

Community Supported Agriculture
in
Western North Carolina

Prepared for the
Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project



by

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Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a growing form of direct marketing by farmers in Western North Carolina. CSA is an arrangement whereby consumers pledge to purchase a share of the produce each week from a particular farmer at a price that is established at the start of the growing season. The farmer gains the security of having a guaranteed market for their produce. The consumer receives a variety of fresh, locally-grown produce all season long, as well as the opportunity to know where their food comes from and how it is produced.

A census of CSA programs taken by the USDA Alternative Farming Systems Information Center in 1999 reported no such programs in North Carolina. Today there are 28 North Carolina-based CSA farms registered on the USDA website (www.nal.usda.gov). The Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) has also seen an increase in the number of CSA programs in its project area, which includes the 23 counties of Western North Carolina (WNC). There were 21 CSA farms listed in ASAP's *Local Food Guide* in 2005, up from 10 when ASAP's Buy Local Campaign began in 2000.

In the fall of 2004, twelve CSA farms completed a survey in which they were asked about their CSA programs and the role of ASAP in supporting and promoting the programs. The farms completing the survey represent both large and small CSA farms, well-established programs and relative newcomers. The data provide a look at challenges and opportunities faced by CSA programs and evaluate the effectiveness of ASAP in supporting this type of direct marketing.

The Programs

Of the 12 CSA farms responding to the survey, 9 (75%) began their CSA programs between 2001 and 2004. Two programs started in the 1990's, in 1991 and 1999. The smallest number of shares sold by any one CSA in 2004 was 4, and the largest number that year was 52. In terms of acreage, the largest farm had 7 acres in production in 2004, while the smallest had only a 5000 square foot greenhouse. Table 1 highlights characteristics of the CSA farms surveyed here.

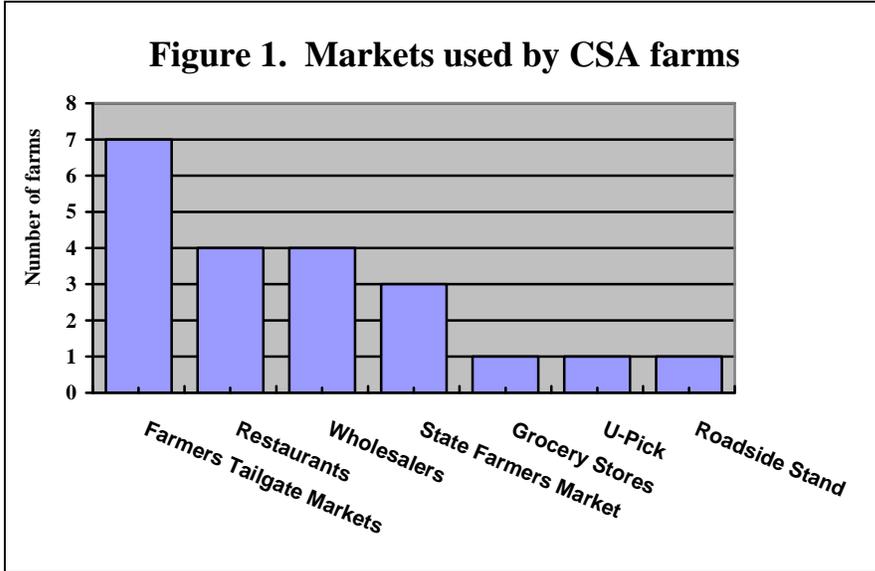
Table 1. General Characteristics of CSA Farms in WNC

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>Average</u>	<u>Range</u>
Years in operation	4.5	1-14
Number of shares sold	27.2	4-52
Acres in production*	3.5	<1 to 7
CSA income as a % of farm income**	45.3%	10-90%

*When answer given was "less than 1", a value of .25 was used for this calculation.

**When a range was given for an answer, the midpoint was used for this calculation.

For all of these farms, the CSA program represents only a portion of their total farm business, some as little as 10% and others as much as 90%. Farmers tailgate markets are the most common venue for selling farm products outside of the CSA, followed by restaurants and wholesalers (see Figure 1).



In addition to selling farm products, CSA programs provide social and educational opportunities for members. Nine of the CSA farms surveyed (75%) encourage members to come to the farm, either for required work hours or for social gatherings such as farm tours and harvest celebrations.

Program Challenges

CSA farming has a unique set of challenges compared to traditional farming. The most significant of these as perceived by farmers is poor public awareness about CSA programs. When asked what resources or information would be helpful for marketing their CSA programs, half of all suggestions (4 of 8) involved public education, including presentations about Community Supported Agriculture for groups such as churches, civic clubs and college organizations. The next most suggested help was print media, including brochures, business cards and fliers.

CSA operators face many of the same challenges faced by other small business owners. For example, they must find effective ways to communicate with members and manage record-keeping requirements. One-third of CSA farms surveyed keep records by hand while the rest use a variety of different types of software. Two thirds of the farms reported using the internet to communicate with members, either for distributing newsletters or sending messages as needed.

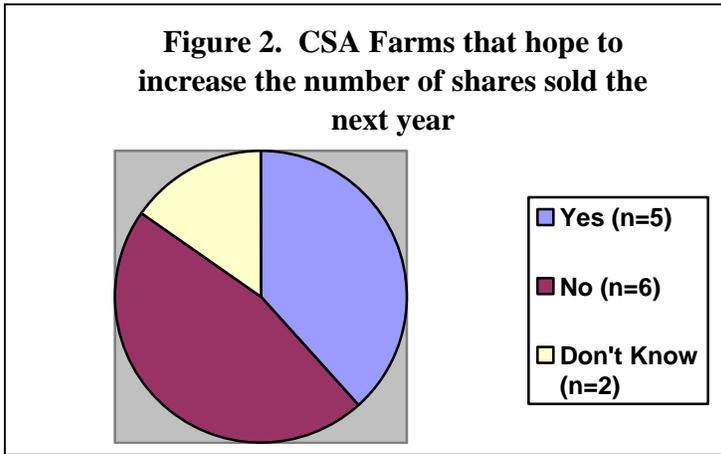
Running a CSA also requires additional time compared to traditional farming for sorting, packing and distributing shares. When asked about their interest in helping to start a

CSA association, five said yes and six said no. Time was the single factor cited for not being willing to participate at that level.

Opportunities for Growth

Nine CSA programs collect feedback in some way from members – some formal and some informal – and most report this to be positive. Members are reportedly satisfied with the farm products as well as the experience of working directly with farmers. Indications are that there is potential for growth in CSA farming based on consumer satisfaction with the model.

Farmers were mixed in their opinions on expanding. Of farmers who answered a question about whether they were interested in expanding in the next growing season, nearly as many said they were as were not (see Figure 2). Further, when asked if they were interested in expanding their CSA to serve groups in the future, only two said yes. Opportunities for growth in this sector may lie in recruiting new CSA farms rather than trying to expand the size and scope of existing programs.



One way that CSA programs may be able to work more effectively is by working together cooperatively. When asked about the role of a collaborative association of CSA farms, 8 of 16 comments (50%) described resource sharing as a way to improve opportunities for CSA farming. This includes things like CSA farms joining together to order supplies in bulk and receive group discounts, or CSA programs combining their offerings to extend or expand what a single farm could offer its members. Three CSA programs reported that they currently work with other farms in this way.

Impact of ASAP Support

Five of 12 CSA programs reported that ASAP's Local Food Campaign promotional and outreach efforts, such as the *Local Food Guide* and the *Local Food – Thousands of Miles Fresher!* bumper sticker have contributed to the success of their program. Six of 12 said that ASAP's overall Local Food Campaign work has contributed to their program's success. In addition to customers learning about a CSA program through the guide, farmers reported that ASAP has been helpful in promoting and explaining the CSA concept and in raising awareness about the benefits of buying locally-grown food.

When asked what promotional materials these farms would like to see, 6 of 12 CSA farms (50%) wanted to see more of the same from ASAP – that is, continued use of the *Local Food Guide*, bumper stickers and advertising in local publications. As far as the timing of such advertising, most (60%) suggested mid-winter through early Spring before the growing season begins. Other suggestions were for ASAP to sponsor or facilitate CSA conferences, farm tours and marketing materials, and to establish a centralized local producers' market for the region.

Conclusion

The results described here reflect only the twelve CSA farms that returned a survey as part of this study. They were not randomly selected and they do not represent the full set of CSA programs in Western North Carolina. So the results must be viewed with caution and cannot be generalized to a larger population of CSA programs. They can, however, offer some insight into the challenges and opportunities facing CSA programs in this region.

In terms of the impact of ASAP in particular, it is likely that the CSA farms listed in the *Local Food Guide* and supported by ASAP marketing efforts would have a favorable impression of the organization and its work. It would be useful to know what CSA programs that are not affiliated with ASAP think of the support and services ASAP provides. Nevertheless, it is clear that what ASAP is doing is well-received by these CSA farms, and that efforts to support and promote CSA farming should continue.