Overview of Owsley County

An agrarian county, Owsley County has 246 farms totaling 31,767 acres in farm land. Much of this land is in forest lands. Tobacco has been the mainstay of agriculture in the county for several decades. While there is limited diversification into vegetables and cattle, these alternatives are almost always in addition to tobacco. Other crops grown in Owsley County include cabbage, pepper, strawberries, corn, hay and various fruit trees. Animals raised in Owsley include goats, beef cattle, swine and horses. Some Owsley County farmers have begun to look at new crops. Some of the new and emerging agriculture production includes vegetables, mushrooms, grapes, organic vegetable production, pumpkins, squash, napa cabbage and bok choy.

Owsley County is one of the most tobacco dependent counties, since tobacco is the primary crop grown. The county’s farm income has decreased by more than 60% down to 2.7 million dollars per year. Only .7 million pounds of tobacco will be harvested in the year 2000. This is more than a 70% decrease over the past three years and accounts for the majority of the county’s loss of farm income.

Bordered by Breathitt, Jackson, Lee, Leslie and Clay Counties, Owsley County is located in the Southern Cumberland forestry region which includes the Daniel Boone National Forest. Although Daniel Boone National Forest extends into Owsley, much of the forest land is owned by private individuals. The forests are made up primarily of hardwoods like white oak, red oak and hickory.

The South Fork of the Kentucky River flows through the county. Some of the richest, and most under utilized farm land in the county is located in large river bottoms along the South Fork.

Compared to other Kentucky counties, Owsley is small. The population of Owsley County is 5,404 with 46.6% living at a poverty income level. Median household income in Owsley County is $14,393. The loss of tobacco income coupled with the effects of welfare reform place Owsley County as the poorest county in Kentucky and the 7th poorest in the nation according to the latest statistical data.

Owsley County lags behind Kentucky and the nation in all income categories: median household income, median family income and per capita income. Wages and salaries account for the highest proportion of mean household income. Farm self-employment, largely tobacco related, income and retirement income are next in importance. Owsley County is more dependent on farm income than other counties in the Kentucky River ADD or Kentucky as a whole. It is somewhat more dependent on farming than the nation as a whole. For this reason, the loss of tobacco income is having a devastating effect on county income.

Owsley County has no large manufacturing plants and many Owsley Countians drive fifty miles or more to work each day. In 1992 32.5 percent of working Owsley Countians were working outside the county and 10.6% were commuting 45 minutes or more to their place of employment. Image Entry, a data entry plant, employs approximately 50 people. The largest employer in Owsley County is the Owsley County Board of Education. Federal, state and local government agencies make up the other primary employers. In 1992 the percent of farmers with farming as a primary source of income was 45.7%. The percent of jobs in farming (1995) was 29.7% compared to 5.4% for the state.
In addition to good agricultural land, especially rich river bottom land, Owsley County has farmers with years of experience, adequate farm equipment and a variety of established organizations with an interest in an agricultural future.

Through technology, Owsley County has access to all forms of statistical data and information sources. The University of Kentucky Agriculture Extension Services stands ready to assist with our needs. Other agencies, the Conservation Board, the county and city governments and the Owsley County School System are available for assistance whenever needed.

Owsley County has access to valuable human resources through the support of local organizations. The Booneville/Owsley Industrial Authority has committed to assist in the economic development of our area. The Industrial Authority has two buildings ready for occupancy in Lone Oak Industrial Park. Fiber optic cabling has been extended to the industrial park. The Owsley County Conservation District is supportive of efforts to improve life in Owsley County. The Red Bird District of the Daniel Boone National Forest is supportive of efforts to improve the economy of Owsley County. The Owsley County Action Team is committed to sustainable community development in our area. The Action Team has assisted in convening and facilitating meetings of farmers who are exploring new opportunities. Through the Action Team we have access to meeting space and soon will have CenterNet, a video-conferencing and distance learning lab, available. The Owsley County Fund for Excellence is committed to involving young people in the future of our county. This organization will soon have a student-run business up and going in our county.

Review of the Process

a. How was the comprehensive plan developed?

The council met as a whole to plan a county wide meeting. Four of the council members attended a regional information meeting at Quicksand and council members gathered statistical data from reputable sources. Some council members attended a meeting in Lee County to gather information about the application process. Individual council members have attended several meetings that dealt with agriculture development in several areas of the state. Two county wide meetings open to the public were held. All meetings of the council itself are open to the public. The data gleaned from the first of these meetings was used to develop a rough draft of the plan and the draft plan was then presented to the public for comment and corrections at the second meeting. These meetings were advertised in the local paper and a mailing was sent out by the Extension office to county farmers. In addition the Owsley County Action Team published information in its newsletter and information was included in the Extension newsletter.

Before amending the short term priorities at the request of the State Agriculture Development Board, a third county meeting was held to obtain public input into the revisions. This meeting was advertised in the local paper. In addition, the Cooperative Extension Agent for Agriculture and Natural Resources attended another training in Lexington before the plan was revised.

b. Who had input into the plan?
The council is made up of county leaders, farmers, an attorney, a business owner, an insurance sales person, and a retired school teacher. Anyone interested who attended one of the public meetings had input into the plan. Attendees include representatives of the conservation district, Natural Resources and Conservation Services, school teachers, community development personnel, farmers and representatives of the local media. It was the goal of the council to include as many people as possible and all input has been considered.

Assessments

a. Strengths
Strengths include a large number of tobacco farms with good agricultural land, extensive hardwood forests, many good barns and a good collection of farm equipment. Many farms have access to water for irrigation, including a number of farms with river bottoms on the South Fork of the Kentucky River. Owsley County is in a good central location, with proximity to a large population within 6-8 hours driving time. The county is blessed with unspoiled scenic beauty. There are a number of skilled farmers with years of experience. CenterNet (video teleconferencing center) is now available in the county and it is hoped it can be used to train tobacco farmers who are attempting to diversify.

b. Weaknesses
The number of farmers in the county has been declining and those that are left are older and highly dependent on tobacco and resistant to change. Although these farmers have good production skills, they often lack the tools to market what they can produce. Young people are forced to leave the county for employment and those that stay travel long distances for low paying jobs. A low priority is put on education in the county and many residents have few entrepreneurial skills coupled with a lack of initiative. The county lacks infrastructure such as good roads, adequate sewage, and industry.

c. Opportunities
Phase I tobacco money is the first glimmer of hope tobacco farmers have seen in a long time. Many farmers who wish to continue farming realize they must diversify and now there will be money available to help them diversify. Farmers need a marketing specialist and would be willing to partner with other counties in the region to retain one.

Owsley County has been instrumental in bringing attention to the fledgling goat industry in Kentucky with the formation of the Eastern Kentucky Goat Producers Association. There is a large goat herd in Owsley County and a number of experienced goat producers. With demand for goats being greater than the supply, the county is in a good position to make some money with their goats if they can get some marketing assistance.

Owsley County hosts the largest trail ride in the state every fall. This is a unique opportunity to expand into larger tourism areas and to showcase the county’s scenic beauty.
d. Threats
The lack of young farmers poses a significant threat to agriculture in the county. This is exacerbated by a general loss of the young people who are forced to leave the county to find employment. Due to the failure of past cooperative efforts there is great resistance to farmers cooperating in the future. Farmers here are resistant to change and new ideas, with many refusing to believe that the tobacco program may end. There is a trend toward absentee land ownership. For the most part, this acreage will not be farmed leading to smaller farms and less production.

Owsley County Council Objectives

a. The mission of the Owsley County Agriculture Development Council is to provide leadership in the transition from a tobacco dependent economy to a more diversified and healthy economy.

b. The council has identified the following short term priorities:

1. Livestock
   A. Improve herd genetics
   B. Improve forage
   C. Increase herd size
2. Horticulture
   A. Expand horticultural crops
   B. Add value to all horticultural crops
3. Wood Products
   A. Encourage value added marketing of wood products

It is suggested that farmers work together as groups to cooperative produce and market the above products and livestock.

c. The council has identified the following long term goals:

1. Support an increased number of farmers planning and pooling resources,
2. Provide infrastructure for agriculture needs,
3. Provide for more value added forestry products,
4. Support the establishment of a core large scale industry,
5. Support tourism and recreational activities,
6. Support an increase in speciality livestock,

Tactics for Leveraging Funds

Whenever possible the council will encourage applicants for Phase I Tobacco funds to seek other
funding, state and federal, with similar guidelines. For example, if an applicant has an interest in tourism, then he/she should be looking at the new Tourism Corridors project that the Center for Rural Development in Somerset is spearheading. Or if a project will employ several people, one should look to the economic development council for additional funding. In some cases, these could be the required matching funds. Applicants will be encouraged to look for partners locally and on a regional level. However, regional or multiple county projects must show that the project provides a benefit to the county in proportion to the requested funding.

**Evaluation and Review**

Applicants will be expected to follow the guidelines as laid out in the state application. (50% match is required). The council will evaluate and review each proposal according to our short term priorities. State guidelines and criteria will always be considered in prioritizing proposals. Assistance to farmers most impacted by the loss of tobacco income will have first priority. For instance, if two applicants had very similar proposals, one a tobacco farmer and one a vegetable producer, the tobacco farmer’s proposal would take top priority.

Applicants will be expected to provide the required matching funds. The applicant should also be prepared to show a well developed and thought out plan. Parts of this would include, but would not be limited to:

- A clear description of the project
- A marketing plan
- A management plan
- A financial management plan

Success or failure of projects will be measured by the profitability as well as the benefit to farmers and the economy of the local community.
OWSLEY COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Approved March 28, 2001

Owsley County Agriculture Development Council 2000

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