

One-on-One with NC Farm Bureau's Shawn Harding
Episode 28: Farms, Food and You Podcast

N.C. Farm Bureau President Shawn Harding discusses his farming experience, the Farm Bureau's priorities and today's agricultural challenges.

Dee ([00:06](#)):

With over 600,000 member families, the North Carolina Farm Bureau is the state's largest farm organization. And as its president, Shawn Harding is one of the state's most influential leaders in agriculture.

I'm Dee Shore of North Carolina State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. And in this episode of Farms, Food and You, Harding talks about the Farm Bureau's priorities, his experience as a farmer, and his thoughts on agricultural challenges in our state.

Dee ([00:40](#)):

About a year and a half ago, Shawn Harding took the helm of the Farm Bureau. In addition to its well-known insurance offerings, the organization has government relations, member services, agricultural education, and other programs designed to promote the interest of farmers and their communities.

Harding says his years growing up in farming in the Eastern North Carolina town of Chocowinity, have helped him understand the kind of challenges and opportunities faced by North Carolina's farmers. Chocowinity is in Beaufort County, a county that lies along the Pamlico Sound.

Shawn ([01:27](#)):

I grew up there. My father farming, my grandfather farming. So that was a culture of my boyhood. And as many people got involved in FFA in high school, and eventually went on to NC State, studied agriculture.

Dee ([01:46](#)):

Harding attended the universities two-year Agricultural Institute, graduating with a degree in field crops technology in 1988. While he loved the Agricultural Institute, his time at NC State was hard. His father passed away the year before he graduated, leaving his son to take over the farm.

Shawn ([02:08](#)):

A lot of young people struggle with how to go back to the farm. And that was my entry way back to the farm was taking his role. Not the way you want to go back, but I started farming young. I think I grew up quicker than a lot of my peers. And that's just what you do when you have those circumstances. But I look back on a very fond childhood.

Dee ([02:27](#)):

As an adult, Harding got involved in Farm Bureau's Young Farmers and Ranchers program. It was a life-changing experience.

Shawn ([02:36](#)):

Loved it. Just fell in love with the organization from the very beginning. I love the unity that Farm Bureau had -- the general farm organization representing all farmers across the state. It was the only thing that would make me leave my farm, was to serve this organization. And I got that opportunity in December of 2019, ran for president, and here I am. I love what I do. Every day is different. So it's like farming in some ways: You never know what's around the corner. But I get to stand up and be an advocate for agriculture and farmers. It feels like a privilege. I don't take it for granted. We have some great farm leaders across the state and great farms and great people. And I'm here to just represent them.

Dee (03:20):

Before stepping into his Farm Bureau leadership role, Harding had worked as a farmer for 30 years. Initially, he produced tobacco and grains like his father and grandfather had done. However, in 1999, he and his wife turned his Southside Farms into a pick-your-own strawberry enterprise that also produces blueberries, blackberries, and other fruits and vegetables. With his move to the farm Bureau's headquarters in Raleigh, Harding turned over the reins of the farm to his son, Billy.

Shawn (03:56):

One of the issues that we always have in agriculture is the transition. As I mentioned, mine happened with an unfortunate circumstance, and I'm just blessed that we can transition this farm to our children with a fortunate circumstance.

Dee (04:11):

As Harding says, it can be difficult for young people to get into farming. Sometimes that's because they don't have and can't afford land and equipment. And sometimes it's because they have a hard time finding suitable land. Issues related to farmland and farm transition create what Harding considers one of the greatest challenges in North Carolina agriculture today.

Shawn (04:36):

Everything starts with land in agriculture and farming and the shrinking farmland that we see across our state. The pressure that comes from we call urban sprawl is just tremendous. And for folks who have left the farm, who have really no interest in the farm, it really, makes a lot of sense to just sell out and just sell the farm to developers, and houses and those kinds of things. So we've got that pressure.

And then now, as we look at alternative energy and those things and we see solar development increasing, that also puts pressure on farmland.

So there's a lot of pressure to take land out of production. And that really concerns me when it comes to agriculture and what we're going to do as a state. That also puts pressure on farmland. So there's a lot of pressure to take land out of production. And that really concerns me when it comes to agriculture and what we're going to do as a state.

There's a lot of talk about climate change now and practices that we can do. And I think farmers stand ready to do some of these practices that will help climate change, but that may take more land. It may take more farmland.

How do we balance this competition? I think it's really something we need to address in the future.

Dee (06:02):

Harding says that addressing issues related to farmland loss will require innovative thinking on the part of farmers and all of society.

Shawn (06:12):

I think it's a whole society issue that we need to think about as a society and say, 'OK, we need more houses to put more people in North Carolina that are moving here.' But how do we do that smartly? How do we plan? How do we think about, we also need farms? We need farmland. So again, whether it's solar energy or other climate practices, these all take land. So we need to come up with some really smart, innovative ways to think about the future. I've seen and talked with some people about maybe some of our poultry farms, do we have solar on the farm that it runs the farm and are there some ways that we can do that? So, we just need to think about it as a society and really plan for the future.

Dee (06:57):

As the states urban areas expand, Harding says he'd like to see more jobs in rural areas.

Shawn (07:04):

We had an announcement, not too long ago of Apple coming to Wake or Durham County with 3,000 jobs. And while we applaud such announcements, what's concerning to us is that it continues to be that same corridor of the Triangle where there's already so many jobs and so many people.

One of the things that we'd like to see is expansion into some of our rural areas, whether it's Eastern North Carolina, or even Western North Carolina, to have more jobs for our rural folks there so that young people will come back and that the talent pool won't just all be coming into the Piedmont. That's one of the things that we've talked about. That helps everybody in the community, and it helps agriculture, and it helps for those areas.

Dee (07:49):

Harding says another thing that would help agriculture is policy reform to make it easier to deal with the difficulty farmers have when it comes to finding people to work on their farms.

Shawn (08:01):

When you talk about issues, I think the first and foremost one that comes to everyone's mind is labor.

Dee (08:07):

Because it's hard to find employees for farms among the US population, many farmers depend on the H-2A guest worker program. The program allows agricultural employers to hire workers from other countries on permits lasting up to 10 months.

Shawn (08:25):

I think there are some great partners that work with our farmers. And I say partners because that's really what they are. Every year in the H-2A program, they come up from Mexico and other countries. And they're temporary workforce. They come here temporarily, work in our fields. And some of them have been coming for 20 years and had just built great relationships with the farms and the farmers. And it's a great program, and we need it to continue.

Dee (08:55):

Still, Harding feels strongly that the H-2A program, as it is, is not enough to fill labor needs.

Shawn (09:03):

We need labor. We need a stable labor force. And that's been an issue for many years, and it continues to be an issue as our country struggles with an immigration policy.

Sweetpotatoes has been a rising star in North Carolina. It's a great industry, but it's very a labor-intensive industry. So we need folks to work in the fields to harvest sweetpotatoes. Our pork and poultry industry are huge in North Carolina. We need to process meat. And that takes a labor force that we need here year-round to run those plants.

And so I think it's on everyone's mind, is how do we address this issue as we go forward? So that's one of the big issues that we continue to work on, have worked on for many years, and will continue to work on.

Dee (09:52):

Harding mentions another challenge, access to affordable broadband. The pandemic has taught us that people can work successfully from home wherever home may be, if they have good internet access. That means broadband could allow for more jobs in remote, rural locations. It could also help farmers who want to use advanced technology that requires solid internet connections.

Shawn (10:21):

We got to have connectivity. We've seen through this pandemic, that there's a difference of connectivity from our urban areas and our rural areas. Everybody's on board, and there's a lot of money going into that sector, but we've still got a few kinks to work out to make sure that everybody gets connected. They get connected affordably.

I continue to say this: It's very much like electrification of our rural areas in the '30s. And, certainly, it has to be a public/private partnership, because I understand the business model doesn't work to send fiber out in some rural areas in our state where there's only one home or one farm. But that person deserves an opportunity just like everyone else in the state. And so that's where the government can come in and help. And there's certainly a lot of money going into it right now. But I think that will do as much to help jobs in rural areas as anything, if we can get connectivity.

Dee (11:16):

Harding mentions another challenge. The rapid change in the types of commodities produced in the state. Still, Harding believes North Carolina agriculture is in good shape.

Shawn (11:29):

I think the state of agriculture is good in North Carolina. Our ranchers, everyone in this state that works in agriculture, works hard, gets up every day and feeds a lot of people and they do it efficiently. And I'm just proud of North Carolina agriculture. It is in flux, I think, but I wonder sometimes if agriculture isn't always in flux, if it isn't always changing, but certainly change is difficult or can be hard. And we see that in North Carolina agriculture.

The two major industries for a long time were tobacco and dairy, and they certainly have changed quite a bit in the past 20, 30 years. We've lost a lot of tobacco farms. We've lost a lot of dairy farms.

So who are we going to be in North Carolina agriculture is really the question we move forward. And I think that's really the flux that I see in agriculture. But I always tell people, farmers are resilient folks. They figure out how to make a living in agriculture. It's a good living and they enjoy it. It's in their blood. And so they're going to figure it out.

Dee (12:35):

Though the issues in North Carolina agriculture change constantly, Harding says the priorities of the Farm Bureau remain the same.

Shawn (12:44):

Our priorities really don't change. And I think that is what has been great about Farm Bureau for so many years. And in that our number one priority is to be the voice of farmers, a voice of agriculture. And so we'll continue to do that. We want be the voice for farmers to say, how are we going to plan smartly for the future when we talk about shrinking farm land? We want to be the voice of farmers when we talk about contract farming, whether it's tobacco, or pork, or poultry, or any industries.

We talk about energy, we talk about housing, talk about roads, all of those things. We work in all of those arenas, and that will continue to be a high priority for us.

Somebody needs to stand up for the farmers and say, who's looking out for us?

Dee (13:30):

When it comes to ensuring a strong future for agriculture, Harding strives to keep the needs of farmers and farming on the minds of consumers and of other leaders at the community, county, and state levels. Since many consumers are removed by generations from agriculture, they need to understand more about where their food comes from.

Shawn (13:53):

I think the pandemic has caused consumers to stop and think, where does my food come from? How does it get to me? And do I need to worry about my food supply? That's always a good thing.

We've been trying for years to have that conversation with consumers about what we do. And what I find most times is when you have that conversation with folks who don't understand agriculture, they're just blown away by the technology, the hard work, everything that goes into the growing food and fiber for people.

Farmers are good people. They're trying their best to do everything they can to conserve the land. The land is precious to them because that's where their income comes from. They're not out here trying to destroy the land. They're trying to preserve the land and they're the best environmentalists we have. I think that's something that I want people to understand.

I hope they appreciate what farmers do. I think they do appreciate what farmers do. And we just want to continue to have that conversation.

Dee (14:57):

Harding is encouraged that that conversation is happening when he sees and hears of farmers who are inviting consumers and even schoolchildren onto their farms.

Shawn (15:09):

We've seen farms transition into retail farms. They're selling direct to consumers. Consumers love it. They get to learn about the farm when they go to a farm. Farmer gets to talk about what he does. And so that's building that relationship between the farmer and the consumer. And I think that's a positive. And I think that's where we need to head in North Carolina agriculture.

Dee ([15:33](#)):

As Harding looks ahead to the future of his Farm Bureau presidency and of farmers, he's an optimist.

Shawn ([15:40](#)):

I think the future is bright for our state. I think that probably comes from being a farmer. Farmers are optimists. We used to say, 'We bury much money in the ground and hope we see it again.' And so we're optimists; we farm.

And so I bring that to this job -- that certainly we have challenges, We've got things we need, many problems to work on, but I'm always optimistic that here in North Carolina, we will figure it out. We will take care of each other, and we'll be successful together.

And so even though there's much change, and change is always scary, and what the future holds is always unknown. I think we can look at our past and say, we figured it out then, we'll figure it out this time. We'll be OK.

Dee ([16:27](#)):

Thanks for listening today. And we hope you'll join us again for the next episode of Farms, Food and You. To learn more about the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and our podcasts, visit go.ncsu.edu/farms. While you're there, share your thoughts. We'd love to get your ideas and to hear what topics you'd like for us to explore in the future.

About Our Guest

Shawn Harding was elected president of the North Carolina Farm Bureau in December 2019. Harding grew up and farmed in Beaufort County. He previously served the Farm Bureau in various roles, including president in Beaufort County, member of the state board of directors and state public policy director. He is a graduate of the Agricultural Institute, part of NC State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.