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2021 Appalachian Grown Annual Producer Survey Report

ASAP Local Food Research Center
May 2022

Introduction



About the Appalachian Grown Program

ASAP's mission is to help local farms thrive, link farmers to markets and supporters, and build healthy communities through connections to local food. To support Southern Appalachian farms and build a local food system, ASAP developed the Appalachian Grown™ program in 2007 with the goal of expanding local market opportunities for farmers by providing a way for the public to easily identify products from local farms.

Appalachian Grown is a branding program for farms, farmers tailgate markets, retailers, and wholesalers that annually certifies food and agricultural products grown or raised on farms in Western North Carolina and the Southern Appalachian Mountains. This region includes 60 Appalachian counties in North Carolina, Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. A trusted label helps buyers and shoppers know that they are spending their dollars to benefit local family farms and communities.

Participation in the program provides connection to a network of family farmers in the region as well as access to services, educational materials, and resources to support viable farms and a strong local food system. **In 2021, 873 farms were Appalachian Grown certified.**

The Appalachian Grown 2021 Producer Survey

Every year since the Appalachian Grown (AG) program was founded, a survey has been sent to participating farms to assess the impact of program services and gather feedback to shape the program's future direction. In December 2021, this annual online survey was sent to 760 Appalachian Grown certified producers – those farmers for which we had a valid email address. The survey asked about their experiences farming in 2021, including questions addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It opened on December 11, 2021 and closed just over three weeks later on January 3, 2022. One hundred and sixty Appalachian Grown farmers responded to this survey. Twenty-four emails bounced back and 203 emails were unopened, for response rates of 31% (opened emails only) and 22% (opened and unopened emails).

This report contains the findings from the survey.

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Executive Summary: Lasting Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

This report presents findings from the 2021 annual survey of Appalachian Grown (AG) certified farmers in the Southern Appalachians. These farms are small, family-owned, and primarily located and selling in Western North Carolina. This annual survey gathers information about market channel opportunities, marketing strategies, and farm product sales. Respondents report challenges to farming in this region and the AG program's impact on their farm business' success.

A primary focus of this year's survey was the influence that the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic had on farming - both positive and negative. The lasting pandemic effects were widespread in 2021, particularly on input availability and prices. Sourcing was particularly difficult for farmers as supply chains experienced unprecedented disruptions. Farmers reported challenges to sourcing equipment and supplies, including tools, seeds, feed, machinery, and packaging materials. Nearly 80 percent of respondents described production costs increasing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, compared to 50 percent in 2020. Along with variability of input goods, a major theme that emerged from this survey was labor. Many farmers reported challenges finding and hiring workers.

The unpredictability of input supply and labor availability created tight profit margins for many farm businesses. However, survey results show farmer resilience. Adaptations to supply issues came in the form of creative supply outlets and rethinking product prices. Farmers continued the previous year's trend of selling to multiple markets channels to diversify income streams and over half sold through new or different channels. Farmers sold to an average of three channels in 2021, with farmers markets being most popular, followed by farm stands and restaurants.

Luckily, market opportunities and sales rebounded in 2021. Many market channels, particularly restaurants and farmers markets, became viable again as COVID-19 preventative measures proved effective and restrictions loosened. Multiple respondents noted reconnecting with restaurants in 2021. Farmers market access was reported as being more stable than the previous year. Consumer interest in local foods continued its upward trend from previous years. Nearly half of farmers surveyed reported higher sales in 2021 than in 2020 and nearly a third reported stable sales from 2020 to 2021.

A new question posed to farmers asked what gives them hope to continue farming in the future. Farmers thoughtfully and beautifully expressed how they farm for the simple love of it. From connecting to the natural environment, to keeping family traditions alive, to sharing healthy food with their community, to sparking interest in others to grow their own food, farmers have an inspired outlook for the future of agriculture in the Southern Appalachians.

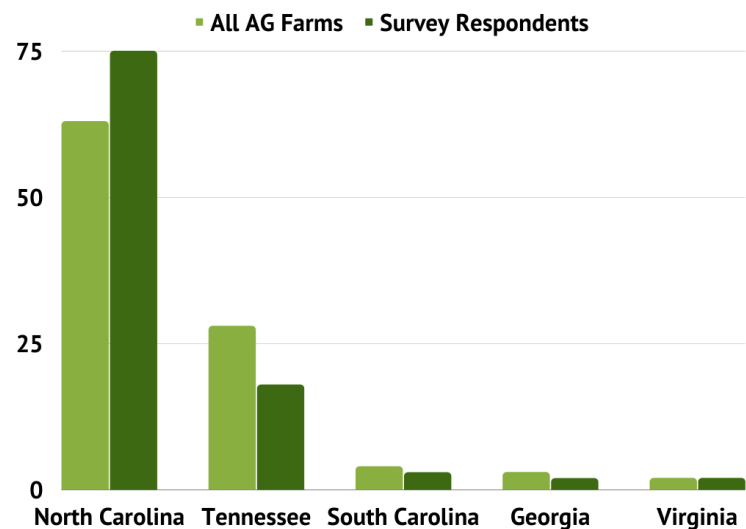
Summary Findings

Farms and Farm Operators

The responses to this survey represent the experiences and opinions of 160, or 18 percent, of the 873 Appalachian Grown farmers in 2021. The following section details the characteristics of the Appalachian Grown farmers who responded to the survey. This survey had a representative sample of responses in terms of distribution of farms across the Appalachian Grown region and acreage of farmland in production. However, a significantly higher proportion of survey respondents were new to farming compared to all Appalachian Grown farms in 2021.

Seventy-five percent of respondents farm in North Carolina, compared to 63 percent of all Appalachian Grown Farms. The counties with the most survey representation include seven in North Carolina (Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, Haywood, McDowell, Ashe, and Watauga) and two in Tennessee (Greene and Knox).

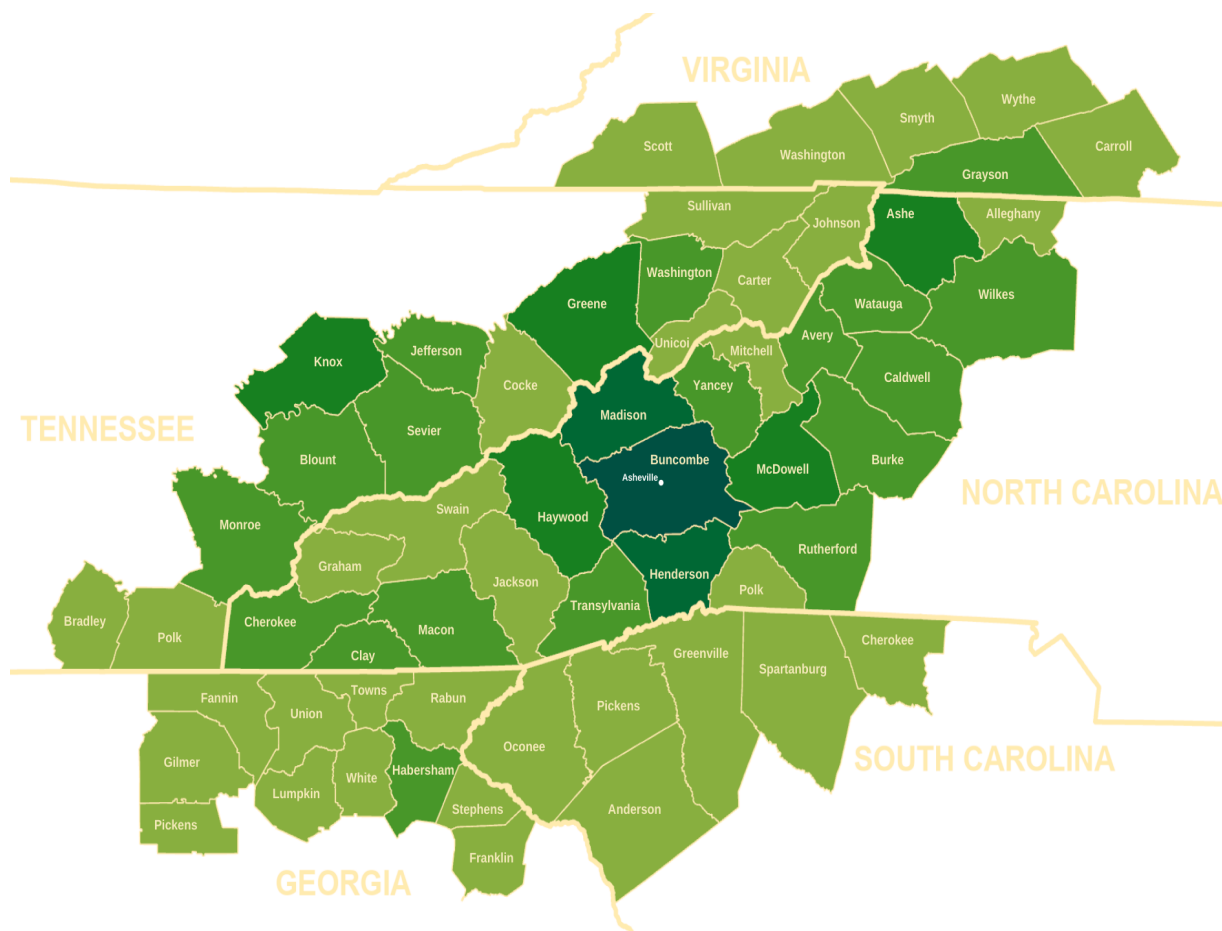
Figure 1
Percent of Farms in Appalachian Grown States



Although no personal demographic information was gathered in the Appalachian Grown producer survey, some overall Appalachian Grown farmer demographics are available. Ninety-five percent of Appalachian Grown farmers identify as white, 3.3% identify as Native American, 2.8% identify as Hispanic, 2.2% identify as Black, 1.5% identify as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 4.8% identify as another race or ethnicity. Of those, 7.4% identify as being multiracial. The average age of Appalachian Grown farmers is 53, and ages range from 22 to 91 years old. Forty-two percent of primary farm operators are female.

Figure 2

Map of the Appalachian Grown Region, Shaded by Number of Survey Responses



Seventy-six percent of respondents were “new” to farming. The USDA defines a New and Beginning Farmer or Rancher as being the primary operator on a farm (i.e., making the day to day decisions) for 10 or fewer years. Forty-one percent of all Appalachian Grown producers are considered New and Beginning, noticeably less than the proportion of survey respondents.

Survey participants had an average of 49 acres in production in 2021. This is nearly equivalent to the average acreage for all Appalachian Grown farms. Acreage in production differs from total farm size, as it only includes farmland that is actively used to produce crops, graze animals, or harvest timberland. Farmland in production ranged from one-tenth of an acre to 1,200 acres for survey respondents and to 2,500 acres across all AG farms. However, 53 percent of survey respondents and 55 percent of all AG farmers operated on six acres or fewer. These are very small farms, especially compared to the average farm size in North Carolina (182 acres) and nationally (441 acres). Those who responded to this survey farm a total of 7,928 acres, twenty-eight percent of the total Appalachian Grown farmland in production (27,901 acres).

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to have an impact on local food production in 2021. This section explores the consequences of the pandemic, its effect on the region's farms, and how farmers adapted throughout the year. The biggest impacts on farmers were supply scarcity and rising prices of inputs to production. Nearly 80 percent of respondents described production costs increasing in 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Farmers faced supply shortages involving growing, packing, and manufacturing materials. Even basic necessities for growing food, like seeds, were difficult to find and had higher prices when farmers were able to source them. The costs of fuel, animal feed, and fertilizer all increased significantly throughout the year as well.

"The price of everything has gone up. The inconsistencies with supplies have been frustrating, slowed production, skewed the health of the farm and forced us to get creative in how we tend our fields and our animals."

The combination of rising input prices, shortages, and extended delivery times majorly disrupted production and farm business planning. This was true globally, as agricultural operations that sell to national-level or global markets depend on many other businesses to process, market, and sell their products. However, farms that produce at a smaller scale, like many of the AG farms, have a greater ability to adapt to changes in consumer demand, supply availability, and market availability. AG farmers were able to get creative to account for uncertain input supply. When asked how they are adjusting their farm business as a result of the ongoing pandemic, one farmer said,

"Trying to decrease dependency on bought goods. Focusing more on saving seeds, making our own compost, building with repurposed materials, etc."

As the cost of production rose, farmers had to grapple with the unfortunate reality of raising food prices for consumers - mirroring price hikes in grocery stores. One farmer noted that the biggest challenge in selling to local markets is,

"The education we have to do of customers but particularly wholesale accounts around rising production costs and paying a fair wage to farm workers. It is hard for people to understand why local food costs more."

Although input supply was precarious throughout the year, local food demand and consumer interest in local farms rose. Farmers often saw continued support from consumers and a willingness to pay for local foods.

"Seeds and supplies took longer to get delivered. Material prices were higher. But I also believe consumer demand for local food rose as a result of the pandemic. And people were willing to pay more for healthy, sustainable food."

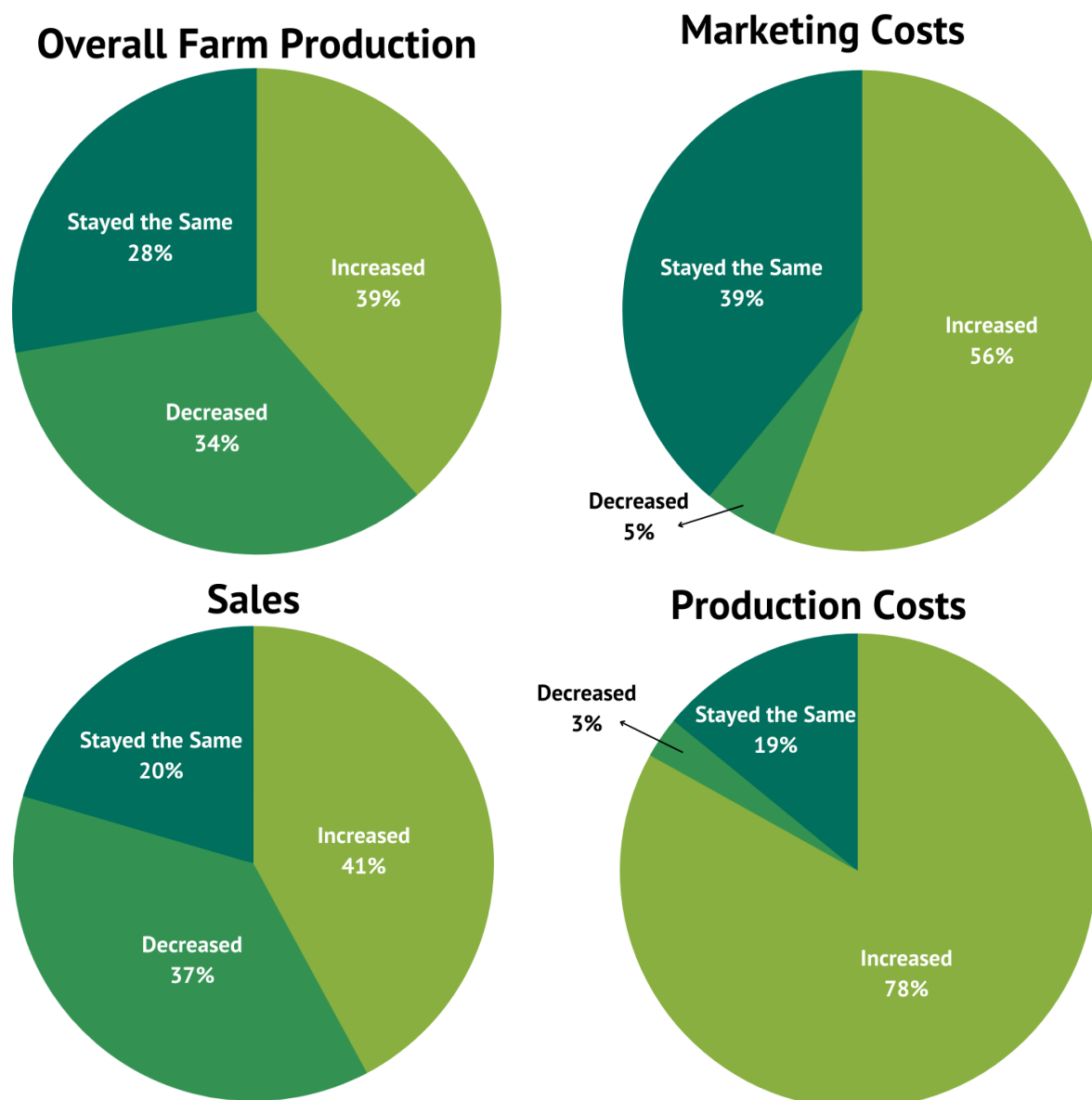
COVID-19 Pandemic Impacts to Farm Businesses in 2021

Theme	Quote
Sourcing Challenges, Higher Input Prices 31%	<p>“Was really tough to find seed potatoes and certain seeds. Fertilizer and feed went up. Fuel went up. Seemed like everything increased in price that we used while what we sold our product for stayed the same.”</p> <p>“Supply chains have been an issue for all.”</p>
Pivoted Markets 25%	<p>“Wholesale produce orders dropped off significantly. We countered a decrease in sales by traveling further for markets in Charlotte, Winston Salem and Boone.”</p> <p>“Restaurant sales were lower than previous years, but this was off-set by increased sales and customers at the Farmers Markets I sell at.”</p>
Labor Challenges 11%	<p>“The workers are still hard to find and are expecting a higher salary with little to no experience.”</p> <p>“Labor is a big issue. But the workers we had, we offered more time.”</p>
Reduced On-Farm Events / Public Access to Farm 8%	<p>“The covid pandemic forced us to minimize and discontinue our farm tours and events, which made an impact on our annual revenue. It also forced us to close the farm for several weeks.”</p> <p>“We were unable to hold open houses or classes during 2020 and 2021 which impacted overall sales, especially plant sales. Farm visitors were very limited. We used contact-free pickup locations which worked fine but reduced our interactions with customers.”</p>
Higher Sales / Demand 8%	<p>“Market traffic was way up, but lots more people were seeking food assistance. Thankfully, [ASAP's Appalachian Farms Feeding Families] program was a big boost to our wholesale and SNAP tokens at market were widely used.”</p> <p>“Seems that more people are buying local due to covid-19 so that has been positive.”</p>
Meat Processing 7%	<p>“It is very difficult to plan raising beef because of the processing issues. I had to cut back on the number I had processed.”</p>
Loss of Markets 7%	<p>“In 2020 our sales were bigger than ever, we planned for a big 2021 year and added an additional market. We didn't come close to doing what we did in 2020 and barely did any online sales.”</p>
COVID-19 Sickness and Protocols 5%	<p>“Despite being very careful and fully vaccinated I experienced a breakthrough infection in late July. This effectively lost me three weeks in the garden so the garden pretty much failed.”</p>
Off Farm Work / Homesteading 4%	<p>“Due to concerns about food security, I shifted my farm to feed my family instead of pursuing additional farm revenue.”</p>
Other 13%	<p>“This is difficult to answer because my farm became operational during the pandemic and a result of the pandemic. I likely would not have set up a grow had it not been for the uncertainties the pandemic caused me.”</p>

Farm businesses continued to undergo changes in 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic had similar impacts on overall farm production, marketing costs, and sales in 2021 compared to impacts from the previous year. Overall farm production increased for thirty-nine percent, stayed the same for twenty-eight percent, and decreased for thirty-four percent of producers who responded to this survey. **Marketing costs increased for over half of respondents and stayed the same for two fifths; very few saw a decrease in marketing costs.** Over sixty percent of respondents had increased or constant sales in 2021. However, the remaining thirty-seven percent experienced a decrease in sales. Production costs, including labor, materials, and storage, increased for nearly eight out of ten producers in 2021 compared to 2020 costs.

Figure 3

Aspects of Farm Businesses that Changed in 2021 as a Result of COVID-19 Pandemic



Examining the reverberations of the COVID-19 pandemic felt by farming businesses in 2021 more thoroughly, hardships involving production prevail as a major theme. All operational facets of production proved difficult, from sourcing supplies to hiring farm workers to processing farmed goods.

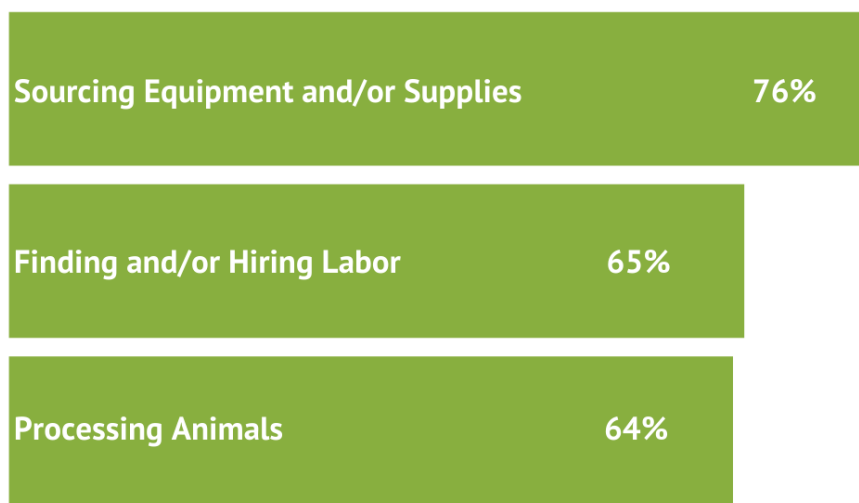
Over three fourths of producers reported experiencing challenges sourcing equipment and supplies. Not only did prices rise for essential farming materials, like tools, seeds, feed, and packaging, at times these necessities were difficult to find in stores or were delivered later than expected. Growing crops and animals for food is time sensitive and disruptions can affect the entire season's production.

In addition to sourcing issues, **sixty-five percent of respondents had difficulty finding and hiring farm workers.** Fear about being exposed to COVID-19 deterred both farmers from hiring extra help and potential laborers from being willing to work on farms. Salary expectations rose alongside other production costs.

Meat processing issues that emerged at the beginning of the pandemic continued throughout the second year. Of those who it affects, **sixty-four percent experienced delays or other challenges when processing their animals.**

Figure 4

Challenges as a Result of the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2021



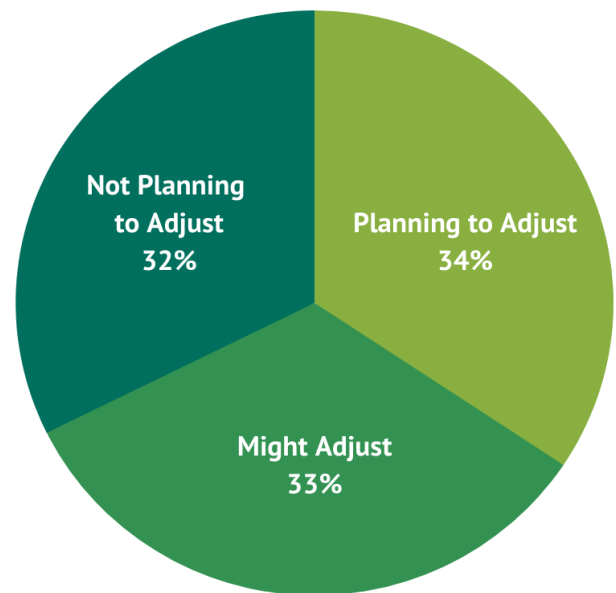
In response to the adversity posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, producers sought ways to make up for losses by expanding to new market outlets and seeking additional off-farm work. Over half of respondents sold to new or different markets in 2021. Nearly thirty percent of producers reported that they sought off-farm work in 2021 as a result of the pandemic.

Through all the new obstacles introduced to farm businesses in the last two years, the demand and appreciation for local food continues to strengthen and farm businesses find ways to remain resilient.

Figure 5

Plans to Adjust Farm Plan in 2022 as a Result of the COVID-19 Pandemic

When asked if they were planning to adjust as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, **sixty-five percent were at least considering adjusting their farm plan in the coming year.** Strategies for modifying farm businesses included diversification of market outlets, increasing and diversifying production, adjusting to higher input prices, and pausing or scaling down business.



Expected 2022 Adjustments Due to COVID-19 Pandemic

Theme	Quote
Diversifying & Changing Revenue Streams 51%	<p>"We are stepping back and out of the CSA model and changing our outlets to reflect only our roadside stand, some wholesale, and some retail sales through MarketWagon as able."</p> <p>"If conditions improve we will have more classes, workshops, and open houses, and sell more ginger and turmeric plant starts."</p>
Increasing & Diversifying Production 34%	<p>"We plan to expand our variety of produce to offset the increased farm cost with animals."</p> <p>"Diversifying what we grow, adding garlic and field corn, cows and pigs to the chicken operation and vegetables we already grow"</p>
Adjusting to Higher Input Prices 15%	<p>"Planning a year or more in advance for processing dates and limiting my delivery area because of insanely high fuel prices and raising beef prices, because processors are going up on fees and commodity beef is so much higher right now."</p>
Pause / Scale Down Farm Business 13%	<p>"My plan is to host another farm business that needs space to grow and I will reduce my involvement in the business."</p>
Other 17%	<p>"Not really sure what or how exactly to adjust."</p>

Markets and Farm Sales

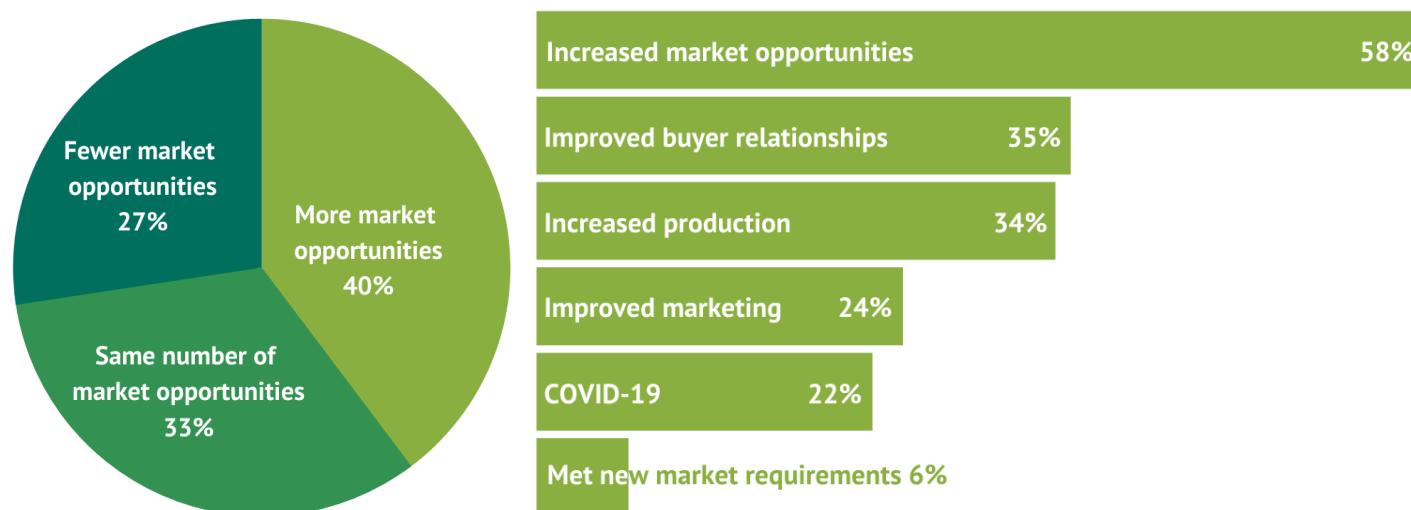
This section explores the market opportunities available to and used by producers, strategies for connecting with consumers, and overall market viability in 2021. Most producers reported better market opportunities compared to in 2020, as well as stable or increased sales.

Local food producers who responded to this survey had a generally better market outlook for 2021 compared to 2020. Only 27 percent responded that there were fewer markets available in 2021, down from over fifty percent who responded that way in 2020. **The remaining seventy-three percent of respondents experienced the same or more market opportunities in 2021.** As social distancing restrictions loosened in 2021, consumer-facing markets like restaurants and farmers markets began to reopen. Over half of those who expanded into new markets did so because of this increase in market opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic had a much smaller impact on market expansion in 2021 (22%) compared to its effects in 2020 (55%).

Figure 6

Market Opportunities in 2021 compared to 2020

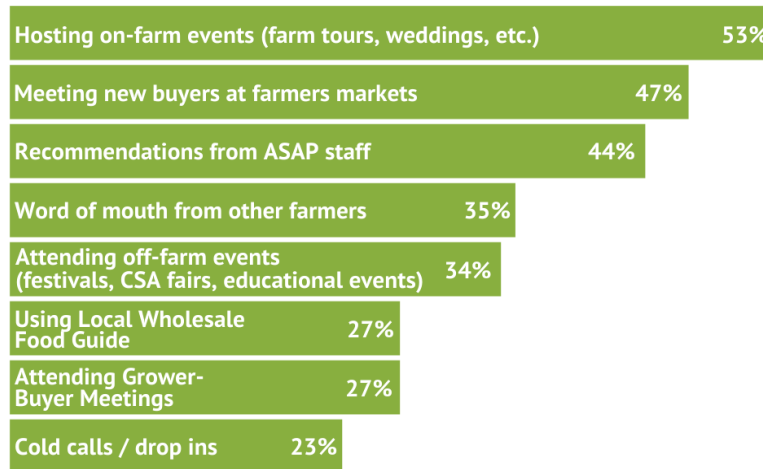
& Factors that Influenced Farmers' Expansions into New Markets in 2021



Local food producers take on many roles in their businesses. Some of the most crucial to increase and sustain sales are connecting with new buyers and building relationships with customers. Mirroring similar instances already noted, the reintroduction of in-person events like farm tours and farmers markets were rated as very useful to farmers for finding new buyers. As in 2020, recommendations from ASAP staff members remains a useful tool.

Figure 7

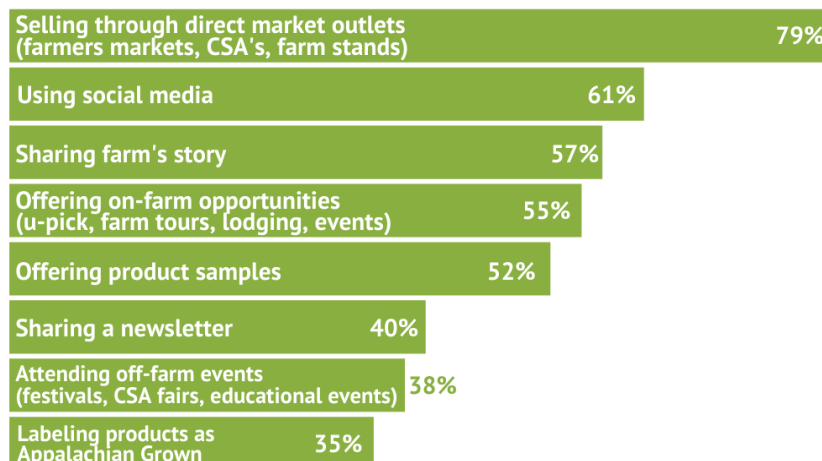
Strategies Farmers Used and Rated as “Very Useful” for Finding New Buyers in 2021



Building customer relationships often depends on marketing to communicate product availability and strengthen customer loyalty. Farmers reported that selling through direct market outlets, like farmers markets, CSA's, and farm stands, are the most effective way to build customer relationships. Those settings give farmers the opportunity to interact with customers and teach consumers about how and where their food is grown. Social media outlets and sharing their farm's story are also reported as very useful for building relationships with customers.

Figure 8

Strategies Farmers Used and Rated as “Very Useful” for Building Customer Relationships in 2021

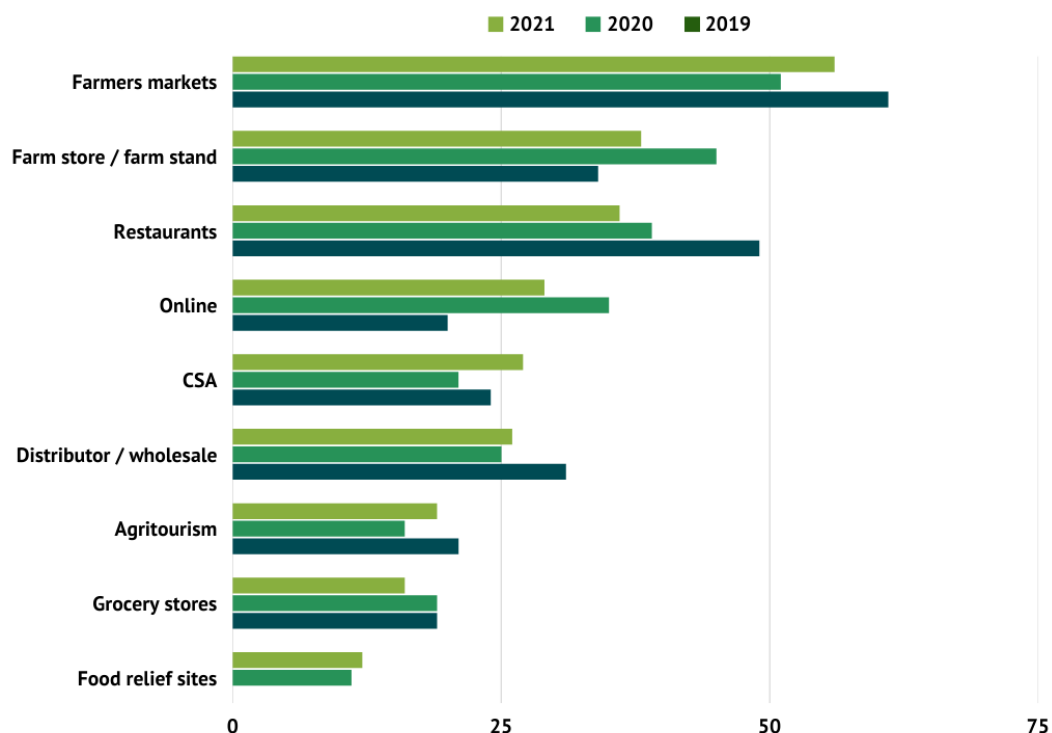


Producers who depend on selling goods locally often diversify their sales between direct, intermediate, and wholesale channels to sustain income streams. **Those who responded to this survey sell to an average of three types of market outlets, and twenty-eight percent sell to four or more market outlets.** Only nine percent of producers reported selling exclusively through direct to consumer channels (farmers markets, CSA's, agritourism, or farm stands). That percentage is down from twenty-two percent in 2020, signifying more farmers diversified the types of market outlets they sold to in 2021. Over eighty percent of respondents sold to a mix of direct-to-consumer (farmers markets, CSA, etc.), intermediate (restaurants, online, etc.), and wholesale (grocery stores, distributors, food relief) markets.

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 had a big impact on the market outlets that farmers sold to. The percentage of farms selling through CSA's, distributors, farmers markets, and agritourism initially decreased from 2019 to 2020, but rebounded in 2021. Selling online provided farms with a contactless way to connect with consumers during the most high-risk time of the pandemic. Although the percentage of farms that sold online decreased from 2020 (35%) to 2021 (29%), it was still higher than pre-pandemic (20%). A similar pattern occurred for farms selling through on farm stores/farm stands - increasing from 2019 (34%) to 2020 (45%) and then decreasing in 2021 (38%). Farmers markets remain the most popular market outlet, followed by farm stores and farm stands, then restaurants. **Fifty-six percent of respondents sold some or all of their goods at farmers markets in 2021.**

Figure 9

Percent of Farmers that Sold to Each Market Outlet in 2021, 2020, and 2019



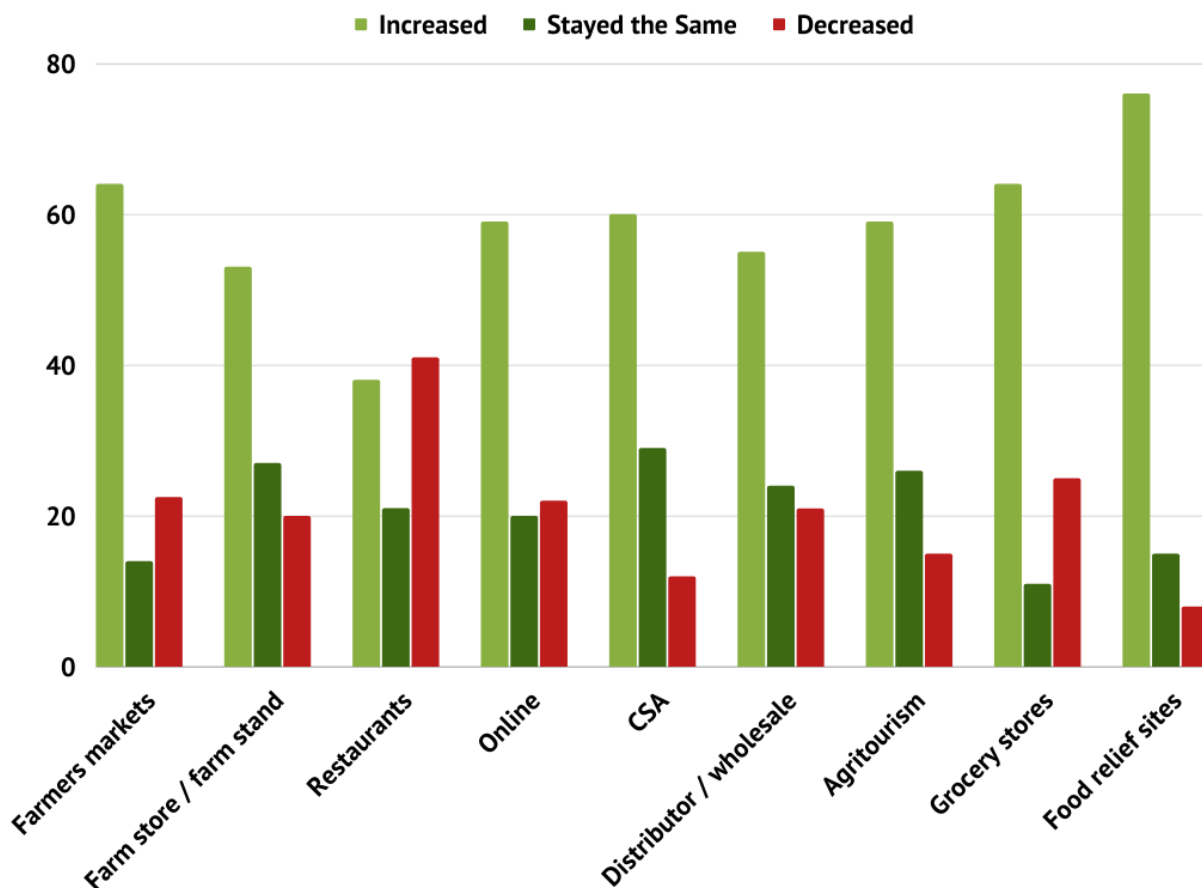
Note: Food relief sites were added as a new category in the 2020 Annual Survey.

Sales to various market outlets continue to fluctuate annually depending on economic and social situations, farm production, and how producers decide to promote their goods. The following graph (figure 10) does not capture those reasons, only the shifts in sales compared to the previous year. Similar to results from the 2020 annual producer survey, more farmers in 2021 experienced a decrease in sales to restaurants than those who saw increased or steady sales. However, the gap between those who saw decreased versus increased sales to restaurants is much smaller than it was in 2020.

In all other market outlets, more farmers had increased sales than those who had decreased sales. **In fact, each of the remaining market outlets had at least two times as many producers who experienced increased sales as those who had decreased sales.** Of those who sell to food relief sites, nearly eighty percent had increased sales to that market outlet. Around sixty percent of producers who sell to farmers markets, distributors, or grocery stores, and/or through CSA's, online markets, or agritourism reported increased sales compared to sales the previous year.

Figure 10

Percent of Farmers whose Sales Changed for Each Market Outlet

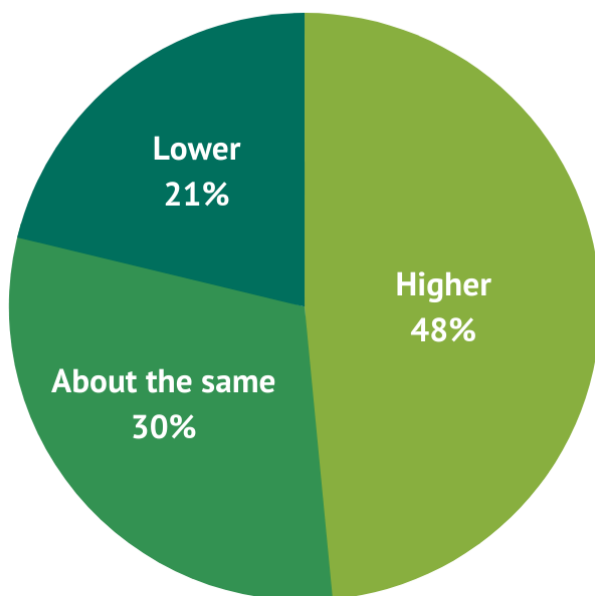


Forty-eight percent of farmers reported their gross sales were higher in 2021 than 2020. The proportions of those who said their overall sales were higher (48%), about the same (30%), and lower (21%) in 2021 are very similar to the proportions reported in the 2020 annual survey. Gross sales of Appalachian Grown farmers depend on a variety of factors including farm maturity and seasonality, desired scale, and market opportunities. Those reporting sales of \$40,000 or lower represent sixty-two percent of respondents, down from nearly seventy-five percent last year. Those that fall within the gross sales category of \$40,000 to \$120,000 make up twenty-two percent of respondents, up from fifteen percent last year. It is important to keep in mind the increases in production inputs while noticing the increase in those who reported higher gross sales in 2021.

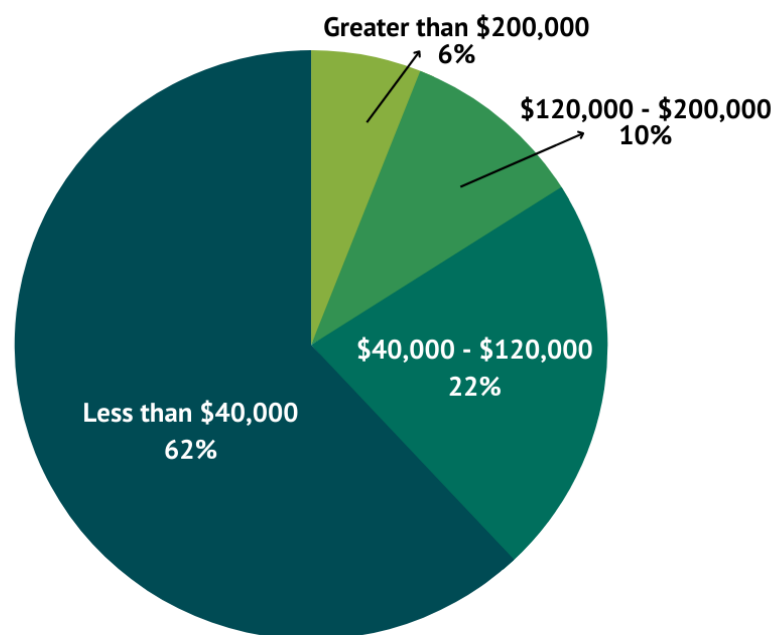
Figure 11

Sales Changes Compared to 2020 and Gross Sales for 2021

Sales Compared to Previous Year



Gross Sales



When asked their greatest challenges to selling in local markets, responses varied from demand to logistics to marketing and market access. The top challenge faced in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, did not surface as a distinct challenge in 2021. However, pricing and profit margins were revealed as a new category and directly related to the lingering impacts of the pandemic.

Challenges Selling to Local Markets

Theme	Quote
Demand 17%	<p>“Demand. Sometimes it’s unpredictable.”</p> <p>“Demand isn’t high enough for our production. Much of what we sell goes to bigger wholesale distributors [that are] regional but not hyper local.”</p>
Supply / Need More Capacity for Production 12%	<p>“Can’t grow enough!”</p> <p>“We could really use some high tunnels so that we could get to market sooner.”</p> <p>“My own production capacity - I never have enough [produce]!”</p>
Competition 13%	<p>“Restaurants like to proclaim they are “farm to table” but are difficult to sell to and seem to prefer US Foods and Sysco as their producer suppliers.”</p> <p>“It isn’t convenient for people to come by our farm and pick up meat. I think they decide to just go ahead and buy from the grocery store because they are already there shopping and it’s convenient.”</p>
Logistics 12%	<p>“I do not have the transportation for loading plants.”</p> <p>“Finding the time to sell to multiple outlets that are interested in products. For example, finding time to pack CSA orders, deliver restaurant orders, and attend [the farmers] market.”</p>
Profit Margin / Pricing 11%	<p>“Getting prices that support our small scale, 7 acre vegetable production.”</p> <p>“Having the right price point in lower income areas.”</p> <p>“Overcoming biases against the products, higher cost of production means higher cost to the retailer.”</p>
Marketing 10%	<p>“Connecting with buyers and getting the word out about the farm.”</p> <p>“Brand recognition, sharing the value of organic foods.”</p>
Market Access 6%	<p>“Accessing large enough markets to justify the marketing expenses/labor to set up.”</p> <p>“1) getting IN to an established local market 2) being in a new market w low turnout”</p>
Processing 4%	<p>“Lack of local meat processing facilities.”</p>
Other 11%	<p>“Weather”</p> <p>“Unpredictability”</p>

Participation in the Appalachian Grown Program

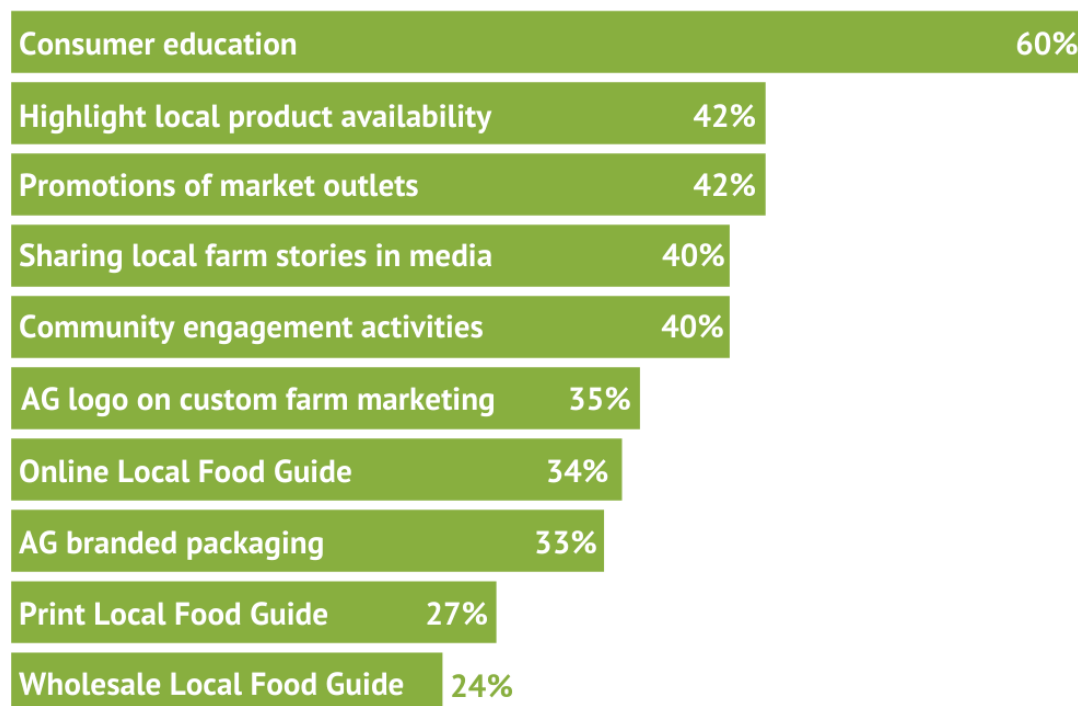
This section asks farmers to reflect on their participation in ASAP's Appalachian Grown program and what impact, if any, it has had on their farm business.

ASAP offers promotional materials and discounted branded packaging to help customers identify and recognize farmer products as locally grown in this region. These materials include stickers, bags, wax boxes, twist ties, and more. In 2021, sixty percent of farmers reported using Appalachian Grown branding for some or all of their products. An average of forty percent of respondents' products were labeled or marketed as Appalachian Grown in 2021.

In addition to branded packaging, ASAP's programming aims to educate consumers on the value and availability of local food, promote local food market outlets, and engage the community in various ways. Sixty percent of farmers responded that ASAP's consumer education was very important to increasing sales in 2021. Highlighting local product availability and promoting market outlets were also ranked highly as important to increasing sales.

Figure 12

ASAP Services Rated by Farmers as "Very Important" for Increasing Sales in 2021



The Impact ASAP's Appalachian Grown Program has had on Farmers (selected testimonials)

"[ASAP provides] better branding that's more recognizable than anything we could do, we like being affiliated because we share the same values."

"Huge impact in 2021! I feel supported in all aspects by ASAP - in marketing, production improvement opportunities, grant opportunities, and connections to other farmers. My business would not have been nearly as successful this year, without help from ASAP."

"The AG program has supported [us] with secondary resources, i.e. other people who are associated with the program. I've really developed my community network."

"I was able to purchase small stickers for my winter squash, they tell what the product is and where it was grown. That increased my sales a good bit."

"Overall, the AG program has been very important to sustaining local food production in Western NC, and increasing the awareness to buy local."

The final section of the 2021 Annual Appalachian Grown Producer Survey asked farmers what gave them hope to continue farming in the future. Some shared that farming is their way of life and way of maintaining family traditions, while others view the increased societal value of farming and community interest in local food as their reasoning to carry on. Although some struggled for answers, overall the responses were **hopeful and optimistic**.

"Every year more and more people begin to grow and raise their own food. The more people reconnect to what they're eating and how it's grown, the better our world will be. For those who can't farm, I want to be able to do it for them."

"I love growing quality products and seeing how excited people get when I sell to them. Growing mushrooms at scale is awe inspiring by itself, but being able to share my product directly to local people and see their reaction is very fulfilling."

"To keep the farming traditions of my family alive"

"Love of agriculture and the way it contributes to the flourishing of the community."

"Farming is great! The failures hit you in the face, but the successes pump you up. Ok, so I have a metaphorical broken nose, black eye and bloody lip -- we are still standing. Our land is getting better every year, we can carry more animals every year, they are healthier every year. We sell to people who are happy to buy our products, we show what a farm is really like to people who want to know that."

"It's our way of life. It's not a job, it's just how we live."