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Summit weighs health of agriculture industry

By [Bethany Fuller](#) | Statesville R&L

If North Carolina were a cruise ship, state Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler said on Tuesday, agriculture would be the engine propelling it forward.

In an address to officials from both the agriculture and political landscape across the Piedmont, Troxler and Secretary of Commerce Keith Crisco stressed the importance of finding a balance to preserve the state's \$70 billion agricultural industry during an agriculture summit at the Statesville Civic Center.

The two state officials were the keynote speakers at the Regional Agriculture Symposium Agricultural Support and Farmland Preservation held by the Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina and The Land Trust for Central North Carolina (LTCN).

"There is a lot of pressure on farmland for development," Troxler said. "If we keep losing the land resources and the human resources, we are going to be in trouble when it comes to food."

LTCN Executive Director Jason Walser said the goal of the summit was to educate, contemplate and understand the challenges farmers across the region are facing.

"We had things that made us pause and think that maybe getting our food from a place we can't spell isn't the best idea," he said. "We are at a crossroads."

The average age for a North Carolina farmer is 58, which means the state is approaching a large generational change in the ownership in farmland, Troxler said.

Troxler said it's important to engage local community groups to partner and participate in agricultural activities.

Polk County Agricultural Economic Development Director Lynn Sprague said his organization is partnering with just about everyone, including arts, civic and heritage groups. It is up to them to engage people and teach them that producing crops and raising livestock is actually fun, he said.

"You have something that can touch back to the core of Americana," he said. "Put your foot in the door and take action."

Farmers need to connect directly with the customer, said Foothills Connect Business and Technology Center Director Tim Will. The organization completed a project to wire broadband Internet across Rutherford County to connect farmers to restaurants and residents in Charlotte. Farmers are selling goods on a specialized Web ordering system called Farmers Fresh Market.

Will said the program was so successful, a bar-coding system is now used to track whose crops are going

where.

Local farmer Jim Dobson found the discussions informative. There were a lot of ideas, he said, and a lot of different approaches to solve some of the problems in the agriculture industry.