

# **OWSLEY COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN**

**Revised: 06-12-2025**

## **Owsley County Agriculture Development Council 2025**

Denise Hoffman – Extension, Chairman

James Cornett– FSA, Vice-Chair

Craig Callahan- Extension

Gary McIntosh - Conservation

Gary Bowling - Conservation

Tommy Wilson - FSA

Dalton Callahan – Young Farmer

Edward Baker – Young Farmer

Melissa Dooley - Minority

\*Facilitator

Paul Sizemore, Owsley

CEA/Agriculture and Natural Resources

## **Overview of Owsley County**

An agrarian county, Owsley County has 84 farms totaling 21,686 acres in farm land. Much of this land is in forest lands. Tobacco has been the mainstay of agriculture in the county until now. While there is an increasing amount of diversification into vegetables and cattle, these alternatives were almost always in addition to tobacco. Other crops grown in Owsley County include cabbage, pepper, strawberries, corn, hay and various fruit trees. Animals raised in Owsley include goats, beef cattle and horses. Some Owsley County farmers have begun to look at new crops. Some of the new and emerging agriculture production includes vegetables, mushrooms, grapes, organic vegetable production, pumpkins and squash. Owsley County was one of the most tobacco dependent counties but now has no Tobacco on record being produced. This accounts for the majority of the county's loss of farm income.

Bordered by Breathitt, Jackson, Lee, Leslie and Clay Counties, Owsley County is located in the Southern Cumberland forestry region which includes the Daniel Boone National Forest. Although Daniel Boone National Forest extends into Owsley, much of the forest land is owned by private individuals. The forests are made up primarily of hardwoods like white oak, red oak and hickory.

The South Fork of the Kentucky River flows through the county. Some of the richest and most under utilized farm land in the county is located in large river bottoms along the South Fork.

Compared to other Kentucky counties, Owsley is small. According to the 2020 US Census, the population of Owsley County is 4,051 with 33.1% living at a poverty income level. This 4,051 in population represents a loss of 3.1% in population from the 2010 Census. Median household income in Owsley County is \$29,340 The loss of tobacco income coupled with the effects of welfare reform place Owsley County as one of the poorest counties in Kentucky.

Owsley County lags behind Kentucky and the nation in all income categories: median household income, median family income and per capita income. Wages and salaries account for the highest proportion of mean household income. Owsley County is more dependent on farm income than other counties in the Kentucky River ADD or Kentucky as a whole. It is somewhat more dependent on farming than the nation as a whole. For this reason, the loss of tobacco income is having a devastating effect on county income.

Owsley County has no large manufacturing plants and many Owsley Countians drive 25 minutes or more to work each day and 10.6% were commuting 45 minutes or more to their place of employment. The two largest employers in Owsley County are the Owsley County Board of Education and The Owsley County Nursing Home. Federal, state and local government agencies make up the other primary employers.

In addition to good agricultural land, especially rich river bottomland, Owsley County has farmers with years of experience, adequate farm equipment and a variety of established organizations with an interest in an agricultural future.

Through technology, Owsley County has access to all forms of statistical data and information sources. The University of Kentucky Agriculture Extension Services stands ready to assist with our needs. Other agencies, the Conservation Board, the county and city governments and the Owsley County School System are available for assistance whenever needed.

Owsley County has access to valuable human resources through the support of local organizations. The Booneville/Owsley Industrial Authority has committed to assist in the economic development of our area.. The Industrial Authority has a building ready for

occupancy in Lone Oak Industrial Park. Fiber optic cabling has been extended to the industrial park. And The University Of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service Has built a new office in the Industrial Park and most recently South fork Metal has opened under new ownership.

## **Assessments**

### **A. Strengths**

Strengths include a large number of tobacco farms with good agricultural land, extensive hardwood forests, many good barns and a good collection of farm equipment. Many farms have access to water for irrigation, including a number of farms with river bottoms on the South Fork of the Kentucky River. Owsley County is in a good central location, with proximity to a large population within 6-8 hours driving time. The county is blessed with unspoiled scenic beauty. There are a number of skilled farmers with years of experience. The Owsley County Farmers Market is located on the Owsley County High School Farm and open to all producers. Owsley has a very active Farm to School Program.

### **B. Weaknesses**

The number of farmers in the county has been declining. Although these farmers have good production skills, they often lack the tools to market what they can produce. Young people are forced to leave the county for employment and those that stay travel long distances for low paying jobs. A low priority is put on education in the county and many residents have few entrepreneurial skills coupled with a lack of initiative. The county lacks infrastructure such as good roads, adequate sewage, and industry.

### **C. Opportunities**

County Council money is the first glimmer of hope tobacco farmers have seen in a long time. Many farmers who wish to continue farming realize they must diversify and now there will be money available to help them diversify. Farmers need marketing skills that they can receive through various programs offered by the Extension Service. The Farmers market can be used in such a way as to provide additional income to the farmers.

### **D. Challenges**

The lack of young farmers poses a significant threat to agriculture in the county. This is exacerbated by a general loss of the young people who are forced to leave the county to find employment. Due to the failure of past cooperative efforts there is

great resistance to farmers cooperating in the future. Farmers here are resistant to change and new ideas. There is a trend toward absentee land ownership.

## **Owsley County Council Objectives**

- A. The mission of the Owsley County Agriculture Development Council is to provide leadership in the transition from a tobacco dependent economy to a more diversified and healthy economy.
- B. The council has identified the following short term priorities:
  - 1. Livestock
    - A. Improve herd genetics
    - B. Improve forage
    - C. Increase herd size
    - D. Improve infrastructure
  - 2. Horticulture
    - A. Expand horticultural crops
    - B. Add value to all horticultural crops
    - C. Promote the Farmers Market
    - D. Improve infrastructure
  - 3. Wood Products
    - A. Encourage value added marketing of wood products

It is suggested that farmers work together as groups to cooperative produce and market the above products and livestock.

### **C. The council has identified the following long term goals:**

- Goal #1:** Support an increased number of farmers planning and pooling resources,
- Goal #2:** Provide infrastructure for agriculture needs,
- Goal #3:** Provide for more value added forestry products,
- Goal #4:** Support the establishment of a core large scale industry,
- Goal #5:** Support tourism and recreational activities,
- Goal #6:** Support the Owsley County Farmers Market.

### **D. Tactics for Leveraging Funds**

Whenever possible the council will encourage applicants for County Council funds

to seek other funding, state and federal, with similar guidelines Or if a project will employ several people, one should look to the economic development council for additional funding. In some cases, these could be the required matching funds. Applicants will be encouraged to look for partners locally and on a regional level. However, regional or multiple county projects must show that the project provides a benefit to the county in proportion to the requested funding.

## **Evaluation and Review**

Applicants will be expected to follow the guidelines as laid out in the state or county application. (50% Or 75/25% match is required). The administrator will evaluate and review each proposal according to our priorities and the score sheets for the C.A.I.P. participants. State guidelines and criteria will always be considered in prioritizing proposals.

Applicants will be expected to provide the required matching funds. The applicant should also be prepared to show a well-developed and thought out business plan for Projects, Parts of this would include, but would not be limited to:

- A clear description of the project
- A marketing plan
- A management plan
- A financial management plan

Success or failure of projects will be measured by the profitability as well as the benefit to farmers and the economy of the local community.

The Owsley County Comprehensive Plan will be reviewed by the County Council and updated based on the needed changes every five years from this date forward.