



The Future of Warren County Agriculture

A community-based program to address the needs and future of farming in Warren County

INTRODUCTION

The Future of Warren County Agriculture is a community-based program supported by Penn State Cooperative Extension to help residents and farmers respond to the challenges facing agriculture in Warren County. It helps the community identify the concerns and barriers to survival and growth facing local farms, and then develop and implement a community-based plan for sustaining farms and farming in the county. The ultimate goal of the program is to create or sustain a healthy local farm economy and an improved overall business climate in the county.

To develop an accurate picture of farming in the county, the *Future of Warren County Agriculture* (FWCA) task force gathered data through two primary efforts: Farmer Let's Talk Sessions and a Farmer Survey. Three Let's Talk sessions were held in different locations across the county in November of 2004, and were attended by 62 farmers and 20 other county residents, during which participants discussed opportunities, challenges, and the future of farming in Warren County.

The Farmer Survey was conducted during the months of February and March 2005. Forty-four citizen volunteers conducted in-depth interviews with 73 farmers in Warren County, to learn about their concerns, identify their needs, and get their insights about what could and should be done to help agriculture prosper in the future. In the spring of 2004, the FWCA task force worked through the information from the Let's Talk sessions and the surveys, and developed an Action Plan to improve the business climate and community environment for agriculture in Warren County.

This report provides a summary of the Action Plan developed by the FWCA task force, as well as an outline of these findings. It is important to realize, however, that while the goals and action plans outlined here have been developed after careful consideration and discussion, they represent only the first steps toward addressing many of the issues and long term challenges facing agriculture in the county. Reaching our long term goals of increasing the competitiveness of Warren County farms and agribusinesses, sustaining a healthy farm economy, and insuring the future of farming in the county will require an on-going effort and collaboration.

WARREN COUNTY GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND PROJECTS

As outlined above, a critical component of the Future of Agriculture Program is to bring together a diverse set of stakeholders, farmers, and residents to develop a road map for addressing the issues identified in the survey and Let's Talk sessions. In essence, we have created an Action Plan to ensure agriculture remains a viable part of the county's economy, society, and natural resource base. After careful study of the results, we identified a wide range of goals to address the needs of agriculture in the county. These include:

Goals Identified to Address Critical Issues

- Expand local markets; develop marketing plan, develop directory of Warren County farms
- Educate consumers about where food comes from, buying local, etc.
- Provide farmers with information about educational services and programs available
- Provide tax breaks/incentives for farmers
- Hire professional farm management assistant for county
- Develop directory of goods and services for farmers
- Develop county agricultural website
- Establish farmer intern project
- Educate government officials about agriculture
- Create/improve banking, loans, financial services, etc.
- Expand farmstead exemption
- Develop relationship between school district and agricultural agencies and programs
- Complete establishment of agricultural land preservation program
- Develop additional resources about alternatives for farmers: value-added, agritourism, etc.
- Link to agriculture on chamber website
- Help farmers diversify production
- Establish equipment sharing network
- Include agricultural development as part of overall economic development plan

This broad list was further refined into a list of 'high-priority' goals based on the concerns and issues the group had earlier identified and – importantly – laying out some of the steps, partners, and timelines necessary to achieve these goals. It is towards accomplishing these goals that the majority of effort will be directed over the next year. These goals and projects are outlined here. Contact information is also provided as a means for you to become involved.

Goal I: To expand local markets for buying fresh, buying local, and buying Warren County farm products.

Objective 1: Develop campaign to promote locally produced products.

Project A: Meet with people that are currently part of farmers' markets. Present our ideas to expand local markets. Discuss possibility of PASA's "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" campaign

Project B: Establish our logo, signs (farmers and main roads in and out of Warren).

Project C: Expand current farmers' markets to encourage participation of new producers.

Objective 2: Establish local source directory.

Project A: Collection Advertise, Consolidate

Project B: Publish web page, hard copy (Stepping Out, The Guide), reference magnetic poster

Objective 3: Develop relationships to provide product liability to local farmers who are providing local products.

Objective 4: Develop year-round markets (store front or fresh foods store).

Contact: Dick Burlingame, 757-8540, stoneycreek@kinzud.net

Goal II: Establish and maintain agriculture in the science and technology curriculum in the Warren County School District utilizing all community resources.

Objective 1: Incorporate standards-based education in traditional classroom settings.

Project A: Meet with school board and administration regarding results of this survey; perhaps have a representative come to some of our meetings.

Project B: Conduct in-service training for teachers on ag related instruction.

Objective 2: Promote participation in non-traditional, hands-on agriculture related education in schools as well as pre-schools and youth groups of all types.

Project A: Identify resources available.

Project B: Recruit volunteers to assimilate information

Project C: Make information available (booklets, newspaper, website).

Objective 3: Educate public about importance of agriculture to gain support for the curriculum.

Contact: Pam Stoleson, 489-3734, stoleson@aol.com

Goal III: Enhance Farmer education and information provision

Objective 1: Develop booklet and distribute at the Warren County Fair and local businesses explaining service and education for local farmers.

Project A: Getting quotes from several printers to present to the Farm Bureau for consideration for cost of printing.

Project B: Reserve booth space at Warren County Fair.

Project C: Possibly solicit advertisers for booklet (local feed mills, equipment retailers, veterinarians, hardware stores, etc.)

Objective 2: Computer literacy: work with Higher Education Council and Warren County Extension Office for fall 2005 completion (available so farmers can use during winter months).

Contact: Linda Nicklas, 814-726-2186, lnicklas@westpa.net

Goal IV: Increase public awareness of the benefits of local agriculture and develop support for the local farmers and gain recognition for their contribution to the community.

Objective 1: Educate consumers about where food comes from.

Project A: Develop displays

Project B: Placement of displays in mall, tourist center, library, supermarkets, courthouse, allied agencies and fair

Project C: Develop web page

Project D: Initiate Weekly Paper Column – “Would you believe?” Weekly Q&A

Objective 2: Promote Farm-City Week (aka Warren County Fair)

Project A: Invite Farmers’ Market

Project B: Signs promoting farmer and statistics

Objective 3: Tax revenue generated by farm community and benefits

Project A: Research

Project B: Publish on webpage

Project C: Publish hard copy – newspaper column

Objective 4: Promote wise timber harvesting

Project A: Identify local products

Project B: Develop display

Project C: Identify benefits of proper management

Project D: Post information on webpage

Contact: Les Sanford, 563-4389

SUMMARY OF SURVEY AND LET'S TALK SESSIONS

Let's Talk Sessions

Three Let's Talk sessions were held in November 2004. To ensure broad geographical participation, these sessions were held in different locations around the county (Columbus, Pittsfield, and Lander). The purpose of these sessions was to provide both an initial look at the agricultural issues in the county as well as to generate ideas and topics to be incorporated into the survey instrument. The three major themes that evolved from these discussions included:

Warren County Opportunities/Strengths

- 1) Close to markets
- 2) Potential for alternative markets (agri-tourism, direct marketing, value-added)
- 3) Concentration of farms means possibility for organized buying/sales
- 4) Good place to live / rural lifestyle
- 5) Community support for ag
- 6) Land, water available
- 7) Lack of urban pressure

Farm Survival/Economic Viability Concerns

- 1) Few local suppliers to meet farm needs (type, quantity, proximity)
- 2) Few local markets / distance to markets eats into profit
- 3) Local regulation of ag
- 4) Productive land unavailable for farming
- 5) Tax structure
- 6) Farm credit/loans
- 7) High costs of production
- 8) Low commodity prices
- 9) Aging farmers; youth not interested
- 10) Lack of farm labor
- 11) Short growing season
- 12) Small, distant fields
- 13) Roads

Community Environment Concerns

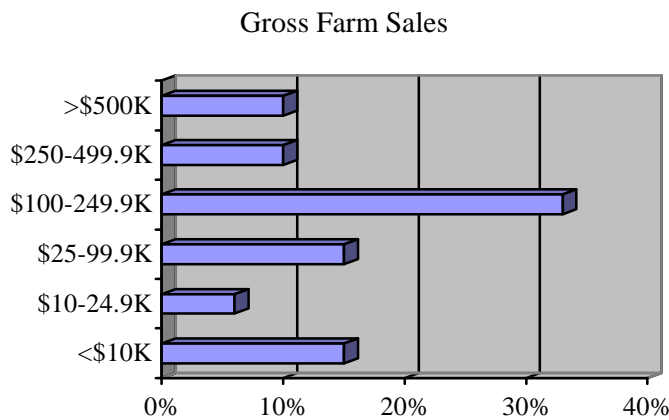
- 1) Lack of ag voice in community decision-making
- 2) Local elected officials not knowledgeable about ag
- 3) Neighbors don't respect farmers
- 4) Consumers don't support/understand local food system
- 5) Few opportunities for farmers to interact, network, share
- 6) Need to promote local farm products
- 7) No agricultural education in schools

Summary Of Farmer Survey Results

As noted above, 44 citizen volunteers, working in 22 teams, each visited 3 or 4 farmers. These volunteers successfully interviewed 73 of the 85 Warren County farmers they attempted to contact. Farmers selected for interviews were randomly chosen from a list of all farmers in the county to talk about their concerns, identify their needs, and get their insights about what could and should be done to help agriculture prosper in the future. The unsuccessful interviews included nine people who refused to participate in the survey and three who were out of state during the interview period (and are thus considered refusals). The effective response rate was 85.9 percent (73 completed / 85 possible). Highlights of the survey’s findings are outlined here.

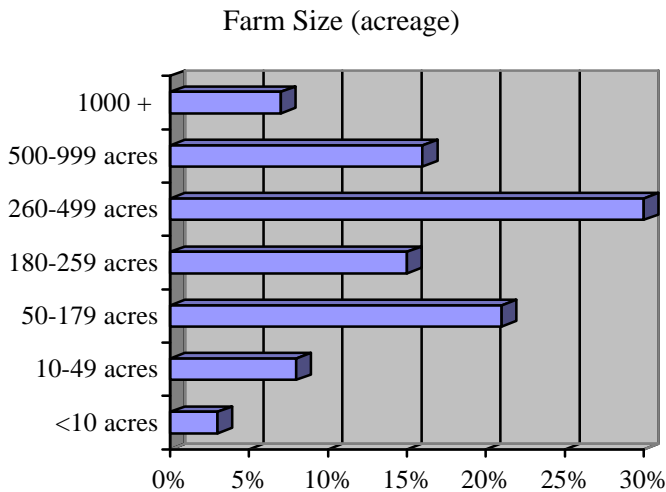
Farm, Income, and Product Characteristics

As you can see in the chart below, one-third of the farmers interviewed had total annual gross farm sales of between \$100,000 and \$249,000 with the remaining farmers evenly split above and below this central range.



In addition, and consistent with what we know from agricultural statistics, dairy products are by far the most important source of farm revenue for a majority of farmers in the county. Indeed almost two-thirds of the county’s farmers (60%) derived most of their income from dairy sales with beef (8%) and fruits and vegetables (4%) were a distant second and third. Less than 3% of other farmers reported receiving major sources of revenue from such things as swine, forestry, hay,

poultry, animal corn, and goats and milk. Taken together, 59.7% of total farm income comes from dairy, 22.3% from beef and other livestock, 13.9% from all other crops including fruits and vegetables, and 4.2% from silviculture.



Further substantiating dairy’s importance to the county’s agricultural income, data from the survey indicates the majority of farmers (51%) in the \$100,000 - \$249,999 range are dairy farmers and that dairy farmers were much more likely than other farmers to receive a majority or all of their family’s income from the farm.

Other findings from the survey include 86% of farms being family or individually owned (not as a partnership or corporation), with the vast majority of farms having been in the family longer than twenty five years (75%). The average age of farmers surveyed was 52

years of age.

When we look at farm size (total acres owned and rented) we see that more than two-thirds of farms have at least 180 acres or more. Of these, 54% expect to neither expand nor reduce their acreage in the next five years. Of the dairy producers that expect to change the size of their operations, 70% expect to grow while 30% plan to reduce their acreage. (Of the fruit and vegetable producers 83% had no plans to change the size of their operations). More than 54% of dairy producers, however, noted that if they had the chance to purchase more farmland they would. Only 23% of farmers surveyed noted that they had any difficulty finding land to rent. There were no major differences among commodities with respect to have difficulty finding land to rent.

Farm Supplies, Labor, and Marketing

The survey asked a wide array of questions regarding issues that farmers felt important to the economic viability of their operations.

Farm labor appears to be an important challenge for many of the farmers in the community. Slightly less than half (43%) indicated that they had difficulty finding qualified employees. In most cases farmers had the greatest trouble finding skilled labor and equipment operators.

Farm supplies also appears to be somewhat challenging for many farmers in the county. Thirty-one percent of the county's farmers reported having problems purchasing supplies and services. Only regarding the purchase of feeds (53%) and banking services (72%) do farmers get the majority of goods or services from within Warren County. Of the farmers surveyed, only 3% buy their farm machinery, 15% their livestock, 15% their chemicals, and 17% their veterinary services within the county.

Marketing of crops and produce also appears to be a problem for some farmers. Slightly more than one in every four farmers (28%) note that they lack access for their products and, of these farmers, 37% report that this lack of access affects their farm decisions. In addition, 40% feel that lack of competition among buyers for their products causes them to receive a lower price.

More than 74% of the surveys respondents, however, have access to the internet. Although less than 3% of farmers sell products on-line, one in four (25%) buys farm supplies on-line.

The Future

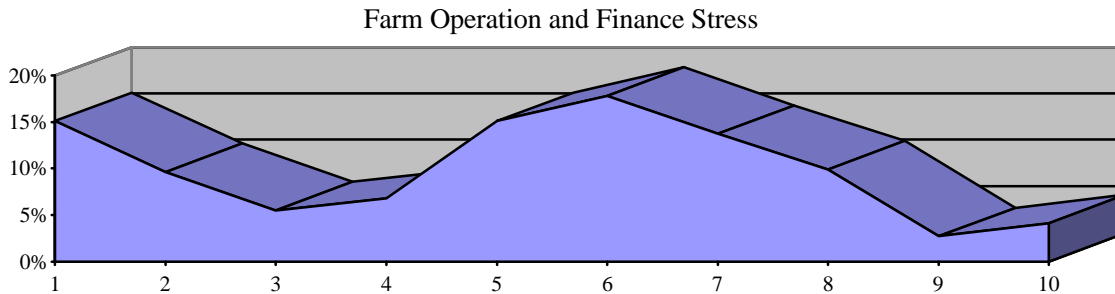
Future Farming Plans. When farmers are asked to look ahead to the future, most, but certainly not all, expect to still be farming 11 or more years from now. However, more than one in five farmers (23%) intend to stop farming within the next 10 years. Age and retirement were the reasons most often given for why. Of those that plan to stop farming, 44% plan to transfer the farm to a relative while 25% plan on selling to a non-family member who wants the farm. Only 13% thought they would sell some or all of the land for non-agricultural purposes. In terms of the product mix of their operations, 54% of farmers who are planning on continuing farming noted that they planned to diversify their farming operations in the next five years.

Threats to Farming. The survey also asked farmers about a wide array of farming related issues that affect their operation now and into the future. Of the many issues raised, farmers considered (in order of greatest threat) increased cost of health care (82%); rising real property taxes (82%); mergers among ag processing companies (70%); mergers among agricultural supply companies (68%); increased concern over the environment (67%); zoning that is too restrictive (61%); and local legal restrictions on farming (61%) to be either a 'great threat' or a 'threat' to farming in the county. Consistent with this, farmers noted in a separate question that rising real property taxes,

increased cost of health care, and increased concern over the environment were considered the most problematic for their operations.

Alternative Farming Options. In response to a wide array of alternative marketing or production options farmers noted the greatest interest in learning more about (in order of greatest interest): purchasing cooperatives (32%), organic production (30%), alternative livestock production methods (27%), managing or selling timber (27%), direct marketing (23%), value-added cooperatives (19%), marketing cooperatives (19%), and sharing equipment or facilities (18%).

Stress of Farming. As the chart below highlights, farmers in the county differ considerably with respect to their levels of stress related to farm operation or finances. It's important to recognize,

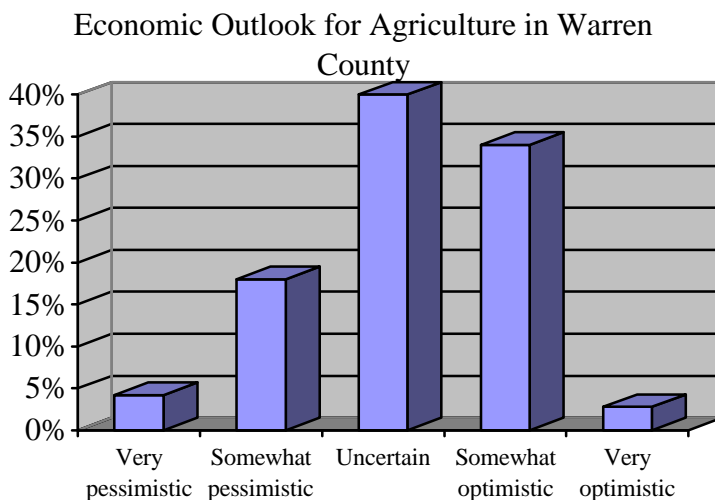


that on a scale of 1 to 10 ('1' being 'no stress' at all and '10' representing 'unbearable stress') when taken together, almost half (48%) of all farmers in the county indicated that they were a '6' or higher.

Warren County Agriculture

Finally, the survey asked farmers about a considerable number of issues specific to Warren County and how these issues may or may not affect the future of farming in the county.

Economic Outlook. The first of these looked at how optimistic farmers are with respect to the economic outlook for agriculture in Warren County. The chart presented here notes, perhaps not



surprisingly, that the majority of farmers in the county are somewhere in the middle – with a tendency toward being guardedly optimistic (38% either somewhat or very optimistic, compared to 22% either somewhat or very pessimistic). The remaining 40% placed themselves squarely in the middle of the continuum. When asked about specific advantages of farming in Warren County they noted the availability of affordable land, good climate/abundant rainfall,

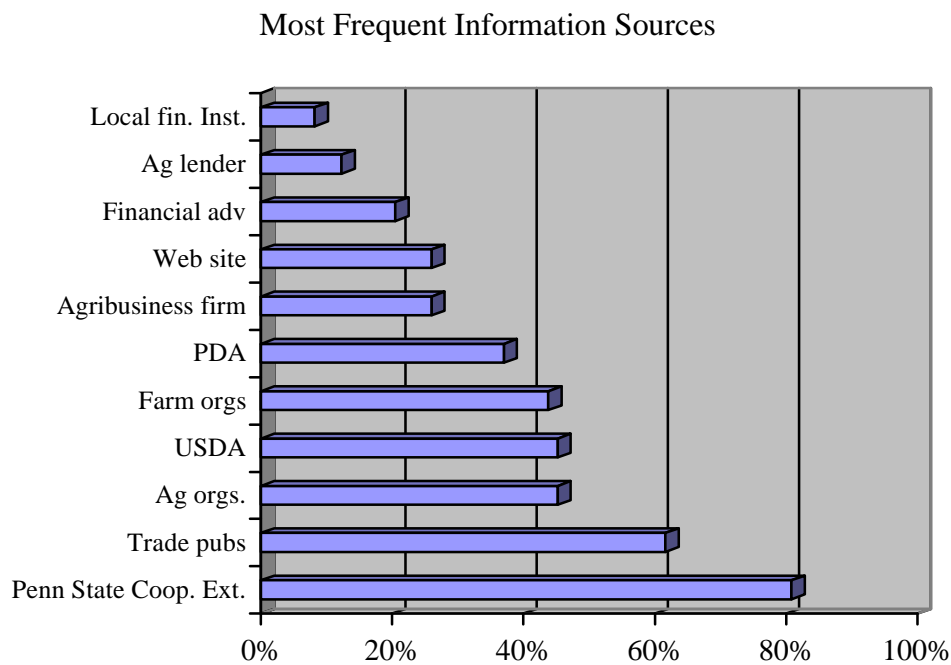
proximity to markets, reasonably low taxes and few restrictions on agriculture, relatively little development pressure, the rural heritage of the area and understanding of farmers, and good quality of life. Disadvantages they noted included lack of, and distance to markets, poor highway system,

limited soil capacity, lack of prime farmland, lack of agricultural curriculum in the schools, limited suppliers, poor business climate, limited population, poor land use regulations, and local government politics.

Business factors that affect their operations also were issues farmers we asked to assess. Those factors thought to be ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ in the county included availability of farmland (45%); availability of housing (43%); availability of markets (38%); and how others view agriculture (30%). Those that were rated ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’ include property taxes (45%); how others view agriculture (36%); availability of markets (33%); and availability of labor (31%). It seems clear that there is some disagreement among farmers regarding many of these factors.

Farm organizations and the services they provide were also factors farmers were asked to consider. Most farmers noted that agriculture gets its recognition in the county primarily through the newspaper, local farm organizations (with the Farm Bureau, Cooperative Extension, the County Fair, and the 4-H program noted most frequently) and the radio.

When farmers were asked what farm organizations they belong to the Farm Bureau (49%); Holstein Association (14%); Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (8%); Dairy Herd Improvement (8%) and 4-H (4%) were cited most frequently. Farmers were also asked to consider what more they would like these organizations to do to support them. Responses to this question included nothing, they are already doing everything they can, help get higher prices, develop markets and help advertise, and help educate consumers.



Regarding the sources of information farmers rely on most for farm management decisions, Penn State Cooperative Extension and trade publications were the most frequently cited.

County government was another topic respondents were asked to address. Things that they thought the county should be doing to support agriculture include (in no particular order):

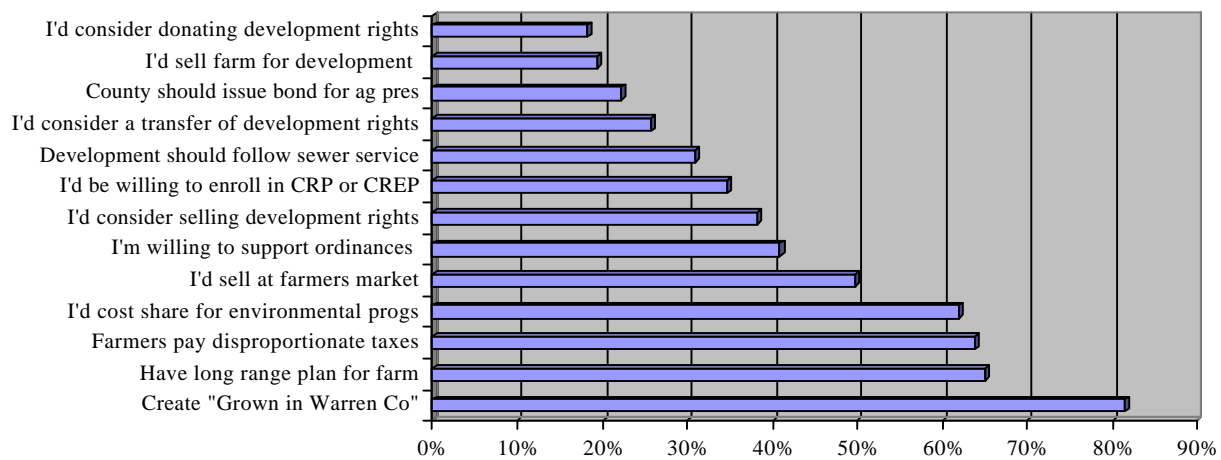
keeping taxes low and fair, helping educate consumers, helping to preserve farmland, encouraging farmer participation in the community, strengthening the business climate for agriculture, increasing support for agricultural related agencies and organizations, and keeping out of agriculture’s way.

When the same question was asked about township government, responses included: keeping taxes low, strengthening agricultural security areas, limiting restrictions that affect agriculture, and improving local roads.

General issues that need to be addressed to enhance agriculture in the county was another topic addressed. Consistent with a number of areas already addressed in the survey and during the Let’s Talk Sessions, community education, support for farmers (services and education), keeping taxes low, and enhancing the business climate for agriculture were mentioned with considerable frequency.

Agricultural programs and plans. Respondents were also asked to note to what degree they agreed with a wide range of statements. The table below highlights (in descending order) those with which farmers ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ most often.

Agricultural Programs and Options



Conclusions

Taken together, the picture of Warren County agriculture that emerges from the data and discussions presented here is one of both deeply-embedded strengths and long-term challenges, but not without considerable opportunity. Taking full advantage of these opportunities will require the involvement and active participation of many in the county – local government officials, farmers, consumers, farm related organizations and agencies, and both the farm and non-farm business community. The report presented here begins to lay out the rationale for, and steps towards, the realization of these goals.

Accomplishments and Directions

Phyllis Wright, Extension Educator and Project Coordinator

The success of this survey is due to the time, dedication, and knowledge of the task force members and volunteer interviewers. Over 500 volunteer hours were devoted to the interviewing process. Without the 44 volunteer interviewers, the collection of the quality and quantity of information could not have been achieved. Thanks also go to the 73 farmers who were interviewed and were willing to express opinions and give information about facts on their farm businesses. Thanks also goes to over 80 farmers and consumers who shared their perspectives regarding the Future of Agriculture in Warren County during the three community "Let's Talk Sessions." The leadership of key leaders is to be recognized as they conducted the focus sessions and lead committees.

For this community project study to be effective in the long run, individuals and organizations will need to continue to take the leadership, provide their input, and participate fully in the implementation of the Action Plan. More individuals and groups interested in agri businesses are needed to help solve immediate concerns, and use the information in making decisions to sustain our future farm families' income, and the countywide economic growth.

When farmers were asked - "will you continue to farm?" - the common reply was "yes, because of the quality of life that farming provides my family and Warren County." Our role in Cooperative Extension is to support the FWCA volunteers and this study to provide the education and information necessary to farmers, agribusinesses, and citizens that will continue the improvement of individual family farms and their quality of life as well as expand our county's future economy.

Thank you to Rose Wolfe and Joanne Sharp, Cooperative Extension Administrative Assistants for the survey data entry. The contributions of Dr. Kathy Brasier and Walt Whitmer from Penn State Cooperative Extension and the Dept. of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology has also made the success of this project possible. Their knowledge, resources, and research experience are appreciated.

Thank you to the Warren County Commissioners John Bortz Jr. (Chair), David Bauer Esq., and John Eggleston for their support of this county economic development project.

2004-05 Future of Agriculture in Warren County Task Force

*indicates key leader

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