2015 Whidbey Island Farmer Survey Summary

Compiled by the Whidbey Island Conservation District

Introduction

A 59-question survey was distributed to the Whidbey Island Farming community in March of 2015. The survey was created with two goals in mind. The first was to assess the land management, production, and marketing needs of farmers on the island. The second was to utilize the final data to inform the 2016 Comprehensive Plan currently under development in order to better serve farmers in the future. The following is a short summary of the relevant information gleaned from the survey.

Results Statistics

- Emailed 82 People
- 10 E-Mail Delivery Failures
- 59.7% email response rate
- Mailed 17 People with No Responses
- 1 Person responded as a result of word of mouth
- 55 Total Responses
- 11 Incomplete Responses

Profile

The respondents of the survey represent a diverse set of farming experiences. Both beginning farmers and more experienced farmers answered the survey. The largest representative group has been farming 11-20 years (Figure 1). However, similar to the national average age of 58.3 years, the average age of the Whidbey Island principal operator is 53 years old. The majority of Island farmers (78.6%) are looking to turn a profit with their farm business while a smaller number (21.4%) are looking to break even. A few farms are managing the land for charitable purposes or using it as a farm school. Of the number of farmers running their farm as a business, 22.5% can support their cost of living without outside sources of income (Figure 2).

- 79.6% of respondents live on the land they own
- 82% of respondents are over the age of 50 years old.
- 13% of respondents are veterans of the armed forces

Top Four Challenges for Whidbey Island Farmers:

1. Farm Profitability
2. Equipment Maintenance
3. Storage and Packaging
4. Accessing Markets

Figure 1: Number of Years Respondents have Farmed

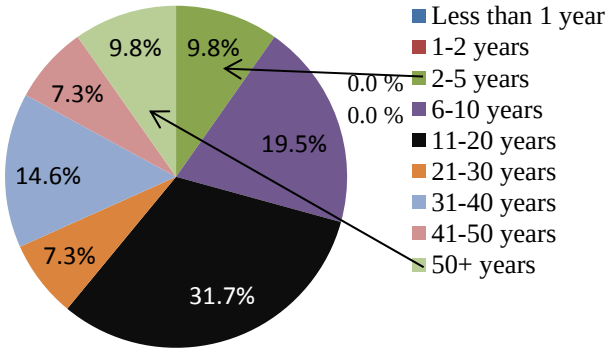
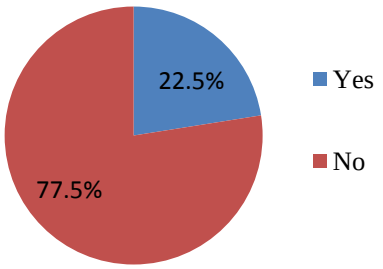


Figure 2: Percentage of Farms that can Support their Cost of Living



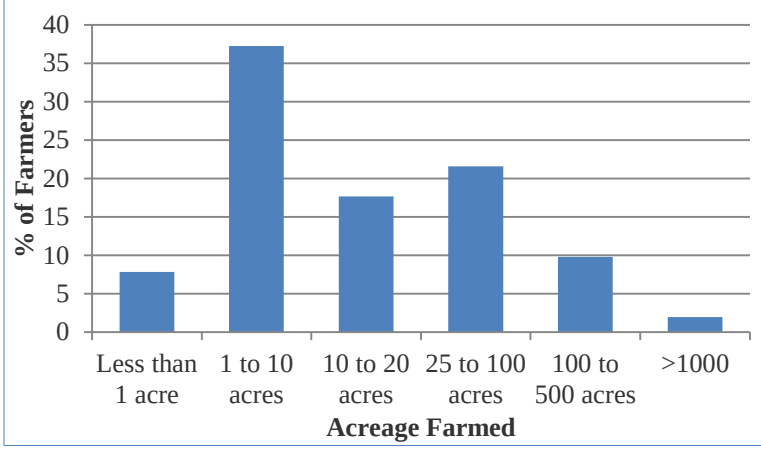
Education and Experience

Farmers that responded to the survey have been farming a minimum of 2-5 years (Figure 1). Additionally, 41% of respondents had completed multiple education trainings in some combination of internship, degree program, non-degree program, farm apprenticeships or incubator farm. When asked to rate their interest in attending a satellite degree program that may potentially be offered by Washington State University, 5% of farmers stated they would be interested.

Production

Whidbey Island farmers can generally be profiled as "small" farmers with 87.8% of respondents producing on less than 100 acres (Figure 3). Production practices fall under a variety of categories but the majority of farmers claim to use Organic production practices with 9.4% of respondents farming land that is Certified Organic. The next three most popular production methods are: Sustainable, all-natural, and then Conventional farming. Just over 30% of farmers identified with at least two production practices.

Figure 3: Total Acres Under Production



- The top livestock products for sale are eggs, beef, swine, and lamb. The Island is also producing poultry, fiber, honey, dairy, and goats.
- 52.6% of farmers engage in fruit and vegetable production with floriculture, hay, and nursery crops being the next most popular crop products.

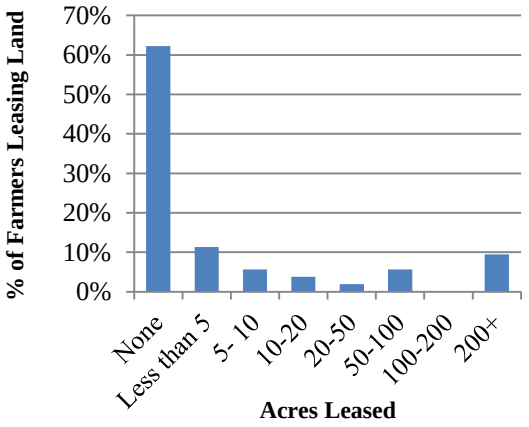
Product Distribution Challenges

Farmers identified the following as the most significant issues when trying to transport or distribute their products:

- Time constraints (88% of farmers)
- Transportation issues/costs
- Labor shortage
- Market shortage

As seen in Figure 4 most farmers do not lease any land at all, implying that most own their land.

Figure 4: Total Acres Leased



Mobile Processing Units

Table 1 displays the numbers of livestock being processed annually per farm as well as a total and an average for the entire island. Overall, cattle and chickens are processed in the highest numbers. Averages

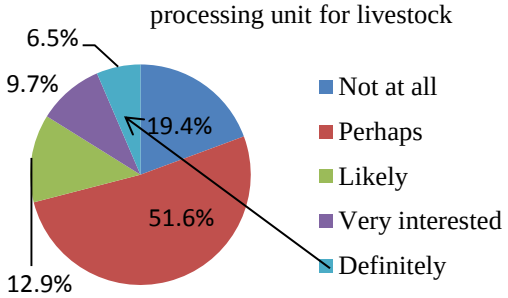
were calculated for smaller producers as a group and larger livestock producers as a group. Smaller livestock producers were defined as having less than 50 animals. Splitting up small and large producers revealed that smaller farms have more chickens than any other livestock whereas larger farms tend to raise cattle and hogs for processing purposes.

Table 1: Livestock for Slaughter	Cattle	Small Ruminants	Hogs	Poultry
Farm 1		8		
Farm 2				6
Farm 3	1			
Farm 4	5			
Farm 5			10	
Farm 6		100		
Farm 7	150			
Farm 8		2	7	
Farm 9				200
Farm 10	9			
Farm 11				60
Farm 12		22		
Farm 13		2		25
Farm 14			2	15
Farm 15	4			
Farm 16	3			
Farm 17	100		12	
Farm 18	150	100	150	
Farm 19		5	20	50
Farm 20	8		1	6
Farm 21			4	30
Sum Total	**430**	**239**	**206**	**392**
Average/Farm	**47.7**	**34.1**	**25.75**	**49**
Small Producer Average	**5.3**	**7.8**	**8**	**16.4**
Large Producer Average	**133.3**	**100**	**150**	**103.3**

Figure 5 displays the level of interest farmers have in processing their livestock using a mobile unit. Smaller producers voiced concern that it may be too expensive for them. Larger farmers stated that if it were available in a central location that worked efficiently, then it would be valuable. Most farmers stated that usage of a mobile processing unit would depend on many variables and a few mentioned that they were already taking advantage of the process offered by 7 Generations Artisan Meat based in Clinton. Nearly 20% of respondents had used the Mobile Poultry Processing Truck or its accompanying equipment before the survey.

- 19.6% of farmers have previously utilized the MPPU.
- 52% indicated they may be interested in using the MPPU

Figure 5: Interest in utilizing a mobile processing unit for livestock



- 29% rated their interest as likely, very interested, or definitely interested.

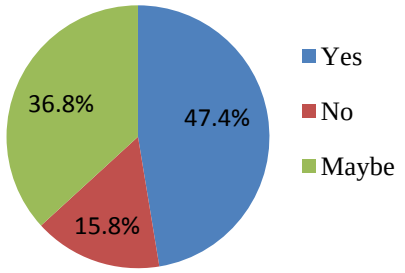
Labor

- 40.9 % of respondents employ on-farm labor

Of farmers that have employees:

- 27.8% employ people under the age of 18
- Farmers employed an average of 2 full-time paid employees, 3 part-time paid employee and 2 interns.

Figure 6: Interest in taking part in a youth program designed to employ high school students on farms



Top 3 Challenges finding on-farm labor:

1. Wage and/or benefit expectations greater than revenue support
2. Lack of trained agricultural workers
3. Lack of soft skills (ability to follow directions, showing up to work, etc.)

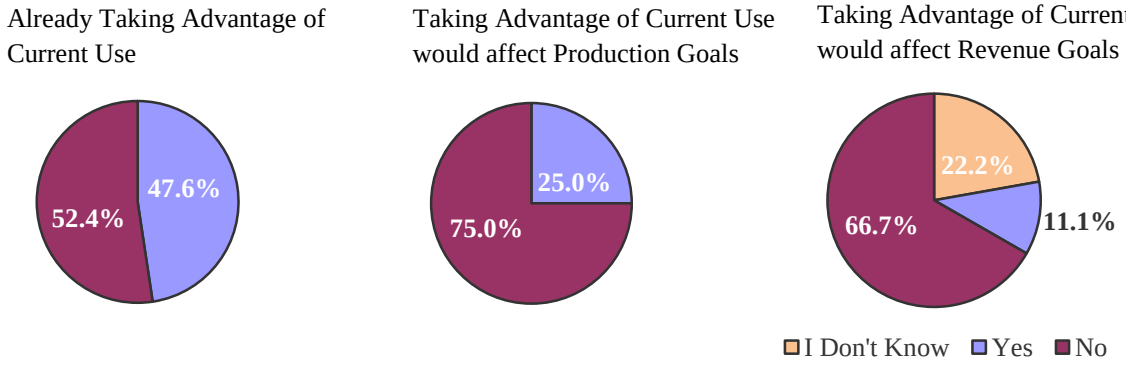
Average Full-Time Employee Wage: $14.8
Average Part-Time Employee Wage: $17.4
Average Intern Wage: $5.57

Land Management

The majority of farms are zoned in Rural (R) 5+ acres, followed by Rural Ag (RA) 10+ acres, and then Commercial Ag (CA) 20+ acres. However, 11.1% of respondents did not know their zoning. No farmers had land in Residential areas of more intensive rural development. Based on Figure 7, over half of the Island farmer population is not taking advantage of Current Use tax designation and is not cognizant of its requirements, benefits, or exactly how it may affect them.

Critical areas: 34.1 % of farmers believe they have critical areas on their property and 11.5% are unsure.

Figure 7: Current Use Tax Designation: Present use and how it may Affect Island Farmers in the Future.



Farm plans (referring to Succession, Business, Conservation, or Marketing plans), and their utilization is summarized in Figure 8. 17% of farmers have created a succession plan. Figure 9 displays the interest in participating in a program similar to Farmlink- an interface that links up beginning and retiring farmers. 58.5% demonstrated some interest in the program. Of the farmers that responded about utilizing conservation plans, 54.7% had completed one. Of the ones who did not, 61.8% expressed interest in working with the Whidbey Island Conservation District to create one (Figure 10).

Figure 8: Completion and Use of Succession, Business, Conservation, and Marketing Plans

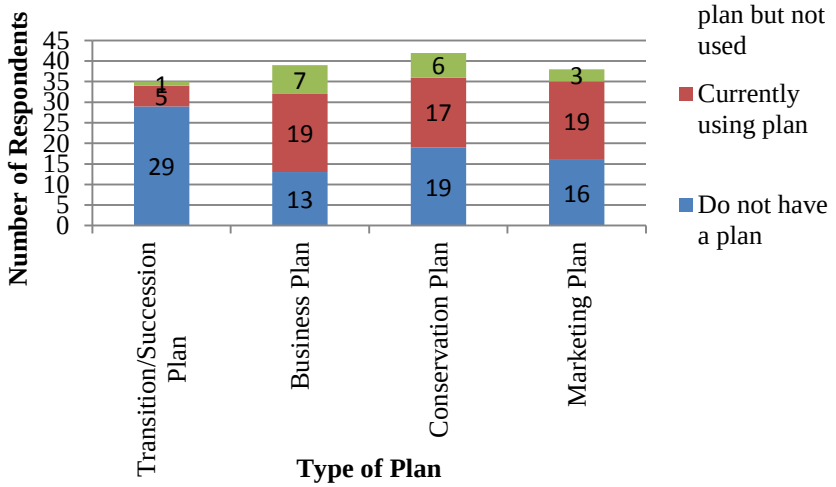


Figure 9: Interest in a Whidbey Island "Farmlink"

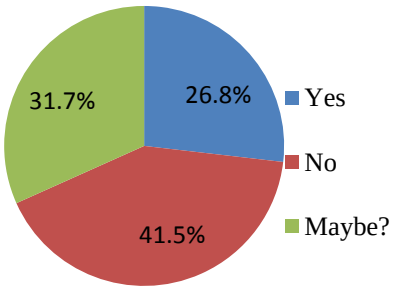
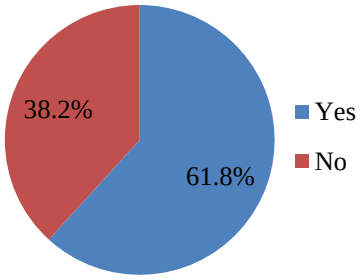


Figure 10: Interest in Completing a Conservation Plan with WICD



Markets and Marketing

- 61.4% of farmers had not heard of the Island County Economic Development Workshops but 62.8% would be interested in attending future workshops.

Whidbey Island Grown

62.8% of farmers are **not** utilizing the Whidbey Island Grown Brand Farmers, giving the following reasons for why:

- Don't know enough about it
- It is not well-known and therefore has little to no advantage
- Already have a solid customer base and therefore do not need it
- Thought it was no longer active, unclear as to advantage
- Costs too much or requires too much time

- The furthest distance 42.9% of farmers are willing to transport products is 25 miles.
- 60% of Respondents use Facebook and 20% are not utilizing any social media at all.

Institutional Markets

Figure 12 demonstrates interest in accessing institutional markets. Farmers stated that the greatest advantage of being a part of an institutional market would be the delivery to one location whereas the two greatest disadvantages would be the high quantities expected and the lower prices.

20.5% of Island Farmers are interested in a Marketing Cooperative whereas only 15.4% are interested in participating in a Food Hub

Figure 11: Furthest Distance Farmers are Willing to Transport Products

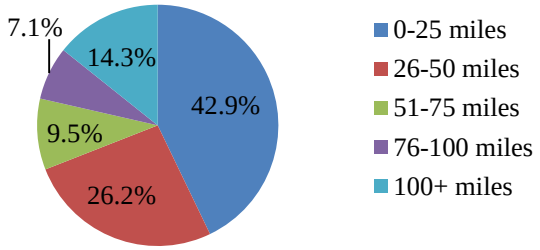


Figure 13 shows the interest in accessing a food hub or marketing cooperative. About 33% of farmers would need more information before giving a set "yes" or "no" answer. The total cost and benefits of the set-up would need to be clearly outlined. For example, 66% of farmers will join a food hub or marketing cooperative at 10% of sales or less.

Figure 12: Interest in Accessing an Institutional or Retail Market

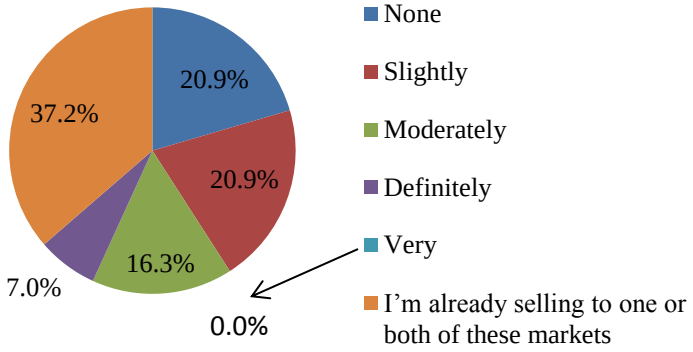


Figure 13: Interest in Accessing a Food Hub or Marketing Cooperative