



Sandhills Region – Lee, Moore, and Richmond Counties

Economic Development Plan Green Fields Initiative 2013 – 2018

Executive Summary

History

Representatives from Lee, Moore, and Richmond Counties came together in the Fall of 2012 to develop a regional economic development plan under the US Department of Agriculture's *Stronger Economies Together* (SET) initiative. Over the next 9 months, the Sandhills Sustainable Ag Working Group met on a regular basis and completed a 9 module training on creating strategies for building new economic opportunities for the region. Training team members included faculty and staff of NC State University and NC Cooperative Extension Service and the USDA, as well as independent subject matter specialists. The Sandhills Region Economic Development Plan – Green Fields Initiative - is the result of that convening and training process.

For purposes of this SET Regional Economic Development Plan, the “Sandhills Region” encompasses the three counties of Lee, Moore, and Richmond.

Introduction

Using the SET initiative guidelines, a region's vision sets the tone for the development of a strategic plan. As one member of the Sandhills Sustainable Ag Working Group said:

“There is great potential for food, forestry, trade, and heritage tourism opportunities in the Sandhills region. With the proper focus and attention, these opportunities may be harnessed into real economic drivers in our communities. This will effect the preservation of our history, culture and land, enabling the region to meet the increasing demand for

water, clean air, open space, and recreation opportunities as the area experiences dramatic population growth in the near future.”

The final version of the Sandhills Region’s vision considers this statement, but focuses specifically on the role sustainable agriculture can play in the development of the region’s future. This vision describes “collaborative economic development efforts in the three-county region of Lee, Moore, and Richmond which will result in a vibrant agricultural sector that is recognized as a critical component of an economically vigorous region. More healthy local foods will be produced and consumed; numerous economically viable, food and non-food, entrepreneurial agribusiness opportunities will be encouraged and supported (resulting in the average age of region farmers trending younger and agricultural lands and rural lifestyle being preserved long-term); and the health of community members will be significantly improved.”

Our focus for the SET Sandhills Region Economic Development Plan is how sustainable agriculture can be a driver for the region’s economy, resulting in healthy, vibrant communities throughout Lee, Moore, and Richmond Counties.

The full content of the SET Sandhills Region Economic Development Plan will serve as the roadmap for the future economic development efforts in the area of agriculture in Lee, Moore, and Richmond Counties, which make up the majority of a geographic area known as the Sandhills Region of North Carolina. Key regional stakeholders embrace a spirit of regionalism to support this initiative. Implementing the action items described within that document will strengthen the ability of the Sandhills Region to secure its economic future and position it as a competitive region. The plan reflects a nine module planning process with active participation from business, civic, and community leaders. Significant research and discussions have led to the development of the plan.

Summary of Plan Goals and Strategies

Set forth below is a brief summary of the Sandhills Region Economic Development Plan’s goals and strategies. Action steps and measurements are specified in the full plan document.

Goal 1:

Over the next 5 years, retain the number of acres devoted to agriculture and forestry at 2007 levels, while increasing the number of people entering farming or forestry by 1% per year.

Goal 1 supports our vision by preserving agricultural lands and rural lifestyle and lowering the average age of the region’s farmers (which currently is an average age of 58).

Two of the three counties in the Sandhills Region have experienced steady population growth; in some cases, even exponential growth. The third county, having lost population for decades, has now stabilized, but at great cost - loss of agricultural and forested lands throughout the region (Working Lands Protection Plans - Lee, Moore, Richmond Counties).

With the growing local food and goods movement and its emphasis on reducing the carbon footprint of the national food and timber industry, doesn't it make sense to grow local produce and timber locally as much as possible?

By keeping our working lands in production, the Sandhills Region will continue the rich history of agriculture and forestry in the region. This history strengthens the cultural fabric that binds the region together. The purpose of Goal 1 is to keep farmers farming, support the timber industry, and attract more people into farming and timber. This will enable the valuable open spaces and rural landscapes of the area to continue to exist.

Strategy 1.1: Provide farm business planning trainings to beginning farmers.

Strategy 1.2: Provide continuing education to beginning and experienced farmers in marketing to improve profitability.

Strategy 1.3: Provide farmland transition planning and estate planning materials.

Strategy 1.4: Provide tools to connect available regional farmland to emerging farmers, including the creation of an interactive website listing properties.

Strategy 1.5: Provide resources to ag lenders on the value of alternative crops.

Strategy 1.6: Address barriers to value-added small-farm agriculture.

Goal 2:

Produce and consume more agricultural and forestry products in the region, resulting in an increase in average farm income by 20% over the next 5 years and an increase in forestry management plans by 10% over the same period.

Goal 2 supports our vision by increasing the production and consumption of healthy local foods, encouraging the establishment of entrepreneurial agribusinesses, and improving the health of community members.

By producing and consuming more local ag products in the region, the Sandhills Region will create a more regionally supported food system that provides satisfactory family income and a good quality of life to producers as well as healthy food choices for consumers. Increasing the number of forestry management plans will result in better environmental and business management of available timberland, thus increasing income potential for land owners while contributing to the prosperity of the community at large by maintaining the beautiful natural amenities the region is known for.

Creating a vibrant and diverse agricultural economy supported by the regional market it serves is the focus of Goal 2. Goal 2 strategies build consumer and institutional buyer awareness of the value of locally produced food and non-food goods in the region as well as develop a regional food system supplied by local producers. They further support better management of timber lands, thus resulting in a supply of high quality wood and pulp

products to regional and global commercial buyers.

Strategy 2.1: Engage consumers in the conversation about local food and its value in terms of individual health, community well-being, and regional self-sufficiency.

Strategy 2.2: Create a regional food hub.

Strategy 2.3: Identify high value alternative crops for the region that will be feedstock for energy production or lead to other value-added opportunities. Provide options and information to producers on diversification and “income patching,” including niche or new products, growing season extension, conservation easements, solar farms, carbon credits, and other non-traditional revenue opportunities.

Goal 3:

Raise the profile of agriculture and timber Industries so they are widely recognized by local and regional policymakers, politicians, community and business leaders, and others as being critical and essential economic drivers. By 2018 the region will be generally recognized as a leader in sustainable agriculture and community development.

Goal 3 supports our vision by developing a vibrant agricultural sector that is recognized as a critical component of an economically vigorous region.

By drawing attention to agriculture as one of the region’s significant industries, the Sandhills Region will promote policies and implement systems that will accelerate its progress towards regional economic self-sufficiency. The promotion of these policies and implementation of these systems will result in a strong and stable agricultural economy, a vibrant farming base and community that demonstrates active engagement in agriculture through prioritizing the purchase of local ag products and supporting other local rural ag based economies such as outdoor and agritourism activities.

Sandhills agriculture supports the livelihoods of small and midsize farmers, rural families, and ag-related businesses. It also has the potential to supply a larger percentage of the food that serves the region, thus reducing dependence on cross country shipping systems and imported oil. Perhaps even more important, however, is the fact that locally sourced food and non-food products build community pride, a key ingredient in any community development toolbox.

Strategy 3.1: Hold an annual summit in the region to introduce the newest thinking on models of sustainable agriculture and best practices in community development.

Strategy 3.2: Provide tools for ag groups on how to promote agriculture and timber industries.

Strategy 3.3: Adopt an “Ag Literacy” curriculum into schools and youth programs and promote regionally.

Regional Economic Data

Agriculture and the timber industry have a strong tradition in the Sandhills Region and remain a viable economic cluster today. Total 2011 farm income for the three counties equaled \$316 million (<http://www.ncagr.gov>). As an industry cluster, Ag Business, though a “mature” industry, has stayed strong, despite fluctuating commodity prices, the tobacco industry decline, and economic downturns. It remains among the top six industries for the region, which also include biomedical, advanced manufacturing, ARE, education, and chemicals.

Agriculture is the industry that feeds the world, yet it is threatened by a myriad of economic and regulatory forces. It is hard work, with long hours, high capitalization costs, and diminishing returns. Not surprisingly, the average age of farmers is trending upward, and part-time farming is becoming more and more the norm in order to make ends meet.

Recent social trends, however, indicate a growing demand for locally-produced goods. New non-food uses for ag-based products, including chemicals, biofuels, and cosmetics, also hold promise for growers and dovetail nicely into the other strong industry clusters in the region, particularly biomedical and advanced materials.