

# VIRGINIA SMALL AND BEGINNING FARMER FOCUS GROUP REPORT



*Helping the Virginia Small Farm Resource Center  
Improve the Growth, Profitability and  
Sustainability of Virginia's Small Farmers*



VIRGINIA SMALL FARM RESOURCE CENTER  
VIRGINIA STATE UNIVERSITY SMALL FARM OUTREACH PROGRAM  
VIRGINIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

**DECEMBER 2018**



SUPPORTED BY VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF  
HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

## Acknowledgments

The VSU Small Farm Outreach Program is grateful to the farmers and service providers from state and federal agencies, academic institutions and business and non-profit organizations who graciously donated their time to participate in these focus groups. Thank you for your insight and support for the development of the Virginia Small Farm Resource Center.

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### Virginia Small Farm Resource Center

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*The Virginia Small Farm Resource Center will launch in 2019.*



Virginia's Small Farm Resource Center was initiated by a 2018 Virginia Building Collaborative Communities Grant from Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development to create an online center connecting farmers, ranchers, businesses, and farming communities to unlimited, diverse agriculture and agribusiness information.



## Purpose

In 2018 Virginia State University's Small Farm Outreach Program (SFOP) received funding from the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development to begin building the Virginia Small Farm Resource Center (SFRC), a web-based clearinghouse for information, resources and news, that can improve the profitability and sustainability of the state's small and beginning farmers. To achieve this goal, the Virginia SFRC team conducted focus groups throughout the Commonwealth in order to assess small farmers' current challenges and identify common needs that would guide Virginia SFRC website content and development.

## Background and Summary

In the last decade, VSU's Small Farm Outreach Program, part of the university's Cooperative Extension program, has established itself as a leader in the Commonwealth for its training and technical assistance to minority, limited-resource, socially disadvantaged and military veteran farmers and ranchers. SFOP provides educational programming, outreach and training designed to encourage and assist these small farmers and ranchers to own, maintain and operate farms and ranches independently, to participate in agricultural programs, and to improve their overall farm management skills. VSU's Small Farm Outreach Program also is uniquely positioned to engage agriculture service providers (i.e., employees from federal and state agencies, ag-related business and non-profit organizations) to ascertain the needs of small and beginning farmers and how best to assist them.

Between January and March of 2018 SFOP conducted 13 focus groups, each comprised of three to 15 participants. In total, 35 farmers participated in seven focus group sessions, and 27 service providers participated in five focus group sessions. Focus groups were conducted across Virginia.

The *Virginia Small and Beginning Farmer Focus Group Report* summarizes the attitudes, perceptions, key issues and significant challenges for small and beginning farmers as they strive to be successful and sustainable. Information presented in this report was gleaned from a review and distillation of more than 600 pages of transcription. From that review, seven themes emerged as key issues for Virginia's small and beginning farmers.

### *Seven Themes Emerged*

1. Turning Small-scale Farming into a Viable Business
2. Identifying and Accessing Farm Product Markets
3. Improving Farmers' Business and Marketing Skills
4. Accessing Land, Equipment, Capital, and Labor
5. Utilizing Available Government and Agency Resources
6. Improving Broadband and Cell Services in Rural Areas
7. Engaging the Next Generation of Farmers

*Focus group participants also identified several common needs of small and beginning farmers, including:*

1. Additional training and educational programs to provide marketing and business management skills.

2. Increased numbers of farmer mentors and on-farm internships.
3. Access to affordable health insurance and healthcare.
4. Access to farmland, equipment, labor and other resources that is fair, equitable and available at a price they can afford.
5. Advocacy efforts that promote the value of small farms locally and statewide that emphasize the importance of sustaining small farmers' success into the future.
6. Improved/Increased communication and partnerships among agencies, institutions and organizations that support small and beginning farmers.

The focus group sessions and this review of the transcribed material provides a framework that will be used to build the Virginia Small Farm Resource Center as an online tool to support small and beginning farmers with access to information such as:

- Diverse models of farm production and farm operation
- Agro-equipment rental
- Education and training resources
- Federal, state and local legislative issues
- Funding resources and opportunities
- Ag-related news and events

Small and beginning farmers will benefit from the comprehensive information that is gathered together in the Virginia Small Farm Resource Center as they navigate an easy-to-use website for agriculture-related education, research, news and business opportunities.

## Introduction

Agriculture is Virginia's largest private industry, with an economic impact of \$70 billion annually and provides more than 334,000 jobs in the Commonwealth. (Rephan, 2018) In addition to its tangible benefits such as farm cash receipts and jobs, agriculture provides many intangible benefits. These include recreation, tourism, wildlife habitat, biodiversity, flood mitigation, improved water quality and soil stabilization.

Virginia has 44,800 farms. (USDA Census of Agriculture, 2012). Of these, 94 percent are considered a "small farm" as defined by USDA. The Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) compiled information from the 2012 Census as well as data from a 2016 survey by USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service and Economic Research Service to show that, in Virginia:

- The typical farmer is 59.5 years old. Thirty-six percent of farmers are 65 years of age or older.
- The average farm size is 181 acres.
- Farms cover 8.1 million acres, or 32 percent of the Commonwealth's total land area of 25.3 million acres.
- Approximately 17 percent of primary farm operators are female.
- The market value of agricultural products sold in 2016 was \$3.32 billion.
- Nearly 90 percent of Virginia farms are owned and operated by individuals or families.
- In the 1960s, one farmer supplied food for 25.8 people in the U.S. and abroad. Today, one farmer supplies food for 165 people in the U.S. and abroad.
- Less than 16 cents of every consumer dollar spent on food actually goes to the farmer.

As the Small Farm Outreach Program works to provide training and technical assistance that supports and sustains Virginia's small, minority farmers, the program also is uniquely positioned to solicit insights and perspectives from the constituencies it serves, as well as from agriculture-related service providers with the following goals:

1. to understand the challenges small and beginning farmers face;
2. to ascertain what resources are available from service providers who help small and beginning farmers; and
3. to strengthen the support SFOP provides to small and beginning farmers with the development of the Virginia Small Farm Resource Center.

Beginning in November 2017, SFOP conducted a series of farmer and service provider focus groups that were held across the state. In addition to the valuable information this report has provided SFOP for the development of the Virginia Small Farm Resource Center, participants shared insights on common issues and challenges that are preventing these small and beginning farmers and ranchers from being more successful.

While the information shared during these focus group sessions may not be generalized to represent every small and beginning farmer in Virginia, the questions posed to participants did reveal several common challenges and concerns that impact small farm profitability and sustainability. These are issues that SFOP can continue to address through its current programs well as through the strategic development of additional programs, services and initiatives like the Virginia Small Farm Resource Center.

### *What is a small or beginning farmer?*

The term “small farmer” may bring to mind images of a farmer driving a tractor or a family working together on land that has been passed down through the generations. The “beginning farmer” may conjure up images of a young person starting out on property that has been parceled off from the family farm, or one who has purchased land specifically to pursue farming as a career. But the profile of small and beginning farmers today is far more diverse.

For the purposes of this report, we have adopted the USDA definition of a small farmer: “A grower, famer or rancher whose gross cash farm income is less than \$350,000 a year.” Also, according to USDA, a farm is any place from which “\$1,000 of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, in a year.”

Individuals who are new farmers or prospective farmers span all demographics. One service provider from the Petersburg area said that the prospective small farmers he’s been in contact with have ranged in age from 17 to 65. There are people, like a farmer in the Chatham focus group, who is employed in full-time job but would prefer to farm. There are others, like a man from the Charlottesville focus group, who was raised on a farm but only decided to start his own farm operation at age 50. There are professionals who want to move from urbanized areas and grow their own food, and those who’ve had lifelong dreams of farming. There are young people, including high school and college graduate, who are interested in farming but don’t have the financial resources to begin their own enterprise. There are women, military veterans, minorities, retirees, people who speak English and others who don’t—all interested in farming.

Based on feedback from farmers and service providers, five broad categories of small and/or beginning farmers were identified, including:

1. The young adult who wants to carry on the family business
2. The college graduate who is motivated to be an agricultural entrepreneur
3. The military veteran who wants to be his/her own boss
4. The working professional hoping to step away from his/her current job to build a farm business based on a lifelong passion
5. The retiree who wants to start a farm business to supplement retirement income

Further, people who are interested in farming have diverse ideas about the type of farming they want to pursue, whether it is growing fruits, vegetables or row crops, raising livestock, using organic or commercial farming practices, offering agritourism opportunities or making value-added products. Often, small farmers explore and practice a combination of several types.

## Focus Group Overview and Methodology

Thirteen focus groups were conducted throughout the state. The groups were separated into farmer groups and service provider groups. Each farmer focus group comprised 3–15 people, while service provider focus groups had 5–15 participants per session.

Participants in the farmer focus groups included prospective farmers, new and beginning farmers, military veteran farmers, minority farmers, young farmers, generational farmers, and limited-resource farmers. Participants represented a wide variety of agricultural sectors and were drawn from cities and counties across the state, including: Accomack, Albemarle, Amelia, Appomattox, Bland, Buckingham, Campbell, Caroline, Carroll, Charlotte, Chesterfield, Cumberland, Essex, Fauquier, Franklin, Gloucester, Grayson, Halifax, Hanover, Henrico, King and Queen, Louisa, Northampton, Northumberland, Nottoway, Orange, Petersburg, Pittsylvania, Prince Edward, Prince William, Pulaski, Smythe, Southampton, Spotsylvania, Surry Sussex and Wythe.

Service provider focus group participants included representatives from federal and state agencies. Federal representatives were invited from several United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) agencies, specifically: Farm Service Agency (FSA); Rural Development (RD); Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS); and National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). State representatives were drawn from Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board, Agrability Virginia, Virginia Tech/Virginia Cooperative Extension Beginner Farmer and Rancher Coalition, the Virginia Association of Biological Farming (VABF), Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF), Virginia State University School of Business, Virginia Agribusiness Council, Virginia Farm Bureau, Farm Credit, Colonial Farm Credit, and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS). Some of these service providers are farmers themselves.

Participants were asked a series of questions and were encouraged to speak openly and honestly (see Appendix A for a list of farmer and service provider focus group questions). More than 600 pages of transcribed text were derived from the meetings in which participants provided thoughtful responses and numerous insights.

### *Seven Themes Emerged*

1. Turning Small-scale Farming into a Viable Business
2. Identifying and Accessing Farm Product Markets
3. Improving Farmers' Business and Marketing Skills
4. Accessing Land, Equipment, Capital, and Labor
5. Utilizing Available Government and Agency Resources
6. Improving Broadband and Cell Services in Rural Areas
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These seven themes are discussed in more detail in the following section, Focus Group Findings. The themes were common among all focus groups; however, their listing does not necessarily reflect rank of importance. Instead, a review of the transcription allowed each of these issues to surface as a broad but significant area of concern.

## FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

*In this section, findings from the farmer focus groups and service provider focus groups, respectively, are listed under each of the seven themes.*

### Turning Small-scale Farming Into a Viable Business

#### *Farmers*

The statement “Farming is much more than growing something” was a common refrain. As farmers decide what to produce and how to manage operations on the farms, these choices impact their success in one season and over the long term.

One farmer from the Farmville area shared: “What I didn’t know is not how hard it is, but how hard it is just to make a living. A lot of times your profit margins are just on a dime. Just one bad season, and that farmer is starting from zero.”

Many farmers emphasized the need for help to develop a business plan as a way to help support a farm’s economic viability. They noted that the best business plan is one that is a living, organic document that can change over time. One farmer likened a business plan to a baby: “It’s just growing every day, and it never stays the same.”

Experienced farmers emphasized that a business plan is a prerequisite for applying for a bank loan and is often required for agriculture-related funding programs.

One farmer shared his experience: “For us, when we got started, we felt like we could grow, and we did. And we could grow plants and everything. But once we grew them, we didn’t know what to do with them . . . If we’d had a plan in the beginning, we would’ve known what to do with it after we grew it.”

A Warrenton-area farmer said: “Nobody really gives you a list of how many hours a day or a week it takes to maintain this little thing that you might

want to do whether it be berries or mushrooms or hops...”

Another farmer summed up the difficulty of making a living farming: “We’ve had the farm since 1908. I’m retired from law enforcement. We used to be tobacco farmers. That’s faded out. . . And I had to make sure that the farm remained a farm. I’m not making a living from the farm at this moment, but I know a lot of people say it takes five years before a farm becomes profitable. But it took me 10 [years], because after you buy the equipment and everything, it takes you that long.

Farmers want to be profitable so that they can draw a salary and support their families, participants noted. A Farmville-area farmer reflected: “I think farming is not an occupation where people value themselves. People don’t budget a salary for themselves. They don’t value their time as much as they should.”

Some farmers expressed regret for not using their resources effectively. According to one: “That’s what I really think the problem was when I first started. I didn’t appreciate that I didn’t use my resources efficiently.”

Another farmer echoed the sentiment: “I asked for a large loan and got it, and I caught hell paying for it, too. I think . . . the government would’ve helped me make my payments a little easier. But I took it, and I made it. But there were several lean years.”

A third farmer said: “I certainly could’ve used a lot more help from the very beginning about knowing how to make this profitable, even on a very limited scale. I think as I look back on it, I really wasted quite a bit of my resources and my financial resources. However, at that time there wasn’t a lot of information available. There’s a lot more now when it comes to planting and crop planning and recordkeeping and finance—the business side of farming.”

Access to affordable health insurance was identified as one of the challenges to a farm’s profitability and economic sustainability. “You still need affordable healthcare,” said a Piedmont area



farmer, "...moreso when you're first starting out because you're taking every little thing you get just to make ends meet."

Another farmer from the Piedmont region talked about past injuries that he had doctored himself because he didn't have health insurance. Sometimes it took him as long as eight weeks to recover, but during that time his animals still had to be cared for. Several farmers expressed the common concern that, without affordable healthcare, an injury that sidelines a farmer could be devastating to his or her livelihood and family. One participant suggested: "The best thing farmers do for their families is [purchase] life insurance. As much as they can afford."

Participants expressed the idea that building relationships between new farmers and farmer mentors could improve the prospects for farming careers. Many of the farmers were interested in mentoring programs that would allow beginning farmers to learn from experienced farmers. Participants emphasized the importance of face-to-face contact, networking in-person and online, and internships.

A farmer from the Wytheville area said: "The mentor is gold. Because that saves you a heck of a lot of money." Another in the group agreed: "A mentor is huge no matter what you're doing."

A farmer from the Warrenton area stated there is value in learning "...by just going places. You learn from people, and you learn from somebody who's already growing..." A Chatham area farmer added: "I'd like to sit down with somebody and write a business plan ... that's something else a mentor could help you with."

Farmers unanimously agreed that they desired access to more information, especially for small farmers. Small farmers need to know where to go for information, resources and expertise. They'd like to have templates available for recordkeeping and planting schedules as well as checklists that might include the steps for registering a farm, getting a tract number or obtaining a DUNS and Bradstreet number, as examples.

Participants also reflected on the dearth of beginning farmers and the declining numbers of small farmers. One farmer asked: "How do we find more people like us who even want to try doing this?"

### *Service Providers*

The future of farming is under threat, service providers suggest. Specifically, participants in these focus groups referenced the average age of the Virginia farmer—currently 59.5 years—and the dearth of young farmers as threats to the viability of the farming/agricultural industry. They highlighted the "riskiness" of farming due to the challenges of building a sustainable income—which can take farmers several years.

Beginning farmers need a plan "...to know what is involved with the farming process," noted several participants. They need support and training on how to develop that business plan, and knowledge on how to alter that plan to be able to diversify and/or change commodities. They also need access to information about what programs are available to help them get started and to help them succeed once they've begun.

Developing a business plan is a prerequisite for beginning farmers. As one service provider said: "[New farmers] need to have a plan before they start anything. And they need to think this through... Often you have family farms in which the older person—the father or grandfather—passes along his experience to the younger farmer."

The economics of farming can be difficult unless small farmers have identified some type of niche market, one service provider suggested. Another remarked: "I think income from small farming hasn't been proven very sustainable either."

Another participant in the group agreed: "You are your salary, and it's a risk. And [for] young people today, it's a scary time, especially if they're coming back with school loans and debts to pay."

"Cash flow can be a significant barrier for the beginning farmer—if they don't have it then they

likely have to work another job to have money to support themselves and their farming endeavor. “It’s a vicious circle,” a service provider said. “If they’re working, they can’t devote the time to the farming... But what I always tell them is: ‘Don’t quit your day job’ and ‘Start off small with something you can handle.’”

Another participant shared that the most common question he gets from new small farmers is: “What can I do to make money?”... They need a class to show them all the options and get some ideas about what they might enjoy doing, what they might be good at, and what they’ve got the ability to do.”

Another participant pointed out: “Often one big misstep is [that] the prospective farmer—young in particular—they look at just going into it instead of growing their operation. They need to take it slow. It’s hard to saddle a young farmer who says, ‘Well if I grow more, I’m going to have much more money.’ But take it slow.”

Service providers also stated that beginning farmers may not fully comprehend what they’re getting into when they decide they want to operate a farm. One service provider said, “I think some just have absolutely no clue about what needs to be done.”

Beginning small farmers need hands-on experience, service providers asserted. One service provider noted that some farmers may “...work for a neighboring farm... and sometimes it’s not with pay. But that’s what it takes to get the experience... That’s where we really see our biggest challenge—the experience.”

Another service provider said: “They’ve got to start small and get that experience. And I think that’s our biggest challenge that we see—people who want to be farmers, but they don’t know what it takes. It’s a lot of work to be a farmer.”

Participants agreed that access to affordable health insurance is a serious concern for beginning farmers. “...you almost have to have a spouse that’s employed to have group health insurance,” one participant said. “You’re talking potentially \$15,000 a year for a family just for health

insurance. When you are small and margins are tight, it’s hard to make that leap.”

Beginning farmers need access to networks to be successful, service providers suggested. Those networks include resources, expertise, peers and markets. Participants discussed how a mentorship program could be invaluable for beginning farmers to get stewardship or guidance from experienced farmers.

One service provider recommended that beginning farmers could: “...get some stewardship or guidance from the older farmers. Be an understudy or a student of the farm to gain ideas of what you want to do.”

It’s beneficial, another service said, “...to have a good peer whom you can bounce ideas off of, and get some information locally.”

One participant shared: “We’ll have farmers come in the office—young farmers starting out—and say, ‘Can you help us get connected with another farmer that’s doing what I want to do so that I can apprentice or that I can help them?’”

Another participant pointed out that at his institution, “A loan officer is a mentor for each participant. We have a loan officer mentor them [the small and beginning farmers] the whole way through. Because, again, most of our loan officers either come from a farming background or they’re farmers themselves.”

Where farmland is being transitioned from an older generation to a younger one, tight margins can be a significant issue for small farmers. One service provider explained the difficulty that can occur during the transition process between generations: “... now, instead of supporting one household, you’re supporting two households. And so if you’re not already at that point where the farm supports two households, you have to get bigger.”

Another participant added: “If they have all their equity tied up in land or their farm assets and they just give it to their kids, then they have no retirement income. Transition is difficult for a lot of people.”

Despite the challenges, one service provider surmised that farming is "...starting to become sexy again. I feel like younger people want to know where their food comes from now... I think there is some interest coming back."

## Identifying and Accessing Farm Product Markets

### *Farmers*

Focus group participants stated that farmers are looking for information on how to access markets and customers, to know who is buying and who is selling. One farmer noted: "That's our biggest problem; we have to find buyers. You have to market to people."

Another farmer said, "...a lot of it, too, is finding the right place to sell [and] to be able to find the customers that you want to sell to."

A farmer from the Chatham area stated: "There's plenty of people out there growing food, but it's not always easy for a consumer to find them or for them to have a place to sell it. And so that flow of information between who wants to buy it and who's selling it, I feel is an important missing piece."

Farmer participants also discussed how to gain access to larger markets like those in Northern Virginia and Washington, DC. A farmer from the Piedmont region focus group said: "The markets are mostly north of here. That's where you're going to be able to move stuff."

Access to up-to-date pricing information is valuable to small farmers so they can know the fair market price of their products. One farmer shared: "Our concern with a lot of it was pricing. How did we know what to charge other than already going to an existing farmers' market and matching everybody else?"

Another participant said: "I haven't found a good way to figure out my costs. I know what it costs me as far as diesel fuel and seed cost and the inputs into it. But I still haven't figured out a really great way to figure out how much I should sell it for."

She went on to explain that she can look at weekly market prices for wholesale vegetables on the North Carolina state website, but was not aware of a similar resource in Virginia. And even with wholesale pricing available online, she struggles to determine a competitive retail price for her vegetables.

Farmers said they need support and training to help them educate consumers on how their products differ from those sold in supermarkets, and how to encourage consumers to buy from the local producers. One participant remarked: "Help us educate the consumer that what we are selling to people is different than what you're buying at Walmart or at Kroger or somewhere else."

Another farmer in the group added: "We all need to promote buy local. You buy as close as you can. You buy in your area, your county, your state, and then you buy outside."

In one focus group, the discussion about finding and accessing markets yielded several comments specifically related to social or racial barriers that minority farmers may face.

One farmer expressed: "White people don't traditionally buy anything from black people." Another participant added, "White people don't travel to a black neighborhood to go shopping... They [don't travel] to black farms to go shopping either. Even less so because we're less visible."

The discussion continued about social and racial barriers minority farmer may face, and if more needs to be done to help them be successful in building a sustainable customer base. Farmers identified fee-based certification program, such as USDA's GAP certification, that can be cost-prohibitive for African American farmers unless they're in a co-op. And this posed another challenge, the group noted—there aren't enough minority farmers.

### *Service Providers*

Not only do small farmers need to know what products they can sell, they need to be able to

find a market and develop a customer base. One participant cautioned that if a small farmer lacks a buyer, "...don't plant the seed...don't buy the goat or the cow or the sheep,"

Another service provider made a similar statement: "Before you grow the crop, find out what your market is. Look ahead and not just grow the product and then say, 'Where am I going to sell this?' So planning ahead is certainly important..."

Additionally, as another participant explained, a small farmer's success requires a diverse client base and the ability to engage with them.

One key to profitability, at least for small growers in Virginia, may also be access to bigger markets like Northern Virginia and Washington DC., service providers suggested. One participant expressed: "I think there's definitely advantages of going where you can sell. So many small farmers that I sometimes talk to... they're relatively close to a huge population center... in D.C. and Northern Virginia...[but] they see it as a long drive to go up there."

Another participant agreed: "You need to go where the market is no matter if it is a drive and there's some traffic."

It can be difficult for new farmers to acquire space in existing farmers markets because these markets already have established vendor agreements. A service participant said farmers have shared stories of farmers markets where demand was high for eggs and often sold out, but other farmers were not allowed to sell eggs because "it would upset the apple cart of the two [established] egg vendors."

Anticipating trends and being able to adapt can be a significant marketing challenge. One service provider said that small farmers, "have to be adaptable. You can't keep doing the same thing if you're failing. Don't keep doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different result."

Small farmers must have flexibility to change commodity areas, another service provider said: "The market can get saturated. A lot of people all

of a sudden feel like that's a direction. You have to have foresight to be able to see where the marketplace is playing..."

Another participant shared how millennials use farmers markets differently than other age groups, and how "...there's a lot of 'channel hopping' right now—at least in more urban communities that have a lot of options for how to get food. I think it's not clear yet what that means for small farmers. Like, how is that an opportunity? How is that a pressure point?"

In short, participants noted that it has become harder to determine how people are going to shop for produce and other food products in the future.

## **Improving Farmers' Business and Marketing Skills**

### *Farmers*

Several participating farmers expressed the need for more education and training so they can be effective business owners and not just expert growers and producers. Focus group participants identified the need to learn about record keeping, budgeting, money management, financing, operating loans and scaling operations.

A farmer in the Warsaw area said, "...A lot of old people like us don't necessarily want to go back and spend four or five years in college, but it would be nice if we could take a class here and there to get a little more knowledge or at least get somebody else's opinion."

One farmer remarked, "My father was a pretty good businessman as far as farming. I needed more outreach ... There [were] a lot of money management courses I could've taken. I still was a little naïve as far as getting financing."

Farmers would also like to learn strategies to help them market their products effectively. A Chatham-area farmer said: "The first thing you need to do is to get your market. Find out who you're going to be selling to and have a plan."

A Wytheville-area farmer expressed: “What I hear a lot from our farmers is, ‘I can grow anything you want me to grow, but I can’t sell it.’ How do you fix the marketing?”

Another farmer stated: “I think a lot of the Internet selling is just getting your information out there so people know what you have or know that it’s available.”

A Chatham-area farmer suggested that templates for selling at farmers markets would be helpful: “Templates for signage or guides on how to design things as far as marketing; then, therefore, your profits increase.”

Training is valuable for farmers who want to create an effective online presence with a website and social media, farmers noted. One issue that was identified by a Petersburg-area farmer related to marketing skill development: “My granddaughter is helping me now, but I would love to know more myself about website development, [and] if I had more efficient use of social media and tools that were out there, I think it would help my operation a whole lot more.”

According to a Chatham-area farmer, “You have to have a customer base. Or even an email list. People have to know you’re there... So, to be successful, you’ve got to have the means to either have them watching you with a website or a Facebook page or have their information to contact them to get [your products] to them.”

Focus group participants also said small farmers could benefit from learning how to produce and sell value-added items. They also expressed interest in learning how to attract certain groups (e.g., seniors who use coupons, and people who use SNAP cards) through targeted marketing strategies.

Education and training about how to extend growing seasons to provide additional marketing opportunities and improve profitability would be beneficial to small farmers, according to the focus groups. As one farmer said: “I’ve been gathering more information about season extension, because

we’ve really been getting into that more. We have four high tunnels now, and so I have capacity to grow more year-round. I’ve been really interested in learning more about how to use them efficiently and how to use them well.”

Participants were asked about the benefits and challenges for small farmers engaging in the online grocery business. Responses were mixed with several farmers expressing concerns about logistics, especially for growers and producers located remotely. They noted the difficulties of shipping perishable produce like tomatoes, which bruise easily; about small farmers being able to grow sufficient quantities to ship; and about packaging and shipping costs.

A farmer from the Farmville area said: “I just think [online] produce is so risky...” A farmer in the Piedmont region offered: “It’s not even applicable to the products that we raise and grow.”

Questions were raised by focus group participants about product distribution and delivery. Would products be shipped directly to the consumer? Would there be a central site where consumers could pick up their purchases?

“Unless it’s something that can be frozen, [online grocery] is useless to a small farmer because it’s almost impossible to get it there unless you’re a half-mile away,” one farmer noted.

A farmer in the Warrenton area stated: “I think people [who] buy what we have to sell want to come and see it, taste it, feel it. I think that would be the same with produce.”

Another farmer emphasized that, “... success in the online space comes back to marketing.” That is, knowing what people would be willing to buy and creating a market structure based on what is profitable.

Participants mentioned the need for outreach to help small farmers learn more about USDA-related programs such as GAP certification.

### *Service Providers*

Service providers discussed the how marketing needs are different among small farmers. For example, selling grain is much different than trying to sell vegetables. One participant suggested: “A lot needs to be done on branding, promotion and marketing outreach.”

Another service provider identified the importance of using social media to build relationships. He said: “There’s a whole social media aspect that I’ve seen more and more of on the direct market side, which seems positive. It helps people get to know the farmer.”

## **Accessing Land, Equipment, Capital, Labor and Resources**

### *Farmers*

Access to land was identified as a significant issue by farmers in the focus groups. Some farmers may reside on a family-owned farm or have access to family property, but face issues related to land transfer or transition. Namely, small farmers are challenged to keep their land in the family or, at least, to keep their land zoned for agricultural use.

A farmer in the Warsaw area posited, “Waterfront property is gobbled up and turned into a subdivision as quickly as possible. I mean, why is a guy going to spend his life making \$100,000 a year when he can sell it for several million and just live off the interest?”

While discussing land access, one farmer noted: “There are other people out here that need help, and there are people out here that are looking to farm but don’t have land. We’ve got land and no help. They’re willing to help, but they have no land. And we can’t get in touch with them. A and B can’t get together.”

In other cases, farmers noted, there are people who want to know how and where to lease or purchase land in order to start a farming operation.

Purchasing land and/or equipment often means going into debt, and farmers in the focus groups expressed a desire for innovative ways to access equipment cost-effectively. They spoke about the need for access to equipment rentals, the ability to pool resources to buy and/or use equipment or to find available equipment-sharing programs.

A small farmer from the Chatham area explained: “One of my greatest challenges is having access to equipment.” A Piedmont farmer agreed: “Equipment for a new or small farmer—the tractors and all the equipment that you need—where do you find that?” Another farmer added, “You have to go into so much debt for your equipment...”

They also discussed the benefits of an online resource for what one farmer described as, “Available equipment. Sometimes you’ve got equipment that you can borrow or rent cheaply, like old over-seeders.”

In regard to capital resources, minority farmers in some focus groups discussed their perceptions and experiences of social and racial barriers to accessing government programs and financing. One farmer said, “Government programs have been so hard on black people.”

Another farmer reflected on difficulties he encountered with financing. He remembered a time when he saw, “...the banks weren’t doing a lot of lending to minorities, or if they did it was high interest rates... We were always afraid of banks. We tried to self-finance.” He elaborated, saying the lack of access to financing at affordable rates resulted in “missing out on deals as far as equipment or chemicals or fertilizer, or whatever you needed to produce a good crop.”

Participants also agreed that there has been an increase in the number of banks and credit unions that cater to African Americans’ needs. One participant remarked: “There are several black banks around, so we maybe need to be courting them.”

Recruiting farm workers is a challenge. Farmers agreed that there is a need for access to reliable help so they have lower labor turnover. A farmer

from the Piedmont region stated: “Affordable labor is one thing, but good labor is the main thing.”

One farmer noted that those who rely on foreign workers face many hurdles, from recruiting American workers, to verifying American workers can’t be found in order to hire foreign workers. He summarized: “Then you have an exemption to go out and hire the same people [foreign workers] you’ve hired for a million years....”

Another farmer expressed that “finding ways to keep employees throughout the year” is part of his interest in doing season extension. He elaborated: “We’ve kind of scaled up to the point where we need to have good people all year. When I was starting out, I was relying more on part-time people or interns or just family. Now as my wife and I are getting older, we are needing to depend more on employees, and I’m beginning to see that you have the best people that are trained well and kind of stick with you. But for them to stick with you is hard in the off season. This is where having season extension and having something to produce and sell is a big help.”

### *Service Providers*

Access to land is a critical issue for small farmers, especially if they have not inherited land that is already in the family. One service provider remarked that bigger farmers who have more land may be more profitable compared to “...a small farmer just starting out [who] may not have an option to have that much land or the financial means to get that much land. It’s economics-based.”

Another service provider said, “Purchasing land is expensive, and then finding leased land for someone new without connections ... I would perceive that to be difficult.” One solution, another participant offered, might be “...providing models for long-term lease agreements that are fair on both ends, and the different ways those [models] can work.”

“We can help them find land,” said a service provider. “[Farmers] need to find the right land that’s got the right terrain and the right soil type....”

Land access issues, as one participant suggested, may also have to do with historical inequities, whereby people may have been deprived of their property rights and have no legal recourse to reclaim the land that was once theirs.

A participant from the Lynchburg area highlighted land transitioning as a problem. She said: “It is very hard to convince a current landowner or farm owner to start a transition plan early as a beginning farmer... It’s a cultural shift to get people to think about the end. Education for land transfer and then technical assistance to make that happen is incredibly important...”

A participant in this same session said: “We have to think about the ability for people to transfer to familial relationships as well as outside of the family... There are also a lot of issues with who’s going to actually help transition the property to the next generation.”

A third attendee commented on changes related to land use: “Depending on the area you’re talking about, there are some places that land use has been a big issue... New farmers starting out have to realize where they’re located... because they may not be able to farm in that particular area.”

Urbanization and zoning are yet other issues that hinder access to farmland noted several participants. “I cover the counties of Amelia, Powhatan, and Goochland, and the one thing we’re struggling with is urbanization and access to land,” one participant shared. Although everyone has a right to farm in Virginia, another service provider said, “...it’s kind of hard when the land use of most counties is going up into residential, and there’s no emphasis on farming.”

It can be much easier and more profitable to sell property as residential than to keep it as agricultural land, the service providers agreed.

Rezoning land can be a barrier to beginning farmers, noted a participant. He shared an example of one beginning farmer who wanted to farm 14 acres on a 60-acre lot in a section of the county zoned residential. County officials required that the

land be rezoned agricultural at a cost of \$2,500 to the farmer. “He doesn’t have \$2,500 to rezone his 14 acres,” he noted. “But 14 acres is plenty because he’s doing mixed greens and micro greens. . . . He can [grow] everything he needs to on one acre. But he [needs additional acres] if he’s going to sell from his land. So, access to land is also a problem because of zoning,” the service provider said.

A service provider based on the Eastern Shore said: “Getting land is hard. Getting money for equipment is hard.” Another participant agreed: “. . .if you do find a piece [of land] that you can buy or rent and you want to do something that requires irrigation, then you’ve got to go and get a loan to get that going.”

Startup is expensive, especially for equipment purchases like a tractor, and small farmers can easily rack up significant debt. One participant said: “It’s difficult to finance a new farmer that doesn’t have an existing income source to just get started. A lot of the things that they want to buy are capital intensive. . . . If someone has operating history, it’s a lot easier for a commercial bank to finance that.”

Another participant spoke of the challenge of securing financing: “Financing can be pretty difficult, especially for a small farmer. Around the state, we hear a lot of the producers saying you’ve got to ‘get big or get out.’ I perceive that as a big struggle to small farmers.”

“Even with a small farm, you can rack up a million dollars’ worth of debt. You get a small tractor, believe it or not, and you’ve sunk \$100,000. So it is a barrier,” said a participant from the Lynchburg area.

Debt can be daunting for college graduates who would like to farm, but who already have student debt. A service provider in the Lynchburg area said, “What I find really challenging is that some people who are younger carry a lot of debt coming out of college. I know that’s a national conversation around debt forgiveness potentials for farming.”

Student debt can hinder young people’s ability to start up farming enterprises. They might wind

up living in poverty, the same service provider asserted. “Is that what we’re hoping for our next generation? The game is different than it was 30 or 40 years ago.”

Service providers emphasized the importance of loan programs to help small farmers. They mentioned operating loans, loans for expansion, and loans for equipment purchases as examples.

Labor problems that small farmers encounter are well known among service providers. It can be hard to find reliable help year after year, they agreed, including seasonal labor. One participant said: “. . . it’s hard to get labor. It’s hard to pay them. . . . I think it falls back on the income stream more than being able to pay somebody. And it’s hard work. We know a handful of acres can take a lot of attention.”

Farmers may have to rely on migratory labor, and it can be difficult to navigate the regulations for bringing in seasonal help, service providers agreed. In addition, labor rates are rising, which puts greater pressure on small farmers operating with already thin profit margins. One participant noted that regulations are “. . .driving the labor price essentially through the roof, based on product sales. . . . Availability in some areas [is challenging], if you get outside of migratory labor, [farmers] just can’t find labor on a seasonal basis now.”

Service providers went on to discuss the need to help break down racial, age and gender barriers, both implicit and explicit, so that those individuals engaged in farming have more equitable access to resources and opportunities. One participant who is trying to present information at local churches on small farming opportunities said: “. . .I’ve been told multiple times that agriculture is still a stigma career for African Americans. . . . I would say that’s a cultural barrier from the history of agriculture.”

A service provider from the Lynchburg area remarked that at his institution staff members have worked to be more sensitive to roadblocks that may prevent certain groups of small farmers from receiving assistance and accessing resources. He said institutions could “contribute to some of the barriers coming down.”



Another participant in the group said: “It may have to do with race. It may have to do with age, whether someone is too old or too young. It may have to do with gender. Those factors in terms of getting access to resources may come into play. Those kinds of things are hard to identify, yet they can be life-changing in terms of their impact.”

A third participant asked: “How does institutionalized racism, or sexism or ageism become a barrier for getting access to communities?” She elaborated on how those institutionalized inequities can impact whether a farmer will be welcomed into a local community, be invited to have a seat at the table at the agency level, or be able to get capital and have access to much-needed resources. She said access “...is something that I don’t think the agriculture community talks a lot about...”

## Utilizing Available Government and Agency Resources

### *Farmers*

Farmers discussed the need for improved advertising of programs and funding opportunities from service providers. The consensus was that farmers often don’t get access to funding and grant information soon enough, and by the time they learn of opportunities, there’s no money left.

A farmer in one group said: “The government would put press releases out about all these programs that were going to be available to farmers, and then the funding was never enough to get around.” Another farmer made a similar remark: “...I know they have grants and things, and I always seem to inquire when there’s no money available. The other day I called about high tunnels, and he’s like, ‘No money this year.’”

Another farmer in the group expressed: “Most of the people that I see these grants going to are people who have been in the business for a long time. They’ve already got all this money. They’ve got a really successful business.”

One farmer stated: “Government programs are a huge turnoff to small farmers. You’ve got to be

bullheaded and pretty persistent to push your way into it. I think they’re getting a little better now, but honestly they’ve been hell.... The bottom line is when we find out about it, ‘We ain’t got no more money.’ That’s what they tell us.”

Farmer participants indicated that they would like to receive feedback on rejected grants, so they can improve their chances of success in the future. A farmer from the Chatham area described how she applied for a grant several years ago but wasn’t approved. When her application was denied, she asked how she could improve or change future applications to improve her chances for success. She said: “...I asked for feedback, and they never responded... How can I improve my chances of getting this grant? Not a word. So feedback, I think, is a major thing.”

Another participant said: “It’s basically training yourself, getting knowledge on how these grants work, and being able to put these grants into motion.”

Farmers see value in having access to individuals who work as grant writers. A farmer from the Piedmont region said: “Professional grant writers are very necessary.” Another farmer in this group, said he’d like to see the state “...provide a pool of grant writers for small farmers.”

One farmer had purchased his farm in 2000 but only started working with government agencies in 2016. He reasoned: “I’m just not a big fan of government being all up in my business, to be honest with you...if I’d have felt more comfortable, I’d have dealt with them sooner. It’s just that we made a lot of headway in the last 24 months. We could’ve made that headway 10 years ago and been leaps and bounds ahead of where we are.”

Farmers would like to have timely information on regulations and laws related to their farm, farm business and agriculture practices. One farmer offered the requirements related to the Food Safety Modernization Act as an example. Farmers also noted that these issues are related to a need, in general, for more advocacy for small farmers.

### *Service Providers*

A common concern among service providers was how federal and state budget cuts have affected their ability to offer services and support to small and beginning farmers. Not only are there not enough agents to cover the state, but agents also must cover large territories. One participant said: “Our issue: budget cuts. We took a drastic cut this year.”

Office closures and fewer office hours and personnel reductions in favor of online services does not help small farmers, according to service providers’ experience. One explained: “We keep downsizing the office and saying we can do this online, but farmers want to come in. . . . a group of five or six farmers came in and said, ‘No. We want to come in the office. We don’t want to go online.’ . . . To really help the small farmers, you need to have people.”

Participants agreed that the farmers they work with prefer to meet face-to-face with agricultural agency and government staff, so they can sit down and have a conversation, discuss issues and get answers. Not having sufficient staffing to make that human connection can hurt small farmers, service providers said.

“What I’ve noticed with farmers, especially small farmers, is they want to talk to somebody. They don’t want to talk to the Internet. They want to see somebody’s face and look them in the eyes,” said one attendee. She cited small community banks as an example of institutions that provide—and pride themselves—on personalized customer service.

Some participants went on to identify how budget cuts have affected the number of services and programs their agencies can offer, and it also has affected their outreach abilities. With limited financial resources, service providers have had to adapt their outreach practices to be more cost-effective. Direct mail is expensive, so its use has been curtailed. It is also costly to create, print and distribute paper fliers.

In addition, service providers noted that their agencies are often uncertain about the best ways to reach people. A participant from the Petersburg

area said, “When I worked in Brunswick County, we tried doing every door direct mailing. [It was a] complete failure.”

Email is cheaper than direct mail, yet in some areas farmers have inferior broadband and cell phone services, if they have access to the internet at all. Radio advertising, social media, text messaging (SMS) and farm-based events are other opportunities to get the word out, service providers say, but there is no clear evidence regarding which is the most effective. Another participant mentioned that local newspapers don’t want to print agricultural-related news articles.

One participant suggested: “[Texting] is the new wave of communication. When you text somebody, it’s instantaneous. But that takes action on the producer’s part. They’ve got to set it up so that we can text them, and we just have struggled to make that connection to a wider audience.”

Regardless of how much program advertising is undertaken, one service provider pointed out: “The only ones that are going to come are the ones that are interested in it. You cannot make [people] come to your programs. All you can do is try.”

Service providers said there was room for improvement both in referrals among agencies as well as partnerships among institutions. One participant emphasized “. . .partnering with agencies that already have a reach over the Commonwealth can help close those gaps.”

In addition, service providers identified the need to further educate their internal staff about working with small and beginning farmers. A service provider in the Lynchburg area spoke of the need for education within institutions to help staff understand “. . .what does it mean to work with small farmers? What does it mean to work with socially disadvantaged farmers and beginning farmers and veteran farmers?”

An attendee from the Petersburg area said: “We’re trying to leverage the services of the Small Farm Outreach Program while also trying to establish a network in the counties that I serve.”

Another Petersburg service provider focus group participant said his initial meeting with a beginning farmer lasts as long as four hours. “I assess what they want to do, and I tell them whether it’s feasible or not, and then I direct them to the appropriate agencies...,” he said. “It’s been my experience that once you hand them off to the expert, they’re going to be taken care of. I’ve had a positive experience with all the specialists in the different organizations.”

An issue closely related to conducting effective outreach is how service providers identify those individuals who need assistance. One participant said: “I think we do a good job once we get that referral, but the key is getting the referral. That’s been a challenge the last couple years especially. Referrals are just not coming like they have been in the past.”

A second participant noted: “One of our bigger challenges is finding and identifying the farmers or the operations that could use some assistance... They’re not reaching out for help that [could] make a big difference to their operation.”

Service providers suggested community farm leaders may be able to help disseminate information to small farmers in their local areas. Holding farmer-to-farmer and farm-based events are also effective ways to engage small farmers. Additionally, when service providers are invited to join or host these events, it can help build relationships between farmers and service providers. One participant said, “If you can make one good connection somewhere with a farmer and then bring the rest of the community to his or her farm, that’s one good way to disseminate information, [but] that is still a challenge for us.” Another participant noted the reliance on Extension agents and VSU Small Farm Outreach Program agents to engage with farmers directly to find out what resources farmers need.

The consensus across service provider focus groups was that small-scale farmers, producers and ranchers are unique and have diverse needs. A participant stated: “I think there’s a lot more that can be done within our organizations and institutions

to better understand the experiences that these individuals are facing.” She mentioned military veteran farmers as an example, and remarked that the USDA has done a good job with that target group over the past few years.

Another service provider stated that Virginia State University has been effective in partnering with other groups and agencies to offer programming for small farmers. “I think sister land grants [offer] another opportunity to work together,” she said.

Another participant said the idea of developing an educational program for small farmers has been discussed at her institution. She added that some financial institutions also have programs centered on financial education and recordkeeping where partnerships could be formed.

According to service providers, farmers are not eager to share their data by completing the census or filling out forms for state and federal government agencies. One participant said: “We have growers that are nervous about their specific farm information being put out for the public to see. And so, if we do any kind of reporting, such as a grant, we have to reassure them that it’s aggregated data.”

Consequently, service providers noted, a lack of accurate data can have a direct impact the availability of and access to government programs.

A participant from the Staunton area shared his experience with farmers who were reluctant to work with the government. He explained: “I said, ‘Well, just give us a chance, and tell us what you think.’ They turned out to be very good farmers, but at first they wanted absolutely nothing to do with the government at all.”

Increasing regulations regarding irrigation, pesticide applications, and other farm practices, can make farming more challenging, service provider agreed. One participant cited GAP certification as an example of a certificate program that can be expensive and difficult for small farmers to obtain. Another said regulations like the proximity of wildlife to vegetable crops and food safety can present challenges for small farmers. A service

provider in the Petersburg area spoke about VDACS' bird-limit exemptions: one is a 1,000-bird limit and the next limit is 30,000 birds. He said: "I don't think you would call a beginning farmer someone that's going to process up to 30,000 birds... there's got to be common sense applied to that exemption."

## Improving Broadband and Cellular Services in Rural Areas

### *Farmers*

Farmers are well aware that broadband and cell phone coverage issues are pervasive in rural areas around the state. A farmer near Chatham said: "I wish Internet was better out in the rural areas. It's just almost nonexistent."

Another Chatham farmer with satellite service said: "We have HughesNet available to us on our cell phones, and that's it. And I can't even do an unlimited plan because once it drops me lower than 4G, the Internet is not available."

A third farmer from the area who connects through Verizon DSL explained: "The DSL comes into the house. [At] night if I'm at home, I can't do anything because [at] certain times it's almost impossible. If I get it first thing in the morning, I can zip through and do anything I want to do, but at night when you want to work on stuff, it's so slow."

Focus group participants also pointed out that not all farmers are computer savvy or know how to use the Internet effectively. One farmer said of service providers: "They like to do a lot on the computer, but everybody is not computer savvy. Everybody doesn't have computers. Everybody doesn't have time to spend an hour or two on computers a day. To me, that's a serious question."

### *Service Providers*

Service providers remarked on the poor quality and lack of broadband and cell phone service in rural Virginia counties. One service provider gave an apt description of the challenges of subpar cell phone service: "Literally I'm in the field and I can't move,

because if I [take a step] the connection is going to fall apart. I've had conference calls that way with people. It's really hard."

Another participant said: "...from Keysville to Charlotte County up to Gretna, you don't even have cell phone service."

"There's spots that are so bad that you don't even get a cell phone signal," another agreed. "King and Queen is really bad. The main road that runs through King William County from Caroline County all the way down to West Point is Route 30, and there is about a six-mile spot on the only main road through the county that you can't even make a call."

Farmers who reside in areas with poor Internet connectivity often rely on cell phones. A Petersburg area service provider explained: "In the areas that have poor internet connectivity, a lot of people are using cell phones. But that's cost prohibitive if you're going to be doing a lot of online stuff."

Internet access through satellite is also expensive, to the point of being cost prohibitive for many. A service provider from the Petersburg area said: "... Virginia still has such a huge issue with broadband access. You can build the best website in the world, but if [farmers] can't access the technology to even get online and check their email, it's not worth anything."

Another participant also raised the issue of inferior service. She said a lot of Virginia's agricultural communities "...have terrible service and terrible access to high-speed Internet... I do think that access will be important in the future." A Petersburg service provider concurred that the broadband issue is "very relevant" because it hinders agencies' abilities to reach their target audiences.

She explained: "...in King and Queen County in particular, only a third of the residents have access to Internet. And so just from a standpoint of us promoting our programs, we can have the best program in the world. But if two-thirds of your county [doesn't] know about it, it's a problem."

Access to the Internet has become increasingly integral to people's lives—from how they receive information to how they research and shop for goods, including food. One participant said: "... the issue is that a carrier is not going to do anything unless there are enough residents to support the cost." She went on to observe that in rural communities there is rarely a sufficient customer base to convince a carrier to make the significant investments in infrastructure that area required for better Internet access.

Service providers also mentioned how older farmers may lack Internet savvy. Those who are not knowledgeable about navigating the Internet may not be able to find beneficial resources and information, the groups noted, and these individuals may also miss out on funding opportunities that are only published online.

## Engaging the Next Generation of Farmers

### *Farmers*

Farmers stressed the need to target and engage youth—to start early in developing the next generations of farmers. A farmer from the Warsaw area said there is a "need to get kids to appreciate livestock or agriculture."

A farmer from the Wytheville area said it's a matter of "Just reaching out to young people and saying, 'You can do it. You can do it. And we're here to make sure that you do have the necessary tools that it takes to be successful.'"

Getting young people thinking about and interested in agriculture was deemed important by farmers, but there was no detailed discussion about how to do so.

### *Service Providers*

Service providers mentioned the need to engage the next generation. One service provider referenced the increased average age of farmers and the lack of young farmers as a significant issue. To engage youth, a service provider from the Staunton area said: "Catch them when they're young and teach them about this stuff. I think it would be very beneficial."

While the need to engage youth to ensure the future of farming was identified, there was no discussion about the best approach to do so.

## ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Small and beginning farmers, though extremely diverse, face several common challenges to building successful and sustainable farm businesses. Farmers and service providers in these focus groups agreed that access to land; land transition; access to capital; high startup costs for property and equipment; lack of affordable healthcare; access to markets where they can sell their products; an inability to capitalize on grants and funding opportunities; and the need for easy access to information, resources and experts were significant issues for small and beginning farmers.

There was consensus from all that small farmers need to develop a business plan that they can adapt over time to take advantage of new opportunities and to prevent potential revenue losses. They also need agribusiness training that includes instruction on using computer software programs for recordkeeping, estate planning, and other business-related activities.

Developing small farmers' marketing expertise, including training them to develop their brand and online presence, was also unilaterally emphasized. One difference emerged regarding GAP certification. Service providers consider GAP certification an important opportunity for small farmers to operate in larger markets and generate more revenue. Small farmers, however, may not be convinced of the return on investment because of the upfront costs.

Farmers are aging and the farming workforce needs more young people who can help build and sustain the profession. Farmers and service providers alike lamented the scarcity of young farmers. They stressed the need to engage youth at an early age so that they become motivated to take up farming as a career. While small farming may not be at risk of extinction, without future farmers the industry is at risk of being understaffed, perhaps severely so, they said.

Both groups discussed inequalities in farming; namely, that it has historically been harder for minorities, women, military veterans, the socially

disadvantaged and those with disabilities to garner the same access to expertise, information and funding. Participants pointed out that bias or discrimination is often institutionalized. Service providers said efforts are needed to break down barriers, and efforts to do so can begin with training internal staff about these issues. More effort is needed to level the playing field, they agreed, so that anyone interested in becoming a small farmer can take advantage of the training programs, education, technical assistance and financial resources that are available.

Poor quality and lack of broadband and cellular services in rural counties across the state was identified as a significant issue. Service providers want to use email, websites and social media to advertise their programs and services, yet farmers in rural areas struggle with poor connectivity. Consequently, relying on the Internet to disseminate information has shortcomings. At the same time, direct mail is an expensive and ineffective way to reach farmers, according to service providers. Additionally, older farmers might not be able or want to navigate the Internet.

Small and beginning farmers need help be effective entrepreneurs who can build a sustainable, profitable business. They expressed a need for better access to information, resources and training so that they can prosper from the fruits of their labor.

Participants in the both farmer and service provider focus groups also put forward ideas and potential solutions based on their knowledge, observations and experiences.

***Training and educational programming can give small and beginning farmers invaluable marketing and business management skills.***

Farming is not only a way of life—it's a business. To be successful business owners, small and beginning farmers need appropriate training. Specifically, they need training to develop a business plan, manage their finances, oversee their operations and labor, keep business records and conduct effective marketing, and build a reliable

customer base. Small and beginning farmers also need training and assistance with writing grant proposals and feedback on unsuccessful grant applications.

***Farmer mentors and the creation of on-farm internships can help beginning farmers.***

Established farmers can provide tremendous service by mentoring beginning farmers. There also may be opportunities to create internships that result in a win-win arrangement—established farmers get assistance with farm operations and pass along their expertise to a next-generation farmer. In turn, beginning farmers get much-needed, hands-on experience that will contribute to their success and may also facilitate their efforts to secure financing.

***Improved broadband and cellular services in rural Virginia would aid farmers' access to invaluable local, state and federal information and other online resources.***

Inferior broadband and cellular services are a chronic yet well-recognized problem in rural Virginia. It can have impacts on farmers in these areas as agencies and organizations reduce their budgets and offer more services online.

***Small and beginning farmers would benefit from access to affordable health insurance and healthcare.***

Farmers with tight margins may consider healthcare premiums an expense they cannot afford. But injured farmers who cannot do their jobs effectively may inadvertently put their businesses, and livelihoods, in jeopardy. Access to affordable healthcare policies that provide coverage for small farmers and their families is a top consideration for those contemplating farming as a full-time occupation.

***Small and beginning farmers need access to land, equipment, and labor that is equitable and affordable.***

There are individuals in Virginia who are eager to farm but lack access to affordable land. The cost of new equipment is prohibitive not only for beginning farmers but also for those who are already farming on a small scale. And the shortage of reliable farm labor is problematic and can hinder a business owner's success.

The inability to procure and retain farm land, equipment and workers was repeatedly identified as a significant hardship for farmers. Focus groups felt that cultivating strong partnerships among service providers could improve referrals and help farmers with cost-effective solutions to these issues.

Further, all individuals who are interested in pursuing farming need access to information, resources and programs. Service providers especially were interested in solutions to remove institutional barriers, improve staff training, and create targeted initiatives that give historically disadvantaged groups more opportunities.

***Efforts are needed to emphasize the value of small-scale agriculture in order to sustain it over the long term.***

Action is also needed to get more people, especially youth, interested in farming. Participants want to make farming an appealing career opportunity. Getting youth excited entails dismantling negative perceptions about farming and getting more students involved in agriculture education and activities at school, in 4-H and in their communities.

## **CONCLUSION**

Agencies, institutions and organizations offer a wide array of services, information, resources and assistance to Virginia's small and beginning farmers. But it is evident from this review of farmer and service provider focus groups conducted around the state that they need even more support to be successful.

VSU Small Farm Outreach Program is considering solutions to the issues and challenges noted here as it works to develop of the Virginia Small Farm Resource Center for improved access to information, resources and farming experts. With the guidance offered by our focus groups, the Virginia Small Farm Resource Center (refer to Appendix B) can be designed to make it easier for small and beginning farmers to find what they need— contacts for representatives with local, state and federal government agencies; financial services experts; federal and state agency websites; information on available grant, incentive and funding opportunities; training and education for business and marketing; planting schedules and more.

Further, bridging generational gaps to help ensure access to information that will help every small farmer is important to VSU's Small Farm Outreach Program as it builds educational programs, partnerships and collaborations that will sustain Virginia's small farmers.

While the findings presented in this report cannot be considered a generalization of all small farmers in Virginia, it is hoped that the identification of common issues discussed by our focus group participants will prove useful to all those who are working in and serving the agricultural industry to benefit Virginia's small and beginning farmers.

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## Appendix A: Farmer and Service Provider Focus Group Questions

### *Farmer Focus Group Questions:*

1. Think back to when you first started farming or were thinking about getting into farming. What information do you wish you had to get off to a better start?
2. What type of information have you looked for in the last two years to help with your farming operation? Were you able to easily find this information?
3. Imagine there was one website for comprehensive information about farming. Describe what you would like to find there.
4. Have you ever found yourself questioning why a particular service wasn't available to small farmers? What service would that be?
5. State and federal government agencies provide many services to small farmers. What additional ways could these agencies help you succeed as small farmers?
6. What are the primary reasons your farm is not more profitable?
7. What sources do you currently use to stay up-to-date on farming news? Do these news sources fill all of your needs?
8. How many of you are familiar with the USDA Census of Agriculture?
9. Does the Census of Agriculture help you be a more profitable farmer? Why?
10. What are the most important factors to selling your product/s online? What do small farmers need to be successful in an online grocery business?
11. As we develop the Virginia Small Farm Resource Center, is there additional information that would be helpful for us to know?

### *Service Provider Focus Group Questions:*

1. What are the issues and challenges facing Virginia's small, disadvantaged and veteran farmers?
2. Could your institution do more to assist Virginia small, disadvantaged and veteran farmers? If so, what are your suggestions?
3. What additional methods could be developed help farmers succeed, especially in remote and underserved areas?
4. How do you disseminate information to remote and underserved areas where Internet speeds are low or non-existent?
5. Is your organization effective in delivering information to Virginia small, disadvantaged and veteran farmers?
6. What are your suggestions for improving information dissemination?
7. Are there gaps in how you are able to disseminate information and address the needs of small and beginning farmers?
8. Does your organization, agency or institution get resistance or apprehension from small or beginning farmers? How does this affect your institution's ability to gather or disseminate information? What can be done to remove this apprehension?
9. Are there ways institutions could collaborate further to allow for easier access to information?

## Appendix B: Virginia Small Farm Resource Center

The Virginia State University Small Farm Outreach Program (SFOP) received funds from the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development to create the Virginia Small Farm Resource Center (SFRC). The SFRC is being constructed as a web-based clearinghouse for education, resources and news that can help to improve the profitability and sustainability of the state's small and beginning farmers.

The SFRC will offer relevant, valuable and timely information that is generated and aggregated from agriculture-related agencies, institutions and organizations that assist Virginia's small farmers. SFRC staff may also be reached by phone for those who wish to call for information or are unable to use the website.

Focus groups held across Virginia in early 2018 served to inform the Small Farm Outreach Program and the Virginia Small Farm Resource Center about how the website can be designed to best meet the needs of Virginia's small farmers. A list of suggestions made by the groups for consideration is presented below.

### *Farmer and Service Provider Suggestions for SFRC Content and Functionality*

#### ***Farmers' Suggestions***

- List grant programs and funding sources
- List fencing and water sources
- List locations for testing samples including soil, water and tissue
- Establish an internship program for people who want to farm, but who don't have land
- Create a smartphone app to access daily wholesale and retail market rates for crops
- Create a comprehensive list of agriculture-related agencies and organizations
- Define types of farming such as organic, permaculture, alternative, hydroponic, aquaculture, heritage livestock, etc.)
- Develop Informational sheets for specific crops that include best practices, pest management, growing tips, and marketing strategies)
- Provide checklist(s) with information on how to register your farm and get your tract number, and an explanation of a DUNS and Bradstreet number
- Include case studies of successful farmers
- Provide templates that can be used for planting schedules, seasonal calendars, and marketing signage
- Offer how-to videos
- Provide information on:
  - Alternative energy sources (solar, wind)
  - Where to rent equipment
  - How to gain access to markets and customers
  - Applicable laws and regulations (e.g., Produce Safety Act, Food Safety Modernization Act)
  - Ways to connect with peers (online chat, peer groups)
  - How different farmers markets operate around the state
- Include a financial simulation program (such as SimFam)
- Provide a link to "Ask an Expert"
- Host discussion board(s) and include site interactivity

*Service Providers' Suggestions*

- Make the website easy to navigate
- Include a variety of ways to access information with links, a call line (211 number, online follow-up and chat features)
- Define different categories of farmers (service provider matrix—where do farmers fit in)
- Strive to be more than a connection to resources—get to the next level
- Educate farmers about how to connect to their local services, agencies and state and federal representatives
- Address sustainability for funding and staff for this website

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