

Perceptions from Agricultural Stakeholders

Michelle Downs, Courtney Flint, and Bronwyn Aly
Department of Kinesiology and Community Health,
Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences,
Dixon Springs Agricultural Center
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

As part of the Southern Illinois Regional Assessment Project, interviews were conducted from January through June 2007 with Southern Illinois residents involved in agricultural production either as an owner/land manager or a producer. Interviews were conducted in 12 counties within the 20 county study region including: Franklin, Gallatin, Jackson, Johnson, Massac, Pope, Pulaski, Randolph, Saline, Union, White, and Williamson Counties. In general, the objectives of the interviews were:

- To identify production and marketing types and approaches and changes over time
- To identify common characterizations of the Southern Illinois region and its characteristics
- To assess perceived threats and opportunities to the region
- To assess perceived roles of the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center
- To garner opinions and suggestions as to how the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center could better serve the needs of the region

Methodology

Interview participants were selected by two means. Some key agricultural informants were identified by Dixon Springs Ag Center staff and others were self-identified from farming survey request forms indicating consent to further questioning. Thirty-four interviews were conducted, and all but two interviews were conducted face-to-face. The remaining two interviews were conducted via e-mail correspondence. The interview was composed of open-ended questions and data was analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis techniques. After obtaining participant consent, in-person interviews were digitally audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Research Findings

Production Types and Approaches

The majority of participants were involved in corn and soybean row crop production, beef cattle production or fruit or vegetable production or some combination of these production types. The most prominent combination was a corn and soybean rotation with a beef cattle herd. One farm was an experimental organic vegetable and herb farm. One

focused primarily on small seed production and one was involved in aquaculture, but not solely. At least one farm focused its efforts on agri-tourism.

No-tilling was a prominent practice. Most participants described their farming operation as being both conventional and no-till in the sense that they used pesticides and herbicides and occasionally would plow the land after a few years of no-till practices. Only one farm was certified organic. However, an additional farm was working to obtain certification. In general, most farmers saw the land as an asset not to be exploited if at all possible and praised the development of no-till agriculture as being a great benefit to agriculture, but especially agriculture in Southern Illinois.

The following quotes indicate farmer perspectives on land stewardship:

“I want to be a good steward of the ground and to be a good steward I think you’ve either got to keep it in a situation where you don’t have soil erosion or where you don’t abuse the ground and you keep it rotating.”

“You have to treat these hills with great respect or you’ll slide it on down the river.”

“No-till farming is the one thing that saved a lot of hill land in Pope County. No-till farming allowed people to manage some of these hills where you could put row crops on ‘em.”

“Land is an asset. It’s the only asset we have really and if we don’t manage it right, we’re not gonna have an asset.”

Changes in Farming

For farmers in this study, the advent of herbicides and no-till planters made no-tilling possible. The majority of farmers were involved in no-till production previously, but at least two farms had made the switch to no-till more recently. A sense of loss in small farms during the 1950s and 1960s was described. For some, this loss was still being felt. Others, however, commented on an increase in the number of small hobby farms with more people retiring and moving back to five acre patches. Moreover, some farmers, based on the advent of ethanol prospects, had recently stopped rotating corn with soybeans to strictly produce more corn.

Marketing Strategies

Marketing strategies across the farmers studied were as varied as the farms themselves. For row crops, the majority of farmers indicated that they sell their grain through the local elevator or through mechanisms such as forward contracting. Most specialty producers use roadside marketing or on-farm marketing. On-farm marketing includes U-

pick operations. At least two farms utilized a local farmers' market. One specialty producer mentioned taking extra produce to a local food co-op. One specialty grower used grocery stores for distributing and one operated on a large-scale to wholesalers. One specialty grower indicated he would like to create a market with local restaurants. Livestock producers indicated a tendency to market with direct packers and beef producers tended to utilize the Illinois Heifer Development Program. There is not much of a market for lamb in the area.

Concerns about Farming

Concerns regarding farming in Southern Illinois vary, but primarily lend themselves to financial matters. For example, land prices were seen as too high for the small farmer, and profit margins were perceived as shrinking due to increased input costs for all. The costs of water and irrigation systems were a concern for specialty growers. Bad lending practices and not having sufficient capital for expansion were also seen as threats. Many people were concerned about their children not being able to stay on the farm because farming is not seen as a viable income for them. These sentiments are reflected in the following quote:

“Having sufficient capital makes it hard for small farmers to expand. The little guys keep getting swallowed up by big farms.”

Beyond financial matters, staying knowledgeable about farming practices, particularly specialty crop methods, was mentioned as a difficulty. There were also general concerns regarding the aging farm population. As one farmer stated:

“When I don't want to farm anymore, I'm afraid there won't be anyone to rent my ground to. The farmer is getting older and older and it shouldn't be that way.”

Two major issues for farmers in the region were marketing and labor. Farmers felt that opportunities to reach urban and distant markets were constrained and in need of regional cooperation. Migrant labor is an important part of farming, particularly specialty growers. Changes in immigration policies are complicated issues for these farmers as they depend heavily on migrant labor to get produce from the field to the marketplace. The following quotes from two different farmers outline the critical issues:

“From the specialty grower construct, labor is a big issue-having enough people to do the manual labor that is necessary for specialty crops. I know row crop workers have a need for labor, but not near as much per acre as what we do and that labor gets more difficult every year to obtain and I don't have a good answer for that. There are changes in society. We used to be able to get high school students during the summer time to work. That's not available now and then the immigration is a whole other set of problems. So, that's a big problem, I think, as far as the specialty grower.”

“The migrant people are used basically for production, but grunt work-planting, weeding, picking, grating, sorting, boxing and then, the local people I use for retail. We’ve got to have those people to do the grunt work because, again, no matter how good it looks in the field, until you can get it on the shelf and get it sold, it really doesn’t matter.”

Opportunities for Farming

Specific opportunities for farming that were mentioned included development of better seeds, diversifying into fruit and vegetable production and generally finding niche markets derived from agriculture.

Employment off the Farm

Off-farm employment is popular compared to farming as the sole source of income. Off-farm work was seen as a sense of security as indicated in the following quotes:

“We raised six children and working off the farm gave me some security with a steady income and health insurance.”

“There are not many full-time farmers. I know one that’s 24. He farms by himself and he’s very proud that he can do this, but I think what’s gonna happen is he’s just gotta have one bad crop year or bad prices and he’s gonna be a tired, probably injured young man. But, we need people like him with that sprit.”

Relationships among Farmers

Opinions regarding the relationships of farmers were split. Approximately half of those interviewed felt the relationships among farmers were good, while the other half felt there were tensions, especially when it came to land acquisition because of land prices. Regardless of the tension, however, the participants felt that people would still help one another in the event of a disaster. The following quotes indicate sentiments about farmer relationships:

“The farmers that live close, they’re like brothers and that’s the way it should be. If we can’t we need to just stop.”

“The farmers I know don’t get along. They’ve got some kind of waterway war. But, they’ll help if someone’s sick.”

“In our area, the relationship among farmers is excellent, but is starting to decline because there is a tremendous amount of pressure when land comes up for sale or lease. Feelings get hurt.”

“Farmers get along quite well. You know there might be little disputes now and then, but by and large I would say farmers get along quite well.”

What Constitutes Southern Illinois and Uniquely Defines the Region?

Southern Illinois was seen by participants as being predominantly Interstate 64 South, and I-70 south and extending farther to the north on the eastern side of the state than on the western side because of the Metro St. Louis region. One participant said “Decatur south” was Southern Illinois. Another said “about Route 50” was the northern boundary. Mt. Vernon and Effingham were commonly mentioned as the northern cut-offs. As one farmer mentioned, *“Southern Illinois depends on where ya’ are.”*

In terms of the region’s uniqueness, participants generally mentioned the hilly topography of the area, the warmer climate, the variability in the soils and the vast amount of natural resources such as coal, oil, and fluorspar and trees as being genuinely unique to Southern Illinois. They also noted the friendliness and compassion of the people as well as its spaciousness. Economically, they acknowledged that the region is quite economically disadvantaged.

Threats to the Region

The greatest threats mentioned for the region were lack of jobs and lack of diversity in the economy, the drop in school enrollments, the overall out-migration of youth, land prices, the Forest Service, regulations on development, and a lack of infrastructure for rails and roads. Interviewees were also skeptical of change and sensed an unwillingness of municipalities to cooperate. In addition, people retiring to the Southern Illinois communities were perceived as having more discretionary income and were blamed for driving up the price of land. One interviewee also mentioned a general lack of preparedness for disasters. These sentiments are reflected in the following quotes:

“How are the farmers today gonna teach the next generation or two generations down? The age of the farmer is gradually increasing and increasing and it should be the other way. ...Can we make farming available cost wise that that young person can make a living?”

“We have a surplus of labor. We have a number of people that are underemployed or unemployed. We have people with a good work ethic and a willingness to work. We just need jobs and opportunities.”

“Land prices are a big problem. For the area, it’s getting almost untouchable for someone to start.”

“The people who generally own their land, their farm, their business, don’t want to leave, but there’s not much right now to entice people to come in unless it’s retirement or a job that’s related to something already going on.”

“The Forest Service has just stopped any economic activity. Our hands are tied to the greatest asset we’ve got. Our biggest threat is also our biggest asset, our government ground, the Shawnee National Forest.”

“Regulations enacted to keep this area a wilderness limits what a person can do to create jobs.”

“Here, there is no cooperation. Each city, municipality, wants their own little empire.”

“Coal mining runs for a 10-15 year period and then you’re back to zero.”

“Young, bright people that go to college, they don’t come back and I think this is quite a big problem.”

Opportunities for the Region

Opportunities for the region most often mentioned by participants involved increasing tourism and utilizing natural resources more creatively. Hunting leases were seen as a very positive opportunity for the region. Capitalizing on ethanol, biodiesel, and switchgrass production were also mentioned along with river transportation. A number of participants also felt that transferring some Forest Service land, especially land near private residences, would help the economy and outfitters.

The following quotes indicate perceived opportunities related to recreational hunting, specialty crops, and coal mining:

“Recreational hunting and fishing are just exploding. It’s like you can’t charge them enough.”

“Young people could support themselves with specialty crops although it’s hard work.”

“Coal mining is an opportunity. Coal mines are needed but not longwall mining.”

Dixon Springs Agricultural Center Findings

All but one of the participants were familiar with the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center (DSAC) in some way. Many of the interviewees had attended DSAC programs recently or in the past. A significant number, however, were unaware of current activities or ongoing research at the Center. Dixon Springs was seen as having a marketing role in working with crops and people and was perceived as being important to the region in that it is capable of researching agricultural practices that are relevant to the region. Opinions varied as to the effectiveness and utilization of DSAC today. However, not one participant disputed the historically positive impact DSAC has had for the region. Most agreed that it could have a greater influence on the region. Common sentiments were that the Center should form cooperatives with other colleges and/or universities, the leaders at the DSAC should be more empowered and have more backing from appropriate sources, and DSAC must be able to experiment if it is going to be an experiment station. These sentiments are articulated in the following quotes:

“I think the influence Dixon Springs has today is the reputation of what it was before, what it has meant to the area, that anything that comes out of Dixon Springs research-wise is much more considered to the area. That is a valuable tool for us to look at.”

“Dixon Springs is for the Southern part of the state what the University of Illinois is to the middle area. Both have changed over time and must continue to change to remain a voice in agriculture.”

“To be successful at all, we have to resolve the land issues with the Forest Service and the Ag Center. There are things the Ag Center can't do because the land is owned by the Federal Government. How can you have an ag center if you can't experiment?”

“Dixon Springs Ag Center could better serve the needs of the region if the backing were there for the leaders.”

“We couldn't begin to measure the impact and amount of scientific research/results that have come through Dixon Springs and have been openly shared.”

“The uniqueness of Dixon Springs is its location. It's a different geographical area than Champaign, Mt. Vernon, Springfield. That's why they put it where they did.”