



**Virginia Cooperative Extension**

Virginia Tech • Virginia State University

[www.ext.vt.edu](http://www.ext.vt.edu)

# Situation Analysis Report

## Southampton County

### 2013

#### Southampton County Extension Staff

Austin Brown, Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Agent

Neil Clark, Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Agent

Teisha Evans, Unit Administrative Assistant

#### Southampton County Extension Leadership Council

David Trimmer

Teri Zurfluh

Teisha Evans

M.L. Everett

Judy Ferguson

Lorraine Whitehead

Melissia Lee

Bruce Phillips

Daniel Dawley

Michelle Stivers

Walter Young, Jr.

Gene Drewry

## Introduction

Southampton County Extension conducted a revision of its situation analysis during 2014. The purpose of the analysis was to gather and organize statistical data, identify key issues effecting county citizens and provide Extension staff with current information useful in developing educational programs. Southampton County's Extension staff currently consists of: one Ag Agent, a shared 4-H Agent with neighboring Isle of Wight County, a Unit Coordinator who is also a District Forestry and Natural Resources Agent, and one Unit Administrative Assistant. The need for a situational analysis was first discussed among the staff and then introduced to the unit's Extension Leadership Council (ELC). The ELC discussed community needs and decided additional key people were important to determine other important issues facing the community. A diverse group of stakeholders were assembled to represent the variety of needs and perspectives across the county spanning geography, occupation, age, gender, race, and socio-economic status. The members gave of their time and talents and served diligently throughout the entire process. We were privileged to have individuals from our state and local agencies, non-profit organizations, churches, schools, and parents to help with this process.

## Unit Profile

Southampton County is a 600 square mile rural county in Western Tidewater with agriculture as the primary economic driving force. Neighboring counties include Greensville to the west, Sussex and Surry to the north and Isle of Wight and Suffolk border the east. Two North Carolina counties, Northampton and Hertford are opposite the southern county line. An independent city, Franklin is located between Southampton and Isle of Wight County. Counties and cities to the east are much more populated than Southampton County.

Population growth has stabilized after decreases from the 1950s to 1990s. The current population is 18,571 in 2007, a 5.33% increase since 1997. Population density has remained mostly constant at around 30 people per square mile from the 1990s to present.

The median age of Southampton County residents has increased to 44.3 years from 33.8 in the 1990s. Population under 18 years of age was 21.1% in 2012. The older resident proportion, those 60 years and older, remains fairly stable at 21.7% of the population. The gender makeup is 52% male to 48% female.

Racial composition of Southampton County changed little from the 1990s to present. In 2012, the white population was 61%, black population 37%, and all other were 2.0%. This represents a very small increase in the proportion of the white population over the last two decades. Among other races; Multiple, Hispanic or Latino, Other, American Indian, and Asian reported in at 261, 203, 64, 62, and 46 individuals, respectively.

Income per capita for Southampton County, in total 2011 dollars not adjusted for inflation, has increased very slowly to \$21,212, up from \$16,930 reported in 2000. However, per capita income for Southampton County has dropped to 64% of the per capita income for

Virginia as a whole compared to 79% in 2004. Median household income in 2011 was \$46,733. The average Annual wage for 2013 is reported at \$31,408, a full 40% lower than the \$53,456 for Virginia statewide. Unemployment rate in August 2013 is reported at 8.6% somewhat greater than 6.2% reported for Virginia statewide. The 2011 poverty rate in Southampton was 16% compared to the average Virginia poverty rate of 10%.

Teenage pregnancy continues to drop since the late 1990s. There were 35 teenage pregnancies per 1000 female age 15-19 in 2013 compared to 41 in 2010 and is pretty much in line with the Virginia average but over 50% higher than the national rate of 21. The incidences of sexually transmitted infections are at 517 (per 100k) which is significantly greater than the 385 Virginia average and 500% greater than the national average of 92.

In 2013, 87% of the county's citizens 25 years and older graduated from high school. Twelve (56%) had received some education at the college level. 35% of children live in single-parent households compared to only 20% national average. And 15% have limited access to healthy foods. This is nearly 4 times the state rate and 15 times the national rate.

## **Community and Resident Perspectives**

VCE staff and the ELC members utilized a combination of online and written survey responses from existing databases, and through broad-based advertising among local organizations including schools, libraries, administration offices, and public postings. Additionally key informant interviews helped to provide more details than the broad survey responses returned.

The main issues that surfaced dealt with agricultural profitability, youth development, and employment preparation and opportunities.

### **Ag Summary**

Southampton County is the one of the most important agricultural counties in the state of Virginia in terms of acreage and economic impact to the community. Southampton County produces more acres of row crops than any other county in the state of Virginia. There are approximately 100,000 acres devoted to row crop production. The major crops produced are soybeans, cotton, wheat, corn, peanuts, and sorghum. There is also a significant acreage of watermelons and pumpkins produced as well within the boundaries of this 600 square mile county. As recently as 1995, there were over 28,000 acres of peanuts produced in the county. Since the passage of the 2002 Farm Bill that eliminated the government support prices for peanuts, the acreage has declined drastically down to about 7,300 acres in 2014. Over the last decade, cotton and soybeans have remained the top two crops in terms of acreage and value for Southampton County farmers. The county is typically the largest producer of cotton, peanuts, and watermelons in terms of acreage on an annual basis. In 2014, there were 35,235 acres of soybeans, 34,660 acres of cotton, 10,429 acres of wheat, 6,775 acres of corn, 7,347 acres of peanuts, and 273 acres of watermelons, and 8000 acres of other crops.

The estimated farm gate value of agricultural production is nearly \$52 million dollars. There are also many businesses that are directly in support of row crop production. These include grain elevators, peanut buying stations, seed suppliers, crop protection materials retail centers, and trucking. Agriculture is the most important industry in this largely predominantly rural county situated in the fertile coastal plain of Virginia.

Over the last 5 years, grain prices have been historically high, thus prompting farmers to plant more grain crops than ever before. Cotton still remains a stable and profitable commodity for the sandy soils of Southampton County. The last three years have afforded local producers the opportunity to install more grain infrastructure and irrigation equipment. Peanut producers have been offered contracts that enticed increased acreage in 2012, but overproduction nationwide led to an acreage reduction in 2014. This is a huge hindrance to long term acreage stability. The cyclical nature of the peanut market has kept overall acreage low in relative terms. Cotton, soybeans, and wheat are the staple of the majority of producers.

There are 134 farming operations in Southampton County that operate an average farm of about 750 acres. The largest operations encompass 2,500 to 4,000 acres, but the vast majority of these operations fall in the 500 to 1,500 acre category. The average age of primary farm managers is about 59 years old. There will be many operations that change hands in the next decade when these farmers near retirement age. The county government has supported agriculture very prominently over the last 10 years by creating fairly restrictive development ordinances in order to control growth. This has helped to preserve farmland, but there has been some land lost to development in some localities within the county's borders.

Overall, the agricultural sector in this historically rich county has remained a shining light in the face of economic turmoil nationwide. Commercial row crop production provides jobs and income for many people in this county. The overall success and sustainability will ultimately be determined by market prices, efficient management, and effective communication of research data down to the farm level.

A community survey was conducted in the fall of 2013 to assess the needs and concerns of Southampton County farmers, landowners, and extension stakeholders. There were issues that seemed to be consistent across the majority of the surveys. These issues were high cash rental prices for farmland, farm transition planning, and herbicide resistant weeds. There were many other issues that were mentioned in the survey comments as well as in personal interactions with producers by local extension agents.

These issues included wildlife damage to crops, soil sampling services, retaining agents for long term careers, and youth development opportunities. There is also a concern from many farmers about the relationships between producers when it comes to land rent issues. In times of high commodity prices, there has been intense competition for farmland. This has led to some disgruntled neighbors and strained friendships. The aforementioned issues are critical to the sustainability of successful row crop production in Southampton County.

In summary, there are many positives when speaking of the agricultural sector in Southampton County. It is an exciting time to be involved in commercial row crop production. But, like any other industry, there are many challenges and struggles that will need to be addressed to maintain a successful, sustainable farming community.

## Youth Summary

Of the nine youth development topics listed; “Life Skills/Decision Making”, “Leadership Development”, and “Youth Violence” were ranked as the top three by order of importance. “Crime and result [of crime],” “manners and respect of all people,” “teach children moral values,” “life goals,” and “more role models to mentor [youth]” were additional issues that were stated. Going beyond qualitative data, the Virginia Department of Education Southampton County Report Card identified a 94% increase from 2011 to 2014 in “Technology Offenses.” There was also a 15% increase in “Other Offenses Against Persons” and a 14% increase in “Disorderly or Disruptive Behavior Offenses”. The qualitative and quantitative data led those compiling the situation analysis to determine that a critical Unit issue is a need for youth character education that identifies the consequences of good and bad behavior. Based on the situation analysis, effort to collaborate with Southampton County Public Schools and other organizations focused on youth needs to be explored to better address this issue.

## Employment Summary

Following a massive downturn brought about by the closure of a major paper mill and many local sawmills following the recession which began in 2008, the forest industry in southeastern Virginia and adjacent North Carolina is undergoing resurgence. The paper mill has been repurposed to produce fluff pulp and is now absorbing about 30% of the employment and wood volume as the previous mill. Biomass energy in the form of wood pellet production for European markets and a conversion of a coal power generation facility for domestic energy to use of wood residues have combined to make up the balance of wood consumption to previous levels or beyond. Additionally, a large sawmill has begun production and another mega-sawmill is announced to open within the wood basket. With so much of the previous logging workforce gone into retirement or otherwise diminished, the existing logging workforce is not capable of supplying adequate volume of material.

As a response, forestry, wood, and logging organizations; industry representatives; along with Virginia Cooperative Extension, and a local community college have formed a task force to address the logging capacity shortfall. So far this task force has built an infrastructure to provide the tools to assist existing logging businesses to expand and enable new entrepreneurs to start up. We are also looking at ways to reduce the barriers restricting current operations. And we are providing continual training opportunities to keep businesses up-to-date on their requirements under the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. So far the task force has garnered over \$19,000 in grants and sponsorships, hosted an Expo where over 250 loggers, potential loggers, and service providers were provided information on present and

upcoming wood supply needs, available employment and business services, network opportunities with equipment, financial, and other logging vendors. The Task Force has also been active in advising other association members on legislative issues which need attention. A seminar series has also been established to provide a continual maintenance of the existing suppliers needs.

## **Priority Issues**

### **Issue 1: Ag Profitability - Farm Land Rent**

Land rent prices are driven by market prices, competition for land resources, and soil productivity. In recent years, farm profits have been at historically high levels for the operations in Southampton County. Land rental rates declined sharply after the loss of the peanut support program in 2002. The trend line remained flat for nearly a decade as land rent averaged about \$60.00 per acre. Over the last three years, average cash rental rates have increased to over \$80.00 per acre according to the latest survey conducted in December 2012. There are land rental rates as high as \$ 180.00 per acre on some farms. It is becoming more common to see competition drive land rents over the \$100.00 per acre mark. The more profitable operations become, there seems to be more interest in expansion or new farm operators coming into the mix. This creates intense competition for land resources. In many instances, it leads to suspect business practices among landlords and lessees when negotiating for cash rental rates. The high rental rates can be absorbed as long as yields and market prices remain strong, but when cash flow is reduced these high cash rents will consume profits. This could lead to default on loans and the demise of an operation. Landowners and farmers need to understand the dynamics of cash rents and determine fair, equitable contracts.

### **Issue 2: Youth Leadership Development**

Youth character education was identified at the second most pressing issue in Southampton County. This issue surfaced in the Unit-wide survey taken in November 2014. Within the survey, participants were asked to rank nine youth development topics. Of the nine youth development topics listed, "Life Skills/Decision Making" was determined to be the most important issue followed by "Leadership Development" and "Youth Violence." In addition to ranking issues, participants were also asked "What other youth development issues should be considered?" Answers included "crime and result [of crime]," "manners and respect of all people," "teach children moral values," "life goals," and "more role models to mentor [youth]." Going beyond qualitative data, the Virginia Department of Education Southampton County Report Card identified a 94% increase from 2011 to 2013 in "Technology Offenses." There was also a 15% increase in "Other Offenses Against Persons" and a 14% increase in "Disorderly or Disruptive Behavior Offenses". The qualitative and quantitative data led those compiling the situation analysis to determine that a critical Unit issue is a need for youth character education that identifies the consequences of good and bad behavior. Based on the situation analysis, effort to collaborate with Southampton County Public Schools and other organizations focused on youth needs to be explored to better address this issue.

### **Issue 3: Resurgent Wood Industries - Training needs, logging capacity**

Following a massive downturn brought about by the closure of a major paper mill and many local sawmills following the recession which began in 2008, the forest industry in southeastern Virginia and adjacent North Carolina is undergoing resurgence. The paper mill has been repurposed to produce fluff pulp and is now absorbing about 30% of the employment and wood volume as the previous mill. Biomass energy in the form of wood pellet production for European markets and a conversion of a coal power generation facility for domestic energy to use of wood residues have combined to make up the balance of wood consumption to previous levels or beyond. Additionally, a large sawmill has begun production and another mega-sawmill is announced to open within the wood basket. With so much of the previous logging workforce gone into retirement or otherwise diminished, the existing logging workforce is not capable of supplying adequate volume of material.

As a response, forestry, wood, and logging organizations; industry representatives; along with Virginia Cooperative Extension, and a local community college have formed a task force to address the logging capacity shortfall. So far this task force has built an infrastructure to provide the tools to assist existing logging businesses to expand and enable new entrepreneurs to start up. We are also looking at ways to reduce the barriers restricting current operations. And we are providing continual training opportunities to keep businesses up-to-date on their requirements under the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. So far the task force has garnered over \$19,000 in grants and sponsorships, hosted an Expo where over 250 loggers, potential loggers, and service providers were provided information on present and upcoming wood supply needs, available employment and business services, network opportunities with equipment, financial, and other logging vendors. The Task Force has also been active in advising other association members on legislative issues which need attention. A seminar series has also been established to provide a continual maintenance of the existing suppliers needs.

### **Issue 4: Farm Transition**

The average age of farmers in this county like many others in The United States is nearly 60 years old. We will experience a major changing of the guard within the next decade. Younger generations will either assume the managerial role within existing operations or be left with land resources to sell or manage at their discretion. Older farmers have acquired substantial assets in the form of cash, land, and equipment. They have to prudently disperse these assets to young farmers or family members in a manner consistent with scrupulous business practices. There will be many acres of land that could potentially be sold or rented by existing farmers, thus increasing the size of some farms considerably over the next decade. It is vital to the success of these successors and current producers that wise business practices be used when handling decisions that could potentially affect multiple generations of people. In order to maintain Southampton County as the premier row crop county in Virginia, farmland must be preserved and successfully transitioned to the next generation.

## Issue 5: Herbicide Resistant Weeds

The third major issue in agriculture that was consistently mentioned in the needs assessment survey was the battle we are facing with herbicide resistant weeds in crop fields. Since 1996, we have seen the introduction of glyphosate tolerant corn, cotton, and soybeans. This herbicide system was a game changer globally for row crop producers. Weed control was made very simple for over a decade. Post emergence applications of glyphosate (a nonselective broad spectrum grass and broadleaf weed killer) would control the majority of competitive weeds in Southeastern U.S. production agriculture. Farmers moved away from using pre-emergence herbicides and materials that provided residual weed control. The repeated overuse and misuse of this technology allowed for some weed species to select for resistance to glyphosate. There are other chemicals that have become less effective such as ALS-inhibitors. We now have confirmed cases of herbicide resistant Marestalk, Palmer Amaranth, and Ragweed in Southampton County. This has completely changed the way farmers tackle weed control in every crop. Palmer Amaranth has the potential to virtually destroy crop production if left uncontrolled. This weed can compete for water, nutrients, and sunlight like no other weed in the Southeast. New herbicide traits have been introduced to help manage these problems, but no “silver bullet” has been found to help totally control these weeds. Producers have hurried to learn what herbicide programs will work the best on their unique operation to battle these pests. In the last 3 years, we have gone back to a more conventional program based on the use of pre-emergence applications followed by residual materials in addition to glyphosate and glufosinate. There are new technology traits that will be released in the next 3 years that will again change the face of herbicide programs for Southeastern U.S. agriculture. The importance of education regarding these products and their effective use is critical to sustainable production agriculture.