matter of breaking down paradigms with folks and not having to sell them a product but sell them a new viewpoint and getting them to change completely."

Exploring trending markets is key to small farmer prosperity

Despite the slow progress for many co-op markets in acquiring new customers and in changing

consumer behavior, the demand for fresh, organic local food is gaining momentum.

Consumer demand has grown by double digits every year since the 1990s, and organic sales increased from \$3.6 billion in 1997 to \$39 billion in 2014, according to the Organic Trade Association.

Shuman authored "Going Local" to empower communities like Burlington to revitalize themselves and illustrate how consumers are willing to pay more for quality organic goods.

"People with limited incomes don't understand the differences between price and value, and frankly, most people don't understand this difference," he said. "Basically, no one buys anything simply on the basis of price. If that were true, Starbucks wouldn't exist. People make their decisions on the basis of value, not just poor people."

Audience engagement

Although it may be wise for farmers to grow organic goods, it is just as important for them to market their crops effectively.

At Redbud Farm, Nancy Joyner created an email list to garner support and enhance the farm's rela-

tionship with consumers. She also regularly updates a Facebook page to keep the farm's followers up to date with the latest crops being brought into farmers markets.

"You can work as hard as you want to but you've got to have folks to buy your food," Joyner said. "You've got to pay attention to the relational aspect of getting to know the people."

Uncertain future remains

As small farms explore new markets and compete for consumer attention, an uncertain future remains.

The average age of farmers is increasing. The number of small farms is declining. Income inequality is rising. More and more people are moving away from rural areas. Government cost-share programs often require poor farmers to put up money they don't have.

And despite all these issues, farms like Redbud remain optimistic and look to inspire a younger generation to enter an agriculture industry very much in limbo.

Growing emotional, Smith said, "We want to be an example for young people who think they might want to farm."

NC FARMERS' DWINDLING NUMBERS

