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# Situation Analysis Report

## Northumberland County

# 2018

### Northumberland Extension Faculty

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## Introduction

Northumberland County conducted a comprehensive situation analysis during the fall 2018 and winter 2019. The process was led by unit extension faculty and 4-H and ANR advisory groups. It involved the creation of a Northumberland County unit profile as well as gathering community input on issues in the county. Data and information from these activities were analyzed and priority issues were identified.

The unit profile was developed using the data from the VCE Situation Analysis Resource website, Census of Agriculture, Community Health rankings, the Virginia Employment Commission Community Profile, the US census, and the Virginia Economic Development Partnership Community Profile. It was determined that the best way to gather perspectives from residents was to solicit input through electronic and paper surveys. Finally, key findings from the unit profile and surveys were discussed and the top priority issues for Northumberland County were identified, including those that could be addressed with current VCE resources and those that were outside the scope of current VCE resources.

## Unit Profile

Northumberland County is located in the eastern portion of Virginia at the northeastern tip of the Northern Neck peninsula. The county is 223 square miles, bounded on the north by the Potomac River and on the east by the Chesapeake Bay, with 556 miles of shoreline. Northumberland County is positioned halfway between the Washington, D.C. and Hampton Roads metropolitan areas. The county is located 70 miles northeast of Richmond and 112 miles southeast of Washington, D.C. The port of Hampton Roads is 94 miles south.

Based on census data, the overall population of the county will decrease by 2% by 2020. Currently, the population is 12,275 residents. However, the percentage of Hispanic residents has doubled to 4%. 36% of the county population is age 65 or older, while only 15% of the population of Northumberland County is under age 19. The median age of residents is 56.

Data on household composition indicated that 36% of children live in single parent households. Another significant factor affecting the youth in Northumberland County is that 31% live in poverty, up from 28% in 2013. This compares to 11% of the overall population of the county who live in poverty and the state average of 16%.

Health data shows that the teenage pregnancy rate has decreased by 11% since 2010, but the adult obesity rate has decreased from 33% to 27%.

The unemployment rate is 5.4%, over one percentage point higher than the state average. The top three employers are Northumberland County School Board, Manufacturing Techniques Inc., and Alpha Vesselco. A note to keep in mind is that 66% of working age residents commute outside the county for employment. The median income is \$56,677. 48% of the working age population is currently in the workforce.

Educational attainment rates have greatly increased from 2013. The high school graduation rate is 83%, while 26% of adults have a Bachelor's degree or higher.

Data gathered from the 2012 Census of Agriculture indicated that at that time there were 98 farms involved in active agricultural production on 43,270 acres in Northumberland County. Grain and soybean production accounted for a majority of the acreage reported, with Northumberland ranking 5<sup>th</sup> in the state for corn production and 4<sup>th</sup> for wheat production. The Northumberland county census report specified that 16,624 acres had been planted in beans, 14,639 acres in grain corn, and 10,222 in wheat. Since the release of 2012 data, Northumberland farmers have investigated the use of rape seed as an alternative winter crop in the place of some wheat acreage. Northumberland County also houses several direct market vegetable operations and cow calf operations totaling 419 head. Additionally, Northumberland is home to a commercial aquaculture operation which cage raises oysters.

## Community and Resident Perspectives

Community surveys were distributed via several means to reach as many residents as possible in all segments and demographics of the population. Distribution was through email, social media promotion, and US Mail.

Specific issues identified were aging issues, health care, internet accessibility, positive youth activities, availability of higher education options, poverty, agriculture sustainability/preservation and support, community services, opioid abuse prevention, land use, environmental and water quality, and economic development.

## Priority Issues

Based on the unit profile and resident perspectives data, the following top priority issues were identified for Northumberland County.

### **Issue 1: Agriculture sustainability/preservation and support**

**Description:** Among farmers, agricultural land preservation ranked highly as an issue that could be addressed by VCE. The 2012 Census of Agriculture reported that 98 farms had 43,270 acres of land involved in active agricultural production at that time in Northumberland County. When compared to the 2007 Census of Agriculture report, land in agricultural production saw a 3% reduction and total number of farms decreased 24% between 2007 and 2012. According to the United States Census Bureau 36% of Northumberland County's Population is above the age of 65. A majority of that group are people who relocate to Northumberland following their retirement. As retirees continue to migrate to Northumberland County, more and more land, traditionally used for agricultural production, is being developed for housing. Farmers are better able to retain their current acreages when they are

economically profitable. Profitability can be improved through efficient production practices and strategic marketing.

**VCE's role in addressing this issue:** Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Agents of the Northern Neck provide trainings for local producers at which attendees are provided with current information on new production practices, market updates and strategies, and innovative management options. They are also provided trainings necessary to legally manage their crops. Agents also offer individual support to producers with the assistance of Virginia Tech's on campus diagnostic laboratories. Moving forward, agents will provide additional focus on assisting producers further, by identifying alternative crops such as industrial hemp that may provide farmers the opportunity to obtain a premium for their product, as well as spread risk by diversifying their cropping system. Agents will also work to strengthen the relationship between farmers and residents through educational programs with the goal of creating a positive perception of agriculture in the community. Agents will also work with the Northern Neck land conservancy to encourage land owners to place properties into conservation easements, so that land will remain in agricultural production.

## **Issue 2: Positive youth development and education**

**Description:** Positive youth development and education was identified as the second most pressing issue in Northumberland County. A need exists to develop youth activities that promote positive youth development where youth grow into successful adults. In light of current poverty levels and the number of single parent households in the county, many youth lack strong parental involvement and positive role models. It is difficult for many youth to be involved in organizations outside of school because of lack of transportation, with so many adults working outside the county. Enrichment and after school opportunities in the public school system have decreased significantly due to funding.

**VCE's role in addressing this issue:** Since 2008, the Boys and Girls Club of the Northern Neck and the Northumberland Family YMCA have increased opportunities with children. 4-H has built a strong partnership with both of these organizations, and we envision this to continue. Because of the rural nature of the community, it is important for VCE to partner with other youth serving organizations to provide the most impactful programming without duplicating efforts. The VCE 4-H Youth Development agent, with assistance from other unit faculty and volunteers such as the Northern Neck Master Gardeners, will continue to collaborate with the school system to provide more in school enrichment programs, as these can reach the most youth where they are.

Scholarships are provided for 4-H Junior camp to allow all youth who want to attend, regardless of financial need, the opportunity.

The 4-H agent also promotes 4-H programs and the positive impact they have on youth through many types of media, including Facebook and the newspaper. This is done in hopes of showing youth in the unit in a positive light.

### **Issue 3: Water Quality**

**Description:** Northumberland County's proximity to the Chesapeake Bay makes water quality an important issue. Many residents have relocated to the county upon retirement and are unfamiliar with agricultural practices, and believe that poor water quality in our waterways to runoff from farmland. Litter is also a problem on the shorelines and roadways.

With 556 miles of shoreline in the county, and most of it on private property, it is the responsibility of homeowners to manage their shoreline to prevent runoff and erosion issues.

62% of county residents rely on private water supplies as their main source of water, but may be unfamiliar with proper well maintenance.

**VCE's role in addressing this issue:** The ANR and 4-H extension agent have both been certified as a Virginia Master Well Owner, and offer well water testing programs every 2 years in partnership with the Virginia Household Water Quality Program at Virginia Tech. The number of households participating in this program continues to increase. This program not only provides residents with helpful information about the water quality in the well, but educates them about how to care for their well, and the different forms of pollution that can affect your water. This helps to change the mindset that farmland runoff is the main problem.

The Northern Neck Master Gardeners provide a Shoreline Evaluation program for residents with waterfront property. This comprehensive program provides residents a blueprint of steps they can take to prevent runoff and erosion of their shoreline.

The ANR agent provides informational articles in print media, as well as workshops to educate residents on agriculture in the county. Education is the key to dispelling myths about the effects of agriculture on the environment.