

**Location:**  
South-Central North Carolina  
Green Fields

**Population:**  
198,472

**Estimated median  
household income:**  
\$43,685

**Estimated households  
below poverty level:**  
18.1%



*"I think what we're seeing is the coalescence of interest in the local food movement in our area...Nobody has done this before, but we can't stop here. We've got to continue to build on it. It's a big deal."*

*- Pat Corso, executive director of Moore County Partners in Progress*

The Sandhills SET Initiative region in South-Central North Carolina is characterized by strong self-determination and a spirit of regionalism. In June 2013, the SET process launched what is now called "Green Fields Initiative." Comprised of Lee, Richmond, and Moore Counties and situated in what is commonly known as Sandhills Country. The Sandhills region enjoys healthy rainfall and sandy light textured soils which together promote long growing seasons suitable for cultivating fruits and vegetables as well as more traditional row crops. Aside from historic economic drivers such as agriculture and forestry, the region has also developed a robust tourism industry. With changing demographics and demand, the region is excited to promote a younger, local foods movement as a key economic driver.

### Vision

The Green Fields Initiative envisions:  
"Collaborative economic development efforts in the three-county region of Lee, Moore, and Richmond result in a vibrant agricultural sector that is recognized as a critical component of creating a sustainable and self-reliant community. More healthy local foods are produced and consumed; numerous economically viable, food and non-food, entrepreneurial agribusiness opportunities

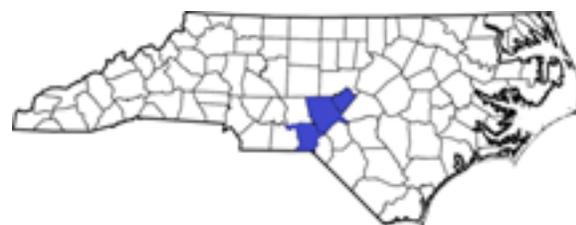
are encouraged and supported (resulting in the average age of region farmers trending younger), agricultural lands and rural lifestyle are preserved long-term, and the health of community members is significantly improved."

### Goals

The Green Fields Initiative is well on its way to establishing a more robust agricultural and forestry economy through its three initial goals: 1) To preserve farm and timberland and encourage more people to start farming, 2) To encourage consumers to find and use local agriculture products, and 3) To celebrate agriculture and the wealth it brings to the Sandhills as an economic driver. Culminating these efforts, the region will be generally recognized as a leader in sustainable agriculture and community development by 2018.

### Strengths

The Green Fields Initiative main strengths stem from the region's rich agricultural resources. However, the project success is a product of the undying energy and passion local leaders, grassroots change-makers, and local farmers commit.



## Progress on Goals

*Goal 1) Preserving Farmland and Training Beginner Farmers:* Green Fields Initiative has helped establish the Sandhills Farm School with collaboration from North Carolina Cooperative Extension (NCCE). The school is currently educating young and old students alike on farm business strategies, agricultural production, and marketing best practices. The seven-month courses are held between February and October, involve in-class and in-the-field activities, and engage up to 30 students per term. In an assessment conducted in October 2014 the group identified the need to broaden enrollment and provide additional trainings. To meet demand, NCSU pursued and received a \$53k RBEG grant from the USDA Rural Development in 2014 to expand the Farm School curriculum.

### *Goal 2) Buying Local*

The Green Fields Initiative is supporting the development of a new certification program at the Sandhills Community College (SCC) led by Good Food Sandhills. This program is a sponsored project by the Tobacco Trust, guided by the Johns Hopkins Sustainable Food Systems Curriculum, and centers on the whole food system: job growth, adding value, distribution, and sales, and how each element in the system supports and interacts

with each other. It is geared to aid both students who have identified their unique place in the food system but need to learn the skills and experience to be successful, as well students who are interested in exploring all possibilities. Good Food Sandhills, as an entity of SCC, has committed to developing local funding alternatives, in addition to access to land that would give special credit to the SCC certificate holders in their application process.

Stakeholders in the Green Fields Initiative are also currently researching a potential food hub to serve the region.

### *Goal 3) Celebrating Agriculture*

The Green Fields Initiative debuted its spotlight on Agriculture to the public at the Pinehurst Fair Barn September 2013. A second spotlight event is scheduled for Fall 2015. This event will celebrate the progress made to date, as well as invite people to join as members of the newly-formed Green Fields Sandhills, a nonprofit organization created to move Green Fields Initiative forward.

Richmond County, one of the three Sandhills SET counties, recently received a \$50k grant from the North Carolina Department of Commerce to hire an Executive Director for this new organization. This position will further



ensure that the Green Fields Initiative meets its metrics as defined in the original SET plan.

## Final Thoughts

Green Fields Initiative continues to strive towards its three major goals. With each season, the Initiative utilizes its trainings, outreach, and networking to grow into an ever stronger case study of SET efficacy. The program has branched out to collaborate with a variety of organizations and institutions to further its impact, including Mount Olive University, the Sandhills Area Land Trust, the NC Cooperative Extension Service, Good Foods Sandhills, Integrity Systems and Sandhills Community College. In conclusion, the program continues to plant new seeds, and expand its regional roots as it develops a robust, local foods economy.