

Madison County
Agricultural Development Council

Update of
COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

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Madison 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.

1. Overview of County

Madison County has long been one of the leading agricultural counties in the state. Since its creation in the late 1700s, local residents have been involved in growing crops and raising livestock to meet their family's needs and to sell in the market place. Over the years, tens of millions of dollars of revenue have been generated through farming, which in turn had a multiplier effect, supporting other related jobs, and turning over money in the local economy. While income has remained relatively high despite large losses of on farm income due tobacco production decline, other less positive trends have been taking place. The number of farmers has declined, along with the number of farms. More farmers have turned to farming on a part-time basis and are working in industries or services in order to support their families. The average age of farmers has steadily increased. There are also challenges and many barriers to entry for young and beginning farmers to enter the industry. Some agricultural diversification has taken place within the county. However, beef cattle and forage production is the main source of income for many Madison County farmers.

a. Agricultural statistics, trends, & projections (i.e. Census Data)

▪ Traditional agricultural production

In recent years agriculture has focused largely on raising beef cattle, hay and an increasing amount of corn and soybeans. The market value of all farm products sold in 2022 totaled 63.6 million dollars. Crops accounted for 1.8 million, while livestock accounted for 45.6 million. There are approximately 1,164 farms in the county at an average size of 165 acres. From 2017 to 2022, the percentage of total land in farms in Madison County has dropped from 82% to 69% or by 38,078 acres. As of 2022 there are 191,746 acres of farmland.

▪ Non-traditional agricultural production

We have a small number of greenhouse operations that produce bedding plants, hanging baskets, and vegetable plants. Overall there is a limited amount of commercial horticultural production in Madison County. Production related to aquaculture, timber management, and beekeeping has been very limited however we are seeing an increase in certain areas.

Few have ventured into non-traditional enterprises. However, some have been successful.

- New & emerging agricultural production

Industrial hemp production opportunities failed to materialize for several reasons. Some Madison County farm owners are pursuing opportunities for industrial scale solar as land leases or outright sale. We have seen a slow increase in acres of corn and soybeans and are currently at 2,000 acres and 2,300 acres of each respectively as of 2024. Niche markets have emerged as new opportunities in the areas of retail meat sales, farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA).

- Tobacco dependency

Currently the economy in Madison County as a whole is not particularly dependent on tobacco production with just two producers. Various other employment opportunities exist in manufacturing, healthcare, education, transportation, and government. However, the limited amount of tobacco production remaining is an important source of income for those involved.

b. Demographic Data

- Social data

Madison County has approximately 99,582 residents, many of which reside in the cities of Richmond and Berea. Most of the 446 square miles of land area in Madison County is comprised of farmland and related uses. Poverty rate is approximately 13.8%. Percentage of the population that is non-white is 8.7% and approximately 15.0% of the population is over the age of 65. The average Madison County farmer age is 58.6 however 39.9% of our farmers are age 65 or older. Approximately 37.9% report farming as their primary occupation.

- Economic data

As of 2022, there are approximately 1,164 farm operations in Madison County of which 2,033 people receive direct income. Median household income is \$62,407 with an unemployment rate of 5.5%. Among 45,817 jobs, the largest employers are in the sectors of public administration, manufacturing, and retail trade.

2. Assessments of the County

a. Strengths

Farmland is valuable and farmers still control much of the county's land area (69.5%). There is a high demand for beef cattle and forages and the county has large areas of suitable soils for these practices. Farmers have skills/expertise in beef cattle and forage production. There are a number of groups/organizations available to assist local farmers- EKU, Madison County Cattleman's Assoc., UK Cooperative Extension, Conservation District and NRCS, FSA, Farm Bureau, and Berea College.

Madison County has good access to markets via I-75 and is within one day's drive - 8-10 hours of ½ of US population. Within 2 ½ hours of 5 metro areas. Bluegrass Stockyards of Richmond provides producers with a local livestock market for beef cattle and other livestock.

b. Weaknesses

Decline of tobacco production and increasing pressures from development in rural areas is a concern. Although the factors are variable and complex, we are losing valuable farmland at an increasing rate. Advanced age of farmers is a challenge with 59 years being the average age. There is interest by younger generations to be involved in agriculture, however many barriers to entry exist which make it difficult to get started. Not many are financially able to overcome the startup cost challenges which include land, capital and operating expenses. Again, this is a dynamic and ongoing issue. Lower levels of productivity and need for increased efficiency; there is room for improving the profit margin both in livestock and crop production. Dwindling labor supply resulting in increasing dependence upon migrant labor - often resulting in less or no productivity. A final concern is the lack of critical mass of some products for marketing and a deficiency in marketing skills. Increasing costs of equipment/technology on the farm and underutilization of technology - computers, internet, record keeping, GPS, etc.

c. Opportunities

- Generally strong national, regional economies for our farm products
- Gaps/niches for new markets in certain emerging agricultural enterprises
- Funds are available for assistance to some new crops and markets
- Increasing access to information and services
- A growing consumer population (state, national and international)
- Increasing demand for many agricultural products
- Technological advancement opportunities
- Farmers can capitalize on continued beef demand
- Some farmers are still seeking alternative options to tobacco for farm income

d. Challenges

- Urban sprawl and development. Industrial solar farm installations
- Prime/general use farmland being developed in certain areas of the county
- Lack of farm labor
- Increasing environmental regulation and governmental oversight
- Lack of young/beginning farmers
- Several barriers to entry for new/beginning farmers
- Farm start-up capital
- Healthcare and insurance concerns for full-time farmers
- Attacks on conventional/traditional agriculture production practices by outside groups with agenda/political driven biases

3. County Council Objectives

a. Mission/Vision Statement

The Madison County Agricultural Development Council has developed a Vision Statement expressing their perception of what farming in the county should look like in the future: "Provide a rural setting that is, 1) conducive to traditional farm values, 2) economically stable, 3) environmentally sound, and 4) that retains valuable farmland."

b. Short term goals

- Increased productivity of farm commodities (Value-added options)
- Improved beef management to increase profit
- Continue to educate farmers in the areas of best management practices, conservation/stewardship, new market opportunities, and increasing production efficiency.
- Emphasize improved grazing practices, feed/hay use efficiency, and forage production.
- Continue to utilize the KADF & CAIP for farm infrastructure improvement opportunities and shared-use equipment purchases.
- Set aside a portion of county ag development funds for new opportunities.

c. Long term goals

- Diversify the agricultural base if possible
- Increase productivity of existing crops/livestock
- Improve the market system opportunities and value-added programs
- Provide needed infrastructure in support of agriculture
- Maintain an agricultural planning and development process
- Support the expansion and efficiency of livestock and forage based operations since they comprise the majority of farm income.
- Regional and group approaches will be explored to develop projects as our farming community adapts to the absence of tobacco production.

d. Tactics for leveraging funds

- Regional partnerships
 - Kentucky Office of Agricultural Policy (KOAP)
 - Kentucky Agriculture Development Fund (KADF)
 - Regional agriculture lenders
 - Kentucky Farm Bureau
 - Kentucky Cattlemen's Association
 - Conservation District/NRCS
- State Agricultural Development Board resources
 - KOAP staff
 - Feasibility analysis/discussion
 - Guidance regarding compliance and implementation
 - Matching funds for county projects
 - CAIP, Shared Use, DAR and special requests as needed

- Other local/state/federal resources

Madison County Farm Bureau
Madison County Conservation District
KY Division of Conservation
Local Ag Lending Institutions
Madison County Beef Cattle Association
Madison County Cooperative Extension
NRCS/FSA Offices via USDA
Small Business Development Center

3. Evaluation & Review

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

Projects being proposed for funding should follow the application procedures provided by the State KADF Board and KOAP. The Madison County Extension Service will assist the Madison County Agricultural Development Council and administering groups by providing information regarding compliance with guidelines and application procedures. Should there be any inconsistencies between this plan and state guidelines, state requirements shall prevail. Project proposals will be evaluated to ensure that they are consistent with the Madison County Comprehensive Plan and investment priorities. This process will be modified as need and circumstances dictate.

- b. How is success and failure measured?

Successful proposals to the Madison County Agricultural Development Council will receive a funding amount and a high priority ranking. Other proposals that are not approved will receive no funding and a low priority rating. Formal evaluations are not typically done, but successful projects have been those that positively impact the Madison County agricultural community through new markets and/or technology, increased production efficiency or increased market price.

- c. How will the county comprehensive plan be revised?

The Madison County Comprehensive Plan will be revised based on input from the Madison County Agricultural Development Council and many other local and regional stakeholders as required by KOAP and State Board directives.