



Initiative Title:	Blue Ridge Grown - Marketing, Promotion, Processing, and Distribution of Agricultural Products Grown in Henderson County
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Project Narrative: Henderson County is one of the leading agricultural producing counties in the state. Ornamental Horticulture production ranks 2nd in the state, with farm income estimates of \$75 million (2002). The county produces 75% of the apples in the state, with a farm income of approximately \$20 million. Vegetable production also ranks very high. The county produces most of the vegetables in the western part of North Carolina, with farm income estimates of \$20 million.

This initiative is aimed at assisting existing and new agri-businesses in the county by developing mechanisms to market and promote “Blue Ridge Grown” products, including 1) maintaining the Internet-based web directory of agri-businesses in the county and the Western North Carolina region; 2) establishing a marketing and promotional fund to assist agri-tourism businesses; 3) establishing a full-time economic developer to promote agri-business and pursue connections with potential purchasers of home grown products; and 4) construct and maintain a facility to process and distribute locally grown agricultural products.

The Henderson County Strategic Plan, approved February, 2005, contained a strategic goal to “Expand access for agricultural enterprises to economic development and tourism promotion programs and support services.” Several specific action steps identified in the Strategic Plan relate directly to this initiative, including:

1. Expand access for agricultural enterprises to economic development and tourism promotion programs and support services which included promoting agricultural products produced in Henderson County
2. Promote agricultural products that are produced in Henderson County
3. Provide ongoing training and technical assistance to farmers
4. Promote and expand voluntary agricultural districts to minimize land use conflicts and to protect farmers’ rights to farm
5. Explore ways to make economic development incentives more readily available to agriculture-related businesses
6. Explore ways to support and expand programs and policies that promote local businesses and “locally produced products.”

The project is outlined in four specific phases, all of which should be initiated simultaneously:

Phase I – Marketing and Promotion of Products Grown in Henderson County (www.BlueRidgeGrown.com)

A web site and directory was established in 2004 to provide a public guide to fresh, locally grown produce and plants available from the local growers, farms, and nurseries of western NC. The directory helps users quickly locate fruits and vegetables, herbs, organic produce, garden ornamentals, tomatoes with that home-grown flavor in summer, the perfect Christmas tree in winter, and everything in between that our local farms have to offer. All listings in the directory are also mapped.

The site covers the area of Henderson and Transylvania Counties in western North Carolina, including Hendersonville, Fletcher, Flat Rock, Etowah, Saluda, Brevard, Mills River, Tuxedo, Edneyville, Pisgah Forest and many other locales. Many farms are also located conveniently close to Asheville.

Phase II – Marketing & Promotion Funds for Agri-Tourism Businesses

There are several organizations and/or local farms that have agri-tourism events and or sell agricultural products locally. This initiative is to assist these groups with their marketing needs and to continue producing directories to list these group's activities and/or products.

The Curb Market, a landmark in Historic Downtown Hendersonville, is one example of the types of organizations that would benefit from this initiative. The market opened in May 1924 with vendors selling fresh produce, fruit, milk, butter, eggs, baked goods and many other items. Today, the Curb Market is a cooperative venture continuing the tradition of selling quality items homegrown or handmade in Henderson County, including plants and flowers, canned goods, baked goods, handmade crafts, fiber art, and fresh fruits and vegetables. The Curb Market sponsors two annual events, Ol' Timey Days at the Curb Market and Ol' Timey Christmas at the Curb Market that would greatly benefit from increased promotion or marketing assistance.

Ol' Timey Days begins each year the first Saturday in June and continues to the last Saturday in September. The festivities start with a breakfast of ham, sausage and gravy biscuits cooked on a wood stove. Live music, farm equipment, old cars, and crafts displays continue throughout the event. The last Saturday in November Ol' Timey Christmas at the Curb Market kicks off the holiday season with music, food, traditional decorations, crafts and gifts. Both of these events are a local tradition attracting local residents and tourists to Hendersonville.

Promotional or marketing assistance for these types of organizations and events would increase traffic and support the tradition of selling Henderson County grown products.

Phase III - Economic Development Coordinator for Agri-Business

This phase includes the selection of an Economic Developer dedicated to promoting agri-business in Henderson County. This individual would interface with Henderson County Board of Commissioners, Henderson County Travel & Tourism, the Greater Hendersonville Chamber of Commerce, and the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service - Henderson County Office. His or her primary role would be to promote existing agri-businesses and to connect them to resources that will help their businesses grow and prosper. This would also include identifying potential customers for Henderson County agricultural products. Additional responsibilities might include coordinating the updates and enhancements for the online directory (www.BlueRidgeGrown.com) which is in effect a database of the businesses this individual will be working with on an everyday basis.

Coordinated educational and marketing efforts between the local stakeholders can make a positive difference in Henderson County. Below is a case study showing direct impact:

Case Study

The NC Cooperative Extension Service has been working to bring research based information to local growers as part of its On Farm Research (OFR) project. Recent efforts included providing information to local growers about new popular apple varieties and how to grow them for increased consumer demand.

During its third year, the OFR project which compared organic versus conventional apple production paid big dividends. During the 2003 growing season a Henderson County grower became the first North Carolina apple grower to become Organic Certified! This cooperative effort proved that North Carolina apples could be grown at a profit even under adverse conditions.

Phase IV - Henderson County Agricultural Products Distribution and Processing Center

The goal of this phase of the Blue Ridge Grown initiative is to provide a structure and supplemental parking areas for the distribution and marketing of locally grown agricultural products. This may require renovate an existing building or building a new facility in Henderson County to be the used by local farmers, nurserymen, and wild crafters to sell their products. The facility would eventually contain cold storage as well as processing capabilities to produce value added products.

Source: NC Extension Service - Henderson County Office, Dynamic Plan of Work (2004)

Goal:

The goal of this initiative is to 1) provide marketing assistance to various local organizations that produce or sell agricultural products and/or have agri-tourism events; and 2) provide a distribution and processing facility to distribute locally grown agricultural products.

Person/Organization Responsible:	Cost to Implement:	Estimated Time to Complete:
NCCES/Greater Hendersonville Chamber of Commerce/Henderson County Travel and Tourism	\$165,000 Initially	On-going project

Action Items:	Resources Required:	Who's Responsible:
<p>Hire Project Coordinator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate options and develop Strategic Plan • Present plans to county • Fund raising for marketing grant funds • Pursuit of customers for agri-businesses • Site/Facility Selection • Construct or renovate building <p>Promote Local Grown Agricultural Products:</p> <p>Annual funding costs for BlueRidgeGrown.org</p> <p>Supplemental brochure development and distribution</p> <p>Distribution of marketing and promotion funds to agri-tourism organizations</p> <p>Marketing training to farmers and/or agricultural groups</p>	<p>\$55,000</p> <p>TBD</p> <p>\$1,500</p> <p>\$5000</p> <p>\$75,000</p> <p>\$15,000</p>	<p>Partners – NCCES, Henderson County, Greater Hendersonville Chamber of Commerce, et al</p>

Performance Measures:	Maintain current web site directory; establishment of a full-time economic developer to promote agri-business in the county ; open and operating processing and distribution facility
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Status:	Web Site Online; planning and discussions relating to full-time Agri-Business Economic Developer
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Overview of Agriculture Businesses in Henderson County

Apple Growing Industry

Henderson County growers, like most fruit growing areas of the county, are having a tough time making ends meet. Many growers feel the inputs equal the outputs. Foreign competition, especially from China, has hurt juice and process prices. Also, supermarket chains selling fresh fruit are merging more and more, making prices paid to the grower lower because of the reduced competition.

If low prices were not enough, 2003 was the wettest growing season (spring and summer) on record, causing tremendous disease pressure coupled with eight different hail storms effecting over 80% of the county orchards. Obviously, apple growing is a difficult, long term commitment.

In 1985 the county had only 6-8 direct apple markets. Today the Blue Ridge Farm Direct Market Association has 31 members and growing. They sell fruit and vegetables directly to the consumer. Because of this organization they have increased profits by cutting out the "middle man". "Entertainment farming" is one of the fastest growing direct market segments of our industry

Ornamental Horticulture

The production and marketing of ornamental plants has long been a major source of agricultural income in Henderson County, NC. This income is contributed to the many greenhouses, nurseries, sod producers, garden centers, landscapers and lawn care businesses in the county. There are approximately 25 greenhouse firms (producing bedding plants, foliage, perennials, seasonal floral crops and nursery stock) in over 2,500,000 square feet of environmentally controlled structures. The combined gross income from these businesses is in an excess of \$45 million dollars. The operations consist of one very large operation, nine medium size businesses and fifteen small growers. The later are primarily part time/ limited resource businesses.

Nurseries and Sod Production

There are four large, multi-county field nurseries (>50 acres), four medium size field nurseries (20 - 50 acres) and approximately thirty five small to medium sized nurseries (<1 acre - 20 acres) growing trees and shrubs. These include six shade tree liner producers and two small fruit tree liner growers. Gross income from these nurseries is estimated at between 45 and \$50 million dollars each year. In addition there are two sod producers growing over 900 acres of sod in the county.

Retail Businesses Using Agricultural Products

There are approximately 30 ornamental retailers including garden centers, retail nurseries, and chain store outlets. These have a combined gross income of over 12 million dollars per year. Over half of these grow some or all of their plants. Currently the landscaping, turf, and lawn maintenance industry is very large. There are around 300 landscape and/or lawn maintenance companies, 17 golf courses, two large sod producers, and several commercial businesses, conference centers, camps, and estates that have grounds maintenance staff. All

of these businesses account for another 45 million dollars in annual revenues. It is estimated that the above firms directly employ over 2300 individuals.

Christmas Trees

Christmas tree production in Henderson County is very limited and will remain so due to competitive pressures and climatic conditions. There are 4 small Christmas tree producers in the county. The production of this commodity is limited due to less than ideal growing conditions in most of the county for Fraser Fir.

Industry Growth Projections

The greenhouse and field nursery production components are, and should continue to be, growing industries in this region. Greenhouse production is growing at a rate of 15% per year and field nursery production is growing at a rate of 25 to 30% per year. This growth is due in part to two factors; geography and human resources. The climate is ideal for the production of a wide variety of both greenhouse and nursery crops. Due to this ideal climate there is a great potential for producing a large number of new plants. The area is ideally situated in relations to excellent transportation links to major market areas within reasonable shipping distances. There are very many enterprising individuals extremely knowledgeable and proficient in the production and marketing of ornamental plants. Horticulture classes are offered at three of the local high schools and also at the local community college, potentially supplying businesses with trained personnel.

Retail sales and the landscape/lawn maintenance, golf course, and turf industries will continue to grow. The number of landscape installation and maintenance firms has doubled in the last two years. One reason is that Henderson County is one of the fastest growing counties in North Carolina. It has long been considered one of the largest retirement "meccas" in the southeast. The population growth is typically made up of well-to-do retirees with both discretionary income and gardening interest that should continue to support the growth of these enterprises for years to come.

Challenges and Obstacles

The greenhouse, nursery, retail, and Christmas tree industry leaders have identified three priorities necessary for both their survival and continued growth.

The primary concern is that of a shortage of qualified labor. While unemployment in this area has reached an all time high due to several plant closings, most of these folk want to start new businesses. Many of them have returned to school to become trained but are not interested in becoming employees of existing companies. Unskilled labor is also difficult to find due in part to the fact that many of the local manufacturing firms are hiring the Hispanic population, a sector that was typically used in the past for full-time positions. Many of the area firms have employee turn over rates that exceed the industry averages. This fact suggests that the local producers need to be educated in developing hiring practices that include employee selection, development, and retention. It would also suggest that educational programs aimed at the area youth and underemployed individuals are needed to encourage them to pursue horticulture careers. It also indicates a need for program development aimed at providing employees the skills and knowledge to acquire professional certifications.

Vegetable Industry

Vegetable production has been one of the backbones of the agricultural economy in Henderson County. The county ranks 2nd in total acreage and gross receipts of all 100 NC counties and 1st in the western third of the state. Currently, over 125 farmers produce tomatoes, snap beans, pepper, cucumbers, squash, cabbage, sweet corn, and specialty vegetables on over 4000 acres on Henderson County's farm land.

The county boasts of the regions top three vegetable brokerage firms and largest packing/shipping facilities. Many of the vegetable farmers grow part of their crops in adjoining counties both in NC and the upstate of SC.

Historically, Henderson County's truck crops have been known to be of high quality and flavor all over the Southeast. Truckers and produce brokers have come from miles away, to the county, for years to procure the crops our farmers have had to offer and take them to tables in other parts of the country.

Industry Changes Projected

The vegetable industry in Henderson County has shown some decline over the past few years. Most of this decline is due to aging out of the local farmer and few if any of the younger generation picking up the reigns and continuing to farm. One sector of the population that has begun to show an inclination toward continuing to operate our local farms, has been our growing Latino population. Today over 25% of our vegetable farms are being operated by Latino farmers. Most of these farmers are younger than the traditional farmer and are often being mentored by some of the older retiring farmers.

Challenges and Obstacles

Several challenges face the vegetable industry and the Cooperative Extension's efforts to meet their needs.

The biggest challenge is to that of extending the market windows of many of our vegetable crops. One of these must be met by encouraging the development of value added products and bringing in processors or packaging companies to extend the shelf life of our vegetables. Currently, virtually all of the vegetables are sold in a raw, unprocessed state and must be processed by the end consumer in a short time frame to avoid spoilage.

The second challenge for Cooperative Extension and other service providers is to provide the Latino population with educational programs, and/or other information that addresses their concerns, in Spanish. This population will continue to expand and play key roles in the future of Henderson County agriculture.

Small Fruits

While not a large part of Henderson County's agricultural economy, small fruits such as strawberries, brambles, blueberries, and grapes are slowly becoming a major player in the total agricultural picture. The areas climate is ideal for the production of many of these fruit crops and the local demand seems to support these new ventures. Currently, there are over

20 producers of berry and grape crops. These producers typically grow these small fruit crops as supplemental commodities to their primary crops, either vegetables, apples, or both. There are fewer than 5 small fruit producers that grow berries, exclusively.

Industry Growth Potential and Challenges

The small fruit industry has potential for growth in Henderson County. Our location should lend itself to an increase in opportunities for consumer demand for fresh, locally grown, berries. The greatest challenge for these producers is like that of the vegetable producers, that of being able to convert some of the crops to value added products such as jams, jellies, ice cream, and pastries. The lack of processing facilities for these products will continue to restrict the potential growth of this marketing opportunity.

Source: NC Extension Service - Henderson County Office, Dynamic Plan of Work (2004)