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ASAP's Local Food Research Center Releases Report on 2020 Farming Season

Survey results tell a story of perseverance amid the challenges of COVID-19.

ASHEVILLE, NC (March 3, 2021)—The Local Food Research Center, a program of ASAP (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project), annually surveys farms in the Appalachian Grown region, which includes Western North Carolina as well as surrounding counties in Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, and South Carolina. In addition to assessing farm demographics, market outlets, and farm sales, the 2020 survey asked questions about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results, available in a new report, tell a story of perseverance among farmers in the region.

For most farmers, the pandemic swiftly upended months of crop and business planning. Fifty-two percent reported fewer local market outlets for their products in 2020, compared to only 11 percent who reported fewer at the end of 2019. For many, the loss of restaurant sales was the biggest disruption—74 percent of farmers reported decreased restaurant sales as a result of restaurants closing or downscaling to operate under capacity limitations. However, the adaptable nature of the region's small and diversified farms enabled most to pivot (sometimes multiple times) to new market outlets and to establish relationships with new buyers. In addition to selling at farmers markets, consistently the most popular outlet for selling local food in the region, many farms opened or ramped up sales through farm stands, online stores, and CSAs, with a significant number turning to these outlets for the first time in 2020.

"I had to shift and reshift our production and markets based on restaurant operations and farmers market demand," responded one farmer. "Overall our sales were good but the supply line is shaky and expensive.... I had to find new customers quickly and adapt my production schedule to individual clients instead of large weekly orders. Our packaging was reusable, and I changed that also."

The 2020 survey was sent to 775 Appalachian Grown farmers in the Appalachian Grown region in November of 2020. A total of 208 completed the survey, a response rate of 27 percent. The majority of respondents are North Carolinians who have been farming for fewer than 10 years and who own or operate small-scale farms.

The full report can be viewed or downloaded at asapconnections.org/research-reports.

[High-resolution photos available. Contact Sarah Hart at sarah@asapconnections.org.]

ABOUT ASAP (APPALACHIAN SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE PROJECT)

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 learn more, visit asapconnections.org.

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