

# Farmers' Market Challenges in a Rural Setting:

## A case study of the Elaney Wood Heritage Farmers Market

By the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI)

*In 2014, RAFI received a grant through USDA's Farmers Market Promotion Program to test direct marketing strategies, track outcomes, and share the resources necessary to build the capacity of farmers' markets and direct marketing farm enterprises. One strategy towards accomplishing this goal was the establishment of Learning Communities: farmers' markets which, with technical assistance from RAFI, could serve as a testing ground from which other markets could learn. From this experience, we have produced four case studies to share insights on specific market topics.*

**T**his case study highlights the challenges faced by **rural markets in recruiting and retaining vendors and in attracting customers.**

Snow Hill, NC (population 1,595<sup>1</sup>) is the county seat of Greene County, a rural county with a total population of 21,134.<sup>2</sup> Greene is a Tier 1 county,<sup>3</sup> with a poverty rate of 28% and an average per capita income of \$18,477.<sup>4</sup> In 2014, 4,518 Greene County residents received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.<sup>5</sup> There are over 300 farms in Greene County,<sup>6</sup> including 20 farms that grow produce, and there are 14 farms that sell direct to consumers. Average farm size is 389 acres.<sup>7</sup> A few other direct-market outlets for fruits and vegetables exist in Greene County: There are 3 roadside stands, and 2 CSAs.



The **Elaney Wood Heritage Farmers Market** in Snow Hill was founded in 2011. In its first year it was located next to the Greene County office building, and in 2012 it relocated to a new market building next to the Greene County Parks & Recreation complex. The market is open on Saturday mornings from May to October. It currently hosts 5 to 10 vendors from Greene County and from within a 50-mile radius, and typically has 85 to 100 people visit the market each week. The market employs a part-time manager and a part-time SNAP/EBT<sup>8</sup> staffer, both funded through grants, and the director of Greene County Extension also spends time promoting the market. Elaney Wood began accepting SNAP/EBT in 2014, and began offering a nutrition incentive through RAFI's Fresh Bucks program in 2015. The Fresh Bucks program matches customers' EBT spending dollar for dollar up to \$20 with tokens customers can spend on fresh fruits and vegetables.

1 US Census, 2010

2 US Census Quick Facts estimate: [http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/37079\\_00](http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/37079_00)

3 The North Carolina Department of Commerce annually ranks the state's 100 counties based on economic well-being and assigns each a Tier designation. The 40 most distressed counties are designated as Tier 1.

4 US Census Quick Facts estimate

5 US Census, Small Area Estimates Branch: <http://www.census.gov/did/www/saie/data/model/tables.html> SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, is a federally funded food assistance program for low-income individuals and households.

6 As reported by Greene County Agricultural Extension

7 2012 Agricultural Census. Greene County Infographic: <https://cefs.ncsu.edu/resources/greene-county/>

8 EBT stands for Electronic Benefit Transfer, the method of distributing SNAP funds. SNAP is distributed through EBT cards, which act like a debit card for a participant's monthly benefits.



## Outreach and Promotion

Market staff actively promote the market and the SNAP/Fresh Bucks program through a variety of avenues.

### SNAP/EBT & Fresh Bucks Outreach

Staff passed out postcards in English and Spanish to the Greene County staff who administer SNAP and WIC.<sup>9</sup> They shared fliers with food banks to include in the boxes of food distributed. They have visited assisted living facilities to make sure residents know that the market site is accessible for those with limited mobility. They have visited the Medical Center (where many clients qualify for Medicaid), met with the director, and passed out fliers in the waiting room.

### In-Kind Advertising & Free Media

The Department of Transportation puts magnetic signs about the market on their vehicles, providing free advertising to the market. The local newspaper writes an article on the market almost every month, and the market has also been featured in Greene Living Magazine.

### Special Events & Cooking Demonstrations

The market hosts special events to attract more market customers, and publicizes them through their website, the county webpage, the newspaper, Facebook, and the Greene County news & announcements for employees. They secured grant funding to pay for a chef to do cooking demonstrations and samplings at the market.

### Community Partnerships

The market partners with a number of community organizations like the fire department, the public library, and 4H, who come out to the market to do informational tabling.

### Promotional Video

With RAFI's assistance, market staff are putting together a video to promote the market and to help recruit community champions who can advocate for the market. A first draft of the video has been completed

<sup>9</sup> WIC, or the Women, Infant, and Children Special Supplemental Nutrition Program is a federally funded food assistance program for low-income pregnant, breast-feeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women and children up to age five who are at nutritional risk.



and more footage will be recorded in 2017.

## Challenges

Elaney Wood faces the circular challenge of simultaneously building its vendor base and its customer base.

### Building a Customer Base

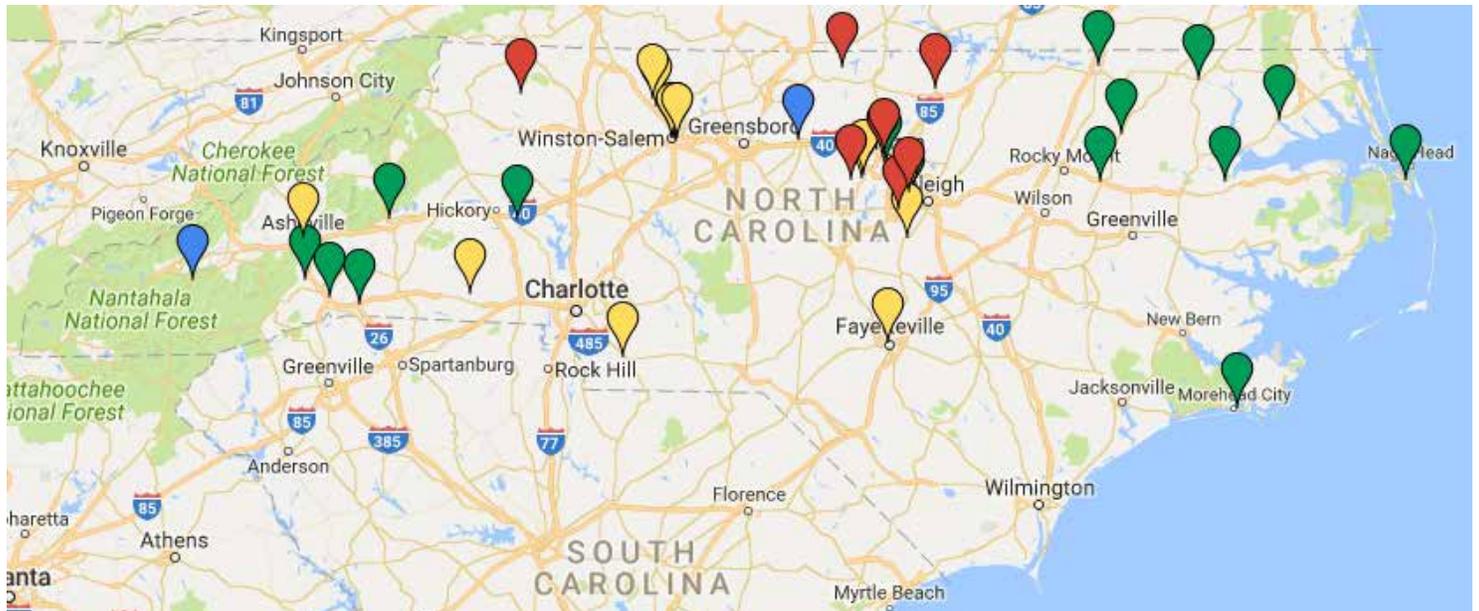
While the new market shelter provides the market with a kitchen and a more comfortable weatherproof place for vendors to set up, market staff has reported a drop in market attendance following the relocation. Many customers who used to walk from their homes downtown to the site by the county office building no longer come to the market; though the new site is barely over a half mile from the original site, the road between them is not safe for pedestrians or bicyclists. In a recent survey of SNAP customers at Elaney Wood, 100% of them reported coming to the market by car.

While market events do help increase attendance, they have not yet resulted in a more stable weekly increase. Given Snow Hill's rural context, the market has fewer local residents and potential customers overall. Market staff have also heard feedback from some first-time customers that there was not a lot of produce at the market. A larger and more varied selection of fresh farm products could help attract and retain new customers.

## Perceptions of customer/vendor balance at N.C. farmers markets

In 2015, RAFI hosted a summit for farmers markets and asked attendees to mark where they were from on a map with different colors according to their perception of the customer/vendor balance at markets in their area.

Blue = did not know if markets in their areas were meeting demand.  
Green = thought markets in their area need to grow to meet demand.  
Yellow = thought markets in their area were currently meeting demand.  
Red = thought markets in their area had grown beyond demand.



### Building a Vendor Base

When the market was founded in 2011 outside the county office building, the market regularly had around 16 vendors, at least 8 of them farmers. Some of the farmers were single-crop vendors, coming by the market with truckloads of potatoes or corn. When the market moved to the new shelter, those farmers did not return to the market. This may have been due either to the change in location, or simply to the fact that they had tried the market in its first year and found it was not a good enough fit.

At the end of the 2016 season, the market had two anchor farm vendors selling fruits and vegetables. Finding and retaining vendors has been difficult for the market, despite the manager's personal invitations to local farms to come sell at the market. While Greene County is heavily agricultural, most farms are large farms growing cotton, tobacco, or corn, so the pool of farms who market their products directly is small

— just 14.<sup>10</sup> This challenge is not isolated to Elaney Wood. Particularly in the eastern and western parts of North Carolina, markets often have a hard time finding and recruiting vendors, as seen in the map above of market manager perceptions of the customer/vendor balance at their markets across the state.

Past and potential farmer vendors at the market have faced the same challenge: it is difficult for them to make enough sales to justify their time at the market, and they often decide they could make a better income selling at markets in more populated urban areas like Greenville, or having roadside stands that could be open seven days per week. To be a viable direct-marketing outlet for local farms, Elaney Wood needs more customer traffic.

Building a market so that customer traffic and vendor attendance are growing but in balance is a challenge for

<sup>10</sup> For comparison's sake, Avery County, slightly smaller than Greene and with a population of 17,572, had 40 direct-marketing farms according to the 2012 US Agricultural Census.

a market of any size; however it is a steeper challenge for very small markets.

Elaney Wood's experience would seem to indicate that there may be a minimum size threshold that markets need to reach to achieve stability and sustainability. The impact of market size on viability is an area of inquiry that warrants further investigation. In their 2006 report, "When Things Don't Work: Some Insights into Why Farmers' Markets Close," Oregon State researchers have identified market size and a

need for more farm products as two of the five factors associated with markets that close.<sup>11</sup>

**Despite active efforts from market staff, due to its rural context Elaney Wood still faces substantial challenges to building a stable, robust market.**

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11 When Things Don't Work: Some Insights into Why Farmers' Markets Close, Garry Stephenson, Larry Lev, Linda Brewer, 2006, Oregon State University Extension Service. [http://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/sites/default/files/small-farms-tech-report/eesc\\_1073.pdf](http://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/sites/default/files/small-farms-tech-report/eesc_1073.pdf)

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*Connect2Direct is a collaboration between the Rural Advancement Foundation International and the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project to support and build equitable community-based local food economies through the development of direct markets for farmers in North Carolina*



**About RAFI:** *RAFI's mission is to cultivate markets, policies, and communities that sustain thriving, socially just, and environmentally sound family farms. To learn more about RAFI's work, visit [rafiusa.org](http://rafiusa.org) or call (919) 542-1396.*