

2026 Ag Stakeholder Focus Group Report

VIRGINIA STATE UNIVERSITY SMALL FARM OUTREACH PROGRAM

Prepared for

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

Presented by

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Focus Group Design and Reach

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.

Focus Groups Conducted

DATES (2025-2026)	LOCATION	NO. OF ATTENDEES
Oct. 24	Petersburg, VA	17
Oct. 30	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



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About Our Stakeholders

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.

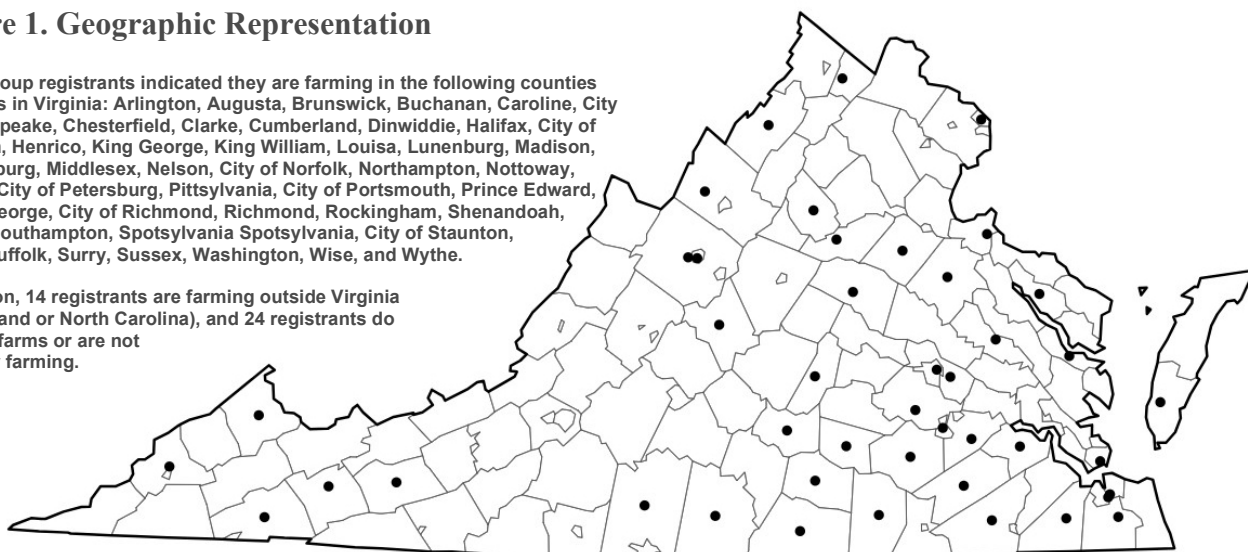
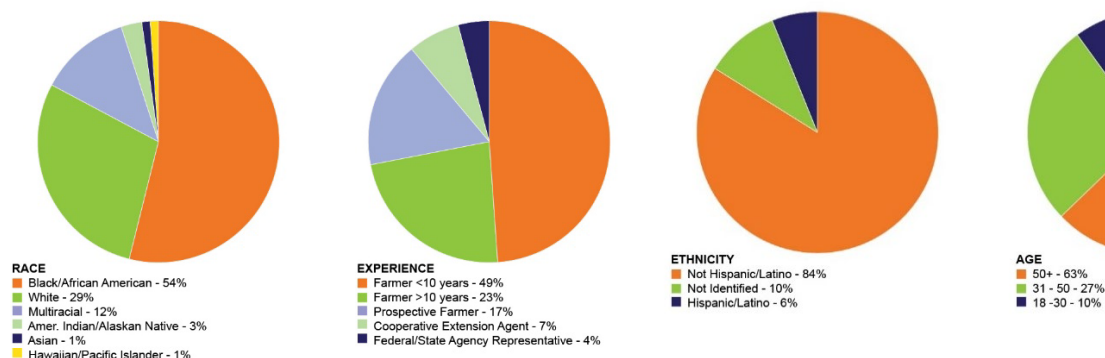


Figure 2. Registrant Demographics



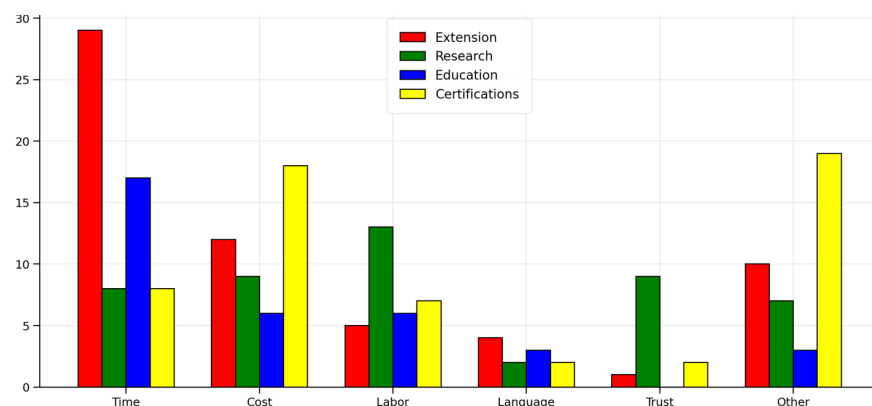
Key Findings of the Report

- Time and cost are universal access barriers across all program areas (education, research and Extension).
- Farmers want practical, on-farm partnerships with VSU, especially for shared research.
- Multiple communication channels are necessary to create a reliable feedback loop that will encourage farmer participation and build trust.
- Land access (acquisition, heirs' property, and succession) is a defining challenge for sustainability.
- Farm owners know they need to have a plan for business/land transfer, but they cannot translate that intent into action without direct, accessible support.
- Mental health is a priority, with community-based, peer-driven solutions preferred.

- Educational programs that are most desired include business-related tools and information; agriculture production trends and emerging opportunities; technology research and adoption; strategies for expanding and creating markets; and information about local, state, and federal policies and regulations, especially related to certifications.
- Initiatives that strengthen farming as a viable business opportunity, professional identity, and thriving community can have a positive influence on next-generation owners and workforce development.
- For support, farmers depend on personal connections, primarily with family members. Farmers also value educational and institutional connections for building support networks.
- Looking ahead, participants identified potential future threats to economic and environmental resources for the viability of farming operations as well as the health and welfare of their communities.
- These stakeholders are VSU's most committed partners and are eager to help ensure a strong and sustainable agriculture industry, especially for small, urban and beginning farmers.

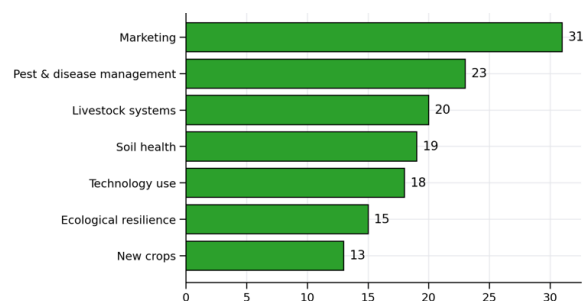
Identifying Barriers, Priorities, and Opportunities

Figure 3. Comparison of Barriers to Engagement and Participation



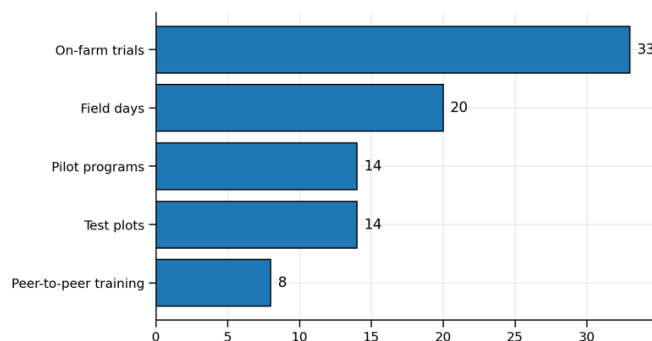
Time is the greatest barrier for stakeholders participating in Extension programs and educational programs. Cost is a significant barrier to obtaining certifications alongside "other." There are several barriers across the board that influence the feasibility of adopting new research practices.

Figure 4. Research Priorities for Small and Urban Farmers

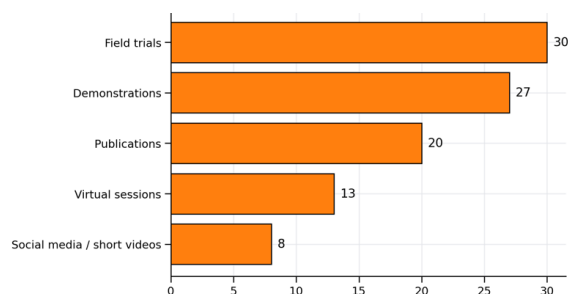


Marketing and Pest & Disease Management are the most valuable research focus needs for farmers and stakeholders, followed by research surrounding Livestock Systems, Soil Health, and Technology Use.

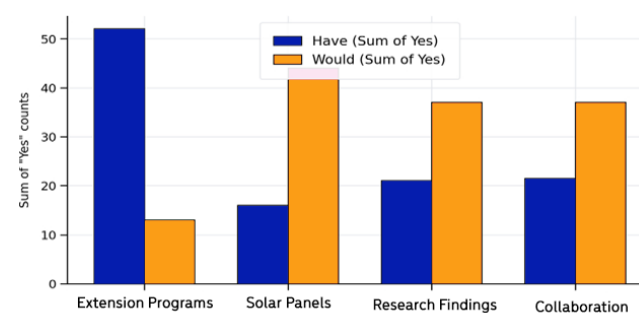
Figure 5. Testing Innovations



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

Figure 6. 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.

Figure 7. Have vs Would

From the choices presented, Extension Programs show the highest current use, while Solar Panels, Research Findings, and Collaboration demonstrate opportunities for expanded outreach, research and partnerships based on higher willingness to engage.

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.

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.

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.