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"Proud Partner of a N.C. Farmers' Market"

When 15 to 20 percent of a town comes out for any event, it is noteworthy – even if it is a town of 300. On Saturday, June 14, 2014, the rural town of Atkinson, North Carolina, in Pender County, celebrated its second "Black River Farmers' Market." At the farmers' market, located on the old railroad easement in the center of town, local vendors offered red, white, and blue potatoes, corn, zucchini, squash, Japanese maples, tomato plants and fresh tomatoes, handmade soaps and natural remedies, handmade hand-painted sachets and much more under bright blue summer skies. Market activity was busy and smells were heavenly, with buyers asking about crops, varieties, how to use some of the more unique items, and enjoying the artisans' creations. The Farmers' Market enjoys ethnic and age diversity, from small children to senior adults visiting the open-air booths. In fact, most vendors sold out all or most of their wares during the first two Market days.

Atkinson is a small but thriving rural community, but the larger, big-name grocery stores are more than half an hour away, in Wilmington, N.C., and surrounding areas. Atkinson has wonderful cropland, and a couple of local citizens decided it would be a great boon to their town to offer fresh-from-the-farm products to local customers and visitors. Renee Williamson Bloodworth, a local attorney, and Teresa Simmons, a local nursery grower, put their ideas into action and began the collaboration which became Black River Farmers' Market.

The goal of this grassroots effort is to have the Market also become a draw for tourists who visit the area's historic sites, lush farmland, fish-filled waterways and coastal beauty, and a great opportunity for nearby small farmers – even backyard gardeners – and craftsmen to sell their wares locally. The Black River Farmers' Market has received guidance and support in part by eastern N.C. region's Feast Down East, an eleven-county collaboration of public and private organizations along southeastern N.C.

According to Dr. Leslie Hossfeld, Chair and Professor of Sociology at UNCW and Executive Director of Feast Down East, their goal is to help area farmers of all sizes to connect with local restaurants, school systems, and the general public to sell their home grown produce and homemade products. Since being established in 2006, Feast Down East's impact has brought \$20.6 million back into our area's economy and 73 new farm-related jobs.

Bob Etheridge, State Executive Director for the North Carolina USDA Farm Service Agency, spoke about Feast Down East's merits at a recent StrikeForce rollout in Pender County. Director Etheridge sees the collaboration between the USDA and partners such as Feast Down East plays an important role in our rural communities. With such strong StrikeForce programs, Director Etheridge said, *"Farmers can find a way on a small scale to have an impact on a large scale."* He stated that through such community-based programs, *"If you give people hope, if you give people help, and you give people resources, you can make a difference."*

Word of the Black River Farmers' Market has been spreading, and interest continues to grow due to local newspaper coverage and the New Hanover-Pender Farm Service Agency sharing the news with local farmers of all sizes. Co-founder and now Market Manager Bloodworth is also a mom and a farmer in addition to practicing law. In fact, the Market has become a family affair, with her children and husband lending a hand to the vendors. Ms. Bloodworth stated that *"people in this area are really excited about having this new Farmers' Market. It is something our community has needed for quite some time."* The Black River Farmers' Market will be held every other Saturday throughout the summer.

It is such an enriching opportunity for me to connect with the Farmers' Market, both on my job and in my personal life. Getting to work alongside some of the farmers/vendors at the Market gives me an up-close perspective of their crops, their challenges, and their optimism. I hope my enthusiasm for the Market also rubs off on some of our smaller farmers that come into the FSA office who might have been hesitant or didn't even know about this sales opportunity. And my telling them that I'll be at the market and hope they'll be near my booth helps them know they will have a friend at the Market. *This entire experience has been truly engaging for me. I'm having a great time!*



*Veronica Bannerman, PT; Linda O'Leary Riesch, PT;
and Emmett Rogers, CED*



Black River Farmers' Market, Atkinson, NC