

**COUNTYWIDE FARMLAND PROTECTION PLAN
FOR
IREDELL COUNTY,
NORTH CAROLINA**



Adopted by the
Board of County Commissioners,
Iredell County
October 7, 2008

**ARTICLE I:
STATEMENT OF NEED FOR ACTION**

Agriculture makes a major contribution to the well being of Iredell County residents, both those living within, and outside the county's cities and towns. In addition to direct contributions to the local economy in the form of product sale receipts and expenditures on farm services and inputs, along with employment on farms and farm support businesses, farmers also make significant contributions as stewards of the remaining amounts of undeveloped land (often called "open-space") in the county. Their stewardship protects the county's soil and water resources, recharges groundwater and abates storm water runoff, connects wildlife habitat, and safeguards the scenic and historic vistas that have defined our county's character. For these reasons, it is in the county's interest to promote the local agricultural industry and protect farmland. Enabling farmers who want to continue to farm is a cost effective way of maintaining the quality of life of everyone in Iredell County.

As demonstrated by data supplied below, Iredell County is losing farmland. Farming faces a unique set of stresses, some of which Iredell County with thoughtful action can help to mitigate. To better understand these stresses, and the steps the county can take to reduce them, it is helpful to first understand the history, geography (including the soil resource), economic trends, and regulations governing farming. It is also important to understand the values and concerns of the farmers themselves.

**ARTICLE II:
AUTHORITY FOR COUNTY ACTION**

In 1986, the North Carolina General Assembly passed the North Carolina Farmland Preservation Enabling Act. The stated purpose of this Act is "to authorize counties to undertake a series of programs to encourage the preservation of farmland as defined herein." In addition to enabling counties to create Voluntary Agricultural District ordinances, which Iredell County adopted in June 2001, the Act also created the North Carolina Farmland Preservation Fund and enabled counties to develop purchase of agricultural conservation easements (PACE) programs. By later amendment, the General Assembly created a matching mechanism for distribution of Farmland Preservation Trust Fund monies, with preference to counties adopting a countywide farmland protection plan. The Act declares that a countywide farmland protection plan shall:

1. Contain a list and description of existing agricultural activity in the county.
2. Contain a list of existing challenges to continued family farming in the county.
3. Contain a list of opportunities for maintaining or enhancing small, family-owned farms and the local agricultural economy.
4. Describe how the county plans to maintain a viable agricultural community and shall address farmland preservation tools, such as agricultural economic development, including farm diversification and marketing assistance; other kinds of agricultural technical assistance, such as farm infrastructure financing, farmland purchasing, linking with younger farmers, and estate planning; the desirability and

feasibility of donating agricultural conservation easements, and entering into voluntary agricultural districts.

5. Contain a schedule for implementing the plan and an identification of possible funding sources for the long-term support of the plan.

The statute suggests that such a countywide farmland protection plan may be formulated with the assistance of a Farmland Preservation Advisory Board, which Iredell County appointed as part of its Voluntary Farmland Preservation Ordinance. That board, known as the Iredell County Farmland Preservation Advisory Board, will take the lead role in administering this plan and reporting to the Board of County Commissioners on its progress.

ARTICLE III: OVERVIEW OF IREDELL COUNTY AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITY

A. Agricultural Production

Iredell County's family farms produce a diverse array of agricultural products. These products include but are not limited to dairy, beef cattle, hatching eggs, corn silage, small grain, nursery crops, etc.

B. Economic Impact of Agricultural Production

Agriculture is ranked as Iredell County's number one industry, accounting for \$145,597,000 Total Market Value of Production according to the 2002 USDA Census of Agriculture. This illustrates agriculture's importance to the local economy. Agriculture is much more than farming in that a substantial number of non-agricultural businesses supply the needs of farmers. These include processors, vehicle and equipment dealers and other enterprises. For these businesses to survive and prosper, a core critical mass of farmers must be preserved and vice-versa. Though difficult to measure, these many businesses supporting agriculture undoubtedly account for a significant portion of Iredell County's employment base.

C. Family Farm Statistics

Family farms make up the majority of agricultural production in the county. According to the 1997 USDA Census of Agriculture, Iredell County's agriculture industry consists of predominately family owned businesses with 90.2 % of farms owned by individuals or families. In 1997, there were 1387 farms in Iredell County. Since that time the number of farms has decreased to 1262 farms in 2002. In that same time period, the average farm size has remained the same at 116 acres. In 2002, 56.7 % of Iredell County farms were 50 acres or more in size. In 2002, 57.1% of Iredell County farmers considered farming to be their principal occupation.

D. Farm Land Use Trends

According to the 2002 Census of Agriculture, Iredell County had 146,556 acres in farms, representing 38.6 % of the total county land base. These lands included

55,846 acres of harvested cropland. In the 1997 Census, the county had 156,748 acres in farms, a decrease of 10,192 acres over the five year period between surveys.

E. Agricultural Soils

Soils in Iredell County are loamy, a mixture of sand and clay which varies in its proportions from one section of the county to another depending on the indigenous mineral structure. To be agriculturally productive, the Iredell soil must be chemically supplemented. The county is however, naturally well drained and watered by the venation of its numerous creeks.

**ARTICLE IV:
CHALLENGES TO AGRICULTURE
IN IREDELL COUNTY**

While the agricultural industry remains an important part of Iredell County's economy, both farmers and farmland owners believe that there are numerous challenges they must face. To help address the challenges facing agriculture, some Iredell County farmers and farmland owners are participating in a variety of local and state programs. Following are some of the specific challenges faced in the farming community.

A. Falling Prices, Escalating Input Cost and Low Profitability.

Low commodity prices, coupled with rising costs of production, have resulted in low profitability and inadequate farm income for farmers across North Carolina. This affects the farmer's cash flow, receivables, return on investment, and incentive and ability to invest in continued operations, thus making the farmer's hold on his or her business untenable. Iredell County farmers have identified low prices as well as the high costs of taxes, labor, regulatory compliance requirements and utility expenses as factors affecting their bottom line.

B. Aging Farm Operators.

In North Carolina, the average age of a farm operator is 55.¹ In Iredell County, the average age of a farm operator is 57. The number of Iredell County farmers older than age 65 is 5 times greater than the number of farmers under 35. This indicates that a large transition will take place over the next 20 years, and with fewer younger farmers available to take over production on these farms, many may fall out of production and be divided up and sold through estate settlement processes. Additionally, generations of farming expertise may be lost, an invaluable asset to the local agricultural economy.

C. Rising Property Values and Taxes.

As suburban development increases in rural areas, land prices invariably increase, which has been the case in Iredell County. Increasing land prices restrict a farmer's ability to purchase more land on which to operate, thus restricting his or her

flexibility to change their agricultural operation or otherwise produce more to increase their income.

D. Conflicts with Non-farmer Neighbors.

Iredell County farmers have indicated that conflicts with non-farming neighbors are increasing. As residential development moves to the farm's edge, new neighbors find themselves faced with the realities of agricultural production processes: dust, livestock smells, noise from machinery, slow moving farm equipment on roadways. Complaints create a hostile operating environment, can end up in costly litigation, and at worst, can result in curtailing a farmer's ability to operate his or her farm.

E. Loss of Local Farm Services.

As noted above, a large amount of Iredell County businesses support agriculture enterprises, and in turn count on agriculture as a large portion of their service base. As farms cease to operate, local businesses depending on that revenue close or relocate further away from agricultural production areas. With the loss of these support businesses, farmers incur rising costs due to delays in their own production due to the lack of an urgently needed service (such as tractor repair) that only a nearby business can provide in the critical amount of time, or they may have to travel further for needed services adding time and travel expenses to their operation. Additionally, farming is a unique business, and the loss of support businesses, particularly in the financial sector, means a drain from the county of service providers who understand the unique needs of agricultural producers.

F. Fractured Infrastructure from Poorly-planned Residential Development.

Time is a very important asset in agricultural production. The ability to achieve certain goals within certain windows of weather and season are critical to successful farming. Often these schedules are based on the farmer's reliance of corridors of transportation between fields, services and markets. As poorly-planned development encroaches into farming areas, these corridors between fields or other necessary destinations can be disrupted, increasing farmers travel time and operating costs. Also, increased traffic in these corridors imposes similar costs.

**ARTICLE V:
OPPORTUNITIES FOR
ENHANCING AGRICULTURE/HORTICULTURE IN
IREDELL COUNTY**

A. Guiding Principles behind this Plan

1. Integrate economic development with farmland protection. Keeping farms viable is as important as protecting the resource base essential for farming and it is more cost efficient.
2. Target agricultural and farmland protection initiatives toward blocks of viable farmland.
3. Educate consumers and elected officials on the relationship between a healthy local agricultural economy and the public benefits working farmland provide.

4. Give farmers incentives to protect farmland in giving them a fair return for the benefits their stewardship of the land provides the non-farming public.
5. Examine the long-term cost effectiveness of incentive programs that compensate farmers for not developing their land. By combining tax, spending and regulatory programs, local communities can strongly support agriculture and meet budgetary needs.
6. Develop land use policies and zoning ordinances that work for agriculture. Conventional “large-lot” zoning is ineffective because it accelerates residential development and converts agricultural areas into lots that are too small to farm.
7. Encourage inter-municipal cooperation. Since farming spans town and county borders, farmland protection requires cooperation between towns and among levels of government. Efforts to promote development in one town can derail farmland protection efforts in bordering towns.
8. Develop a coalition of interests to support agricultural and farmland protection efforts. Reach out to non-farmers by organizing farmers’ markets, farm events and workshops. Unite the farmland protection interests of farm and non-farm community members by protecting farmland that provides scenic views, includes important water resources, or preserves historic landscapes.
9. Promote thoughtful land use planning to prevent conflicts between farmers and neighbors. Manage residential growth in farming communities; buffer farms from neighboring large-scale residential developments.

B. Existing Efforts and Agricultural Protection Tools

1. County Comprehensive Land Use Plan

The 1997 Iredell County Land Use Plan makes no reference to agricultural lands in Iredell County. Starting in 2008 Iredell County has contracted with Clarion and Associates to do a new County Wide Land Use Plan. Agriculture will play an important role in developing this new plan.

2. County Voluntary Agricultural District Program.

On June 19, 2001 Iredell County passed a VAD ordinance. Also pursuant to the ordinance, a Farmland Preservation Advisory Board was appointed by the Board of County Commissioners to represent agricultural interests in the county. While the VAD ordinance encourages investment in agriculture, it does not represent a permanent land protection measure as districts rely heavily on voluntary enrollment and allow for withdrawal.

On December 4, 2007 Iredell County adopted in addition to the VAD an Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District Program. This program is based on a 10 year irrevocable agreement with the county to forego developing their land for a period of ten years. The trade off on this program is that the farmer is eligible to receive higher percentage of cost share money, is able to sell up to 25% non-farm products and still be exempt from zoning, and state department, agencies and institutions that award grants are encouraged to give priority consideration to these farms.

3. *Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements (PACE) Program.*

On April 5, 2005 Iredell County made a resolution adopting a Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program that was created with the help of the Iredell County Farmland Preservation Board. The Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program is to preserve large tracts of land for the protection of agriculture and open space. Additionally, the program seeks to safeguard lands in watershed districts and environmentally sensitive areas. For the purpose of agricultural purchase of development rights, the program strives to conserve and protect agricultural lands, maintain sustainable agriculture operations and promote the agricultural heritage and culture of Iredell County. The program is completely voluntary and builds upon the efforts already established in the County through the Voluntary Farmland Preservation Districts.
4. *State Conservation Funding Tools*
 - a. Farmland Preservation Trust Fund. The North Carolina FPTF is created by statute “for the purchase of agricultural conservation easements” in transactions with both governmental and private non-profit organizations.² These monies, when available, can be matched with certain federal funds described below. The FPTF is administered by the Department of Agriculture or its designee.
 - b. Clean Water Management Trust Fund. The North Carolina CWMTF is a voluntary, incentive-based water quality program to help local governments, state agencies and conservation non-profit groups finance projects to protect and restore surface water quality. Farm and forest land owners are eligible to receive trust fund monies for sale of the development rights to their land under certain guidelines and qualifications. These funds can be combined with certain federal conservation funds listed below.³
 - c. Division of Soil and Water Conservation Agricultural Cost-Share. This program is administered by the Division of Soil and Water Conservation in the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. It is delivered at the local level by 492 elected and appointed volunteer District Supervisors who are assisted by a cadre of experts. Participating farmers receive 75% of predetermined average costs of installed best management practices (BMPs) with the remaining 25% paid by farmers directly or through in-kind contributions. Some applicants may be eligible to receive as much as \$75,000 per year. Also the program provides local Districts with matching funds (50:50) to hire personnel to plan and install the needed BMPs, including Riparian Buffers, Strip cropping, and Grassed Waterways⁴.
 - d. Natural Heritage Trust Fund. Like the FPTF and CWMTF, this fund may be available to purchase development rights on properties with outstanding natural or cultural values.⁵
 - e. North Carolina Conservation Tax Credit. North Carolina law allows a credit against individual and corporate income taxes when real property is donated for conservation purposes. Interests in property that promote

specific public benefits may be donated to a qualified recipient. Such conservation donations qualify for a substantial tax credit.⁶

5. *Federal Conservation Funding Tools*

Below are some of the voluntary federal programs that are part of The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (commonly known as the 2002 Farm Bill) and administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Services Agency (FSA) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). They are designed to compensate farmland owners for the conservation value of their land. Like local PACE programs, they have the dual effect of safeguarding the environmental benefits of farmland as open space while injecting dollars into the local economy via the farmland owner.⁷

- a. Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP). The Farm and Ranchland Protection Program provides federal funds to help purchase development rights, keeping productive farmland in agricultural use while compensating the farmland owner for the conservation value of his or her land. The FRPP program matches state and local PACE programs up to 50% of the easement purchase price, working through state, tribal and local governments and land trusts.
- b. Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The Conservation Reserve Program reduces soil erosion, protects the nation's ability to produce food and fiber, reduces sedimentation in streams and lakes, improves water quality, establishes wildlife habitat, and enhances forest and wetland resources. It encourages farmers to convert highly erodible cropland or other environmentally sensitive acreage to vegetative cover, such as tame or native grasses, wildlife plantings, trees, filter strips, or riparian buffers. Farmers receive an annual rental payment for the term of the multi-year contract.
- c. Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). (where available) CREP is a voluntary program that seeks to protect land along watercourses that is currently in agricultural production. The objectives of the program include: installing 100,000 acres of forested riparian buffers, grassed filter strips and wetlands; reducing the impacts of sediment and nutrients within the targeted area; and providing substantial ecological benefits for many wildlife species that are declining in part as a result of habitat loss. Under CREP, landowners can voluntarily enroll eligible land in 10-year, 15-year, 30-year, and permanent contracts. The state will pay additional bonuses to landowners that enroll land in 30-year and permanent agreements. Cost sharing will be available for installation of forested riparian buffers, grassed filter strips, wetlands restoration practices, water control structures, livestock exclusion, and remote livestock watering in order to increase the efficiency of enrolled practices. Currently available in the Neuse, Tar-Pamlico and Chowan river basins and the Jordan Lake watersheds.⁸
- d. Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). The Wetlands Reserve Program offers landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance

wetlands on their property. The NRCS provides technical and financial support to help landowners with their wetland restoration efforts. The NRCS goal is to achieve the greatest wetland functions and values, along with optimum wildlife habitat, on every acre enrolled in the program. The WRP offers landowners three options: permanent easements, 30-year easements, and restoration cost-share agreements of minimum 10-year duration.

- e. Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). This program provides a source of funding for nutrient management systems. The program offers technical, financial, and educational assistance in designated priority areas to install or implement structural, vegetative, and management practices called for in five to ten year contracts for most agricultural land uses.
- f. Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP). This program encourages creation of high quality wildlife habitats that support wildlife populations of national, state, tribal and local significance by providing technical and financial assistance to landowners and others to develop upland, wetland, riparian, and aquatic habitat areas on their property.

6. *State Right-to-Farm Law*

By statute, North Carolina farmers are granted the right to farm without legal interference from non-farm neighbors and local governing bodies, subject to certain limitations. Pre-litigation mediation of farm nuisance claims is mandatory.⁹

7. *Present Use Value Property Tax*

Working farm, forest and horticultural lands by state statute are afforded a property tax assessment based on their agricultural working value, as opposed to the value of their land for industrial or residential development. A working farm must earn \$1000 in gross sales annually to qualify for this differential assessment. This assessment affords farmers some amount of cost control that would otherwise limit their ability to farm profitably.

**ARTICLE VI.
IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS PLAN
TO ENSURE A VIABLE AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY
IN IREDELL COUNTY**

Enhancing the Local Agricultural Economy

Implementation of this plan should begin with the new County Wide Comprehensive Plan. Agriculture is an integral part of the counties well being and should be thoroughly addressed in this new comprehensive plan. Some of the following items should be included in the comprehensive plan to help preserve and enhance agriculture in Iredell

County. The Farmland Preservation Advisory Board along with County staff will need to work jointly on the remaining items to insure this plans effectiveness.

A. Strengthen Farm Viability and the Agricultural Economy

1. Economic Development

The Farmland Preservation Advisory Board along with county staff and the local chamber of commerce and the local development corporations will need to do the following.

- a. Determine priorities and develop strategies for achieving benchmarks for economic development efforts
- b. Identify and seek additional funds for economic and business development for county initiatives and individual producers through grant writing
- c. Communicating and meeting on a regular basis with stakeholders in agricultural economic development process
- d. Developing marketing initiatives for local agriculture

2. Expand Business Development Assistance to Farm Businesses. To meet the challenges outlined above farmers need more access to business development assistance, particularly as traditional agricultural markets fade and alternative enterprises are needed. This assistance includes business development and planning, market research and communication, and financing opportunity. Efforts to increase assistance include:

- a. Working with North Carolina Cooperative Extension to disseminate published materials on agricultural business issues to area professionals to expand their knowledge of agriculture thus increasing their ability to assist farmers.
- b. Offer workshops to farmers on business planning and development, research, marketing, financing, conservation funding, and estate planning.
- c. Provide grant-writing assistance for federal, state and other non-profit funding opportunities to assist with diversification, etc.

3. Expand Efforts to Promote Iredell County Farm Businesses and Farm Products.

The development pressures on agriculture outlined in Article IV above also provide opportunities for county farmers and agribusinesses in the form of new consumers. Every effort should be made to educate them on the association between a healthy local agricultural economy and the life-style many have sought to achieve by locating to our county. These efforts could include:

- a. Creation of a website and other print publications to identify locally grown products. This website can also be used by farmers to identify purchasing opportunities and renting of land;
- b. Work with the organizers of the local farmers markets and assist with their marketing effort where possible;
- c. Work with local retail stores and restaurants to purchase and promote products grown locally in the county;
- d. Work with local institutions such as schools and state offices to purchase food grown locally;
- e. Expand cooperative efforts with neighboring counties to create a regional identity that includes promotion of agriculture; and

- f. Sponsorship of festivals, farm tours and other public recognition
- 4. *Improve the Marketing Capacity of Farmers:* Traditionally, farmers have relied on off-farm distributors to handle marketing and price negotiation for their products. Increasingly, farmers will recognize the value of direct marketing their products to county residents as they diversify and specialize their production. In addition to the steps outlined above, this item could include
 - a. Formation of new generation farm cooperatives for marketing purposes, financing of new ventures and purchasing of raw materials, such as fuel and electricity, or formation of less formal bargaining groups to jointly purchase farm supplies, cooperatively advertise farm products, provide better outlets for cull-dairy cows and facilitate use of custom service.
 - b. Develop marketing workshops with input from farmers from other counties who have successfully diversified and direct-marketed their production.

B. Support Farm Operations and the Right-to-Farm

- 1. *Encourage the County and Towns to Meet the Infrastructure Needs of the Farm Sector*
 - a. Adopt Sensible Zoning and Subdivision regulations. Zoning regulations must be written to allow farm businesses the flexibility to adapt their operations to new markets or otherwise expand existing operations. For example, some zoning laws may restrict “farm stands,” road-side on-farm retail establishments. Careful consideration should be taken in drafting restrictions on farm stands to allow farmers to better market their on-farm products.
 - b. Address other infrastructure needs including working with state Department of Transportation on road maintenance priorities and needed signage near farm operations.
- 2. *Support the Right-to-Farm:* County and town officials should become familiar with the state right to farm law and seek to improve neighbor relations and general understanding of commercial farm activities and needs to reduce nuisance suits and generate positive public support for local agriculture. Action items can include:
 - a. Ensuring notice requirements under the Voluntary Agricultural District ordinance are followed in the counties land records system as well as posted notice in the tax office, as well as maintaining road signage in agricultural production areas.
 - b. Creating a “neighbor relations” packet for distribution to new county residents by the Chamber of Commerce, Visitors Bureau, tax office, etc. This can also be made available to farmers wishing to further educate their neighbors on farming operations.
 - c. Provide real estate brokers and lawyers with Voluntary Agricultural District maps, the above “neighbor relations” packet, and printed disclosure notices of agricultural operations and encourage them to share these materials with their clients.

- d. Create an easy to understand brochure on the realities of living in agricultural areas and make available for distribution, and add such information to the county website.
 - e. Encourage respect for farm property.
 - f. Set up local arbitration referral program for farm-neighbor disputes. Pre-litigation mediation of farm nuisance suits is required in North Carolina.
 - g. Encourage municipalities to seek input from the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board when developing and revising local ordinances.
3. *Continue Support for Technical Assistance to Farm Operations.* County staff and the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board should undertake to be aware of the various service offered to farmers by Cooperative Extension, Soil & Water, NRCS and FSA, and should have available information on these services with contact information available to new and existing county farmers.

C. Protect Farmland as a Valuable Natural Resource

1. *Encourage Local Land Use Policies that Support Agriculture and Protect Farmland.* How a county plans for growth will greatly impact the viability of its agricultural economy. The county should, through its land use planning (or review of its Comprehensive Land Use Plan) develop policies which take into consideration agricultural production and development. The planning board should include input from the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board in the planning process. Such policies and actions can include:
- a. Incorporate elements of this plan in the Comprehensive Plan.
 - b. Offer officials and landowners training in planning techniques and infrastructure planning to encourage agriculture.
 - c. Develop model zoning and subdivision ordinances or principles and distribute to towns for use in their local planning.
 - d. Tailor zoning ordinances and subdivision regulations to guide growth away from farming areas and buffer farms from neighboring land uses.
 - e. Require buffers between residences and farm fields and buildings as part of new residential subdivisions
 - f. Implement development guidelines that include soil classifications as criteria for prioritizing agricultural land
2. *Promote Tax Relief Incentives:* The County should undertake to ensure that county tax assessors have knowledge of the state's Present Use Value statute with continuous training as necessary, and should undertake to educate farmland owners on the program, and how to apply and comply with present use valuation of farmland.
3. *Provide Technical Assistance on other Farmland Protection Initiatives and Conservation Options.* The county staff, with the support of the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board, should develop educational programs for county farmland owners. The programs, in cooperation with local Cooperative Extension, NRCS, FSA, Soil & Water Conservation District staff, as well as area conservation groups such as land trusts, watershed protection groups, and wildlife organizations, should make farmers aware of the various conservation funds

available for easement purchases, the tax benefits of donated easements, and basic principles of estate planning with conservation options.

4. *Educate the non-farming public on the environmental protection benefits of farmland protection and the detriments of its conversion.*

Develop a public education campaign to tie consumer support of local agriculture with open-space, clean water and air benefits, and enhanced wildlife habitat working farm and forestland provides. Include input from the local Cooperative Extension, Soil & Water Conservation District, Resource Conservation and Development district, and area land trust on specific farm-related conservation projects they have worked on. Tie the education campaign to specific initiatives under this plan to build public political support for protection tools such as funding for a PACE program.

D. Foster Greater Recognition and Public Support for Agriculture

1. *Foster Greater Appreciation for Agriculture Among Government Officials and Non-farm Residents through Education and Outreach Efforts*

- a. Continuing education of county and municipal officials and planning board members on farming issues and basics of agricultural law, as well as education on planning options that concentrate growth near existing centers and infrastructure. County officials should place a regular briefing by members of the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board on their meeting agendas.

- b. Continuing efforts to keep members of the agricultural community involved in local government and planning.

2. *Improve Communication and Networking within the Farm Community.* The county Farmland Preservation Advisory Board should continue to represent the farming community in matters before the county government and should foster communication among farmers and agribusinesses to help foster a sense of community in the agricultural sector. Actions could include:

- a. Hold a farmer symposium and/or appreciation dinner at which farmers have the opportunity to network with farmers from other commodity sectors and different areas of the county.

- b. Encourage farmers to use the county website established above.

- c. Develop a county-level farm transition program, which may include programs where older farmers transition skills to younger new farmers.

3. *Develop Stronger Connections Between Schools and Local Farms.* Schools offer an excellent opportunity to educate students and their parents about the importance of local farms.

- a. Encourage local farms and orchards to offer tours to school students, and make schools and teachers aware of available educational tours for students by distributing materials to area schools at the beginning of each school year.

- b. Coordinate with the North Carolina Farm Bureau's *Ag in the Classroom* program

- c. Encourage school administrators (or the county school board) to purchase local produce for county schools

Key Stakeholders and Their Roles in Implementing the Plan

1. *Town Governments:* Several issues affecting agriculture such as land use planning and zoning actions within a town's extra-territorial jurisdiction (ETJ), municipal service plans and local business promotion are best addressed at the municipal level.
2. *County Government:* By adopting the plan, the county Board of Commissioners has made agricultural protection official county policy. The county, through the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board, has committed to take the lead role in implementing this plan and drawing together the key players to coordinate its efforts and policies. The county Board of Commissioners bears the responsibility for approving any funding to help implement this plan.
3. *State Agencies:* Some key agencies providing assistance to agricultural producers in the county are North Carolina Cooperative Extension, North Carolina State University, and North Carolina A&T State University. The Soil & Water Conservation District provides technical support and cost-share funding to farmers for adopting certain conservation and water quality improvement practices. The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services provides data on Voluntary Agricultural Districts throughout the state, as well as marketing advice to agricultural producers.
4. *Federal Agencies:* USDA has a strong presence in Iredell County with its NRCS and FSA local offices. NRCS administers financial and technical assistance program for farmland protection and conservation initiatives, including grants for best management practices, habitat improvement and purchase of development rights. FSA lends money to operators and provides credit counseling and farm business consulting.
5. *Business and Industry:* Participation of local farm businesses in this plan is critical its implementation. Private industry, both farm supply and nonfarm businesses and the Chamber of Commerce play an important role in promoting the agricultural sector of the county's economy. These organizations should also help in developing new markets such as tourism that will benefit agricultural producers.
6. *Non-governmental Organizations:* Organizations such as land trusts, historic preservation groups, and groups dedicating to assisting agriculture provide necessary advocacy and other service necessary for implementation of this plan.
7. *Residents:* The success of this plan ultimately relies on the participation of county residents in the local agricultural market. The proximity of their purchases to the producers ensures that more of each dollar paid for an agricultural item will return to the farmer, thus increasing his or her profitability and increasing the likelihood that he or she will continue to farm their land. Residents of the county can also recognize the importance of working farms to the local economy and environment and heritage of Iredell County by supporting an effort to establish and subsequently support funding for a purchase of agricultural conservation easements program.

ARTICLE VII.
(Amended March 17, 2009)
SCHEDULE TO IMPLEMENT THIS PLAN
TO ENSURE A VIABLE AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY
IN IREDELL COUNTY

A. First Year Action Steps

1. First Quarter (starting in July '09)
 - a. Conduct meeting of Agricultural Advisory Board, Local Chamber of Commerce, Local Economic Development staff, and County staff to determine priorities and develop strategies for agriculture economic development.
 - b. Schedule and conduct stakeholder group meeting to discuss marketing of local products and other agriculture initiatives.

2. Second Quarter
 - a. Begin implementing prioritized elements and strategies of Agricultural Protection Plan
 - b. Schedule first county-wide meeting of farm and agribusiness operators and elected officials to discuss Agricultural Protection Plan initiatives.

3. Third Quarter
 - a. Develop written materials (eg. brochures, packets) called for under plan to inform area farmers, stakeholders, and citizens about information pertaining to farmland protection
 - b. Develop web-site involving these initiatives.

4. Fourth Quarter
 - a. Begin implementing workshop schedule.

¹ Census of Agriculture, North Carolina Table 11, "Tenure and Characteristics of Operator and Type of Organization: 1997 and 1992," p. 334.

² NCGS §106-744(c).

³ NCGS § 113-145.1 et seq. More information on the fund is available at www.cwmtf.net.

⁴ Other program summaries that assist farmers in controlling non-point source runoff are available at www.enr.state.nc.us/DSWC

⁵ NCGS §113-77.7

⁶ Consult NCGS §§105-130.34 and 105-151.12 for the specific requirements of the CTC Program. For more information see www.enr.state.nc.us/conservationtaxcredit.

⁷ For more program information and legislative authority, see www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmland/2002.

⁸ CREP is listed here under federal programs, although it is partially funded by Clean Water Management Funds and administered by North Carolina Division of Soil and Water Conservation.

⁹ NCGS §7A-38.3.