



Russell County 2023 Situation Analysis Report



Staff

Scott Jessee, Senior Agent ANR and Unit Coordinator

Ashley Clark, Extension Agent 4-H

Kristen Gibson, Associate Extension Agent Family and Consumer Science

Dreama McGlothlin, Administrative Assistant and Fiscal Manager

Bill Worrell, Extension Agent Forestry

ELC Members

Bruce Warner, Russell County Farm Bureau

William Monk, Russell County Cattlemen's Association

Zac Ketron, Abingdon Feeder Cattle Association

Phillip Bundy, Farmer, Lebanon

Laura Usher, 4-H Horse Club Leader

Sarah Barrett, 4-H Stockman's Club Volunteer

Katie Elsea, USDA – Farm Service Agency

Valerie Rice, Educator – Russell County Public Schools

Key Issues

Agriculture: Maintaining production and improving profitability

While Russell County remains a strong county for agriculture, citizens are concerned about farm profitability, preserving farmland, and water quality. By 2050, the amount of U.S. farmland that will transition to new ownership will equal in acreage to the land of the original Louisiana Purchase. Not only do we need consumers that understand modern agricultural practices, we need to continue to educate current land owners how to successfully plan their estate to preserve the family farm.

Promoting Ag Literacy among children and adults

Although most Russell Countians have a rural background, recent research has demonstrated that many lack awareness of agriculture. As beef cattle and forestry continue to be the major industries in the county, promoting ag literacy to all generations will help consumers make the connection between grocery store and farm.

Improving nutrition and chronic disease prevention

Nutrition continues to be a key issue in improving the health and wellness of citizens in Russell County. Issues of nutrition span all age groups and good practices should be taught early. Poor nutritional choices have the potential to greatly affect future quality of life. The rise of poor nutrition and obesity often goes hand in hand with the increase of chronic diseases such as type II diabetes and heart disease. Efforts to communicate and teach the importance of good nutrition and chronic disease prevention is greatly needed.

Strengthening youth leadership and personal development

Helping youth develop leadership, citizenship, and other life skills was identified as one of the greatest issues facing youth in Russell County. Virginia Cooperative Extension continues to address these issues by offering 4-H Clubs and Day Camps throughout the year as well as Junior 4-H Camp once per year to focus on developing leadership, citizenship, and other life skills in youth. Partnerships have also been established with public and private schools within Russell County in order to provide school enrichment programs to allow hands-on learning while also allowing youth to develop these essential skills.

Introduction

VCE Russell County conducted a Situation Analysis during the calendar year of 2023 to identify issues that would guide educational programming for the next five years. The Russell County ELC represents a cross section of the population and demographics of Russell County. Representatives from county leadership, agriculture, youth, education, health care and ethnic groups came together with the VCE Unit Office to share their ideas and glean thoughts from others within their circles of influence. That said, our main source of information was a customized survey approved by the VA Tech IRB offered both on-line and via hardcopies offered mainly to Agriculture groups. Our survey was offered online and advertised on social media.

This report is a compilation of the approximately 95 survey responses as well as conversations with Community members and key informants. Survey takers were encouraged to write in opinions they felt were omitted by the survey choices.

Unit Profile

General

Russell County is located in Southwest Virginia and it lies within the Ridge and Valley providence of the Appalachian Highlands. It is separated from West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee by a semi-circle of other counties. Russell County is relatively rectangular in shape (34 miles long and 15 miles wide – approximately 306,560 acres). Lebanon, the county seat, is about 35 miles north of Bristol, 155 miles southwest of Roanoke, and 328 miles southwest of Richmond. The county was named after Colonel William Russell, who assisted in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. The county has been the home of several well-known persons such as Daniel Boone, Governor H.C. Stuart, Senator M.M. Long, State Senators Phillip Puckett and Ben Chafin, and the Honorable Bruce Warner.

Population and Age Group Data

The data indicated that the population of Russell County has decreased through the period of 2019 – 2023 (27,141 – 25,932).

During the years 2019 - 2023, the greatest changes in population were documented in four groups (40-44: -0.72%; 50-54: -0.23%, 60-64: -0.56%, and 65-69: -0.90%. Population by race is as follows: White – 96.7%, Black – 1.0%, Hispanic – 1.1, and all others – 1.2%. Given the homogeneity of the population, one strong point among Extension educational offerings is the parity of programming inviting participation among racial groups. The office strives to always seek and serve underserved audiences and we seek to enlist volunteers that can speak to the needs of citizens.

Kids in school (elementary and high school) fluctuated greatly from 2019 to 2023 with 1,055 fewer students enrolled. Although there has been a significant decrease in student numbers, the numbers of Nursery/Pre-K children have remained relatively constant.

Education

From 2018 – 2022 citizens who were 25 years or older who completed high school and/or received specialized training without a degree equaled 82.9%. During the same time period, those of the same age classification who completed a Bachelor's Degree or higher equaled 12.6%. This rate is approximately 3.4 times less than the state average. Population by highest level of education is as follows: No degree – 17%; High School – 41%, Some college – 30%; Bachelors – 9%; and Post-grad – 4%. The percentage of people with college degrees is significantly lower than the State average. We feel that the reason behind this is that few of our industries in the county require advanced degrees.

Medical Conditions and Insurance

92.7% of the population of Russell County, VA has health coverage.

- 38.1% on employee plans
- 21.4% on Medicaid
- 22.8% on Medicare
- 8.51% on non-group plans
- 1.83% on military or VA plans.

Between 2020 and 2021, the percent of uninsured citizens in Russell County, VA declined by 0.75% from 8.08% to 7.33%.

The major medical complications affecting people in Russell County include: diseases of the heart, Malignant Neoplasms (Cancer), Diabetes, and Obesity. In 2022, the percentage of adults who are current smokers (age-adjusted) was 25.4%. The percentage of adults age 18 and over reporting no leisure-time physical activity (age-adjusted) was 33.9%.

Personal Income

Economically, Russell County citizens make significantly less per capita than other areas of the state. Per capita income is \$25,939 – which is about half the amount reported for Virginia (\$47,210). Median household income is \$44,088 – which about half of the amount reported for Virginia (\$87,249). Household incomes are as follows: Under \$50K – 62%; \$50 to \$100K – 27%; \$100-200K – 10%; and over \$200K – 1%. We have had some expansions of local businesses and a new industry settle in the county as of late, but their numbers will hardly compensate for the jobs that have been lost to closings and industries moving overseas.

Those living in poverty in Russell County are estimated at 19.3% by the US Census Bureau. The poverty rate for the state of Virginia is 10.6%. By age those under 18 years is 17.3%, 18 to 64 years of age is 21%, and 65 years and older is 16.6%.

Household data

In 2021, 76.1% of the housing units in Russell County, VA were occupied by their owner. This percentage grew from the previous year's rate of 74.8%. People in Russell County, VA have an average commute time of 28.2 minutes, and they drove alone to work. Car ownership in Russell County, VA is higher than the national average, with an average of 3 cars per household.

Single parents continue to make up 40% of household in Russell County. As a result of broken homes, there appears to be an increase of grandparents giving primary care of their grandchildren.

Employment

Many in Russell County work full-time. 64.7% of these are employed by private companies, local / state / and federal government workers are 20.1%, private not-for-profit wage workers are 8.4%, and self-employed workers are 6.7%. Many of these workers commute an average of 27.6 minutes and the majority of these drive alone.

The largest employer was educational and health care services (23.4%), along with retail trade (14.6%), manufacturing (10.8%) and agriculture and forestry (6.4%).

Crime

Russell, VA County has a lower rate of violent crime than the national average, coming in at 12.2 compared to 22.7 across the US. Property crime in Russell, VA County is also lower than the national average, with 30.5 incidents per 1,000 people compared to 35.4 per 1,000 nationwide. Despite this decreased level of crime relative

to other areas of the country, residents should take necessary precautions and stay informed about safety measures to ensure their protection while living in Russell County.

Agriculture

The sale of beef cattle continues to be the driving force behind successful agricultural operations in Russell County. Newcomers and young farmers continue to have limited success seeking out alternative crops and marketing schemes, largely because the local population and economic data does not support direct to public ventures. Russell County is fortunate to have five farm suppliers within its borders. Many counties do not have this luxury.

The hillside terrains of Russell County are the perfect place to grow both grass and trees. Despite the difficulty of estimating production and fiscal transactions, forestry contributes significantly each year to the economy of Russell County.

The time between the 2018 and present Situational Analysis also saw a consolidation of farming operations. As older farmers retire, land and animal assets are combined with existing farms to make larger units. Although the number of farms may decrease slightly, the majority of the land continues to stay in production.

Climate

The average rainfall is about 42 inches, the average last frost date is May 10 and the average first frost date is October 15. This can vary as much as 10 days from different elevations in the county.

Community and Resident Perspectives

General

Overall, citizens feel that Russell County has a bright future and are still willing to invest in young people. They acknowledged that many news topics covered within local media outlets are largely negative.

Jobs

The need for living wage jobs continues to be a major focus of the citizens of the county. Residents also acknowledge that the inability for many working aged adults to pass a drug test is a huge deterrent to many seeking employment. Entrepreneurship is a trend among citizens but declining population figures and lower disposable income totals limit self-employment opportunities.

Labor

Similar to the “Jobs” heading above, employers are finding that windows of opportunity close on them quickly in our county because they are unable to attract and retain competent workers who can provide services their industries require.

Family

Many people feel that the lack of family structure is taking its toll on Russell County. The number of children being raised by grandparents or single parents continues to grow. Factors influencing this phenomenon were identified as drug use, poor life decision, and the lack of spiritualism in the home.

Schools

Citizens feel that our county school system overall is a great asset, but schools are not without their challenges. A growing number of students are home schooled, and the pay scale and benefit packages offered by our public schools make it more and more difficult to hire and retain top classroom teachers. Most school employees are lifelong residents of the county with values that go beyond pay bands. Unfortunately, Russell County is at the bottom of the pay scale for educators in Virginia.

Crime

While our overall crime rate is low, citizens are concerned about the upward trends of drug abuse and the accompanying violent and property crime that travels with the rate of drug use.

Agriculture

Several themes under agriculture were recognized by our farm groups (Abingdon Feeder Cattle Association, Russell County Cattlemen Association, and Farm Bureau.) Issues identified included preserving farm land, working to improve profitability, controlling invasive species, and protecting water quality. In addition to these issues, they also stated that too much emphasis is being placed on niche marketing at the expense of traditional farming enterprises, especially livestock-based agriculture.

Community Issues

Members of the unit and situation analysis team reviewed the data gathered by the Qualtrics survey process. Many issues were identified, but efforts of the unit will be concentrated on issues in which we have the best resources to address. Utilizing community partnership (local school system, Russell County Cattlemen's Association, Abingdon Feeder Cattle Association, Farm Bureau, etc), we will focus efforts to generate the greatest impacts.

Future Programming to Address Community Issues

Agriculture: Maintaining production and improving profitability

While Russell County remains a strong county for agriculture, citizens are concerned about farm profitability, preserving farmland, and water quality. We plan to continue the popular Virginia Quality Assured Marketing Program for beef producers. This program has added over \$10 million to the economy of Southwest Virginia. Working with Russell County Cattlemen's Association and Abingdon Feeder Cattle Association, we plan to provide programs that are relevant to the day-to-day production obstacles faced by producers. By helping farmers understand how cost-share programs operate at the state and federal levels, meaningful infrastructural improvements can be made and water quality can be improved at the same time.

By 2050, the amount of U. S. farmland that will transition to new ownership will equal in acreage to the land of the original Louisiana Purchase. Not only do we need consumers that understand modern agricultural practices, we need to continue to educate current land owners how to successfully plan their estate to preserve the family farm.

Promoting Ag Literacy among children and adults

Agricultural literacy continues to be a high priority for our office and like the "Strengthening Families" issue, the approach is very much interdisciplinary. Production practices need to be understood and improvements, where possible, need to be implemented, but true sustainability is not about production practices. True farm sustainability involves the preservation of both profits and people who farm professionally. We can and do promote the importance of Agriculture as the economic engine of our county and region. Our 4-H Stockman's Club is focused on the need for helping everyone understand agriculture. The 4-H Ag Field Day helps 4th graders as they prepare for SOL's and links ag topics and animals in an interactive learning process.

Improving nutrition and chronic disease prevention in Russell

Family and Consumer Science, ANR, and 4-H programming are all essential in tackling the issue of nutritional improvement and chronic disease prevention in Russell County. Youth can learn about and form good habits early that will carry over into better nutritional choices as adults. Information on home food production and gardening can help provide healthy alternatives. Adults looking to combat obesity and improve their nutrition could benefit from healthy food preservation programs such as canning, freezing, fermenting, and dehydration. Diabetes

prevention programming and education can give support to those who are struggling and want to make a positive change.

Strengthening youth leadership and personal development in Russell County

Helping youth develop leadership, citizenship, and other life skills was identified as one of the greatest issues facing youth in Russell County. Virginia Cooperative Extension continues to address these issues by offering 4-H Clubs and Day Camps throughout the year as well as Junior 4-H Camp once per year to focus on developing leadership, citizenship, and other life skills in youth. Partnerships have also been established with public and private schools within Russell County in order to provide school enrichment programs to allow hands-on learning while also allowing youth to develop these essential skills.

Visit Virginia Cooperative Extension: ext.vt.edu

Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments. Its programs and employment are open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, sex (including pregnancy), gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, military status, or any other basis protected by law.

2024

VCE-596-90NP (VCE-1175-90NP)