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By Tina Alvey
[Register-Herald Reporter \(http://www.register-herald.com\)](http://www.register-herald.com)

In the end, the willingness to innovate could provide the biggest boost for the future success of the Greenbrier Valley's food system.

That was the conclusion reached by the authors of a food system assessment prepared for the Greenbrier Valley Economic Development Corporation by Downstream Strategies, a consulting company with offices in Morgantown and Alderson.

Released earlier this month, the study highlights existing agricultural opportunities and the future possibilities for a bustling local food economy in the valley.

GVEDC executive director Steve Weir noted the study is the brainchild of Jim Cooper, a retired U.S. Department of Agriculture community development specialist now living in Lewisburg.

The study takes note of the valley's "abundant land — over 336,000 acres" that is suitable for agricultural production. Due to the hilly terrain, the best use of the acreage would likely involve grazing cows, sheep and goats, as well as growing berries and poultry, according to the study's authors.

Also noted is the abundance of organizations in the region and state ready to help support a local food system.

"With this combination of land-based and social resources, the Greenbrier Valley region is uniquely positioned to develop a robust local food system," the study concludes.

Of the three counties — Greenbrier, Monroe and Pocahontas — comprising the valley, the study reveals that Greenbrier County farms buck the statewide trend by showing a profit. Greenbrier also ranks first among the state's counties in total number of cattle.

What sets Monroe and Pocahontas apart is their burgeoning organic farm industry. Together, the two counties contain 11 of the region's 13 organic farms.

Most farms in the three-county region are small, with a mean size of 218 acres, compared to a national mean of 418 acres.

In order to take advantage of both the topography and the potential market for the goods produced, the study proposes an increase in growing blueberries and strawberries.

The relatively short growing season in higher elevations could be mitigated by use of greenhouses and other “season extension technology,” the study notes.

That same technology could be pressed into service with other crops designed for local consumption, according to the study. For example, the demand for salad greens is high in the valley — about 35 pounds of lettuce per person, per year — and the six-month natural growing season could be extended to a year-round operation by using high and low tunnels and greenhouses.

The study further suggests farmers operating greenhouses could create a cooperative organization for the collective washing, packaging, distributing and marketing of salad greens to local residents.

Steep pastures, on the other hand, could be best used as grazing land for sheep, lambs and goats, allowing the region to tap into the ethnic markets in nearby population centers like Washington, D.C.

“More local food can create more jobs, more dollars circulated locally and can contribute to health in the region, among other benefits,” the study’s authors state.

The study acknowledges many relevant components of moving the valley toward a relatively self-contained food system remain unexplored or unresolved. Those issues include:

- Required improvements in transportation infrastructure
- Willingness of farmers to adopt new practices
- Willingness of nonfarmers to transition to farming
- Willingness of local and distant consumers to pay for a local product
- Willingness of business leaders to prioritize local foods
- Increased inclusion of the low-income population or those with low food security.

To read the full report, go to www.downstreamstrategies.com/documents/reports_publication/greenbriervalleylocalfood_final.pdf.

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