The Mitchell County Cooperative Extension office, in collaboration with its Agricultural Advisory Board, determined that the county’s agricultural future depends in part on farm profitability and accessing new markets. The need for a central facility and system for collecting, processing, distributing and marketing farm products is one of the most important steps that can be taken to ensure that the county’s farms continue to be a viable part of the WNC agricultural economy. With funding from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, and in partnership with Land In Common and Smithson Mills, Cooperative Extension has prepared this Feasibility Study with this vision in mind, prompted by the county’s interest in achieving three interrelated goals:

- Increase access to healthy, local foods for students and staff in Mitchell County Schools;
- Increase access to healthy, local foods for patients, staff, and visitors at Blue Ridge Regional Hospital;
- Support local farms in the county through institutional purchasing.

Recommendations (based on farmer surveys and school/hospital interviews)

Yancey County is conducting a similar assessment and should be considered a potential partner for Mitchell County in efforts to expand distribution of local farm products. In conjunction with Yancey County:

1. **Identify short-term (1 – 3 year) opportunities** for serving schools, hospitals, and retail buyers in the region with Mitchell County farm products, and develop a business plan for meeting those opportunities.
2. **Determine the type of partnership organization** (multi-county, public-private, cooperative, LLC, other) that would be suitable for collection, processing, storing, marketing, and distributing Mitchell-grown farm products.
3. **Select specific fruits or vegetables** that grow well in Mitchell County, are relatively easy to harvest and process, store well, easy to transport, and are used regularly by Mitchell County Schools and Blue Ridge Regional Hospital food service staff and retail buyers, such as potatoes, cabbage, and apples as identified in this report. Promote production of these varieties among Mitchell County farmers.
4. **Identify specific farm types and farms that may participate** in a distribution entity, such as small diversified farms, and those that responded positively to the farmer survey.
5. **Outline processing/distribution options** (central facility, mobile facility, cold storage).
6. **Develop food preparation and value-added processing options** for farmers and food service staff (canning, sauces, sauerkrauts).
7. **Identify feasibility of long-term (3 – 10 year) opportunities** for serving schools, hospitals and retail buyers with Mitchell County farm products

**For more information, contact:**

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