



Bill Grantham and his father James Grantham stand by their farmhouse that has been in the family since 1763. Bill is the seventh generation Grantham.

Adding value together

Local farmers form task force to save industry

By KAREN CONTRERAS
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MIDDLEWAY – The taxes went to England when Bill G. Grantham’s family first began working their Jefferson farm.

Taxes later went to Richmond and then to Charleston. Eventually, fields no longer were plowed by a sturdy nag, but by a tractor with horsepower.

Since 1763, the Granthams have been changing with the times while going about their business of farming. Representing the current generation of the farm, Grantham isn’t about to change any of that.

So when he was 22 years into his farming career and Grantham couldn’t prosper in the dairy business, he decided to try something new. “It was



time to get out,” Grantham said about a dairy market he felt was heading south.

That was 14 years ago, and the 52-year-old is still farming his land. “Farming has changed drastically,” Grantham said.

Grantham now produces enough vegetables, hay, and a variety of other agricultural products on his 170 acres, called Tudor Hall Farm, to maintain the family business.

From raising a barn to raising a profit

Farming communities are known for coming together in times of need. Realizing that it was the farming tradition in Jefferson County that was in trouble, farmers have been meeting since 2000 to find ways to raise a profit from working the land.

In 2001, local officials, business leaders and other interested residents with some stake in the future of the county’s agricultural heritage formed the Jefferson County Agricultural Task Force.

“We want farmers to make more money than they can by selling their property,” said Dr. Keith Berkeley, a local veterinarian and chairman of the task force.

Berkeley made the comment at a discussion of agricultural sustainability to the northeast division of National Conservation Districts earlier this year.

An original group of nine farmers began meeting in the winter of 2000, Berkeley said. The group was facilitated by Potomac Headwaters Resource Conservation and Development Council Project Coordinator Roger Boyer and Shepherdstown resident Marian Buckner.

Farmers have worked hard to become experts in their trade, Berkeley said. Bringing in speakers and business experts, the group hoped to find ways to make farming more profitable, Berkeley said.

By the summer of 2001, the task force was formed and began developing an action plan to find markets for local agriculture, protect farmland and find new ways to farm in Jefferson County. Of the 32 members on the task force, half are farmers.

Putting the plan in place

Before forming the task force, the group of nine farmers had a decision to make. The farmers were asked whether they felt it was worth it to move forward with their efforts and establish a strategic plan to develop agriculture in Jefferson County.

With several farmers in the group often expressing discouragement and suffering setbacks in their own production, Boyer was unsure whether farmers would vote to push on or give in to the dismal future some saw for local farmers.

The farmers gave a unanimous “yes” to the question, and the agriculture development plan was completed September 2002. The County Commission and Planning Commission gave \$12,000 for the plan’s development, he said.

The Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation and the West Virginia State Conservation committee also contributed funds for the planning and the task force in general, Boyer said.

The plan’s 27 recommendations would help the county develop public policy supportive of farmers, support agricultural marketing, increase economic development of agriculture and establish training for farmers, according to the published plan.

A year after the plan was completed, it has not been sitting on a shelf, Boyer said. The task force and other community organizations have been working to carry out the five and ten-year action plans, he said.

Added Value plant under study

One of the major advances the task force has made in implementing the plan is toward the establishment of a shared-use processing facility for farm products, Boyer said.

The farmers believe a facility that allows them to process their produce into a finished product and sell it directly to the public will help them not only cut out the middleman and make a profit, Boyer said.

The United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development recently gave \$50,000 for a feasibility study through a rural business enterprise grant to the task force. The study is designed to determine if there is a market for locally processed farm products and if a shared-use facility would help farmers in the area. The grant is a great boost to the task force’s efforts and will help the group garner some matching funds for the project, Boyer said.

Sifting through a massive amount of paperwork stipulating how the group can use the money, Boyer hopes to begin the study by the end of the year.

“I’d like to see it sooner than later,” said Grantham, a member of the task force.

Grantham believes the study will find an overwhelming need for a facility that would allow farmers to process milk, eggs, meat, vegetables and fruit into products ready for public consumption.

The importance of being direct

When he made the change from dairy production to a varied production of vegetables and hay, Grantham had to find a new way to distribute his products. The farmer found selling directly to the public is the only way to make a profit on his small, family farm.

Grantham sells vegetables at the Shepherdstown farmers market one day a week year-round and three days a week during peak season, he said. During the summer, Grantham operates a vegetable stand next to his farm off W.Va. 51 six days a week.

The shared-use facility would help farmers cut out the middle man, said Grantham, adding the thought brought a large grin to his face. “It will give the local farmers a local outlet for produce.”

Also, local residents would benefit from fresh products, instead of buying meat from supermarkets that has been frozen for six months, Grantham said. The sales area of the facility would be incredibly important for local farmers, he said.

Products that have been processed have a much greater market value than raw products, Grantham said.

Without the ability to process their products, farmers are forced to sell their produce at below wholesale prices to someone who will reap the benefits of selling a finished product at a higher price, he said.

Turning apples into pies, squash into pumpkin pie filling and milk into cheese adds value to the products, Grantham said. Such products also allow farmers to recoup profits lost when surplus crops aren’t sold in their original form, he said.

Farmers sell their product below wholesale prices but they pay retail for all their supplies, Grantham said. The shared-use processing facility would help their income keep pace with the costs of production, he said.

Turning neighbors Into customers

Depending on direct sales for the past 14 years, Grantham believes the shared-use facility would bring a profit. The county's growing population also means a growing market for farm fresh goods.

Working from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily during hay season, Grantham wants to continue to farm in spite of the challenges.

"My wife says it's a religion – not a job."

Grantham enjoys farming and doesn't want to do anything else, he said. "It's just a good life."

With Jefferson County experiencing a population boom, Grantham is not alone in his passion for the county's rural lifestyle.

The next installment of "Cultivating Jefferson" will look at how the rural way of life attracts newcomers and how local farmers are getting along with these urban additions.