

Leslie County
Agricultural Development Council

Update of
COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN
2025

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LESLIE COUNTY

AGRICULTURE DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL COMPREHENSIVE PLAN 2025

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LESLIE COUNTY AGRICULTURE DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

OVERVIEW OF COUNTY

Leslie County is located in southeastern Kentucky. The county is made up of 253,690 acres of rugged mountainous land and is 402 square miles. The county is situated on the head waters of the Middle Fork of the Kentucky River. The river literally cuts the county in half as it runs its northerly course to the Buckhorn Reservoir in Perry County.

The population of Leslie County, Kentucky in 2024 was 9,729. In 2022 the population was 10,093, 10.5% down from the 11,278 who lived there in 2010. For comparison, the US population grew 7.7% and Kentucky's population grew 3.8% during that period. The city of Hyden, the only incorporated city in the county has a population of 445. The latest figures we have indicate 3,909 households in the county with an average of 2.53 persons per household. The population of Leslie County is classified as rural non-farm with 18.7% over 65 and 21% under 18.

Leslie County is served by four elementary schools with a total enrollment of 1,649. There is one high school with 488 students. Seventy-six students are home schooled. All teachers in the county are fully accredited and have degrees.

Leslie County's economy has been based on the coal mining industry, which has been in a steady decline due to environmental issues. Oil and gas fields play a minor role in the county's economy as a whole. The timber industry plays a major part in the local economy. We have a couple of family owned small sawmills and independent loggers. Issues involving the Daniel Boone National Forest can greatly affect loggers in this county as the National Forest encompasses a large portion of county land. Buckhorn Reservoir covers approximately 2,000 acres including flood plain acres. Approximately 80% of all the land in the county is owned by the U.S. Government, mining companies and absentee landowners. Tourism has a limited impact on our economy.

The unemployment rate in Leslie County, KY is 6.7% as of March 2025. This is higher than the long-term average of 9.33%. The median household income in Leslie County, KY is \$40,176. In 2022, an estimated 30.1% of Leslie County residents lived in poverty, and 37.1% of children under 18 lived in poverty. 100% of our school children receive free lunch.

Besides forestry, Leslie County agriculture is primarily home vegetable gardens.

Farming is the primary source of income for less than ten people in the county. The terrain is rough mountain land with approximately 232,500 acres of it in woodlands, most of which has such poor soil it could only be used for forage. Currently I know of less than ten farms in Leslie County. Horses are the largest livestock operation in the county and it is largely recreational. We have no known farms still actively growing tobacco in the county.

A handful of landowners have considered raising hay for the horse market, vegetables for farmers markets, fruit trees and various berry bushes, managing their woodlots for future timber, alternative forest crops including mushrooms and maple syrup, craft supplies, and recreation and tourism.

The county is served by Highways U.S. 421 & KY 80, with the Hal Rogers Parkway serving as an East/West corridor. Although county roads have improved in the last several years, many gravel and dirt roads are still used on a regular basis by county residents.

The county's public water system is accessible to about 75% of the population. The public sewer system serves the county seat of Hyden and a few miles surrounding town.

Electricity and telephone service is available to everyone in the county. A 40 bed hospital in Hyden serves most of the county's health needs. Fire protection is provided by six volunteer fire departments. Leslie County has a county-wide house to house solid waste collection program. We still have many collection problems and illegal dumps. There are recycling bins placed throughout the county for paper, plastics and metals.

Review of the Process

The Leslie County Agriculture Development Council made every effort to insure as many people as possible were aware that their input was needed for the comprehensive plan. Council members talked to people within their community about the plan and asked people for ideas and to come to the meeting. Those individuals who were not able to attend the meeting left their ideas with council members to present. Notices of the meeting were included in the extension newsletter which has a circulation of approximately 1000. The council continues to seek ideas from citizens within the community.

Assessments

Strengths

One of the primary strengths of this county is the population is resilient to adversity. Poverty has been a constant factor to deal with in this community. The consistent unavailability of large job producing factories and businesses has created an enterprising and innovative workforce. The county is not totally dependent upon agriculture, especially tobacco, for survival. Leslie County has a bountiful resource in its timber. The same timber provides a landscape that is beautiful and has potential to draw tourists. Future enterprises in this county could develop from the natural resource base. As many strengths as the county has, we still have weaknesses to overcome. The population is aging, some face addiction and most young people need to leave the county to find good jobs.

This aging population is resistant to change. Garbage and water quality problems are being addressed, but these issues are still a major problem. The county has a weak infrastructure in the way of poor roads, public water and sewer. Transportation is a major problem for a large portion of the population, especially in the winter. Many secondary roads are narrow and unpaved. One of the major hurdles new businesses face is the lack of knowledge in how to identify markets.

Opportunities

Even though agriculture is not a major industry in Leslie County, we still have opportunities for businesses based on agriculture. There is a strong tradition and knowledge of heritage crops such as heirloom varieties of fruit, vegetable, and native medicinal herbs. There is a renewed interest in gardening and through the NRCS programs and starting a local farmers market.

The Appalachian culture itself is a marketing tool, and can bring value to products produced here. The Daniel Boone National Forest covers a large portion of the county and could be a tremendous asset to the county in tourism and forest products. Leslie County has access to natural gas reserves that could be helpful to developing enterprises. The county is in the process of extending water lines throughout the county. This project could make it possible for people in more remote areas to have access to resources they otherwise might not in their location.

Threats

Once again, the aging population could be considered a threat to success in Leslie County. Also, many working citizens were dependent upon the coal industry for their income, and this industry has no replacement. Many talented individuals are unwilling to turn a hobby into a business, and are fearful of organized marketing activities that could benefit them. We are also seeing a large threat from the opioid epidemic.

County Council Objective

The goal of this council is to make it possible for those involved in some aspect of farming to be able to stay farming and provide food for their families. We would like to encourage producers to try new business ideas, diversify and capitalize on the untraditional markets.

We would also like to support those who are interested in an agriculture enterprise start one.

MISSION/VISION STATEMENT

The Leslie County Agriculture Development Council seeks to work with Leslie County citizens to promote and diversify agriculture in the county. We will serve as a resource for producers to try new ideas and improve on current agriculture operations. We will also help those who have not been in agriculture start new ventures. We hope to serve producers and help get their ideas off the ground.

Short Term Priorities

Our first and foremost goal is to help feed families and to help support the improvement and expansion of their operations. We want those people who are involved in agriculture to be able to stay in agriculture. We would like to identify existing agriculture organizations and help them achieve their long term goals.

Long Term Goals

Long term goals for the most part involving helping producers or interested citizens start new enterprises. Some ideas that have been identified by the community as feasible for Leslie County are elderberry, apple and blueberry orchards, mushroom cultivation, greenhouse operations, cattle production and horticulture ventures. Any reasonable proposal will be considered.

Another long term goal that was discussed is getting involved with the water line extension the county is working towards. Adequate water and sewage service would improve opportunities for business ventures in more remote parts of the county.

Tactics for Leveraging Funds

Funds from this account will be awarded on a cost share basis rather than outright grant. The producer needs to show in-kind labor, matching funds, personal funds or equipment for at least 25% of the total cost of the project. Need and use of funds should be clearly outlined and reasonable. Project needs to show economic sustainability for the future. The proposal needs to clearly define who is responsible for the funds and to where the funds will go. If the project is part of a multi-county or area project, the funds requested from Leslie County should be at least proportional to the benefit Leslie County will receive relative to the funds we have allocated to our county as a whole.

EVALUATION AND REVIEW

Each proposal will be evaluated and reviewed based on how well the proposal is outlined and written, as well as the nature of the project. We expect project goals to be outlined in the proposal, and these goals need to be met in a reasonable amount of time. Producers should receive instruction and guidance from appropriate public agencies for accuracy. Availability of other funding sources will be considered. Quarterly progress reports will be expected of those organizations who were awarded the funds.