

In This Issue

Farm Views..... 2
 Urban Agriculture 3
 Food & Fitness 4
 Home & Family Living... 5
 Horticulture..... 6
 Environmental Focus .. 7
 4-H & Youth 8-9
 Community Focus 10
 Miscellaneous 11-12

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Agricultural Production is \$71 Million Industry in Lancaster County

Tom Dorn
UNL Extension Educator

Lancaster County is considered an urban county by Nebraska standards with an estimated 265,000 residents, ranking second in population behind Douglas County. However, agriculture is still a major economic force in the local economy.

According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), there are over 1,600 farms¹ in the county, (the largest number of farms of any county in the state). Lancaster County has nearly 450,000 acres (about 700 square miles) in farms with a reported 365,000 acres (570 square miles) of mechanically harvested crops.

Harvested grain crops in 2002² included: 8.3 million bushels of corn, 465,000 bushels of wheat, 26,000 bushels of oats, 722,000 bushels of grain sorghum and 4.15 million bushels of soybeans. Besides the grain crops, an estimated 50,000 tons of harvested forages were produced in 2002, according to NASS.

In Lancaster County, 850 people reported farming as their primary occupation in 2002. Of the 1,607 “farms” recognized by NASS, 949 produced less than \$10,000 of products sold, reflecting the large number of “acresages” and “hobby” farms in the county. Another 337 farms reported between \$10,000 and \$50,000 of products sold, 113 farms produced between \$50,000 and \$100,000 and 208 farms reported more than \$100,000 in sales. In all, over \$71 million in agricultural products were sold by agricultural farming operations in 2002. USDA farm program subsidies added another \$5.6 million in 2002, bringing total farm gate revenue to \$76.6 million. Not reported by NASS but a significant economic factor in Lancaster County is the production vegetable crops, small fruits, tree fruits, exotic animals and the “green” industry.

Livestock numbers, except for horses, have been dropping steadily. The 2002 beef cattle and calves inventory was 25,900 head, while dairy cattle and calves accounted for 1,800 head. Hog and sheep inventories were 77,000 and 1,600 head, respectively.

The Urbanization of Rural Lancaster County

About 225,000 of the estimated 265,000 county residents live within the Lincoln city limits. Another 7,000 live in one of 14 small towns and villages in the county. The remaining 33,000 people maintain an independent residence in the rural setting. There are more people living on farms and acreages in Lancaster County than the total population of Seward and Saline Counties combined.

The number of rural residences continues to increase at a rapid pace. The county health department issued about 180 permits per year for new rural residential waste water treatment facilities in recent years.



Photos by Vicki Jedlicka, UNL Extension in Lancaster County



Longtime Farmer Reflects on How Farming Has Changed in Lancaster County

Dale Harlan has farmed in the Hickman area for nearly 50 years. He reflected on how farming has changed in Lancaster County:

“There are far fewer ‘mom and pop’ farming operations than there was 20 years ago and certainly the size of the farm has changed dramatically from when I was growing up in the ‘40s and ‘50s. Farms are much less diversified than they were. My dad fed cattle, raised hogs, had milk cows and mother always had 600 to 800 laying hens along with a huge garden. When I started farming in the ‘50s, I had 4,000-5,000 laying hens—along with hogs. With me, the chickens were the first to go and four years ago, the hogs.

Now its just farming fence row to fence row and that’s the way it is with the vast majority of farmers today. Livestock operations are few and far between but those that are left are just huge.

Some of the reasons for grain and livestock operations getting larger is equipment has become very large and sophisticated and with that, the cost has gone through the roof. The cost of equipment necessitates farming more acres to spread the cost.

Seed and chemical companies have done a great job of improving

yield potential. Forty bushel corn was a good crop 50 years ago. Today our county average is about 140 bushels per acre. Unbelievable! But that remarkable achievement has helped make the food we eat the best buy the American consumers have ever had, with only about 13% of our disposable income going for food.

Our city cousins have a dream of living in the country so they can have some space. Many dream of a big garden—maybe a horse for the kids or grandkids—perhaps a pond. They want to live on a good road, have a great school and be a part of the good life they feel they are not a part of in the big city. So they buy their acreage and build their home—only to find they have all the extra things to attend to like more land and more weeds, fences, their own water and septic system and extra time on the road to get to work.

In our county, the pressure to sell land for acreages is real. Should farmers be a part of selling acreages for more than we can farm out of the land—which leads to a checkerboarding of our rural landscape—or do we continue to farm as we have in the past? In my opinion, in this county, we will see more land converted to acreages.”

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¹The current definition of a farm, first used for the 1974 farm census, is any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, during the census year.

²The most recent year for which agriculture statistics have been compiled and reported.