

Reich: Balance urban, farm needs

By William F. West

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North Carolina must balance the competing demands of a rapidly growing and urbanizing population with the agricultural community's ongoing need for farmland and water, a top state agriculture official said this week.

Richard Reich, assistant director of the N.C. Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services, told an audience in Elizabeth City Tuesday night that the state lost at least 1.6 million acres of farmland between 1990 and 2007, and that nationally, North Carolina currently ranks third in lost farm acreage.

Reich, keynote speaker for the annual Tri-County Farm City Week banquet at the K.E. White Center, said despite the massive loss of farmland, agriculture continues to be a \$71.6 billion-a-year industry in North Carolina, accounting for 17 percent of the state's economy.

The loss of farmland, Reich said, has coincided with a sharp increase in North Carolina's population. The state had nearly 9.6 million residents in 2011, compared to slightly more than 8 million in 2000 and more than 6.6 million in 1990.

The population increase has led to greater demand for housing, schools and shopping centers, which in turn is leading to the farmland crunch.

To reverse the trend, the state implemented the Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund, Reich said. Since 2005, the fund has spent \$9.7 million — matched by \$17.4 million in private funds — to preserve approximately 6,200 acres of farmland.

Despite those savings, the pressure from development on land and water resources is expected to continue, Reich said.

Agriculture, meanwhile, remains a conservative user of water resources. Water surveys, required now by state law following several years of dry weather, show farmers account for only about 1 percent of North Carolina's daily water usage, Reich said. A strategic water plan developed last year should help conservation efforts, he said. It recommends developing cost-sharing and better educational programs on water use.

Another precious resource in short supply is fuel. North Carolinians currently use 5.6 billion gallons of it a year, almost all of which comes from out of state.

To reduce the state's dependence on petroleum, the state is searching for production opportunities in biofuels, including from feedstocks and plants. Since its founding in 2008, the N.C. Biofuels Center in Oxford has channeled \$6.9 million to 48 biofuels projects across the state.

Reich, who spoke to a crowd of approximately 300 that included farmers and agribusiness people, said that overall, the state's agriculture picture is bright. He noted that approximately \$2.9 billion in agricultural products are shipped from North Carolina to 154 countries every year.

Tobacco, cotton and sweet potatoes rank among North Carolina's leading exports, but pork, poultry and wood products are close behind. North Carolina-grown sweet potatoes, in particular, have found a sales niche in Europe, Reich said.

As far as overall production, the state ranks first in tobacco and sweet potatoes, and second in poultry and eggs, hogs and pigs, turkeys and — a product very popular this time of year — Christmas trees.

North Carolina ranks third in the production of fresh market strawberries and processed cucumbers, and fourth in cotton, bell peppers and nurseries and greenhouses. The state ranks fifth in the production of broilers and peanuts.

Reich said North Carolina is also seeing an increasing diversity in agriculture, with more than 500 farmers now registered as meat handlers specializing in the sale of custom meat cuts.

The state is also home to 591 agri-tourism farms, 275 of which belong to an association that works together to share ideas, he said.

The number of wineries has also exploded. In the early 1980s, there were four wineries in North Carolina. Today, Reich said, there are 119 wineries and 400 vineyards on approximately 1,800 acres of land.