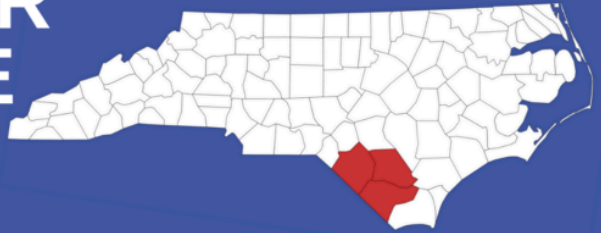


# VISIONING OUR FOOD FUTURE

FOOD SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT FOR  
BLADEN, COLUMBUS, & ROBESON  
COUNTIES



## NC STATE UNIVERSITY



**Farmer Agribusiness Interviews Fall 2022**

**Research Brief**



During Fall 2022 we conducted an assessment with Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) farmers from the Southeastern NC region to listen to their perspectives regarding Agrarianism, their role in local food systems, their interest in agribusiness ideas, and their perceived constraints to success. Between September and November 2022 we conducted 16 individual semi-structured interviews. The participants were recruited based initially on existing relationships with farmers in the project region, and followed-up with recruitment of additional participants using a chain referral method.

The interview protocol included questions about the farmers' demographics and farming practices as well as their stated role in local food systems. In addition, the interviews included a photo sorting activity to examine farmers' preferred agribusiness activities, and a vignette activity to elicit responses to perceived constraints to agribusiness success. The interviews lasted 30 minutes on average.

### **Participant characteristics:**

John Shipp is a Black poultry farmer in his 30's; he runs an African American growers group, offers lodging and experiences in his farm, and has a farm stand where his and his neighbors' farm products are sold to local people.

Mary Jackson is a Black mushroom farmer in her 30s; she actively participates in the black farmers markets in Raleigh and Durham, and the farmers market near her farm. Also she teaches a 7th grade class on how to grow mushrooms and how to access fresh foods.

Mike Parson is a Black farmer in his 70s who owns a very large farm. He has been in farming for a long time, and in addition to agriculture he engages in different forms of agribusinesses such as farm tours, farm stays, and farm activities.

Christina Jones is an experienced Black farmer who is in her 60s. She has worked many years on the land and sells produce locally to enable local families to have healthier lives. She is involved in farm tourism, by offering youth camps on her farm.

Jordan Balmer is a beginner Black farmer in her 60s who is heavily engaged in farm tourism. She has been farming for over a year now, recently taking over her family's 4 generation farm. She hosts farm events at her farm and produces herbal treatments for visitors.

Dwayne Hans is a mushroom Black farmer in his 80s. He has a very deep history in farming due to his elders farming, and is very excited to pass the farm down to his daughter. Currently he sells at the local farmers market and gives free food grown at the farm to neighbors in need.

Hunter Wynns is an upcoming Black farmer in her 30s. She is really interested in becoming involved in farm tourism in addition to her ongoing focus of growing produce. Gradually, she would like to specialize in teaching farming skills, youth education and gardening.

Kathy Johnson is a small-scale Black farmer in her 40s. She has a large garden and a production of livestock. She works hard to support her family's nutrition needs as well as the needs of people close to here. She sells to the community and offers farm apprenticeships.

Jackson Everest is a Black farmer in his 30s and is focused on growing produce. He is very

devoted to running his roadside farm stand, which he has been running for a couple of years. Now he is looking for ways to scale up his business to the next level.

Henry Mann is a highly skilled Black farmer in his 40s. He learned about farming from his father and grandfather. He has been engaged in farm tourism for about a year, organizing a couple events at his farm. He wants to grow his business significantly in the next couple of years.

Jakie Simpson is a spiritual Black farmer in her 30s who reports growing produce as a means of promoting social justice. She is beginning to get involved in farm tourism to teach people in the community the importance of spiritual health, emotional health and physical health.

Klein Hudson is an indigenous farmer in his 40s. He is a hard working vegetable farmer and started farming in the early 2000s. His grandfather was also a farmer. He grows a variety of different vegetables and gives it out locally and tries his best to make it affordable.

Brad Johnson is an indigenous farmer in his 60s. He is a vegetable farmer that has been farming for over 30 years. His grandfather was a farmer but his father was not. Learned about the importance of healthy foods at a young age.

Mike Hopkins is a hispanic farmer in his 50s. He is an experienced livestock farmer. Enjoys holding events at the farm, and engaging you in agriculture activities. Wants more youth involved in agriculture.

Mary Martin is a hispanic farmer in her 30s. She has been farming for 1 year now. Currently tilling the land, and creating a business model in looking at ways she can engage in tourism and agriculture activities to bring people to the farm.

Note: All names are pseudonyms, and self-descriptions were edited to ensure anonymity. When possible we maintained farmers' original self-description narratives, and only made edits to shorten and anonymize their identity.

### **BIPOC farmers' stated role in local foods systems:**

This assessment aimed to investigate ways in which farmers are involved in local food systems. Accordingly, we asked participants to indicate what was their role, if any, in local food systems. A thematic analysis of their responses revealed that participating farmers focus on promoting the value of agriculture through education and farm tourism, on providing their local community with fresh and healthy goods at an affordable price, on introducing niche crafts to the community, and on promoting sustainable farming practices. Results are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Themes of farmers' role in the local food system

Theme/subtheme	Count
Educating others on the significance of agriculture	22
Farm tours - e.g., "Using tours to promote youth education and in-person learning."	14
Community Supported Agriculture - e.g., "we engage in our local CSA market."	5
Farm stays - e.g., "We also offer farm stays that help people try out farming skills, do some hands-on work gardening,"	3
Provision of fresh and healthy food at affordable prices	23
Growing vegetables - e.g., "We grow squash, zucchini, cucumbers, okra field peas, Dixie Leaf peas during summer and during the fall of the last year, we've grown collard greens, and this year we've grown collards, kales, mustard greens, turnips, top purple turnips, cabbage and carrots."	11
Local processing of foods - e.g., "have a few strawberry and blueberry, and blackberry bushes, and a lot of that will be well so that we can have our products for our jams and jellies."	3
Support local markets and availability of products - e.g., "We hope to be able to have people be able to purchase fruits using SNAP benefits, and we want to be able to give food away as well."	5
Growing and selling special products - e.g., "I grow organic mushrooms & produce."	4
Introduction of niche products into the local food system	17
Share innovative crops - e.g., "We participate in farmer's markets and CSAs."	9
Provide communities with new recipes for special products grown - e.g., "narrow down to specialty types of crops and introduce them to new recipe cards."	3
Offer recreation as part of agricultural production - e.g., "I'm doing some hunting tours, and some other ideas I have lined up."	5
Introduce sustainable farming practices into the system	21
Optimal utilization of scarce resources - e.g., "We have vacant lots in the city, and we have turned some of those into community gardens, CFAs, and food donations."	17
Use traditional cropping methods for sustainable agriculture - e.g., "So kind of bringing the opportunity for them to grow mushrooms at home to them is important."	4

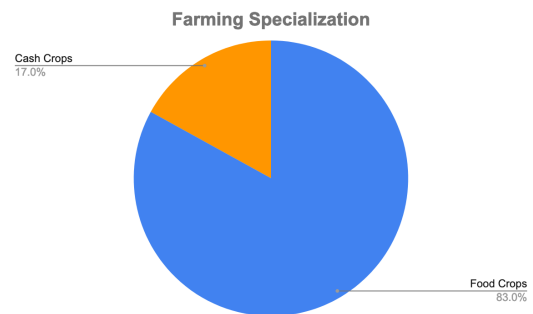


### **Involvement in Direct to Consumer Sales and Tourism:**

Almost all of the farmers were enthusiastic about contributing to the knowledge of crop and animal products within the community. Most participating farmers reported employing different approaches to share their knowledge about farming with their community and with visitors. About half of farmers (52%) invite visitors for educational tours. Some individuals even stated that their farms' primary use is for tourism. The knowledge is shared through different settings, including using Airbnb as a way for people to learn about gardening/farming skills, hands-on work, and youth education while staying at the farm. Approximately  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the participants reported involvement in farmers markets as a way of helping small-scale farmers sell their products or get easy access to buyers. Their motivation to contribute to farmers markets is partially to increase community awareness about the benefits of growing food and buying healthy products sourced from local farmers. Moreover, about 17% also indicated including different events and participation in various agriculture days to promote the benefits of engaging in agriculture production to improve their communities' health outcomes.

### **Fresh and Healthy Food at and Affordable Price:**

Farmers highlighted their contribution to the local food system by providing healthy produce at affordable prices to the local residents. Most farmers (83%) indicated focusing mainly on food production, while few (17%) focused on growing cash crops, such as tobacco and cotton. Some farmers reported giving away large quantities of produce from their crops (i.e. fruits and vegetables) to the community. Most farmers (90%) stated that they felt it was their duty to help society access healthy food. For instance, a farmer stated that taking the herbs grown on her farm and other healthy foods to the local markets and events helps people "know how important it is to take nutrients directly from the earth and put it into your body instead of processed nutrients".



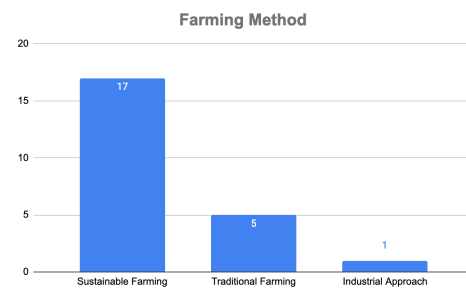
Note: Food crops included mushrooms, sweet potato, collards, beans, regular tomatoes, peppers, squash, zucchini, cucumbers, okra field peas, dixie leaf peas, collard greens, kales, mustard greens, turnips, top purple turnips, strawberry, blueberry cabbage, and carrots. Cash crops included tobacco, trees, and cotton.

### **Introduction of niche products to the community:**

Most participants have been farming for many years or several generations; therefore they have a rich knowledge base in agriculture and agribusiness. Most importantly, many farmers reported a desire to offer support services to people who wish to start a similar farming arrangement they use on their property. For instance, a farmer states that since small farmers struggle to compete with larger farms, it is necessary focus on specialty crops and/or varieties. They try to introduce them to their community, and even use recipe cards to expand community awareness about new types of products.

### Sustainable farming practices:

With virtually all the farmers working on small-scale production on the property, their main approaches have been directed toward driving efficiently. They cite applying efficient farming practices to allow them to make the most of their land while earning a decent living. Many participants (74%) stated that they only use sustainable farming methods. In comparison, fewer of them (22%) incorporated traditional approaches their parents or grandparents used before. Almost none of the participants (4%) reported using industrial techniques. Nonetheless, all the farmers focus on methods that would help them to minimize any unnecessary costs and limit waste while at the same time promoting maximum utilization of available resources to maximize income. Smart crop selection and use of technology were supported by most respondents, who state that they desire others to see how their approaches are beneficial, especially for small-scale farmers, to facilitate success and sustainability.



### Involvement in diverse agribusinesses and tourism microentrepreneurship:

Another objective of this assessment was to investigate what kind of diversified agribusiness activities were BIPOC farmers interested in. We used a photo sorting activity to identify which agribusiness activities were most and least appealing to the participants. A frequency analysis of photo choices and an analysis of the farmers' explanations of their choices revealed this short list of the most and least desirable activities:

#### Most desirable

	BIPOC farmers enjoy working with the youth population and teaching them where the food that they eat comes from. It has been said that connecting children with farming earlier leads to positive association with agriculture and outdoors
	Farmers really enjoyed engaging/teaching others what they do during their everyday lives. Allows the community to get hands on experiences of what a farmer does to produce healthy crops

	Farmers enjoy pouring knowledge into the community of what it takes to grow/maintain crops. Visitors get to see first hand what the farming experience is about in hopes to engage a new generation of farmers.
	Farmers markets are an integral part of commerce. Being able to get support from the community and other networks of farmers is an important part of keeping a farm business running.

### Most undesirable

	Farmers explained that this was an inaccurate picture of what farming actually looks like. Doesn't really show the true meaning of what it means to be a farmer, and doesn't show the business side as well.
	Shows what farming used to look like, and more of a hustle and bustle style of farming. Farmers explained this is considered old school and not how farmers farm in this day and age.
	Hosting weddings is hard work for farmers. They call for serious work on organizing, preparation and breakdown after the event is over.
	Not much interest in having people come to the farm and pick their own produce. Also farmers have noticed that not very many people are interested in U-pick and would rather have it ready upon arrival.

**Overall lessons learned:**

- Most farmers sell fresh food to their communities through a variety of CSAs, farmers markets, and farm stands;
- Farmers seek financial viability by producing specialty crops for premium markets; and they attempt to make healthy food accessible to under-resourced people in their community. It is not easy to accomplish these two goals and more insight is needed about strategies used and new opportunities available;
- Loves educating people about agriculture, pour knowledge into people that dont know about farming, put greenhouse up and let people tour, young people are engaged, great to see women leadingFarmers are engaged heavily in the school systems to teach youth the importance of agriculture and learning where food comes from;
- Loves working with children, incorporating youth, youth learning where food comes from, children are learning, children are seeing where food comes from, building community, seeing food from a farm first hand (experience), focus on black children getting engaged in agriculture, young people are working and being educated, connecting children with farming earlier leads to positive association with agriculture and outdoors, youth are the future
- Farmers genuinely cherish their work and desire everyone to have a positive view of agricultural production;
- Farmers have come a long way in advancing their work using technology and wish people to visit their lands to share the joy they experience growing crops;
- Farming is a full-time job that is enjoyed across different generations;
- Black Commerce, shows all the different products farmers have to offer, networking, educational, show variety, people working together, black people support black farmers and collaborating

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