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Maryland Beginning Farmer Needs Assessment

Shannon Dill

Extension Educator, AGNR
sdill@umd.edu

Benjamin Beale

Extension Educator, AGNR
bbeale@umd.edu

Hannah Shear

Beginning Farmer Coordinator
hshear@umd.edu

James Hanson

Professor, Agricultural and Resource
Economics
jhanson1@umd.edu

Abstract

The Collaborative for Beginning Farmer Success mission is to increase the number of beginning farmers and acreage farmed by them in Maryland. It also supports the continued success of beginning farmers as they navigate through the first 10 years of farm establishment. This project was funded as a part of the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program and is a partnership between university, government and nonprofit agencies. As part of the project, a needs assessment was conducted to better determine the specific needs of Maryland beginning farmers' and program plans for the future.

Introduction

In 2012 the University of Maryland was awarded an USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Project grant to educate and support beginning farmers of Maryland by providing a comprehensive education program that includes workshops, coaching, mentoring and on-farm training. The project brings together the University of Maryland College Park, University of Maryland Eastern Shore, the Southern Maryland Agriculture Development Commission and Future Harvest: A Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture (FH-CASA) as partners in education and outreach.

A decrease in the number of farmers nationwide coupled with an aging farm population and the realization that beginning farmers need support in order to contribute to the food supply led to the development of the Maryland Collaborative for Beginning Farmer Success (BFS).

The BFS program formally launched in 2012 and began creating educational opportunities for beginning farmers in the state. Since then numerous efforts have been made to create meaningful workshops and hands on trainings.

As the program expanded and identified an audience of beginning farmers it became important to better determine and measure their specific educational needs through a strategic needs assessment.



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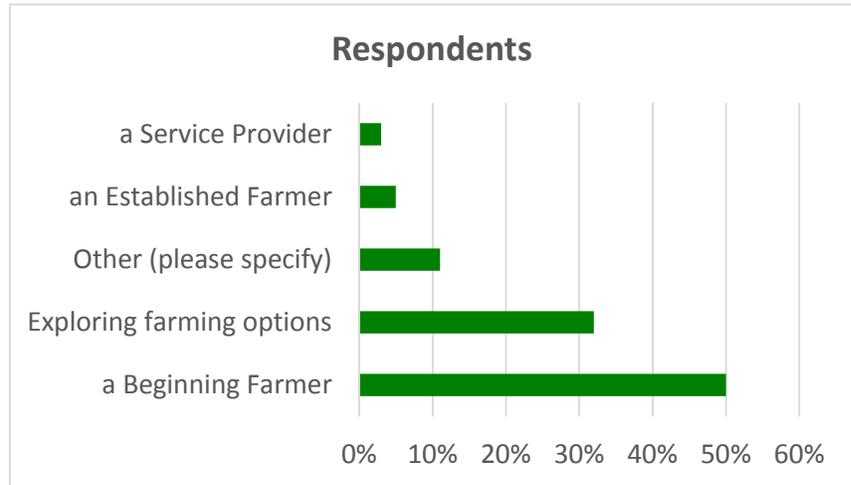
Methods

In December of 2014, a needs assessment survey was conducted to determine current needs of beginning farmers in Maryland and provide validation for future programming. There were 18 questions used to determine beginning farmer needs as well as demographic information. These questions required respondents to utilize a likert scale, rankings, and a comment section where applicable. The process and survey was reviewed and approved by the UMD Internal Review Board (UMD IRB #443446-3).

The survey target audience was comprised of participants in past BFS events or programs and clientele who voluntarily registered to receive a BFS newsletter and other information from the BFS website. The team felt this was the best audience to survey as they are currently using the program and have shown an interest in beginning farmer education. The needs assessment was a web based survey and was administered to 133 BFS contacts residing in Maryland. Participants of the survey were asked to rate the priority levels of educational topics, knowledge areas and preferred educational delivery methods.

Results

Of those participants that completed the needs assessment, 50% identified themselves as beginning farmers using the USDA definition of 10 years or less of active farming. This was closely followed by 32% that identified themselves as “exploring farming options”. Explorer farmers are those that have agricultural interests but have not yet started farming. These two groups combined account for 82% of



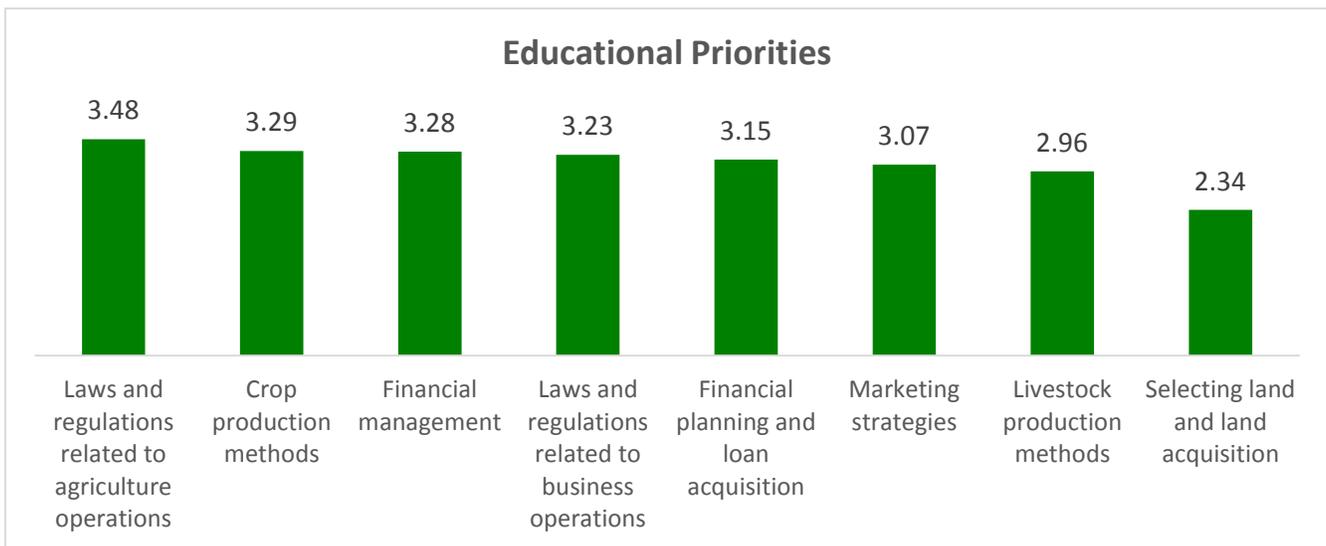
respondents that have a direct interest in beginning farmer programs. The balance of respondents identified themselves as other (11%), an established farmer (5%) and a service provider (3%).

Multiple demographic questions were asked to understand who was responding to the survey. The majority of respondents were women (69%), white/non-Hispanic (86%), ages 45-54 (33%) and college graduates (53%). About half were growing vegetables with livestock and poultry being second.

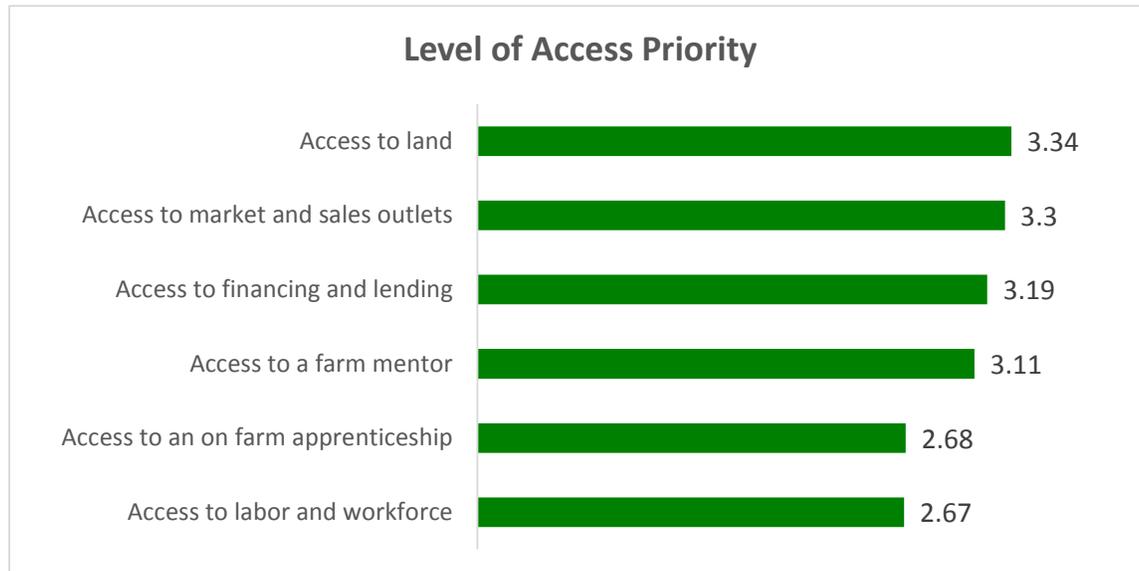
The survey asked various questions to discover desired education topics, set education priorities, rank needs, discover learning preferences and intentions for the future.

Education Priorities

Beginning Farmers report a the highest priority of knowledge in the areas of laws and regulations related to agriculture options, crop production methods and financial management.



In conducting the needs assessment it was important for UME to identify barriers or issues that beginning farmers have. A question related to access and level of priority to beginning farmers was asked. Results show that land was the highest followed by market and sales outlets and financing and lending. These results seem consistent with many national surveys related to beginning, young and new farmers.



Beginning farmers were asked to rank their top three needs for success. Results of the ratings include:

1. Available farmland to rent or purchase
2. Access to credit and financing
3. Crop production information
4. Marketing Assistance
5. Livestock production information
6. Legal assistance
7. Labor

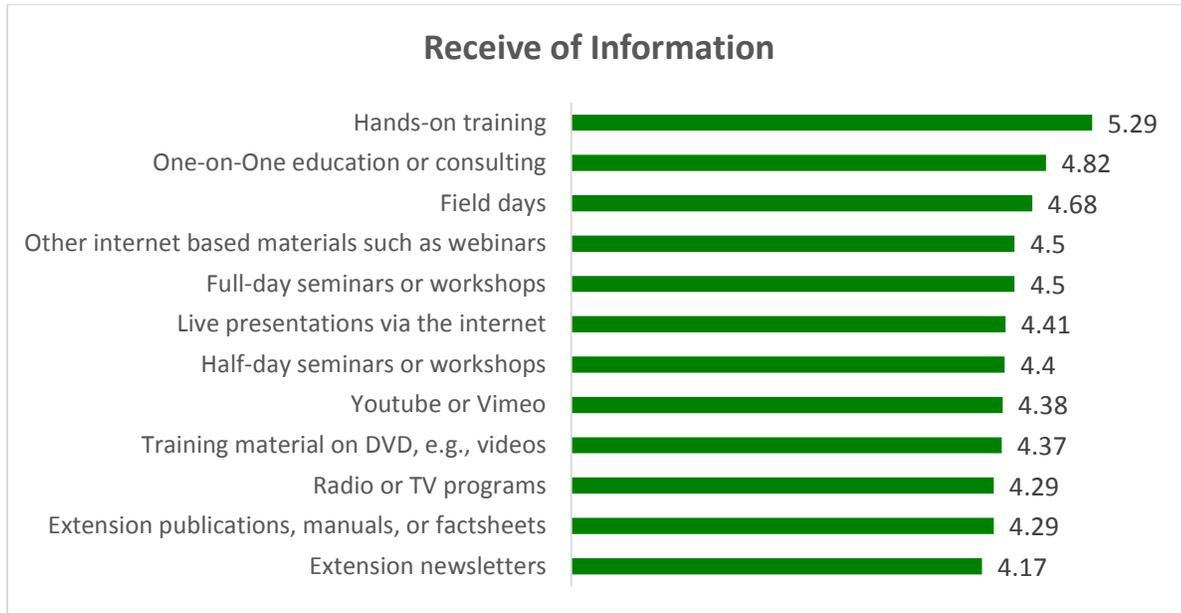
Educational Delivery

The needs assessment attempted to discover how beginning farmers would prefer to receive information and education.

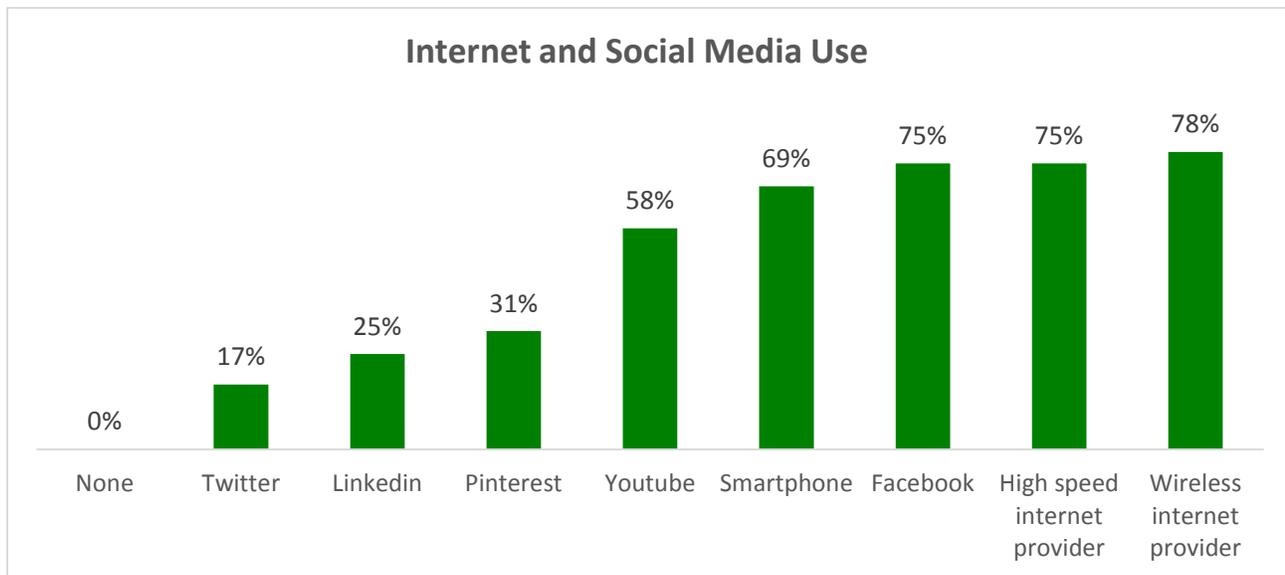
Learning preferences were ranked and results show that beginning farmers prefer:

1. Mentoring
2. Classroom and workshop based resources and education
3. Apprenticing- on farm employment
4. One on one coaching
5. Web based resources and education

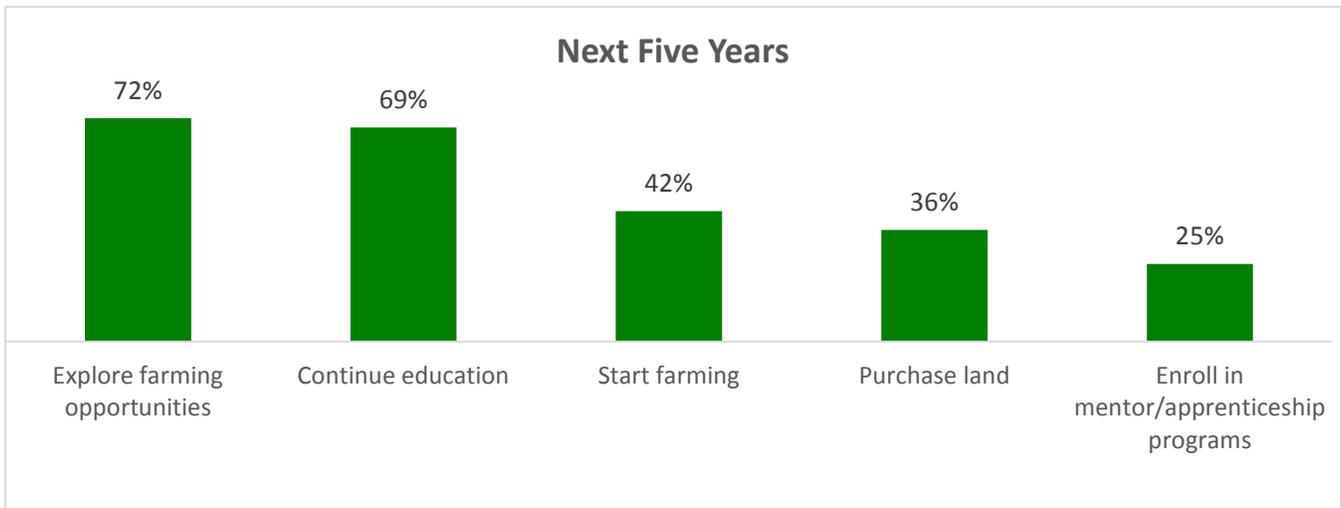
Beginning farmers prefer to receive hands on and individualized training. They also prefer field days and other internet based materials such as webinars.



Most of the participants have internet access and are using social media. Facebook is the most popular social media outlet followed by YouTube.



The survey also asked beginning farmers about their intentions for the future. They could select all that apply to them with many selecting multiple times. The majority are going to explore farming options and continue education. Forth two percent are going to start farming with 36% interested in purchasing land.



Discussion

In response to the survey results, BFS has developed a programming that will focus on meeting the priority needs of Maryland’s beginning farmers. There will be an emphasis on high ranking issues such as land, marketing and financing. BFS provides a wide selection of training opportunities to meet educational needs, including mentoring, coaching, and on-farm training. BFS will expand work to reach and target a broader demographic in the areas of race and ethnicity. A comprehensive beginning farmer website and social media presence will help BFS connect with more beginning farmers and continue to expand the program. The website provides online resource referrals, education learning modules, and various publications. As BFS programming moves forward it will be continuously important to stay engaged with participants needs for education to ensure successful and profitable farms.

www.extension.umd.edu/newfarmer

www.facebook.com/beginningfarmersuccess

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