



**Greater** Happens Here  
College of Agriculture



APRIL 2026

# Focus Group Report

## SMALL FARM OUTREACH PROGRAM

*Prepared for*  
**Virginia State University College of Agriculture  
and VSU Small Farm Outreach Program**

*Presented by*  
**Danielle Freeman Jefferson and Herman Ellison**

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Facilitation &amp; Methodology</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Focus Group Response Analysis</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Dot Surveys in Action.....	<b>8</b>
Discussion/Post-It Note Questions .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>25</b>

## Executive Summary

---

Virginia State University's (VSU) Small Farm Outreach Program conducted 10 focus group meetings across the state, October 2025–March 2026, on behalf of the VSU College of Agriculture. This report presents findings from those meetings where 140 small and urban farmers across Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland provided input and insights on the emerging issues and opportunities for producers in the Commonwealth. Participants also discussed ways that VSU College of Agriculture and the Small Farm Outreach Program can play an integral role in agriculture education, training, and research. Their responses reveal that farming is not only an occupation but also a personal identity, with deep connections to land, family, and community.

For purposes of this report, “peer” refers to individuals engaged in similar agricultural roles or professional experiences (e.g., fellow farmers or producers), and does not denote any demographic, racial, or identity-based grouping.

All findings are presented based on operational, geographic, and access-related factors identified by participants, without regard to race or ethnicity, in alignment with applicable federal non-discrimination requirements.

## Key Findings of the Report

---

- **Time and Cost Are Universal Barriers**

Across all four program areas — Extension, research, education, and certification — time and cost are the most frequently cited barriers to engagement. Labor was identified as the primary barrier to adopting new research practices specifically.

- **Farmers Want Practical, On-Farm Partnerships with VSU**

On-farm trials are the preferred method of collaborating with VSU College of Agriculture, and field demonstrations are the most desired format for sharing research findings. Farmers are ready partners, and they want VSU to meet them where they work.

- **The Feedback Loop Is Broken**

The most urgent finding across all methodology sections is that farmers do not see evidence that their input shapes VSU programming. Research conducted on private farms is not returned to farmers in accessible formats. Addressing this gap is fundamental to maintaining the trust that makes Extension work possible.

- **Land Access is a Defining Challenge for Sustainability**

Land acquisition, conservation easements, heirs' property, and succession represent the most frequently mentioned themes. Farmers see land access, particularly the legal and financial barriers surrounding it, as the foundational challenge to farm viability.

- **Mental Health is a Priority, With Community Solutions Preferred**

Farmers identified mental health as a cross-cutting need spanning all life stages. Community-based, peer-driven support is consistently preferred over clinical intervention. Language access needs were identified by participants and apply to all producers who prefer non-English communication, without regard to race, ethnicity, or nationality. All proposed wellness and

mental-health supports are intended to be universally available to participating producers based on program participation, not personal characteristics.

- **These Stakeholders Are VSU's Most Committed Partners**

The depth, specificity, and constructiveness of farmer responses reflect genuine belief that the education, research, and training from VSU College of Agriculture and the Small Farm Outreach Program can improve their farm operations. They are eager to be engaged in dialogue to ensure a strong and sustainable agriculture industry, especially those efforts that benefit small, urban and beginning farmers. Participants volunteered their farms as research sites, proposed detailed program models, and named specific partnerships they want to build. This report is a roadmap built from that belief.

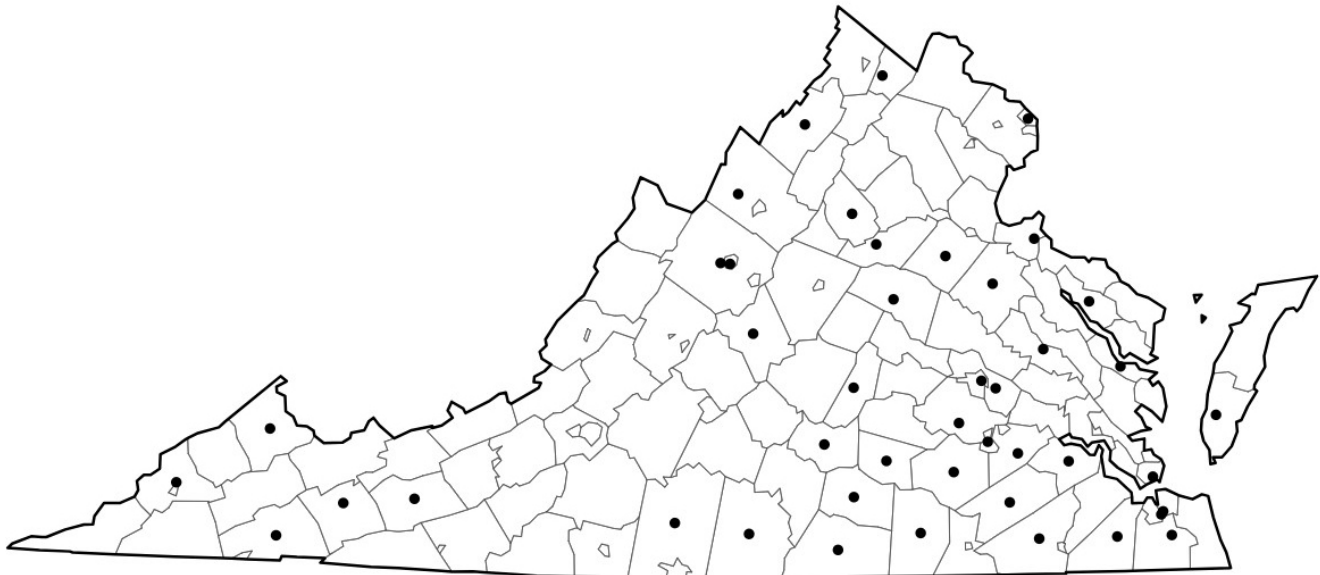
## **Acknowledgements**

The VSU Small Farm Outreach Program is grateful to all who participated and generously shared their time and perspectives. Your insights and continued support help guide Virginia State University's College of Agriculture in strengthening programs and services to better meet your needs.

## Demographics

Prior to participating in one of the regional focus groups, individuals were asked to complete a registration form that included optional demographic information. The following reflects the voluntary answers respondents provided on that form.

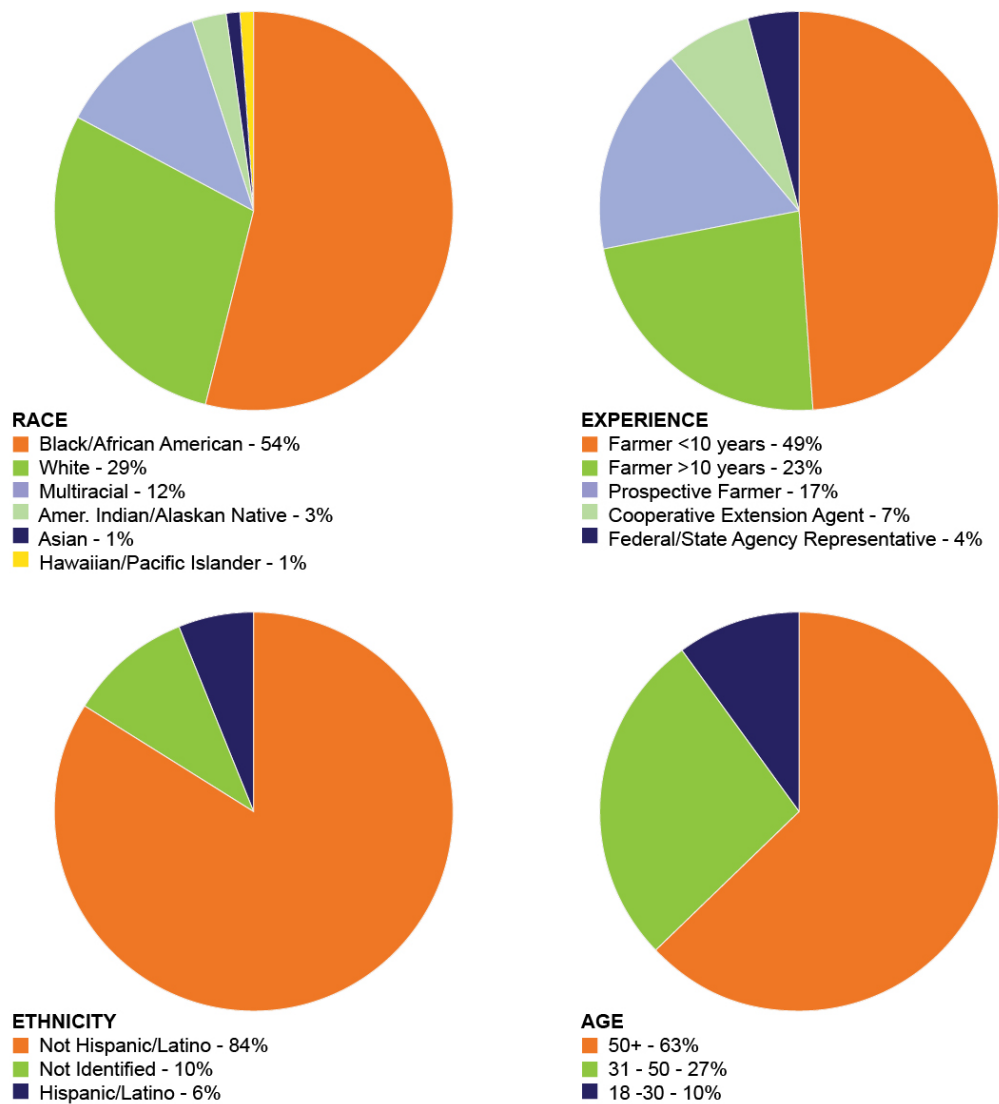
**Figure 1. Geographic Representation**



Focus group registrants indicated they are farming in the following counties and cities in Virginia: Arlington, Augusta, Brunswick, Buchanan, Caroline, City of Chesapeake, Chesterfield, Clarke, Cumberland, Dinwiddie, Halifax, City of Hampton, Henrico, King George, King William, Louisa, Lunenburg, Madison, Mecklenburg, Middlesex, Nelson, City of Norfolk, Northampton, Nottoway, Orange, City of Petersburg, Pittsylvania, City of Portsmouth, Prince Edward, Prince George, City of Richmond, Richmond, Rockingham, Shenandoah, Smyth, Southampton, Spotsylvania Spotsylvania, City of Staunton, City of Suffolk, Surry, Sussex, Washington, Wise, and Wythe.

In addition, 14 registrants are farming outside Virginia (in Maryland or North Carolina), and 24 registrants do not own farms or are not currently farming.

Figure 2. Registrant Demographics



## Facilitation & Methodology

With the intent to gain honest feedback from farmers and stakeholders, focus group questions were derived from suggestions by VSU College of Agriculture leadership, including Dr. Jewel Bronaugh, Dean of VSU College of Agriculture; William Crutchfield, Director of VSU Small Farm Outreach Program; Dr. Ronald Howell, Jr., Associate Dean and Associate Director of Agriculture Research Station; and Dr. Janine Woods, former Associate Administrator, Cooperative Extension. These experienced individuals proposed themes relevant to their backgrounds and current roles within the College of Agriculture. Many themes identified by leadership overlapped in relation to subject matter and timeframes. The resulting questions were developed from these themes and structured to be open to the responder’s personal experience and interpretation.

Questions were thematically grouped and synthesized in the following categories: barriers, preferred communication styles, program and subject-matter familiarity, Research and Extension priorities, and producer needs related to technology and innovation.

Focus groups included a total of 140 individuals across Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland. These locations reflect the territories directly served by the VSU Small Farm Outreach Program. Meetings began in October 2025 and concluded in March 2026.

**Figure 3. Focus Group Schedule and Attendance**

DATE	LOCATION	# ATTENDEES
Oct. 24	Petersburg, VA	17
Oct. 20	South Hill, VA	15
Nov. 6	Norfolk, VA	12
Nov. 13	Wytheville, VA	9
Nov. 18	Culpeper, VA	17
Nov. 20	Verona	22
Feb. 5	Virtual Session	12
Feb. 6	Tarboro, NC	15
Feb. 7	Painter, VA	10
Mar. 2	Tappahannock, VA	11

## Methodology

Two methods were used to facilitate each focus group meeting: Dot Surveys (quantitative) and structured Group Discussion/Post-It Note Surveys (qualitative). Together they reveal critical needs, barriers, and priorities of the farming communities VSU serves.

Dot surveys could be answered with a yes, no, or simple up vote. These questions were displayed on A-frames, and stakeholders used dots to indicate preferences. Group Discussion/Post-It Note Surveys encouraged broader responses. Questions were grouped into open-form categories and displayed at each table. Participants were provided with markers and sticky notes to record brief comments.

## **1. Dot Survey Categories**

- Barriers
- Research-related Needs
- Access to Research Findings
- Have You? Would You?

## **2. Discussion and Sticky Note Survey Categories**

- Mental Health
- Peer Connection
- Feedback Loop
- Educational Programs
- Innovative Practices
- Succession Planning
- Emerging Issues (within 3 years)
- Emerging Issues (5 to 10 years)
- Support Networks

# Focus Group Response Analysis

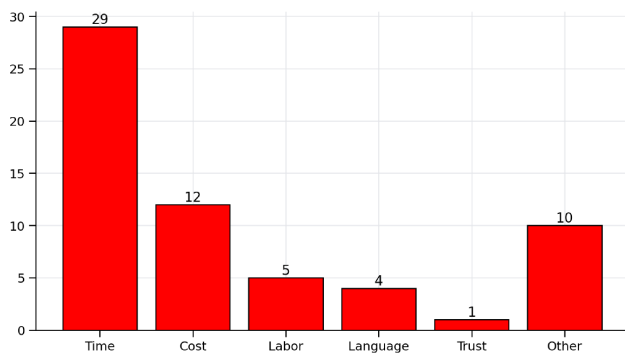
The figures, details, and analysis here were derived from cumulative responses of the 10 focus group sessions. The quantitative and qualitative results are organized and presented as listed in the previous section under Methodology.

## Dot Surveys in Action

### Barriers

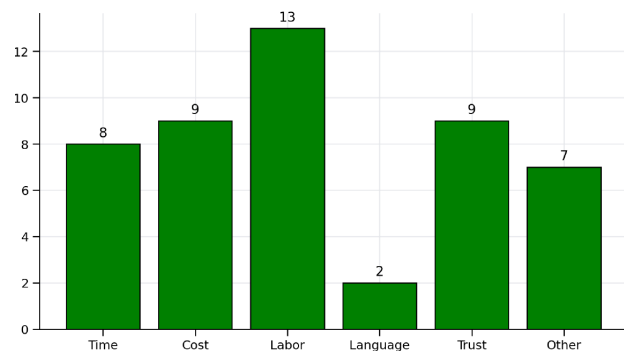
Respondents were asked to identify common barriers to engaging in Extension programs, adopting new research-based practices, participating in educational programs such as a degree program, and obtaining certifications such as GAP or organic.

**Figure 4. Extension Program**



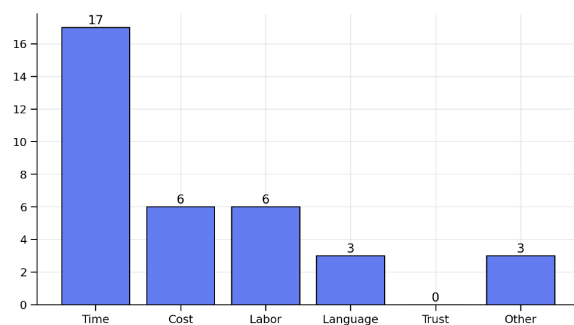
Time is the primary barrier for stakeholders participating in Extension programs, followed by cost and other challenges.

**Figure 5. New Research Practices**



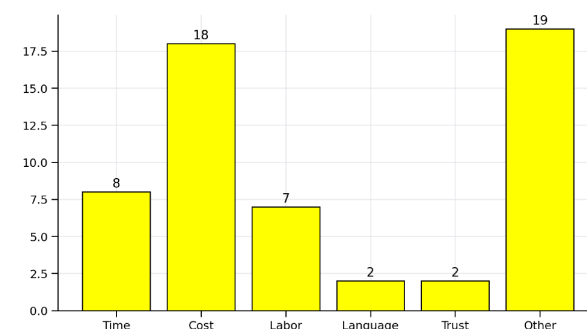
There are several barriers across the board that influence the feasibility of adopting new research practices. Labor is the primary barrier.

**Figure 6. Educational Programs**



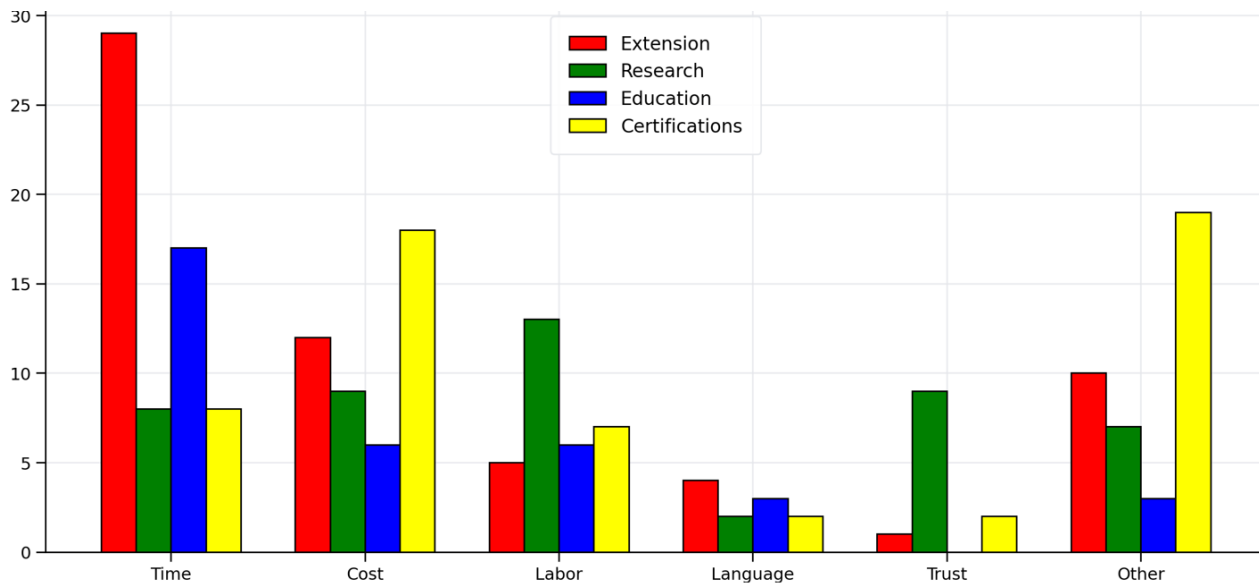
Time is the greatest barrier for stakeholders participating in educational programs. Cost and labor followed.

**Figure 7. Common Certification Programs**



Cost is a significant barrier to obtaining certifications alongside “other.”

**Figure 8. Comparison of Barriers to Engagement and Participation**

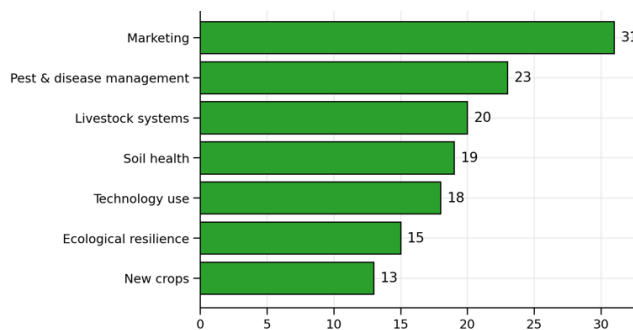


Time is the greatest barrier for stakeholders participating in Extension programs and educational programs. Cost is a significant barrier to obtaining certifications alongside “other.” There are several barriers across the board that influence the feasibility of adopting new research practices.

**Research-Related Needs**

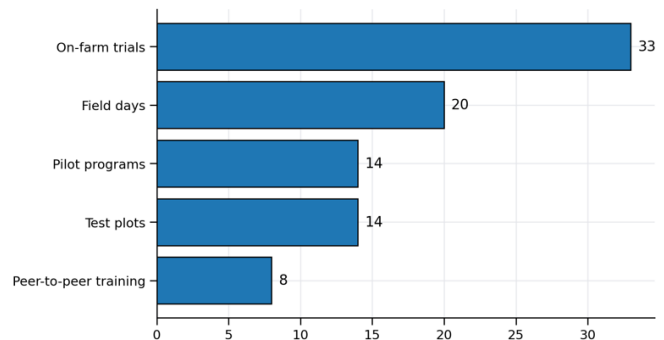
Respondents identified needs for information and education related to agriculture research and shared their preferred ways to acquire that knowledge.

**Figure 9. Research Priorities for Small and Urban Farmers**



Marketing and Pest & Disease Management are the most valuable research focus needs for farmers and stakeholders, followed by research surrounding Livestock Systems, Soil Health, and Technology Use.

**Figure 10. Testing Innovations**

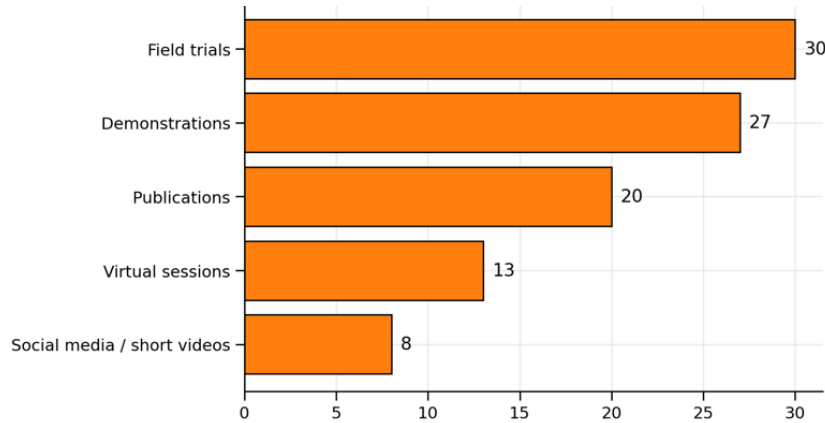


Participants identified On-Farm Trials as the preferred method of partnering with VSU’s COA.

## Access to Research Findings

Respondents were asked about how they would like to receive information about agriculture-related research from VSU College of Agriculture.

**Figure 10. Preferred Delivery Methods**

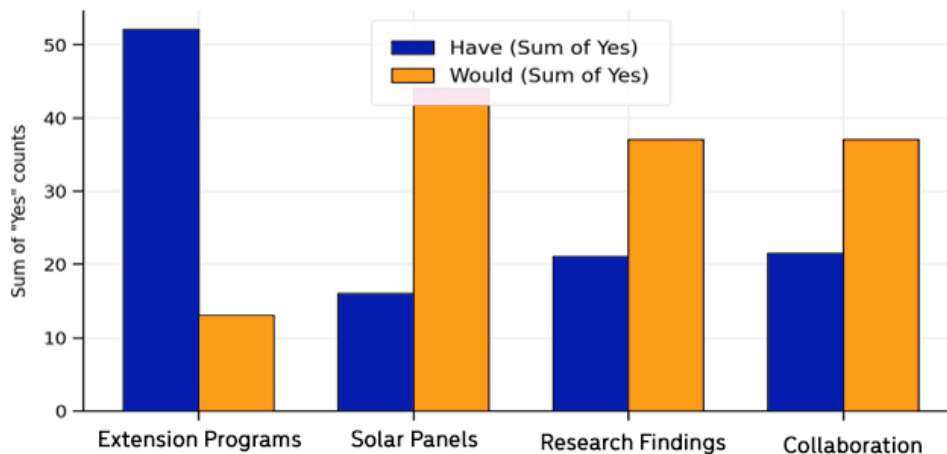


Farmers and stakeholders agree that Field Trials and Demonstrations are the most practical and easy ways to package research findings for them.

## Have You? Would You?

Four items were presented as VSU COA/Extension engagement areas that are currently available or might become available from VSU College of Agriculture. Participants were asked to respond with “yes” to indicate whether they had participated or would be interested in participating.

**Figure 11. Have vs Would**



Extension Programs show the highest current use, while Solar Panels, Research Findings, and Collaboration demonstrate notable growth potential based on higher willingness to engage. These results suggest opportunities for expanded outreach, research translation, and partnership development.

## Discussion / Post-It Note Surveys

---

Participants responded to nine questions during this activity, and all were encouraged to contribute to discussions based on their personal experience and perspective. The first category of questions asked about actions VSU College of Agriculture could take in its education, research, and training programming that would be beneficial to farmers. A second category of questions asked about farmers' short- and long-term timelines for planning, actions, or concerns related to agricultural practices, farm sustainability, and succession planning. These facilitated discussions were intended to promote high-interaction, anonymous feedback, and brainstorming.

Responses were collected from all of the 10 focus group sessions, and those answers were used for the analysis that is offered here.

### CATEGORY: MENTAL HEALTH

#### *How Could VSU College of Agriculture and the Small Farm Outreach Program Address Mental Health?*

Responses reveal a farming community that is not only acutely aware of mental health challenges but also faces significant structural, cultural, financial, and logistical barriers to accessing support.

Respondents proposed solutions spanning at least six distinct programmatic modalities: therapeutic horticulture, animal-assisted therapy (equine), peer support cohorts, crisis intervention infrastructure, educational campaigns, and financial literacy programming.

Participants also had insightful discussions about their concerns and needs related to mental health programs and access.

#### Key Insights

- **Healthy Body/Healthy Mind Connections Affirmed**

Several responses identified ways their work and the food they produce is connected to mental health. Participants noted gut-brain connection, food as medicine, chemical reduction in farming, environmental health impacts, and ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) practices.

- **Crisis Awareness and Response Infrastructure Needed**

Multiple respondents independently identified the need for crisis infrastructure: hotlines, crisis prevention, crisis intervention, and post-disaster support (“crisis support after the storm”).

- **The Need is Intergenerational**

Mental health needs exist across the life cycle: high school youth finding their agricultural path; mid-career farmers managing workload; older farmers experiencing isolation; and farm families managing succession anxiety.

- **Community Support is Preferred Over Clinical Intervention**

Responses consistently prioritized community, connection, and identity before clinical intervention—suggestions included gatherings, lunchtime calls, social events, and buddy checks.

- **Services and Support Must be Multilingual**

Three distinct responses were provided entirely in Spanish, covering three distinct solution types: (1) addressing mental health; (2) stress management and family workshops; and (3) inter-organizational partnerships. This indicates that farmers with language, communication, or

information-access barriers want to be actively engaged and are seeking improved access to program resources.

### Gaps, Weaknesses, and Blind Spots

- **Identifying Resources Available from VSU College of Agriculture—A Critical Gap**

The response, “What do they currently offer?” stands alone. It reveals that participants do not know what VSU’s College of Agriculture currently provides, if anything, related to mental health.

- **Recognize Cycles of Seasonal Stress Specific to Farming**

Farm stress is not uniform throughout the year. Planting season, harvest, weather-related disasters, and market cycles create predictable spikes in anxiety and distress for producers. Only one response mentioned inclement weather as a stressor.

- **Evaluate Program Effectiveness and Measure Outcomes**

Validated tools like the PHQ-9 (Patient Health Questionnaire-9), which one respondent mentioned, and the Farm Financial Stress Scale would be seen as useful tools to evaluate programming related to mental health.

- **Peer Support, Farmer-to-Farmer Models Absent**

Despite strong emphasis on community, no one explicitly proposed a peer support or farmer-to-farmer model. However, programs like Farm Aid’s peer support network and the Farm Bureau’s Farm Family Resource Initiative demonstrate this model’s effectiveness. VSU has a significant opportunity to introduce and champion this approach.

- **Mental Health Programming Offered as an Afterthought, Not a Stand-Alone Initiative**

This underlined, emphatic response appears to express frustration that mental health programming risks being diluted with financial literacy, family services, and technology training. An intentional focus on mental health initiatives that are grounded in evidence will build credibility and trust.

### CATEGORY: PEER CONNECTION

#### *How can VSU COA help you stay connected to your peers?*

Communication (12) and Education (11) were the most-mentioned themes, confirming that VSU’s outreach and extension infrastructure represent highest-volume unmet needs. Community (10) and Training (9) follow closely.

- **Build Integrated, Multi-Channel Communications**

Respondents favor a multi-channel communication strategy, including digital (email, social media), print (newsletters, printed materials), and in-person dialogue. Participants explicitly value VSU’s Extension and academic programs but called for better integration between students, farmers, and professionals. In addition, participants desire training opportunities that include formal workshop formats, informal peer-to-peer mentoring, and farmer-hosted hands-on sessions.

- **Facilitate Opportunities for Community Building**

The need for community building highlights VSU COA’s opportunity to serve. VSU can serve as a convener that strengthens professional connection, peer engagement, and information sharing among farmers through clubs, coalitions, service days, and recurring social events. Mutual aid, barter, collective labor events, and farmer-to-farmer mentoring responses indicate a preference for horizontal rather than top-down cooperative support structures.

- **Acknowledge Financial, Occupational, and Geographical Barriers**

Finance-related terms cluster around incentivizing event participation and sustaining farmer education programs. Scholarships and free or subsidized events suggest financial access is a recognized participation barrier. No respondent used the explicit word “barriers” in their answer to this question, yet isolation, transportation, scheduling, geography, and funding challenges all surfaced indirectly across multiple responses.

- **Share Resources to Help Improve Farmer Health**

Health—especially mental health—was a recurring undercurrent. Participants specifically requested therapists at conferences, wellness recovery action plans, and stress-release farm events, signaling an urgent need for farmer wellness support.

## RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES AND SOLUTIONS

### Communication

*Farmers want VSU to reach them through multiple simultaneous channels rather than relying on any single method.*

- Launch a Bi-Weekly VSU Ag Connect Newsletter
- Create a VSU Farmers Facebook Group (Private, Moderated)
- Establish a Farmer Feedback Portal
- Partner with Farm Stores and Livestock Markets for Print Distribution

### Education

*Respondents call for learning that bridges VSU students, Extension agents, and farmers through integrated, hands-on settings.*

- Establish a Student-Farmer Bridge Program
- Invest in Extension agent continuing education
- Establish a Southwest Virginia Demonstration Farm
- Create a Sustainable Ag and Beginning Farmer Alumni Network
- Add Food Systems and Nutrition Education Programming

### Community

*Farmers want VSU to serve as a convener and anchor for belonging — not just a program provider.*

- Launch a VSU Agricultural community board
- Create an Annual VSU Farm Service Day

- Host monthly community gatherings (on-farm and on-campus)
- Support Regional Farm Clubs, Livestock Clubs
- Facilitate coalition formation among farmers

### Training

*Practical, place-based training with financial incentives is the model farmers say they will actually engage.*

- Create a Farmer-Trainer Stipend Program
- Build a Hands-On Workshop Series with Participation Incentives
- Launch a Farmer Shadowing Program
- Develop specialty training tracks
- Formalize partnership between VSU Small Farm Outreach Program and professional conferences

### Cooperative Structures

*Farmers want formal, VSU-facilitated systems for sharing land, equipment, knowledge, and peer mentorship across the region.*

- Build a VSU Agricultural Exchange Database
- Launch a Farmland Transition and Succession Program
- Establish a Farmer-to-Farmer Mentoring Match Program
- Host a VSU Agricultural Cooperative Design Workshop
- Create a directory of farmers willing to share and help others

## Health

*Mental health support must be embedded throughout VSU programming — not offered as a standalone add-on.*

- Partner with a Mental Health Provider to Embed Wellness in All Events
- Implement WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan) Through Cooperative Extension
- Create quarterly farm wellness and grounding events
- Launch a Farmer Peer Wellness Check-In Program
- Integrate nutrition and food education into all VSU programs

## Finance

*Access to grants, scholarships, and emergency funds is a participation prerequisite that VSU must help farmers navigate.*

- Create a Farmer Program Participation Fund
- Expand and publicize agricultural scholarships
- Launch an Heirs Property Legal Education and Clinic Program
- Develop a Farmer Emergency Assistance Network
- Assign a Grants Coordinator for Agricultural Programming

## Barriers

*Scheduling, geography, and transportation are often the deciding factors in whether farmers can participate at all.*

- Align all VSU farmer events with the agricultural off-season
- Institute a Hybrid (Virtual + In-Person) Event Standard

- Create a Carpool Coordination Program
- Deploy a Southwest Virginia Mobile Outreach Strategy
- Conduct an Ongoing Barriers Assessment Survey

## Business

*Small farms need VSU to treat them as viable businesses and connect them to professional networks, trade opportunities, and markets.*

- Host an Annual VSU Agricultural Business and Trade Fair
- Develop a comprehensive regional farm directory
- Launch a VSU Agricultural Professional Association and Discussion Board
- Offer Farm Business Development Training
- Create a Niche and Specialty Producer Network

## Agriculture as a Profession and Community of Practice

*VSU can strengthen farming as a professional identity and community, which is essential to attracting and retaining the next generation.*

- Launch a VSU Agricultural Alumni and Practitioner Network
- Develop an Agricultural Professional Pipeline Program
- Formalize and Recognize the Farmer Mentor Role
- Strengthen VSU's brand as the agricultural professional home for Virginia

## CATEGORY: FEEDBACK LOOP

### *How Could VSU Demonstrate That Your Input is Shaping Research and Extension Efforts?*

Communication (15) and Training (10) were the most-mentioned themes. Agricultural Practices (9), Community (8), and Education (7) followed closely, demonstrating farmers' reliance on reliable resources to build networks and share information that will benefit their operations.

- **Information Sharing & Outreach Communication**

Respondents called for consistent, multi-channel, two-way communication—including newsletters, dashboards, podcasts, surveys, and follow-up systems—to show that farmer input is heard and acted upon. They asked for improved feedback loops that would provide reliable, ongoing two-way channels—suggestion boxes, focus groups, dashboards, and meeting follow-ups—so that input visibly influences program direction. Communication was the most frequent theme of responses to the question.

- **Workshops, Field Training & Skill-Building**

Respondents frequently referenced hands-on training opportunities including workshops, field days, demonstrations, and farm visits as key mechanisms for demonstrating that their input shapes VSU College of Agriculture’s Extension efforts. These training opportunities along with accessible publications are the primary requested mechanisms for translating research into farmer action.

- **Agricultural Practice & Scope**

Respondents referenced agricultural activities, farm types, and farming practices when describing how VSU College of Agriculture could demonstrate responsiveness to farmer input.

- **Community Engagement & Local Impact**

Respondents emphasized the need for VSU College of Agriculture to engage with surrounding communities, emphasizing the roles that farmers, local citizens, urban growers, focus groups, and government partners play as stakeholders in shared agricultural development.

- **Educational Programming & Learning Access**

Respondents highlighted the need for accessible, relevant, and diverse educational content—from school programs and orientations to publications—tailored to various learning styles and farmer experience levels. They also expressed a desire for capacity building that would enrich educational programs and training tailored to their specific needs, such as understanding new technologies and increasing the number of workshops available within their area.

- **Cooperative Partnerships & Collaborative Research**

Respondents called for formalized cooperative relationships between VSU College of Agriculture and farms, universities, government agencies, and community organizations. Their responses deem research as a shared endeavor rather than a top-down institution. They are interested and eager cooperators/co-investigators for on-farm research.

- **Business Viability & Farm Profitability**

Respondents connected Research and Extension outcomes to farm business operations. Tools that track profit, grant access, marketing, grant access, and economic sustainability are expected program outputs.

- **Funding, Revenue & Financial Sustainability**

Respondents raised financial concerns around research funding transparency, farm revenue tracking, grant accessibility, and VSU College of Agriculture’s budget capacity to implement research outcomes, linking financial accountability to trust. They are interested to know who funds research, how it is accessible, and that Extension outputs are shared freely. Transparency is the cornerstone of demonstrated accountability.

**CATEGORY: EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS**

***What Educational Programs Can VSU COA Offer in Crop, Livestock, Processing, Value-Added Products, Or Alternate Markets?***

Respondents provided a wide variety of answers, and their responses illustrate a desire for information about trends in agriculture production alongside education on business, marketing, and policy that is necessary to adopt new practices successfully. Their comprehensive approach to answering the question also indicates a desire for fundamental knowledge that can prepare them for success. Seven key categories were identified, and specific, suggested programs or topics are grouped in one or more of these categories. The number of topics identified in the collected data appears as (x). Some of these topics may have been suggested by more than one participant.

**AGRICULTURE PRACTICES (26)**

- Medical herbs
- Kudzu
- Rooting
- Grass-fed, free-range vs grain fed
- Multi-species grazing
- Vertical farming
- Bird and wildlife management
- Foraging for plants and herbs
- Feed
- Soil conditioning
- Specialty crops
- Cloning
- Permaculture and Regenerative Ag.
- Tree cultivation
- Cultural crops
- Forest management
- Ginger
- Seeds funding
- Wild mushrooms
- Soil health testing
- Dehydration fruit
- Organic weed control
- Aqua growing
- Crop stacking
- Freeze protection / mitigation
- Ayurvedic methods

**BUSINESS (20)**

- Value added products
- Value added kitchen
- Business/Whole farm planning
- Farm to institution
- Green powder (herbs processing)
- Farm transition programs
- Cost of land
- Cooperative/Co-op
- Shared use equipment
- Succession planning
- Farm to table
- Distribution
- Community Supported Agriculture
- Disability adaptation
- Processing
- Workshops/Camps on farm
- Small and urban farm business
- Canning
- Mobile unit
- Publishing a cookbook

**COMMUNICATION (12)**

- Social media
- Create more partnerships
- Farmer volunteer network
- Broadcaster/Central grant location
- Social interaction/networking
- Making and selling bone broth soups
- Food as medicine/Education
- Building a website or shopping cart
- Blog or newsletter
- Farm activities
- Community engagement
- Professional development partnerships

**FINANCE (9)**

- Grants (general)
- Funding for grant writing assistance
- Insurance info
- Value added producer grants
- APEX
- Increase paid hours for program
- Grants for infrastructure
- PAs distributing funds to farmers
- Cost of land prohibitive

### POLICY (8)

- Food safety certification
- Compliance: local vs state vs federal ag
- FDA GMPs for herbal products
- Help navigate regulations
- USDA Inspection/Organic certification
- Value added certification
- Value added rules and regulations
- Regulations for market/public sales

### RESEARCH (9)

- Solar/Off-grid energy
- AI pros and cons/Data centers
- Livestock and produce best practices for area
- Research (general)
- Wellness and recovery
- Spotted wing drosophila
- Soil health services/testing
- Crop suitability by area
- Geo-located AI-powered search engine

### MARKETS (12)

- Marketing (general)
- Cooperative marketing
- Pick-your-own marketing
- Farm to institution
- Alternate/alternative markets
- Niche market plants and products
- How to set up for sales
- Get unstuck from single commodity identity
- Ethnic/cultural crop markets
- Unique or niche products
- County/city tourism partnerships
- Value added product marketing / Herbal medicine

## CATEGORY: INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

### *What New Practices or Innovations Do You Need to Implement to Help You Solve Challenges for Your Farm in the Future?*

Responses to this question were organized into five general categories. Specific topics noted within each category include the frequency of mentions as (x).

Land access is the dominant concern among participants across all categories. Land acquisition, conservation, heirs’ property, easements, and succession were most frequently mentioned. Respondents see land—and the legal/financial barriers around it—as the foundational challenge to their future farm viability.

Community support, outreach and partnerships are important to participants. Words like coalition, unity, and collaboration appear within every category, suggesting that collective action and trusted cooperative systems are foundational to many of the proposed innovations or practices. Participants are also aware of how these collective actions may be key aspects of heirs’ property and generational land succession planning.

Virginia State University, Cooperative Extension, and related university resources were mentioned across multiple categories—education, research, business, and community—underscoring the institution’s pivotal role as a hub for farmer support and institutional engagement. The university and its programs are viewed as a central resource by participants.

- **Agriculture**

Responses in this category address the core physical and operational challenges of farming. Participants identified land access and conservation (10) as a primary challenge for both urban and rural farmers. Other topics in the category included sustainable and regenerative practices, such as

composting (5). Mentions of equipment needs (9), cold storage, pack houses, barns, walk-in coolers, and high tunnels reflect a persistent infrastructure deficit. Shared equipment models and grant funding for implements were repeatedly proposed as solutions. Improved water and soil management practices (3); and adoption of agricultural technology such as drones and solar energy (6) were also desired.

- **Education**

Participants noted a need for structured learning opportunities across all levels—from educating youth and the next generation of farmers (4) to providing workshops on resources, policy, and financial literacy (8). Technology training and digital access (4) are also recurring sub-themes.

- **Health**

Healthy food systems, food security, and value-added food processing were central topics. Participants expressed the need to expand access to locally grown food through farm-to-table pathways (6). They also noted a desire for community kitchens (4) that would enable value-added production, processing infrastructure, and storage. Pathways for institutional distribution (3) are needed to provide a bridge between local farmers and schools, hospitals, and prisons, as well as cooperative arrangements that would help producers meet capacity demands.

- **Business**

Respondents consistently called for treating small farms as viable small businesses. Grant funding access (8), market development (6), legal and policy reform (7) especially around heirs' property, and financial literacy (5) such as training related to recordkeeping and land-based economies, were all notable components of the business infrastructure needed to sustain farming.

- **Research**

Respondents desire evidence-based approaches to farming that include soil testing (3), data tracking (4), university partnerships (4) particularly with VSU, and the adoption of emerging technologies such as AI and drones (6). Data management and record keeping were also emphasized.

## **CATEGORY: SUCCESSION PLANNING**

### ***Do You Have a Succession Plan?***

During this discussion, stakeholders broadened their responses with insights about challenges and concerns related to business/land transition. Participants confront many obstacles in the process of succession planning—from beginning conversations with family members to acquiring the understanding and practical knowledge they can use to achieve their goals to connecting with experts who can help them navigate the legal and financial requirements for farm transition. Five topics of discussion were identified from the responses, and frequency of mentions are indicated by (x).

- **Legal Planning & Trusts**

Specifically related to succession planning, the term “trust” is mentioned most frequently in this discussion, and appears in various forms: land trust, estate trust, trust/deed, will trust (18). Many respondents indicate they know a trust is necessary but lack the knowledge, legal support, or financial resources to establish one. This indicates that trust formation and estate planning are not just priorities but pressing, urgent gaps. Phrases like “Trust, info about what it is” and “More education on trusts” reveal that expert guidance and education is needed before action can begin.

- **Starting the Succession Planning Process**

Initiating family dialogue (7) is a desired first step for succession planning. Some participants describe this as a process (“Prepping for the future + conversations”), others as a pending task (“Still need to discuss, form a discussion for a plan”), and one described this as building a structured commitment (“Giving the family ownership in decision-making so that there is skin in the game and sense of value beyond their labor”). This last response is particularly notable. It reframes succession not as a single event but as an ongoing desire for inclusion. Some participants said they are not yet planning (6). However, their comments don’t mean these individuals are apathetic but do reveal critical knowledge and service gaps—they know they need a plan, they have identified farming as a value, but they cannot translate that intent into action without direct, accessible support.

- **Next Generation Farm Ownership**

There is also a concern among participants that the next generation may not want to farm. Responses like “Young farmers not interested in taking over existing farm business—want to start their own,” and “Lease agreements when kids don’t want to farm the land,” reveal that succession planning may require strategies that are flexible. Participants specifically mentioned leasing (4), finding others who are interested in taking over a farm operation (2), business diversification and agritourism (2), and conservation easements (8) to help preserve land and farming operations.

- **Workforce Development**

Participants are keenly aware of labor shortages (3), acknowledging that farms urgently need more hands to operate and sustain (“Farmers need more hands, improve labor”). This issue is not merely operational but is inherent to successful succession: farms cannot be sustained, let alone transitioned, without more workers. These concerns prompted a suggestion for a volunteer-to-leadership pipeline (2) that creates a structured pathway for new workers from volunteer and internship stages into leadership roles. In addition, participants called for enhanced youth engagement and education (7) that can spark and sustain interest in agriculture among young people to help build a future workforce.

- **Technology Adoption**

The emergence of agricultural technology (3), including mentions of AI irrigation, drone delivery, and solar energy, signals a growing awareness of technology’s role in farm sustainability. These responses indicate that respondents may see technology as a lever for workload efficiency, such as AI-driven tools that may ease labor constraints, as well as a valuable tool for succession-readiness.

## **CATEGORY: EMERGING ISSUES (WITHIN 3 YEARS)**

*What are the emerging issues of concern you have identified in the near term (within 3 years)?*

Responses were organized into five general categories. The frequency of supporting responses appears as (x).

### **Agricultural**

- **Land Access & Space Scarcity (8):** Difficulty finding, accessing, or affording land and physical space for agricultural use (urban growing lots, rural leases, and permit barriers).
- **Extreme Weather Events & Climate Risk (6):** Climate-related agricultural threats including temperature extremes, floods, droughts, and freeze events.

- **Water Resources & Irrigation Infrastructure (4):** Access to adequate water for farming, including irrigation systems, wells, and the relationship between water supply and soil water-holding capacity.
- **Land Loss to Non-Agricultural Development (6):** Farmland displacement driven by residential housing expansion, large-scale solar installations, and data center construction with all competing for land in rural areas and urban outskirts.
- **Government Policy Bias Against Small Farmers (6):** Respondent perception that government policy, regulations, and funding prioritize large-scale commercial agriculture to the detriment of small, independent farm operations.
- **Soil Health, Crop Protection & Biosecurity (4):** Threats to farmland productivity, including soil degradation, pesticide use and restrictions, invasive species pressure, and biological security risks.
- **Agricultural Infrastructure & Alternative Production Methods (4):** Physical structures and alternative growing systems, including farm buildings, rooftop agriculture, hydroponics, and indoor food production facilities.
- **Livestock Pressures & Predator Risk (4):** Livestock-specific concerns: market price volatility, biosecurity risks, and increasing predator pressure from wildlife displaced by residential development.
- **Post-Harvest Storage & Packaging (3):** Challenges in preserving, processing, and properly packaging harvested produce for storage, distribution, or market sale as well as issues with handling grain surpluses.
- **Food Quality, Input Safety & GMOs (2):** Concerns about the safety and quality of food production inputs, genetically modified organisms, and allergen-related risks in the food supply.

### Culture & Society

- **Youth & Generational Disengagement from Agriculture (5):** Concerns that younger generations are not pursuing agricultural careers or assuming stewardship of family operations is cross-cultural and industrywide.
- **Agricultural Education & Food Awareness Deficit (4):** A gap in public and youth awareness of food systems, farming practices, and seasonality is paired with calls for vocational and trade-based agricultural education.
- **Political Climate & Government Influence (5):** How elections, shifting policies, political dynamics, and misinformation affect agricultural viability, small farmer support, and community decision-making.
- **Family Farm Succession & Generational Transfer (3):** Transferring farm operations, knowledge, and land to the next generation, most notably the need for family dialogue, legal planning, and protection of heirs' interests.
- **Rural-to-Urban Population Migration (3):** A demographic shift where younger residents and farming families leave rural areas for cities, shrinking the agricultural workforce and weakening rural community vitality.
- **Community Engagement & Information Sharing (5):** The importance of farmers staying informed, attending public meetings, connecting with peers, accessing reliable resources, and actively countering misinformation related to agricultural practices and production.

### Medical/Health

- **Food Safety, Allergens & GMOs (1):** Health implications of production inputs, genetically modified organisms, and allergen exposure from commercially grown and distributed food products.

- **Dietary & Nutritional Health Risks (2):** Specific nutritional and dietary health concerns, including excessive sodium in processed foods and reliance on canned goods as primary food sources.
- **Pesticide & Agricultural Chemical Health Risks (1):** Health risks associated with pesticide exposure and the consequences of chemical use restrictions, and issue affecting farmworkers, surrounding communities, and crop outputs.
- **Biosecurity & Agricultural Disease Risk (1):** The risk of disease transmission among crops and livestock, particularly as agricultural land increasingly borders dense residential and commercial areas.

### Occupational

- **Agricultural Labor Shortage & Workforce Availability (5):** Concern about the shrinking pool of available farm labor with uncertainty about who will fill critical roles.
- **Workforce Succession & Employment Transition (3):** Challenges in transitioning farming responsibilities between generations or employees that includes unclear job duties, role ambiguity, and generational reluctance to take over operations.
- **Vocational & Trade Training Pipeline (3):** The need to build a future agricultural workforce through vocational education programs, trade school access, and hands-on skills development for teens and young adults.
- **Equipment Reliability, Technology & Maintenance (4):** Concerns about equipment dependability, costs of agricultural technology adoption, ongoing repair expenses, and difficulty funding necessary equipment upgrades.
- **Undocumented Worker Vulnerability & Risk (1):** Concern about the health and safety of undocumented agricultural workers.
- **Business Operations, Scaling & Market Presence (5):** Challenges in expanding a farm business—from establishing physical retail locations or building a cooperative distribution infrastructure to scaling production with limited or constrained financial resources.

### Financial

- **Funding Gaps & Access to Capital (6):** Insufficient funding is the most frequently cited financial concern across respondents and is identified as a core barrier to starting, sustaining, and expanding agricultural operations.
- **Rising Operational Costs (5):** Increasing costs across inputs, energy, marketing, and equipment repairs.
- **Land Cost & Lease Affordability (4):** Land is increasingly priced at developer rates rather than agricultural rates that is compounded by disproportionate tax burdens on farmland owners.
- **Market Access, Buyer Identification & Revenue (5):** Building viable revenue streams by identifying wholesale buyers, establishing market presence, managing customer payment timing, and balancing operational expenses against income.
- **Trade Policy & Regulatory Financial Impact (2):** Federal and state policies with direct financial implications for farmers, including the Farm Bill, tariffs on agricultural imports/exports, and minimum wage requirements.
- **Commodity & Livestock Pricing Volatility (1):** Market price instability for agricultural commodities and livestock creates unpredictable income streams, complicating financial planning for farm operations.

## CATEGORY: EMERGING ISSUES (5 TO 10 YEARS)

*What are the emerging issues of concern you have identified in the near-term (5 to 10 years)?*

Responses were organized into five general categories. The frequency of supporting responses appears as (x).

### Agriculture

- **Land Access & Rising Prices (6):** Concerns about the affordability and availability of agricultural land, including competition from solar development.
- **Seed & Plant Biodiversity Loss (2):** Loss of genetic diversity in seeds and plants, and reduced availability of diverse seed stock.
- **Climate Change & Weather Impacts (4):** Climate-related threats to crops and livestock survivability, including solar weather events.
- **Pest Control & Management (1):** Ongoing challenges related to pest management in small-scale agricultural operations.
- **Farm Equipment & Infrastructure (5):** Rising costs and lack of access to farm equipment, machinery, and infrastructure such as greenhouses and high tunnels.
- **Factory Farming vs. Small Farm Competition (2):** Concern that large-scale factory farming undercuts small farmers' market viability with lower price points.
- **Environmental Toxicity & Soil Health (1):** Awareness of chemical toxicity in the agricultural environment and the role of plants in mitigating harm.
- **Forest & Land Management (4):** Issues related to forest management easements, property boundaries, and departmental oversight.
- **Artificial Intelligence in Agriculture (3):** AI seen as both a potential asset and a threat to the future of small-scale and urban agriculture.
- **Sustainable Profitability (2):** Maintaining long-term sustainability and profitability for small farming operations.

### Culture & Society

- **Youth Engagement in Agriculture (4):** Difficulty attracting and retaining young people in farming; lack of youth interest in outdoor agricultural work.
- **Generational Knowledge Loss (3):** Risk of losing cultural, agricultural, and family-based knowledge due to aging farmers and lack of succession.
- **Perception & Cultural Respect for Farming (3):** The social perception of farming as a profession needs transformation to attract future generations.
- **Aging Farmer Population (2):** Growing proportion of elderly farmers without successors, threatening continuity of farm operations.
- **Farm Community Cohesion (2):** Breakdown of agricultural community networks and collaborative support systems.
- **Disability & Special Needs Inclusion (1):** The need to include people with disabilities and special needs in agricultural programming and opportunities.

### Medical / Health

- **Health Insurance for Farmers (2):** Small farmers lack access to affordable or any health insurance, creating significant personal and financial risk.

- **Environmental Health Risks (1):** Chemical toxicity in the agricultural environment poses direct health threats to farmers and their communities.

### Occupational

- **Agricultural Workforce & Labor Shortage (3):** Critical shortage of willing and skilled workers; concerns around pay, respect, and the social status of farm labor.
- **Grant Writing & Funding Navigation (5):** Farmers need support learning how to write grants and navigate federal/state funding programs.
- **Market Access & Regulations (2):** Barriers to reaching viable markets, especially for 1890 HBCUs, combined with regulatory hurdles for bringing products to market.
- **Property Rights & Zoning (3):** Legal challenges related to mineral rights, property boundaries, and agricultural zoning.

### Financial

- **Rising Land Costs (4):** Escalating land prices are the most frequently cited financial barrier for current and aspiring small farmers.
- **Rising Input Costs—Feed & Equipment (6):** Increasing costs of feed, equipment, and operational inputs strain small farm financial viability.
- **Funding Access & Grant Dependency (3):** Reliance on and competition for grant funding, including state-level program support, to sustain small farm operations.
- **Market Viability & Profitability (3):** Concern that small farms cannot compete financially with factory farming price points, threatening long-term sustainability.
- **Farmer Retirement & Financial Security (1):** Farmers face unique challenges in retirement planning compared to salaried workers, with few tailored financial safety nets.
- **Solar Energy Land Encroachment (3):** Solar energy development is converting viable agricultural land, reducing available farmland and driving up land prices.

## CATEGORY: SUPPORT NETWORKS

### *Who is involved in your support network?*

Family (22) and Educational & Institutional Support (20) together account for 42 of 101 total mentions—more than all other categories combined. This reflects both the deeply personal nature of farming and the value farmers place on their relationships with VSU College of Agriculture and Cooperative Extension. In contrast, Financial Support & Resources ranks last with only 4 mentions, signaling a significant gap: farmers have extensive human networks but limited access to supportive relationships for capital-based needs and concerns. Digital & Social Media (3 mentions) also lag, suggesting untapped potential for online community building.

Responses were organized into the following categories where (x) indicates the frequency of mentions. The category description was derived directly from these responses.

- **Family & Personal Relationships (22)**  
Family, Children / Kids, Partner / Husband / Wife, Friends, Elders, Daughter
- **Farming Peers & Farmer Networks (15)**  
Other Farmers, Small Farmers Network, Farmer Events & Collaboration, Farmer-to-Farmer Support, Online Growing Community

- **Educational & Institutional Support (20)**  
VSU (Virginia State University), VSU Small Farm Outreach Program, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Tech, Master Gardeners Program, Interns/College Students, Mentors
- **Government Agencies & Programs (10)**  
USDA / NRCS, Soil & Water Conservation District, Town Hall/County Meetings, Civic Leagues, Grants & Fellowships
- **Nonprofit & Advocacy Organizations (7)**  
American Farmland Trust, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Foodshed Capital, WRAP/FVC, Virginia Industrial Hemp Alliance, Northeastern Farm Collaboration, Coalition
- **Broader Community (13)**  
Community (General), Community Leaders & Teachers, Community Organizers & Residents, Neighbors, Pop Market (Local Advocate), Native Tribe Schools
- **Labor & Human Resources (7)**  
Volunteers, Doctors & Health Professionals, Lawyers, Hired Workers (Vets, Teens, Employees), Team
- **Financial Support & Resources (4)**  
Financial Assistance, Knowing People with Money, Collaborators, Future Generations
- **Digital & Social Media (3)**  
Facebook Group, Emails / Flyers / Contracts, Online Growing Community

## Conclusion

---

The voices gathered across 10 focus groups, stretching from the Blue Ridge to Tidewater and into North Carolina and Maryland, carry a message that is both urgent and hopeful. Farmers in our region are ready to grow, learn, and innovate if Virginia State University College of Agriculture and the Small Farm Outreach Program will meet them where they live and work. Farming is not merely what they do; it is who they are.

The opportunities before VSU College of Agriculture are substantial. Feedback from participants uncovered recurring themes such as mental health, peer connection, research feedback, educational programming, succession planning, and emerging issues. And they did not just list their problems; they proposed solutions. They volunteered their farms as research sites. They named the programs they want to attend and the formats in which they learn best, and they identified the kinds of partnerships they are eager to build. This is not a community waiting to be served. This is a community asking to be engaged as full partners in shaping the agricultural future of the Commonwealth.

Several clear programming opportunities emerged from their input. On-farm trials and field demonstrations are the most desired vehicles for sharing research and observing its practical application. Hands-on workshops, farmer-to-farmer mentoring programs, and multi-channel communications strategies represent high-demand, high-impact targets for expanded outreach. Participants specifically called for educational content spanning agricultural production, business planning, grant navigation, legal literacy around heirs' property and land trusts, and technology adoption.

Mental health programming represents a distinct and pressing opportunity, especially if it is community-based, peer-driven, and embedded within existing Extension events rather than offered as an afterthought. Succession planning education is another targeted opportunity. Farmers know they need legal and financial planning tools, but they cannot act without accessible, expert guidance. VSU College of Agriculture is uniquely positioned to close that gap through workshops and direct partnerships with legal and financial professionals.

Finally, farmers want to see that their input matters. Closing the feedback loop through transparent communications, research dashboards, and visible programmatic changes driven by farmer input builds trust and reliance on VSU College of Agriculture as a primary resource for small, urban, and beginning farmers into the next generation.

---

---



Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and local governments, and is an equal opportunity employer. For the full non-discrimination statement, please visit [ext.vt.edu/accessibility](http://ext.vt.edu/accessibility).

---