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Area farms see growth

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Russ Rettger feeds calves on his dairy farm in Leroy Township. Rettger is one of only two dairy farmers remaining in Lake County.

Lake, Geauga counties contribute to agricultural industry in Ohio despite increase in commercial, residential development

Even with increasing commercial and residential development, Lake and Geauga counties continue to contribute to Ohio's \$5 billion annual agricultural industry.

In 2005 - the last year for which complete statistics are available - Lake County ranked 41st out of 88 counties in the state for total cash receipts from marketing of farm commodities. Geauga ranked 68th, said Phil Guss, agricultural statistician for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Guss was a major contributor to an annual report detailing the state's agricultural industry on a county-by-county basis.

But the figures do not tell the entire story. Growth in farming is being experienced throughout Northeast Ohio.

A good reason for this growth is increased demand on the kinds of signature products grown here as well as much improved farming techniques, experts say.

Lake's 1-2 punch

Lake County is especially unique, Guss said, because of its strength with nurseries and vineyards.

"It's a pretty high level, and I can't think of too many other counties like that," Guss said.

Based on total receipts for "other crops" - which include nurseries and vineyards - Lake County ranked third, behind Lorain and Carroll counties, he said.

"Lake County does have a lot of nurseries as well as vineyards; which have gotten bigger and which are being promoted more and more," Guss said.

Russ Rettger of Leroy Township is one of just two remaining dairy farmers in Lake County.

At one time Rettger farmed part time and worked in a factory - a job he has no intention of ever returning to regardless of farming's future.

"I'd stay in farming even if it means I'd have to switch from dairy to something else, like vegetables," said Rettger, who has been president of the Lake County Farm Bureau for 15 years.

As for the nursery and vineyard businesses, Rettger said those industries are showing stress in Lake County as well.

"Let's put it this way: We're seeing more and more nurseries becoming housing developments, and the flood of July 2006 didn't help any of us either. That hit my hay production last year," Rettger said.

Farming will be a specialized industry in Lake County because land prices are so high, said Randy Zondag, the Ohio State University Extension agent for Lake County.

"The only way we're going to save farmland is by making farming viable," Zondag said.

A second issue is encroachment by people who do not respect private property.

"They see a piece of open ground and they think it's theirs, but it's not," he said.

"And it's been hard to get a labor force, too, even with migrant workers. The industry requires a large work force on a seasonal basis."

Zondag said it remains difficult to forecast what the status of farming will be in Lake County.

"I do predict that if we do not make the operations profitable, within 30 years farming will be a shadow of what it is out there now," he said.

Strong in Geauga

That's not the same for Geauga County.

Farming is one of Geauga County's top three industries, and by some definitions it's No. 1 if stores and other businesses that cater to farmers are included, said Randy James, the Ohio State University Extension agent for Geauga County.

"Our agricultural industry is very important, and in terms of growth, it's probably one of the fastest growing. We have twice as many farms now as we did in 1974 and twice as many full-time farmers," James said.

"And it would be easy to say that these are little 'hobby' farms, but that is not what the data suggests."

James also said that 10 years from now, there will still be farming in the county.

"If anything, the pace is picking up," James said.

"As far as I can see and predict, it looks like we'll have more farms into the foreseeable future. We are adding five to 10 farms each year." The county also might lose some.

Louise Mausling, a 79-year-old Montville Township dairy farmer, has been in the business for more than 50 years, including 47 in the community.

She said it's all but impossible for someone to enter dairy farming without inheriting it from an older family member.

"I've lost my husband, but those with families may be able to keep going. There are so many other factors and conditions that are making farming difficult," said Mausling, a member of the Ohio Farmer's Union, a family farm advocacy group.

Mausling also said that while the price of milk has increased, so has the cost of feed and fuel.

"It doesn't really leave you with that much of a profit margin, either," she said.

Industry at crossroads

Troubling signs remain for the state's agricultural industry as a whole. The number of farms in Ohio has fallen steadily since 1958, when there were 158,000.

Today that figure is 76,200 farms; down by 300 from 2005 and 1,000 from 2004.

That decline may have reached its low point, though, giving room for cautious optimism on the part of Ohio's agricultural promoters.

"What we're trying to do is turn around the demise of so many farms in Ohio and the loss of thousands of acres of farmland. The great thing is that because of the so-called 'biorevolution,' that trend is being reversed," said Robert J. Boggs, director of the Ohio Department of Agriculture. This possible reversal of fortunes is due in no small measure to the increasing value and production of various commodities.

Boggs said this year more than 5 billion pounds of milk will be produced in Ohio.

"It's the first time we've reached that mark since 1965, and it took 550,000 dairy cows to accomplish that goal. This year, we'll do the same thing with 275,000 dairy cows," Boggs said.

"What this means is that the tremendous research being conducted along with efficient methods by farmers are paying off."

As for the golden grain - corn - more acreage in Ohio as well as nationally was planted with this crop this year than at any other time since World War II, Boggs said.

"We'll set a new yield record this year of 541 million bushels of corn," Boggs said.

Boggs also said the reason so many farms went out of business in the first place is because farmers couldn't make a decent living.

"Because of more reasonable farm policies and better prices, more and more acreage is going back into farming," Boggs said.

Specifically for Lake and Geauga counties, the diversity of crops as well as their high dollar value is helping keep the farms in this area going, Boggs said.

"You don't have 1,000-acre farms there, but you do produce a greater yield per acre with things like vineyards and nurseries," Boggs said.

Boggs said Ohio remains a "commodities deficient" state, with just a surplus in eggs, chickens and a few other items.

Thus, Ohioans eat more than its farmers can produce.

"So there's a lot of room for improvement with additional production," Boggs said.