

Polk SWCD Case Study

Compiled by Sandra Reid, District Administrator, Polk SWCD, 2009

The effort to develop a farmland preservation program in Polk County is rooted in active Voluntary (VAD) and Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District (EVAD) Programs. The work started with a small group of volunteer supporters and a group of committed farmers appointed by the Polk County Board of Commissioners to look into agriculture opportunities which has turned into a whole community working hard to preserve farmland, increase the agricultural economy and maintain the rural character of the county. Currently 48 farms/5188 acres are in the VAD and 19 farms/1583 acres are in the EVAD.

A 2007-8 survey sent to all Polk County citizens resulted in a clear message that the number #1 priority of over 80% of the citizens was to maintain the rural character of the county. Along with the goal in the Voluntary Agriculture District Program to write a Farmland Protection Program for the county, the survey provided the momentum to the County Board of Commissioners to take action. Through an early grant with the NC Agriculture Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund, Polk County developed one of first approved Farmland Protection Plans in the State. Using a model plan developed by NC State University, a position of Agricultural Economic Development Director was proposed as one of the strategic actions. As the name of the position implies, the Commissioners embraced the theory: "To keep farms farming, they have to be economically sound".

Through this process, the Polk County Farmland Preservation and Agricultural Economic Development Board now oversees the new position, the Polk Soil and Water Conservation District is holding five conservation easements and the County Board of Commissioners has budgeted funds for farmland preservation. The implemented Farmland Protection Plan includes conservation easements, but also addresses three areas:

1. Reconnect the community with agriculture
2. Enhance existing agriculture enterprises
3. Develop new agricultural economic opportunities

What has been accomplished? There are monthly Friends of Agriculture Breakfasts where guest speakers discuss resources available to strengthen farm economies, the local community college has added agriculture courses and outside agencies and organizations have provided workshops on agricultural opportunities, partnerships are being utilized to bring existing agricultural resources directly to Polk County farmers and market opportunities have expanded in both the county and foot hills region. One significant strategy has been to involve farmers in the many resources available for entrepreneurial businesses. Another strategy has been the integration of agriculture into the economic strategy for the county, including agri-tourism, healthy living, viticulture, equestrian community and specialty crops. Most importantly, results are evident on the farms with lands being brought back into production with high value crops, new farmers and operations underway and the expansion of farm markets.

It is exciting to be in the conservation field in Polk County. Not only are our services needed, they are actually appreciated. With the current economy problems a new respect for conservation is being felt.