

Lawrence County
Agricultural Development Council

Update of
COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

2025

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Lawrence County

Comprehensive Plan Update

County Agricultural Development Councils have the responsibility to evaluate the needs of the local agricultural economy. The updated County Comprehensive Plan should identify programs and projects best suited for agricultural development fund investments in the County.

The Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy staff may provide guidance to county councils throughout this evaluation.

1. Overview of County

On the Kentucky-West Virginia border in the scenic Highlands of the Appalachian Mountains, lies Lawrence County with lush green hills, winding creeks, fertile hollows and thick forests. Seventy-one percent (nearly 191,000 acres) are forested with a variety of hardwoods. Farmers and private individuals own close to eighty-five percent of the forestland, leaving fifteen percent owned by corporations or the federal government. Most commonly, land has been in the same families for generations, with ownership shared by absentee heirs. Thus, formerly cleared farmland is now growing back into forest.

Farming in Lawrence County has traditionally been accomplished on small acreage farms with flat to rolling crop/pasture land and wooded hillsides. During the last fifty years, the number of farms has decreased from 519 in 1969 to 284 in 2017 and then to 255 in 2022. While the number of farms has decreased, the quality of land farmed is on the rise.

Lawrence County is rural Americana with no large cities or businesses. Louisa, the county seat and largest city boasts a population of 2,679. "Mom and Pop" County General Stores still dot the windy secondary roads. A rural lifestyle is tightly woven into fabric of everyday family and social events. The yearly Farm and Home Field day is a well-attended social and education event and fall festivals are a way of life. The county's own successful "Septemberfest", billed as "the best little Fall Festival in Kentucky" require cooperative effort and spirit among businesses, farmers, volunteers and civic groups throughout the county. Agri-tourism is blossoming in Lawrence County, the Heritage Harvest Tour began in 2012. It is a self-guided driving tour taking you to farms and churches that give you an idea of how Kentucky was many years ago. The tour stops made a total of \$70,000.00 during that weekend in 2019. It is steadily getting bigger and better every year. Three farms that are currently on the tour have worked with the Agriculture Development Fund.

With good secondary roads with few traffic problems, combined with low crime rate, tranquil lifestyle and natural beauty are attracting a significant number of retirees and other new residents to the county, resulting in one of the fastest growing populations in Eastern Kentucky.

Currently, major agriculture endeavors include hay and forage, cattle/calves, beef cows, vegetable gardens and most recently honey bees. In 2022, nearly 54,526 acres of the county were used in farming enterprises. 2006 was the last year Lawrence County had tobacco estimates, the county harvested a total of 65 acres, yielding a total of 1,530 pounds an acre. The state yield totaled 2,100 pounds an acre. In 2022, livestock, poultry, and products had a total of \$1,080,000.00 in sales in the county while crops in the county had a total of \$823,000.00.

Many Lawrence County cattle producers are members of the Highlands Beef Cattle Association, which has been active in model cooperative cattle/heifer development projects as well as forage quality improvement projects and marketing strategies. Livestock numbers and financial receipts have the potential to increase significantly in Lawrence County and surrounding Eastern Kentucky Counties.

The county's successful summer Farmer's Market provides income for a number of vegetable growers. Through the Agriculture Development Funding, the Lawrence County Farmer's Market has a facility from which they market the fresh produce. The current challenge is getting new young farmer's to join the market.

Most of the county's agriculture leadership is the older generation with an average age of 60 years. Most young farmers are part-time farmers with spouses who work outside the home as well. Both, however, hope for the opportunity for farm income to sustain the household financial needs and for full-time farming to be their lifestyle and heritage.

Outdoor activities that lure in tourists as well as locals in Lawrence County include, but not limited to: hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, horseback riding, and agri-tourism. Construction of the 13,000 acre Yatesville Lake and surrounding 7,000 acre recreational area was completed in 1992 and opened up increasing economic resources in the county. The lake is recognized as a premier bass fishing site with several bass tournaments scheduled each year. Further tourist economic opportunities have emerged with the designation of Highway 23 as "The Country Music Highway" to recognize famous country musicians who came from the counties in Eastern Kentucky. Extending from Greenup County on the north, to Pike County at the south, the 4 lane Highway 23 is Lawrence County's major highway.

The people are enthusiastic supporters of local athletics, schools, churches, festivals and farm activities. The local Rotary Club yearly recognizes the local farmers and the "pioneer family farm"- one that has been continuously owned and operated by

one family for over one hundred years. Mountain heritage is important, as is a traditional value system believing in home, family and religion.

The population of the county was estimated at 16,293 in 2023 with nearly 18.0% of the population 65 years of age and older and 23.7% of the population under 18 years of age. As more retirees are attracted to the county, a large percentage of older citizens is expected. Based on per capita income data, Lawrence County is among the top twenty Kentucky counties with high poverty levels. Latest figures give a median household income of \$45,584.00 from 2019-2023. While the median household income for the state is \$62,417.00 according to the US Census Bureau.

2. Assessments of the County

a. Strengths

Lawrence County's greatest strengths involve our land resources, our heritage, our lifestyle and our people. Our 191,000 acres of mostly private owned forestland attracts not only loggers but also hunters, campers, hikers, and tourists. Much of the land has been in the same families for generations and many once-absentee heirs are returning to their cherished heritage to retire and engage in small scale farming activities.

A hospital and qualified medical personnel may contribute to the phenomenon that Lawrence County has one of the fastest growing populations in Eastern Kentucky. Additionally, Lawrence is a member of a five county regional cooperative organization responsible for health care, education and economic development known as FIVCO Area Development District.

The county has excellent cooperative between agricultural agencies-the local Farm Bureau Agency, Soil Conservation Office, Farm Credit Service of Mid-America, and the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Office-providing agricultural information, leadership, and financial and technical assistance. These agencies and the local County Agricultural Advancement Council have procured hay baling/wrapping

machinery, portable corrals, squeeze chutes, and herbicide spraying equipment with grants that enable farmers to rent them at affordable lease fees with no large individual capital investment in addition to administering grants through the Agricultural Development Fund.

Lawrence County has an increasingly favorable K-12 educational program. The county also now offers opportunities for post-secondary education with Sullivan University in Louisa. Sullivan University offers degrees in fields that are in need of qualified employees and offers flexible scheduling by offering online classes and classes at the Louisa Learning Center in downtown Louisa. Good post-secondary and technical education opportunities are also available in bordering counties a short driving distance away.

Highway 23 is not only the major four lane highway but, also the “Country Music Highway”. With major support from the Kentucky Tourist Commission it is bringing increasing number of tourists into our Appalachian Highlands yearly. Additionally the Yatesville Lake State Park and Recreational area features a marina, campgrounds, horse trails and championship golf course for tourism opportunities.

Weaknesses

Properly managing and marketing our greatest resource-our timberland- is a weakness. Historically, our famers have not managed our timber resources well. There are no infrastructures for wood processing industries or wood industries that would add value to local timer production.

The county's far eastern location in the state requires farmers to travel many miles to the major agricultural enterprises: forage/hay production, livestock and vegetable marketing centers, thus increasing labor and transportation costs and transportation losses.

There are no large businesses in the county and particularly few farm or supply businesses. Again, farmers' costs are increased by the necessity to travel to purchase equipment or have equipment repaired.

Farm labor is unreliable and in short supply. Additionally, many farmers in Lawrence County are reluctant and skeptical to transition to new agricultural enterprises

based on previous disappointing and costly business experiences with unreliable and unethical agribusinesses.

Large animal vets are few and far between. It is hard to keep healthy livestock without a steady, reliable supply of health care for them. Additionally, farm visits are a thing of the past.

Severe weather also causes problems for producers. Over the past few years, we have had extreme weather. From droughts, to multiple floods, this hurts crops and animals as well.

b. Opportunities

The greatest opportunities begin with local marketing and value-added processing of local agriculture products. In the area of timber, local and regional market availability would increase net income for logs. Local and regional wood processing enterprises would further add local dollar value for our wood products. The Farmer's Market facility is a real benefit to the organization allowing for the clientele to remain comfortable in the shade of the building while shopping for fresh produce. At the same time, the quality of the vegetables remains high throughout the day, not being scolded from the heat of the sun.

Alliances to develop new- opportunity agriculture enterprises such as vineyards, meat goats, horticulture products, honey bees, etc. will allow sharing of resources, education and technical assistance. Local and regional marketing alliances will reduce costs to vegetable growers. Additionally, agri-tourism is another viable opportunity for expansion in Lawrence County. AirBnB is growing more popular drawing people into the area thanks to social media.

c. Challenges

Without proper education and management, our forestland faces the exploitation of big industry with the loss of agricultural income. With the drastic decline in tobacco income, our farmers had no other option than to find off farm work to supplement their income. The full time farmer in Lawrence County is rare. Due to increasing population, farmland and woodland is being sold for housing development. Although deer hunting increases some income in the county, the large deer population is an increasing threat to vegetable growers' income.

Larger corporations are buying up farm land and driving up the price of land for locals. This causes the amount of farms to diminish sometimes. Additionally, farm land that is passed down through heirs sometimes becomes too overgrown to work in due to lose of interest.

3. County Council Objectives

a. Mission/Vision Statement

The Lawrence County Agricultural Development Council's mission is to encourage, support, promote, and expand sustainable agricultural opportunities and income for the Lawrence County farming community in the view of declined tobacco income. Our vision is to maintain and develop an agricultural economy that not only will support existing farm families and businesses but also will insure farm lifestyle and income for future generations.

b. Short term goals

The council's short term goals include supporting and expanding current efforts and projects of the Highland's Beef Cattle Association. We want to initiate woodland management plans and support local marketing and utilization of timber direct to the consumer in addition to supporting the marketing for the Farmer's Market and the cattle industry in the county. We will encourage and support farmer's to explore alternative and newly emerging sustainable agricultural enterprises- both crops and livestock- particularly promoting cooperative projects.

c. Long term goals

Our long-term goals are not only to preserve our agriculture heritage in Lawrence County, but also to expand opportunities for the future. We want to encourage sustainable, traditional and alternative agriculture production and to establish processing facilities to add value to our raw products.

d. Tactics for leveraging funds

- Regional partnerships

We will work with groups and organizations such as Highland's Beef Cattle Association, local Farmer's Markets, locally owned and operated slaughter facilities, beekeeping associations, Farm Credit of Mid America, Farm Service Agency, Farm Bureau, Soil Conservation, Kentucky Master Gardeners program, public library's and local housing authorities. Having these partnerships will only strengthen our community ties. Working with

various organizations and individuals will help with the knowledge and education of our farmers and community members.

- State Agricultural Development Board resources

The Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy is a great resource for seasoned farmers, new farmers, young farmers and future farmers. They can help with increasing opportunities for individuals, and financially help get businesses started or expand an existing business.

Other local/state/federal resources

The Lawrence County Agricultural Development Council will support both group and individual proposals that meet the following criteria:

- 1) Benefit a great number of farmers
- 2) Indicate long-term sustainability
- 3) Increase net farm income, and
- 4) Manifest priorities and goals outlined in the Comprehensive Plan. Individual proposals will be reviewed initially taking into account their suitability for the State Agriculture Entrepreneur Program or other methods of funding. Group proposals or multiple county proposals are encouraged and will be given special consideration, but must indicate proportional benefits to Lawrence County group members and farmers. The Council will expect applications to provide indication of 50% matching funds and additional sources of local, state or federal funding.

4. Evaluation & Review

- a. How are proposals evaluated and does this process need modified?

The council will evaluate and review proposals based overall on how each proposal fits the comprehensive plan. Particularly a proposal must meet the four criteria presented above. It must provide sufficient documentation and feasibility studies. Detailed budget plans must include who the funds will be directed to and who will be responsible for expenditures. Measurable short term and long term objectives and goals must be clearly defined. Applicants' contributed share, practically, realistic nature of the project and how knowledge and experience can be shared and duplicated will be considered.

b. How is success and failure measured?

The council will expect semi-annual progress reports that show to whom the money has been allocated and what benefits the farmers have received from the allocation in addition to personal testimony of how the projects as a whole has benefited the farmer.

c. How will the county comprehensive plan be revised?

The Lawrence County Agricultural Development Council will meet and discuss what has changed, improved, declined, etc in the community and see what the people of Lawrence County need. The Council has the community's interest at heart and want to see the area thriving and improving.

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