

Agriculture growing as area job-creator

By Cindy Beamon
The Daily Advance
Saturday, September 22, 2012

Farming is a big job-creator in northeastern North Carolina — bigger than many people think and growing even bigger, agriculture officials said Thursday.

One in five people getting up for work in the 13-county region this morning can thank agriculture for a job, said N.C. Commissioner of Agriculture Steve Troxler. Translate that impact into dollars, and agriculture is the state's largest industry. The \$72 billion impact on the state's economy is greater than either tourism or the military, Troxler said at a regional forum sponsored by the North Carolina Animal Agriculture Coalition at the K.E. White Center.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Agriculture Statistics Service, agriculture has a nearly half-a-billion-dollar annual impact on the economy in the five-county area.

In Pasquotank County, where agriculture makes up 11 percent of the economy, the total annual impact on the economy is \$144 million. Fourteen percent of the county's work force is employed in agriculture.

In Camden County, agriculture makes up 33 percent of the economy and has a total impact of \$60 million. Twenty percent of the county's work force is employed in agriculture.

In Currituck County, the total economic impact is \$55 million while agriculture's share of the economy is 11 percent. Seventeen percent of the county's work force is employed in farming and related businesses.

Even during the economic recession, agriculture has continued to grow.

And the economic impact is likely to keep growing, speakers at Thursday's event predicted.

In coming decades, the demand for food will double for a growing global population, said Blake Brown, a professor at N.C. State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

To keep up with the demand, farmers will have to double what they grow on the same amount of land, he said.

"In the next 40 years, we need to have the same growth in productivity that we have had in the history of agriculture," said Brown.

Technology will be key, he said, a message repeated by all the speakers at Thursday's event.

"We have to concentrate on agricultural research," Troxler said.

Already the state has bolstered its production by using technology.

Twenty-five years ago, the state was not taken seriously has a hog producer. Now it's second in the nation, thanks to technology that helps farmers produce grain and livestock more efficiently, Troxler said.

Ike Jackson, owner of Pasquotank Farms, said science has been an important part of his Angus cattle business.

Today, artificial insemination, DNA testing and ultrasound can insure only the best quality beef is produced.

"The quality of the carcass is paramount," said Jackson.

The 52,000 farms across North Carolina, mostly owned by families, have also benefitted from advances in technology, according to the Animal Agriculture Coalition, whose members include grain, poultry, beef and pork producers. A half century ago, one farmer produced enough food to feed 30 people. Today, the same farmer feeds 155 people, mostly because of advances in farming practices, the coalition's website states.

Thursday's event focused on animal farming, a relatively small part of farming locally but still important to the local economy, speakers said.

Even though the Albemarle may not be a major livestock producer, it still provides grain that's needed to feed them, said Larry Wooten, president of the N.C. Farm Bureau, one of the event's sponsors.

Even with the region's many acres of farmland, the region can only supply a third of what the state's livestock producers need. The industry relies on outside sources for the rest.

Troxler said the economic impact of farming may have been under rated locally in the past, but the industry can no longer be taken for granted.

"For a long time in the state, they viewed agricultural land as the next opportunity for development," Troxler told local government officials at the forum.

Instead, county governments should view them as a successful business, he said.