

Southern Illinois Regional Assessment - Executive Summary

Dr. Courtney G. Flint and Dr. Stephen P. Gasteyer
Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences
Department of Human and Community Development
College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Introduction

The Southern Illinois Regional Assessment Project (SIRAP) was initiated in May 2006 by a funded mandate from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences (ACES) and the State of Illinois. Two assistant professors, Dr. Courtney Flint and Dr. Stephen Gasteyer, both Rural Sociologists in the College of ACES, initiated research with two primary objectives:

- To assess a 20-county region in Southern Illinois, including stakeholder perspectives of emerging threats and opportunities; and
- To assess the role of Dixon Springs Agricultural Center from the perspective of regional stakeholders.

Flint and Gasteyer and their team of student research assistants produced a set of reports and fact sheets covering multiple dimensions of the 20-county region. This Executive Summary outlines the scope of this research effort and key findings about the region and Dixon Springs Agricultural Center.

Research Scope and Design

Dixon Springs Agricultural Center (DSAC), established in 1933 and opened in 1938 as an agricultural experiment station operated by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, serves as a source of local employment and facilitator of agricultural and natural resource research and outreach. SIRAP was driven by a need to assess the existing and potential relationships between DSAC and the greater Southern Illinois region. The outcomes of the SIRAP research effort may be used to inform decision-making regarding future opportunities for DSAC and contribute to the general understanding of environmental, agricultural, demographic, economic, and cultural dimensions in this region of Southern Illinois.

This research was conducted using a multidimensional integrated approach. Multiple methods were used to assess a variety of topics with an eye to assessing how these dimensions interact to shape the characteristics and conditions of the region. Existing data and information from a variety of sources were used to document present and past

conditions and trends regarding the agricultural, environmental, and socio-economic well-being of the region. In addition, social science research methods were used to engage and assess stakeholder perspectives across the region to incorporate stakeholder views into the full regional assessment. In other words, the researchers organized and analyzed what was already known about Southern Illinois and integrated it with the voices of people who are connected to it.

Defining Southern Illinois for this Research

Many definitions and interpretations exist as to what constitutes Southern Illinois. Some refer to the region colloquially as “Little Egypt” connoting the southernmost counties of Illinois and their relative isolation from the rest of the state, their historical focus on grain production, and the hilly, forested topography bounded by the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. There is no clearly delineated regional boundary for Southern Illinois and perspectives fluctuate as to the northern limits. The 20-county region defined for this study was simply a way to outline a coherent area to streamline research efforts and is in no way meant to be the definitive definition of the region.

For the purposes of this research, Southern Illinois was delineated as the 16 southernmost counties that make up the Illinois portion of the Delta Regional Authority (DRA) (a federal-state partnership for economic development) with the addition of four counties along the northeastern border of the DRA area. These four counties were included because they are included in the University of Illinois Extension region and are part of the *ConnectSI* regional development initiative that emerged just prior to the initiation of this research. These 20 counties provide a basis for comparisons with emerging regional research and other initiatives.

The 20 counties included in this study are: Alexander, Edwards, Franklin, Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Massac, Perry, Pope, Pulaski, Randolph, Saline, Union, Wabash, Wayne, White and Williamson Counties.



Research Areas Included in the Assessment

Sixteen research areas were assessed and are summarized in draft reports awaiting feedback from regional and university advisors. Specific reports are available by request:

- Agriculture
- Farming Survey Results
- Perspectives from Agricultural Stakeholders
- History of DSAC
- DSAC Stewardship Week
- Land Use
- Social Context of Shawnee National Forest
- Wildlife Management and Private Forestland Management
- Water Use and Water Quality
- Indicators of Health
- Perspectives from Extension Educators
- Perspectives from Government Stakeholders
- Historical Overview of Sociodemographic Change
- Socioeconomic and Demographic Characteristics
- Income and Employment (including Manufacturing, Mining, and Commuting)

Framing the Southern Illinois Region

Southern Illinois' regional identity is largely defined by how it is different from the rest of Illinois. It is defined not by flat land and row crops, but by increasingly hilly and forested terrain as one travels south. While Chicago is known for high, straight line winds and frigid winters, Southern Illinois is known for sultry summers and temperate winters. Observers in the 1930s were impressed by the distinct lack of cash and the abundance of food. Images of poverty and marginal farmlands, yet diversity in food production, dominate many historical accounts of the region.

Perceptions of Southern Illinois' relative disadvantage continue to this day with claims of higher poverty rates, slower rates of economic development, and problems with soil erosion. Agriculture in Southern Illinois is said to be more diverse in cropping patterns than upstate and less productive acre for acre. Farms in this region are known for specialty crops and livestock as well as for grains. The region is known not only for agriculture, but also for coal except for in the far southernmost counties. Coal production has always been a double edged sword. While the decline in mining in the 1990s took a toll on the region's economy, there are new concerns about the effect of mining on the landscape.

Southern Illinois is naturally beautiful – an interesting mix of trees, lakes, and rock outcroppings. Garden of the Gods wilderness area in the Shawnee National Forest is a well-known treasure and Rend Lake has been listed as one of the “Seven Wonders of Illinois.” As one travels toward the southern tip of the state, the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers encroach until they meet off the southern banks of Fort Defiance Park in Cairo, Illinois.

Through the engagement with regional stakeholders, a clear picture emerged of how people in Southern Illinois characterize their region, capturing many of the dimensions identified above and more. A few of these voices are captured here:

- *There is a pride, I think, in Southern Illinois and maybe that comes from at least partially being at an economic disadvantage to the northern end of the state. I think people from Southern Illinois are really proud that they are from Southern Illinois.*
- *I guess we're more laid back. There's a lot of the attitude of 'know what you can change and what you can't' in Southern Illinois. The soil types and the weather variability really make farming a challenge. Southern Illinois is a fascinating part of the world if you just don't get hung up on all the issues.*
- *Here it's more of a hometown, small town type of situation where everybody knows everybody a lot better. It's wide open country and the land, the climate is exciting to me...*

Key Research Findings

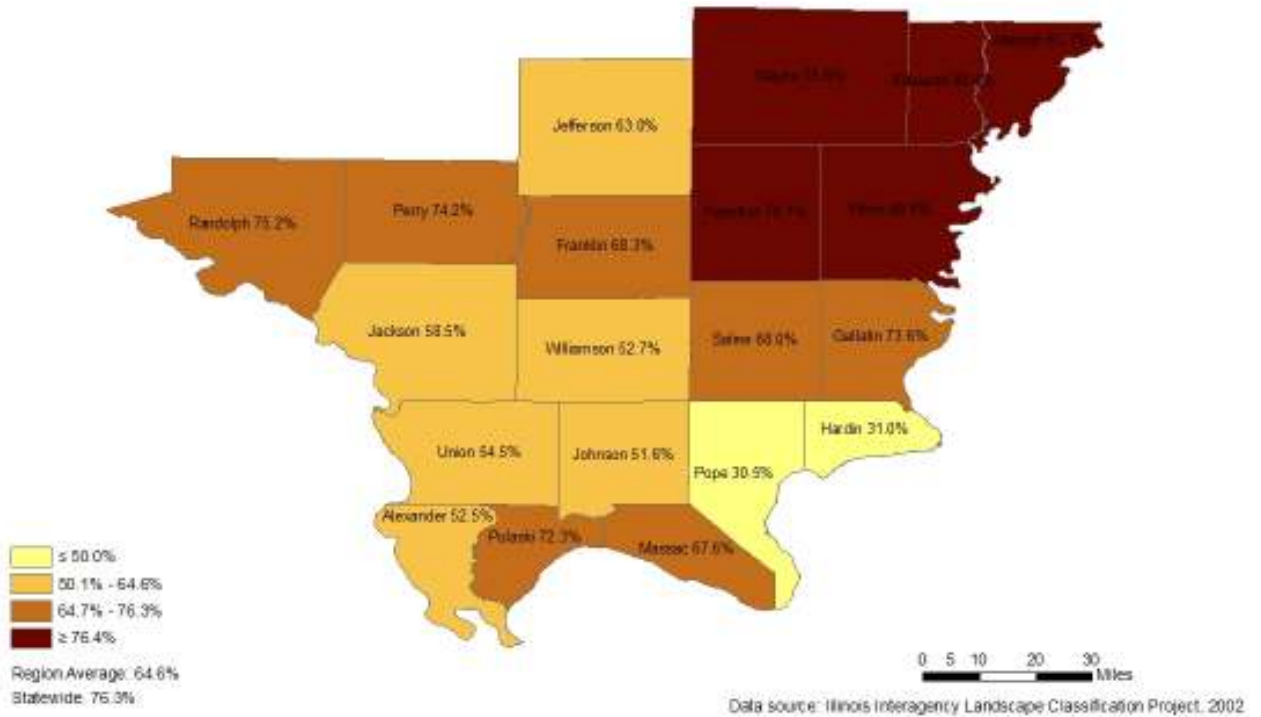
Findings from our research efforts with available data and through our engagement with stakeholders support most general conceptions of the region. However, we found additional dimensions, some surprises, and considerably more insights as we investigated and integrated the multiple dimensions of the region.

Agriculture

Agriculture is the dominant land use, with 65% of the region's total area dedicated to farming. Agriculture in the region is diverse. While many farmers are producing standard grain crops, the region leads Illinois in vineyards and orchards. Specialty crops and products are an essential part of the agricultural economy and culture, though they rarely show up strongly in agricultural data collected at the state level. Farmers often engage in multiple farming enterprises. It is clear that farmers in this part of the state face varied climatic, environmental, cultural, and production challenges. Soils are easily eroded and often don't sustain a hard freeze which leads to insect and weed issues which differ from those in the northern part of Illinois.

Farmers in Southern Illinois are challenged to sustain their operations through bad weather, crop pests, low prices, and poor markets, in anticipation of better times. Challenges from changing agricultural production pressures nationally seem magnified in Southern Illinois. Many farming stakeholders described trials and tribulations with marketing, trying to keep farms in the family, and farm labor. Migrant labor issues are particularly vexing for specialty crop growers who claim that there is no one else to do the painstaking labor of getting produce from the fields to the marketplace. Finally, Southern Illinois farmers feel strongly about being good stewards of the land. Having the tools and information necessary to make sound decisions is vital to their continued viability.

Percent of Land Cover in Agricultural Use Southern Illinois Counties, 2000



Environment

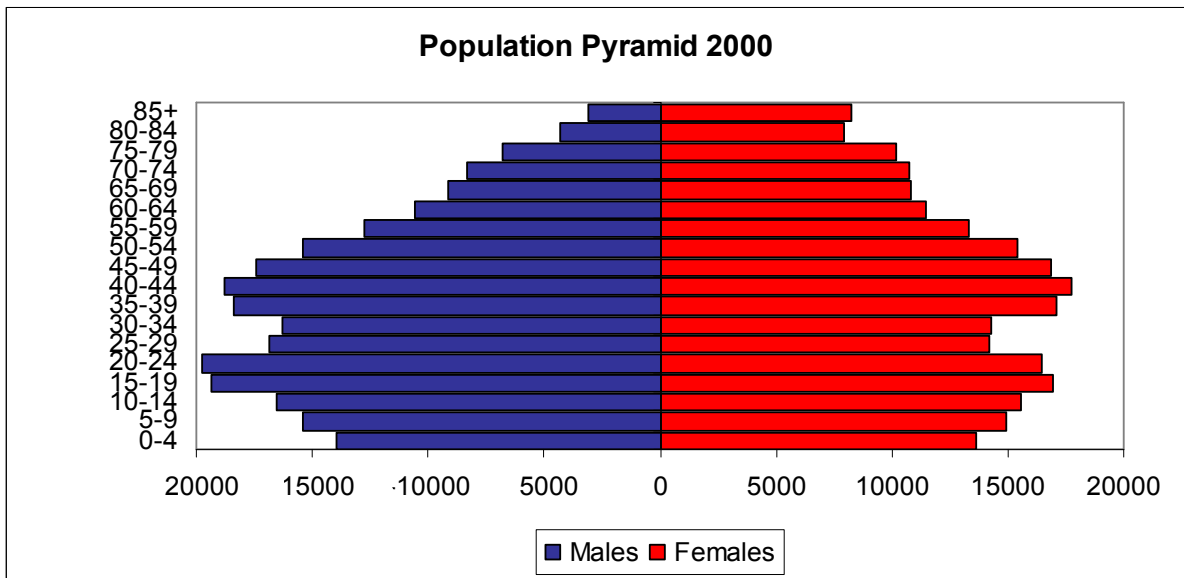
Southern Illinois is blessed with environmental assets that are unrivaled in the rest of the state. Many stakeholders highlighted the recreational amenities and the varied topography and physical features of the region, including the Shawnee National Forest. Protracted conflicts over forest fragmentation, access and use, however, led some stakeholders to comment on the liability of the national forest. A critical issue emerging from this research is the role of recreational hunting, with many citing the economic opportunity that this enterprise represents. Managing wildlife habitat for general ecological well-being, as well as for economic development and agricultural risk reduction, is a high priority issue for the region.

Water use research showed a high incidence of self-reliant water supplies, such as groundwater wells, across all sectors. Given the considerable water quality problems facing the region's watersheds, this presents a potentially risky situation. Agriculture is the leading source of water impairment in Southern Illinois, making clear the need to connect multiple dimensions in evaluating the ramifications of resource use. Energy development, related to mining and bio-fuels is another critical issue. Carefully weighing

threats and opportunities related to development in these sectors is required for sound decision making regarding regional development and to mitigate negative effects on environmental, economic, and social well-being.

Human Well-Being – Sociodemographics and Economy

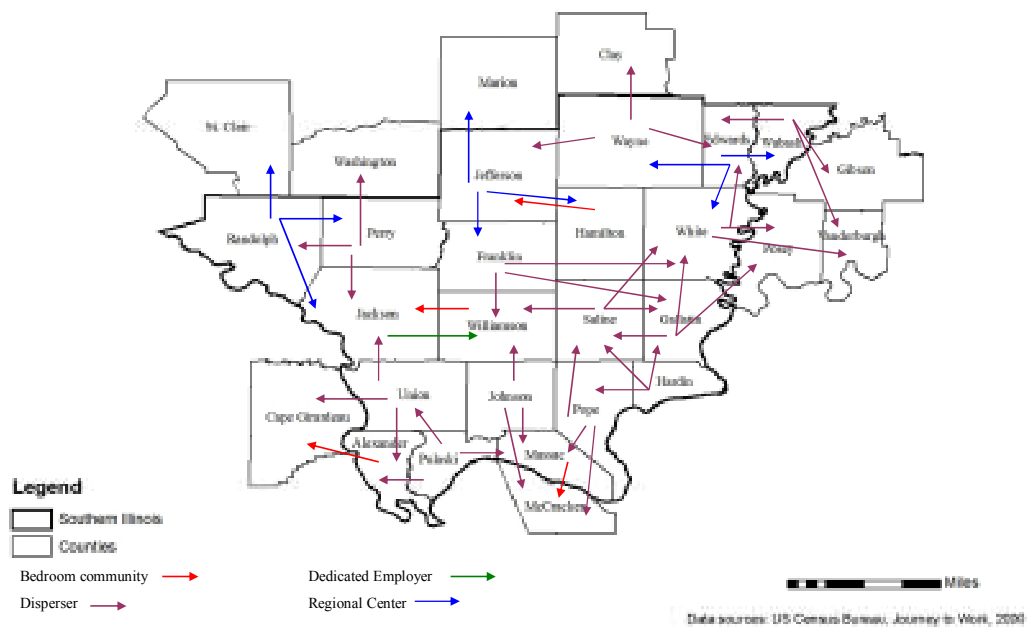
The 20-county region in Southern Illinois fits the statistics of a persistently poor region. The region has lower educational attainment, employment, and median household income than Illinois as a whole. It has the highest poverty levels of the non-metro counties in Illinois. The population pyramid for the region is less a pyramid than a misshapen rectangle as people in their prime working years have left to work elsewhere leaving the young and old. People moving into the region tend to be amenity seekers nearing retirement age. Health care is critical, both in terms of employment and the well-being of the residents. The region is clearly disadvantaged based on health indicators such as alcohol and smoking statistics, incidence of disease, and access to healthcare and insurance.



At the same time, the region is not homogeneous when considering social and economic well-being. While some attributes of regional disparity remain generally hidden from view (including inadequate plumbing, health and well-being of migrant farm labor, racial inequality in income and educational attainment, etc.), there are numerous efforts underway across the region to stimulate development and collaborate across sectors.

The research findings related to commuting indicate that while the region as a whole exports labor, often across state lines, there are job markets within the region. Indeed, there is a great deal of commuting among counties, and some counties that export workers also import them which may be a sign that people in these counties face particularly difficult paths to employment. Regional commuting patterns suggest opportunities to build more vibrant local economies by coordinating within the region and across sectors.

General Commuting Patterns of Southern Illinois Counties, 2000



A number of counties include declining industries related to manufacturing and mining, and are dependent upon subsidies. Others are seizing the day with innovative changes, as seen in the metals industry. Many of the opportunities suggested by local stakeholders, such as bio-fuels, tourism, mining, specialty agriculture, and recreational hunting are directly or indirectly related to the natural resources of the region. Future development of these assets and opportunities should be sustainable, well integrated and coordinated across the region.

Stakeholder Perspectives

Stakeholders involved in the regional assessment include farmers, natural resource managers and forest interest groups, University of Illinois Extension Educators, teachers, and government officials. There is considerable diversity within and among these stakeholder groups.

Farmers: Farmers in Southern Illinois are not monolithic in activity or perspective. While 69% of farmers surveyed said they were involved in conventional farming, producing hay, grain, and/or beef production, 52% percent said they engaged in specialty agriculture. Off-farm work by farmers was significant with 42% claiming to work off-farm full or part time. More significantly 64% percent of those surveyed said that more than 50% of their household income came from non-farming work. In other words, whether out of necessity or choice, agriculturalists are connected to enterprises beyond their own farms. The five top issues identified as threats by farming stakeholders included maintaining family farms, healthcare, employment, soil erosion, and increasing land prices. On the positive side, the five most cited opportunities included bio-fuels, recreational hunting, specialty crops, coal mining, and tourism.

Forest Related Stakeholders: Twenty-one percent of the region's landscape is dominated by forests, with much higher forest coverage in the southernmost counties which include the Shawnee National Forest. Forest management issues are important considerations for the region. Considerable tension exists among forest managers, private landowners, forest recreational users, and environmental interests. Forest planning and litigation documents and stakeholder comments reflect ongoing debate over forest fragmentation, access, utilization, and sustainable stewardship. The critical threats and opportunities posed by wildlife management issues, both in terms of negative disease and agricultural impacts and positive social and economic opportunities, make clear the need for conflict resolution and collaboration to connect the stakeholders in meaningful and useful ways to promote regional well-being.

University of Illinois Extension: Extension Educators highlighted the paradox in Southern Illinois' tremendous natural resources juxtaposed with serious economic depression. Unemployment due to loss of industry and work force issues such as changing demographics were highlighted as major threats to the region. On the other hand, Extension stakeholders anticipated tourism and recreational opportunities based on the region's natural assets.

Teachers: K-12 teachers at the DSAC Stewardship Week shared observations about the economic disadvantages faced by many of the region's children. According to teachers, many children are not able to connect with the region's amenities and opportunities because of their poverty-based circumstances. Teachers value the significant contribution made by DSAC in exposing the region's youth to the importance of environmental stewardship and evoking a sense of pride in the region's natural resources.

Government: Interviews with government officials revealed diversity among people representing differing levels of government as well as their location within the study area. Major threats identified by this group of stakeholders included the lack of jobs; out-migration of educated youth; the influx of retirees needing resources for health and community services which are already constrained; and the lack of regional infrastructure, particularly roads and communication technologies. Their views of regional opportunities were aligned with agricultural stakeholders in highlighting bio-

fuels, value-added specialty agriculture, and more creative use of natural resources. Government officials suggested the potential to capitalize on the region's central location for building industry and listed a variety of policy and development initiatives at local and regional levels to reduce vulnerabilities and maximize potential. Many recognized the need to collaborate to avoid duplicating efforts and competing for scarce resources and markets.

Dixon Springs Agricultural Center

Dixon Springs Agricultural Center, established in 1933 and opened in 1938, has played a key role in shaping Southern Illinois and has provided critical information and technical and management tools for managing agricultural and natural resources. At the time that the Center was founded as an experiment station, the region suffered from tremendous erosion. Contributions from DSAC, such as no-till farming techniques and other animal science and horticultural innovations have changed agriculture, not just in the region but across the country and perhaps the world.



Agricultural stakeholders were quick to highlight the importance and value of Dixon Springs. For surveyed farmers, DSAC topped the list of valued sources of information, and 75% indicated DSAC was important or very important to Southern Illinois. Three key dimensions were clear from respondent perceptions of the center:

- DSAC provides important information on variety trials and best agricultural practices.

- DSAC's location in Southern Illinois is critical for its context-based research and experimentation with common soils, climatic factors, and stakeholders.
- DSAC is a valued resource for information, education, and help for area farmers.

Other regional stakeholders, particularly the Extension Educators and government representatives were less familiar with the details of the center's activities. These groups pointed out on numerous occasions that the center did not seem to have the capacity or resources that it once had. Their comments either explicitly or implicitly indicted that DSAC could increase its benefit to the area by a vigorous marketing campaign and broader dissemination of information and activities.

In the 1970s and 1980s there was a great deal of variety in what DSAC researchers and center staff were doing. Today, with fewer staff, the center cannot undertake the breadth of research and outreach that they once did, nor can they respond to the region's complex challenges needing attention. That said, the center's staff members were highly regarded and respected across the region and the current and recent staff were acknowledged for making critical and practical differences in the agricultural production and well-being of the region.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite a strong and shared regional identity, there are multiple layers to Southern Illinois. The effects of change in one sector, such as agriculture, reach far into other realms of environmental and human well-being. The future of Southern Illinois depends on stakeholders' abilities to manage choices, uncertainties and complexity in a collective, sustainable and integrated way.

Southern Illinois faces numerous threats but also finds itself with valuable assets and a strong tenacity to persevere in the face of adversity. This research indicates that the presence of the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center is central to the region's agricultural well-being and natural resource management but the connections extend into social and economic dimensions. The region looks to DSAC for assurance that the resources of the University of Illinois are being shared in inclusive ways.

Our recommendations are two-fold:

- 1) Decision-makers should be cautious of making blanket assumptions that all of Southern Illinois is alike and should acknowledge the complexity of needs and assets across the varied social, environmental and economic conditions. The research agenda for the region must be multidisciplinary and reflect varied objectives; and
- 2) An advisory committee of key regional stakeholders and University representatives should be established to reflect and react to the findings from this

regional assessment and to guide the relationship between the University of Illinois and the Southern Illinois region served by DSAC.

We are grateful for the opportunity to learn about this important region and from its people. It is our sincere hope that discussions that come out of our work will lead to new programs and plans that can improve quality of life.