

St. Lucie County Western Lands Study



Options and Opportunities for the Future

*Summary: January 14, 2010,
Educational Forum and
Public Input Workshop*

THE ST. LUCIE COUNTY WESTERN LANDS STUDY: OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Summary: January 14, 2010, Educational Forum and Public Input Workshop

Topic: Preserving Farmland through Profitable Agriculture

Location: The University of Florida Indian River Research and Education Center, 2199 South Rock Road, Fort Pierce, Florida.

Structure: The workshop was divided into four components (agenda attached):

- Introductions and overview of the western lands
- A national overview of economic development tools for maintaining farmland through profitable agriculture
- A review of economic development tools for maintaining farmland in Florida
- Questions and feedback

The Western Lands Study: The St. Lucie County, Florida, Board of County Commissioners initiated the Western Lands Study in the fall of 2009. The study addresses the fundamental issues related to the future land uses of nearly 195,000 acres in the western part of St. Lucie County - the heart of the county's agricultural economy. The goal is to develop a plan that considers new and innovative planning tools and strategies and will protect and enhance property values, promote smart growth, foster continued agricultural production, and ensure the cost effective provision of local government services. The premise for the study stems from St. Lucie County's commitment to smart growth and acknowledgement that a functioning network of agriculture, open space, and natural areas is essential for regional sustainability.

Information about the Western Lands Study: To view forum presentations and learn about opportunities for public involvement in the Western Lands Study, go to: www.stlucieco.gov/growth/western_lands.htm or contact Kara Wood, Planning Manager, St. Lucie County Growth Management - phone, 772-462-1589; email, woodk@stlucieco.org; and mail, 2300 Virginia Avenue, Fort Pierce, FL 34982-5652.

Report Organizations: The following summary of the January 14 forum is organized according to the two principal components of the agenda for the day: Speaker Presentations and Participant Feedback.

Speaker Presentations

The day began with introductions and a Western Lands Study review. That was followed by two presentations: An Overview of Economic Development Tools for Maintaining Farmland through Profitable Agriculture and Panel Presentations on the Florida Experience with Growing the Agricultural Economy.

Introductions and Western Lands Study Review

Following an introduction by St. Lucie County Administrator Faye Outlaw, Board of County Commissioners Chair Charles Grande welcomed participants and set the context for the day: how to provide an environment that will maintain the business of agriculture and avoid having rooftops in the western lands. "If we do that, we will have accomplished a lot," Grande noted. "We should not plan for agriculture's departure. That means finding a way to monetize the development value of the land and being open to all ideas before deciding."

Underscoring that point, Western Lands Study project manager Marie York noted that the study process is open to all ideas and is designed to listen to St. Lucie's residents and agricultural landowners. "The study team has no preconceptions," York emphasized. In assessing new ideas, it is important to recognize that "if agriculture is not profitable, St. Lucie County will not have agriculture. Today that continued profitability is in jeopardy for much of the area," York concluded.

The riskiness of farming was highlighted by Dr. William Stronge, Professor Emeritus of Economics, Florida Atlantic University. "The bottom line: citrus is declining," Stronge observed. From 1992 to 2007, the number of acres in farming in St. Lucie County dropped from 300,000 to 153,000, a decline of almost 50 percent. Of the state's citrus counties, St. Lucie County now has the highest amount of abandoned citrus acreage, and the full damaging impacts of greening (currently for which there is no cure) have not yet taken their toll.

An Overview of Economic Development Tools for Maintaining Farmland through Profitable Agriculture

Bob Wagner, Senior Policy and Program Advisor for the American Farmland Trust, provided an overview of four general categories of economic tools that, when used collectively, can help maintain the profitability of farming:

- Making agriculture a core part of local economic development programs, such as removing regulatory barriers to farming, dedicating a person to promote the business of farming, and providing tax and other incentives to target industries and help them grow and diversify.

- Increasing demand for locally produced food by connecting producers of local food with consumers, including county residents, restaurants and institutional users of food, such as schools, hospitals, and other large employers.
- Growing agriculture's role in the production of renewable energy, particularly in the area of biomass production.
- Expanding markets that place an economic value on the ecosystem services provided by farmers and ranchers. For the most part, the public has received those services for free (for example, water storage and treatment, the provision of habitat, and carbon sequestration).

The tools described, Wagner noted, are intended to provide forum participants with information on how other communities around the country address the economic challenges facing agriculture, particularly in areas like St. Lucie County where farming is occurring on the edge of an urban shadow. To continue farming and ranching in that shadow and make the business of agriculture profitable, Wagner emphasized, agricultural landowners will need the ability to layer a number of tools together. A single solution will not work.

Panel Presentations: The Florida Experience with Growing the Agricultural Economy

Wagner's presentation was followed by a panel that described Florida-specific experiences with economic development tools that are enhancing the business of farming and ranching. When introducing the panel, Peter Spyke, Panel Moderator and President of Arapaho Citrus Management, outlined the factors that the Committee for a Sustainable Treasure Coast concluded must be in place to retain the region's rural lands:

- Agriculture must be profitable both now and in the future, providing farmers with sufficient revenue to remain in farming.
- A working Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program must be implemented to maintain the value of lands remaining in agriculture.
- The combination of future revenue and TDR value must give the landowner a value as high as or higher than that of the ranchette or other urban development alternative.

Following those comments:

- Andrew Walmsley (Assistant Director of Agricultural Policy for the Florida Farm Bureau) described initiatives to expand Florida agriculture’s role in producing renewable energy and participating in carbon markets.
- Ann Richmond (Senior Consultant with ENTRIX) reviewed how Florida farmers and ranchers are incorporating environmental services banking, specifically for species and wetlands, into their farm management and business plans and how local governments can facilitate that process.
- Dr. Hilary Swain (Executive Director and Senior Research Biologist with the Archbold Biological Station) highlighted the Florida Ranchlands Environmental Services Project Experience, a Pay-for-Environmental-Services Program that involves eight Florida ranchers.
- Robert Kluson (Agricultural and Natural Resources Extension Agent of Sarasota County) described how the extension office is expanding the demand for locally produced food through a food policy council, a foodshed analysis, and programs to match growers with local food users, for example.

Participant Feedback

Forum participants were divided into breakout groups organized around the six topics of the day (listed to the right). The groups included a broad cross-section of views represented by citrus growers, packers, slow food advocates, civil engineers, builders and developers, cattle ranchers, water managers, conservationists, attorneys, investment companies, and interested citizens.

Each group was asked to offer comments on promising ideas or opportunities and concerns or challenges that should be addressed. Participants could also comments on large post-it notes.

The comments received through both methods of public input are summarized in two ways:

- A review of the common themes that crossed all groups.
- A description of the comments from each breakout group.

Forum Breakout Groups Topics

- Agriculture as a core part of economic development programs
- Increasing demand for locally produced food
- Agriculture’s role in the production of renewable energy
- Agriculture’s participation in carbon markets
- Incorporating conservation banking in farm management and business plans
- Agriculture’s potential roles in watershed

A Review of Common Themes Crossing the Breakout Groups

Forum participant comments called attention to five overarching themes:

One: If agriculture is to be a significant part of the county's future, St. Lucie County needs to play an active and much more aggressive role in growing and supporting the agricultural economy, facilitating the business of farming and ranching, and helping answer the question, "What is the next crop that I can plant?"

Two: Monetizing ecosystem services currently provided for free by agricultural landowners presents an opportunity for new revenue-producing agricultural products. That applies to water storage and purification in particular.

Three: The potential of agriculture to add value through producing renewable energy and sequestering carbon will require further exploration and a supportive local government environment.

Four: There is a high degree of interest in putting in place the networks, venues, and support infrastructure that connect local food producers to consumers (from individuals and restaurants to schools and institutional users of food such as hospitals).

Five: There is no one magic bullet. A full-menu approach is needed to tilt the economics in favor of remaining in agriculture. Landowners must be able to combine a number of options and opportunities in order to create the revenues they need. The type of agricultural operation, the features of the land, and land ownership need to be considered.

Summary of Breakout Group Comments

The comments from the six breakout groups are summarized below. A synopsis (in italics) of the group's findings precedes their comments.

Agriculture as a Core Part of Economic Development Programs

The importance of agriculture to St. Lucie County's quality of life underscores the importance of the public and the county commission investing now in order to assure a strong agricultural economy. That can include hiring an agricultural point person, removing unintended regulatory obstacles to agriculture, investing in research, setting up a system that monetizes the environmental services currently provided by agriculture for free, and helping grow consumption of locally produced food (for example, by establishing a local food council and venues to connect growers with a variety of consumers).

Opportunities:

The comments of several group members frame the list of opportunities to help grow the agricultural economy: “We the public need to realize that we may need to give more to supporting agriculture,” and “So goes farming in St. Lucie County, so goes the quality of life in the county.”

Group members identified a number of ways that St. Lucie County could facilitate the business of agriculture. It should:

- Explore and help facilitate opportunities for monetizing environmental services (water farming, for example) provided by agriculture (also discussed by another group, below).
- Become involved in connecting farmers to consumers through helping to create a local food promotional council, food networks and cooperatives, and promoting events and programs to raise the profile of local agriculture with county residents such as art contests for students and artists that feature local agricultural products. (This topic is discussed in more detail below under Locally Produced Food.)
- Create the position of an agricultural coordinator who can be the voice and advocate for agriculture. The agricultural coordinator could, for example, help the county and non-agricultural community better understand the needs of agriculture, promote new agricultural businesses and activities, and help connect consumers with local products.
- Evaluate the impact of county actions, plans (including the comprehensive plan), rules, and regulations on agriculture and identify any unintended consequences or barriers to current and potential new agricultural ventures. Identifying meaningful economic incentives could also be a part of the process.
- Reinvigorate its contribution to agricultural research.
- With a shrinking citrus presence, help rethink the kind of agriculture practiced in the western lands and what the county could do to help create opportunities for new types of agriculture and farming ventures, this might include facilitating smaller agricultural operations (for example, lifestyle ventures and direct-to-consumer operations).

Concerns:

- The agricultural playing field and opportunities for St. Lucie County agriculture were substantially altered by NAFTA, which is now a fact of life.
- Agricultural and county leaders need to look at what could happen in the western lands if citrus is significantly reduced.

Locally Produced Food

Group members identified a broad range of opportunities for increasing the demand for locally produced food, although concerns were also identified, such as the need for a regulatory environment that is more supportive of small farms and for public education and outreach.

Opportunities:

- Group members highlighted the opportunity to work with diverse groups, for example, those involved in the slow food movement (which involves a commitment to local food and environment) and in farmers' markets. Specific actions should include:
- Sponsoring a labeling of origin campaign to promote awareness and purchase of locally produced food.
- Promoting and facilitating opportunities for agritourism (for example, placing directional signs to agritourism locations on state and county roads).
- Conducting programs that educate residents, businesses, and institutional buyers of food about the importance of buying locally produced food.
- Establishing programs such as farm-to-school to connect producers of locally produced food to potential consumers. That should include creating a dedicated comfortable place for growers, public consumers, and chefs to gather.
- Analyzing the full jobs and market potential of supplying the local food system. That analysis should include research and extension training on the new crops that would meet local consumer demand and take advantage of a nearly 12-month growing season. The analysis should also address the constraints of a seasonal population (noted below as a constraint).

Concerns:

A number of concerns were identified:

- Seasonal variations in population and a public that is used to buying food when they want it (rather than when it is in season) create a fluctuating demand. The need for supply to catch up with demand is also important.
- Mobile and on-farm processing plants are needed to help with distribution.
- Landowners' concerns about liability are a barrier to agritourism.

- A number of regulatory issues impede small agriculture operations. They include state regulations that do not acknowledge small farm exemptions, tariffs that put local food producers at a disadvantage, and health-safety regulations that are costly to comply with.

Agriculture's Role in Renewable Energy Production

Over time, agriculture could play a role in the production of renewable energy, although a number of concerns will need to be addressed, such as pricing, costs, soil limitations, and the need to get new equipment, retrain labor, and learn new technologies.

Opportunities:

The group identified a range of opportunities in the production of renewable energy:

- Land is available in the western lands for producing sources of renewable energy.
- Potential renewable energy sources include solar panels for on-farm private use, wind turbines, biomass, hydro-energy, dedicated bioenergy energy crops, and algae crops that clean water. Producing renewable energy, group members noted, helps with energy independence, the distribution of power, and self sufficiency farmers.
- New bioenergy crops such as sorghum and jatropha present potential opportunities.
- Incentives such as the transfer of development rights can aid in sustainability.

Concerns:

A variety of concerns were identified. In addition to the space required for solar panels, concerns related to the following:

- Climate and soil limitations and the availability of water present challenges that will need to be addressed.
- The catch 22 of getting a permit in place, obtaining conditional use approval, and problems with regulations (for bio-solids and the cow tax, for example) present obstacles to the production of renewable energy.
- Gaining the scientific know-how and the need to switch equipment and retrain labor are barriers that will need to be addressed.
- Another issue is how to establish an integrated buyer and seller market.

Agriculture's Role in Carbon Sequestration

In a nutshell, the group's conclusion was that carbon markets currently do not appear to provide a significant method of protecting the future of agriculture in St. Lucie County and are not suitable for all types of agriculture, including citrus.

Opportunities:

Carbon sequestration can provide an opportunity for some (although not many) of additional revenue for certain types of agriculture, which does not include citrus, breakout group members concluded.

Potential opportunities include:

- Pine plantations, although a longer-term (15 years) investment is required.
- Certain types of pasture grasslands that are managed for carbon sequestration. The provision of grasslands and wetlands could create some synergistic opportunities with ecological restoration as part of conservation species or wetland banking.

Concerns:

As noted above, selling carbon credits will likely be a small source of revenue in a farmer's business plan. Obstacles include the following:

- The price currently received for carbon credits is too low to add value, and the amount and cost of the paperwork required to submit a proposal are too high.
- The length of the contract time (e.g., 15 years) might not be long enough to recoup investments.
- The future of legislation is uncertain, both when it will happen and what it will call for.
- In a carbon market, farmers and ranchers cannot get credit for the carbon they are already sequestering. The carbon sequestered must be in addition to current levels. There is also uncertainty about how to value the additional sequestration and questions related to the ability to recover money for services already provided.
- Landowners could attempt to game the system by destroying habitat and then trying to get credits for restoring it.

- With its lack of soil fertility, St. Lucie County might not be that highly compatible with carbon sequestration.
- Because of the required investment of time and money along with competition from states like Georgia, North Carolina, and Alabama (as well as north Florida) that already have a track record in forest carbon sequestration, planting pine tree plantations to sequester carbon might not be sufficiently profitable to justify selling the carbon credits.

Incorporating Conservation Banking in Farm Management and Business Plans

The revenue from incorporating conservation banking in farm and business plans is not that high and will need to be combined with other revenue sources. To make banking credits more valuable, a multi-agency unified credit system will be needed that allows a landowner to bundle credits.

Opportunities:

Discussions by the South Florida Water Management District to lease land for shallow water storage presents a potential opportunity for landowners in the western lands area. A safe harbor-type program will be needed to protect landowners from a higher environmental standard if, for example, a wetland is created by the water storage. (Modeled after the federal program, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's safe harbor provision provides private landowners with assurances that they will not be penalized by endangered species laws when they manage their land to conserve listed species.)

Concerns:

- The biggest barrier to conservation mitigation banking, group members noted, is that each agency involved in conservation banking uses a different credit system. A unified credit system for all agencies is needed to simplify the use of credits and add to their value.
- Landowners should get credit for providing different forms of conservation banking (called bundling). More flexible and multifaceted mitigation options are needed.
- Concerns were raised about the perpetuity requirement of easements.

Agriculture's Potential Roles in Watershed Management

The ability of agriculture to store and purify water can play an important role in meeting new basin water quality standards and create a new revenue source for farmers and ranchers.

Opportunities:

- New nutrient load requirements for watersheds as a part of Basin Management Plans present an opportunity for monetizing ecosystem services, specifically the involvement of agriculture in water quality mitigation banks and water quality (nutrient) trading.
- Current efforts to reduce the amount of nutrients going into the Indian River Lagoon (IRL) provide a specific opportunity for involving agriculture in meeting water quality standards. Because of its geographic scope, cleaning up the IRL will require cooperation among multiple local government jurisdictions.

Concerns:

A strong market demand is needed if storing and purifying water is to become a financially feasible alternative for agricultural landowners. St. Lucie County can help create that demand by incorporating an ecosystem services approach in its public facilities and infrastructure policies and plans. Examples include linking water quality trading to sewage treatment capacity needs or advanced treatment requirements and linking water storage to water quality and flood protection objectives.

Attachment

THE ST. LUCIE COUNTY WESTERN LANDS STUDY: OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

January 14 Educational Forum and Public Input Workshop: Preserving Farmland through Profitable Agriculture

University of Florida Indian River Research and Education Center
2199 South Rock Road, Fort Pierce, Florida

AGENDA

Setting the Context: St. Lucie County Western Lands and the Agriculture that Sustains Them

- 9:00 Introduction - *Faye W. Outlaw, MPA, County Administrator*
- 9:05 Welcome/Overview - *Charles Grande, Chairman, St. Lucie County
Board of County Commissioners District IV*
- 9:15 The Western Lands Today: The Agricultural Economy - *Marie York,
President, York Solutions and Associate Director, Center for
Building Better Communities at the University of Florida, and Dr.
William Stronge, Professor Emeritus of Economics, Florida Atlantic
University*

An Overview of Tools that Grow the Agricultural Economy

- 9:30 Economic Development Tools for Maintaining Farmland Through
Profitable Agriculture - *Bob Wagner, Senior Director of Farmland
Protection Programs, the American Farmland Trust*
- 10:15 Break
- 10:30 Economic Development Tools for Maintaining Farmland Through
Profitable Agriculture - continued
- 11:00 Participant Clarifying Questions on Economic Development Tools for
Maintaining Farmland

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AGENDA – Continued

Florida Experiences with Growing the Agricultural Economy

11:30 Panel Introduction - *Pete Spyke, Panel Moderator,
and President, Arapaho Citrus Management, Inc.*

Expanding Florida Agriculture's Role in Producing in
Renewable Energy and Participating in Carbon Markets
- *Andrew Walmsley, Assistant Director of Agricultural
Policy, Florida Farm Bureau*

Incorporating Environmental Services Banking into
Florida Farm Management and Business Plans - *Ann
Redmond, Senior Consultant, ENTRIX Senior
Consultant*

12:00 Break / Pick-Up Lunch

Florida Experiences with Growing the Agricultural Economy

12:15 The Florida Ranchlands Environmental Services Project
Experience: A Pay-for-Environmental-Services Program - *Dr.
Hilary Swain, Executive Director and Senior Research Biologist,
Archbold Biological Station*

Growing Demand for Locally Produced Food - *Robert Kluson,
Agricultural and Natural Resources Extension Agent of
Sarasota County*

12:45 Participant Clarifying Questions for Panel Speakers

Participant Evaluation and Next Steps

1:15 Participants Feedback on Ideas from the Day

2:45 Closing Comments and Next Steps - *Mark Satterlee, Director,
St. Lucie County Growth Management Department*

3:00 Adjourn