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The Impact of Agriculture: It's More Than Economic (Part I)*

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There is growing evidence of agriculture's positive impacts on rural economies. Indicators such as income and employment multipliers help Extension staff, planners and economic developers make the case for protecting agriculture and for promoting agricultural economic development. However, the non-economic benefits of agriculture for local communities, including recreational access, aesthetically-pleasing green space in the countryside, and quality of life for residents have received comparatively little attention. Increased awareness of these benefits may help local leaders more fully understand the importance of local agriculture, and develop and successfully implement policies and strategies for sustaining agriculture in communities.

Feedback from focus groups

We facilitated a series of focus groups¹ to gauge public and agriculture-industry understandings of a range of possible non-economic benefits that agriculture provides to local communities. We conducted three focus groups in one of each of the following types of counties: rural; rapidly suburbanizing; and dominated by a metropolitan area, for a total of nine focus group meetings.

More than 50 people participated. One focus group in each county was composed of a random sample of adults without ties to agriculture. Another group was composed of farmers, businesspeople, and local farm agency staff nominated by local Cornell Cooperative Extension staff members to represent agriculture and related organizations in their respective counties. The third group was composed of a mix of people from these two categories. We began each focus group by asking participants the following questions: "From your own perspective, is having agriculture in your community important to you? For what reasons?" We specifically told participants that we were interested in more than just the economic reasons, and asked the participants to post all of their comments under the headings of "social/cultural," "environmental," and "economic." We then discussed what these comments meant to the participants. The nine focus groups yielded 338 individual statements on the importance of local agriculture. These were later coded into the benefit themes shown in Table 1.

What are the perceived benefits of local agriculture?

The stated non-economic benefits of agriculture were wide-ranging, including preserving open space (for wildlife and bucolic views), providing a buffer to development, providing a local source of fresh food, and preserving a highly valued heritage and its traditions. The most frequent comments fell under the subtheme "provides aesthetic benefits and open space" and the subtheme "contributes to quality of life in the community."

¹A focus group is a qualitative research method which includes posing a research question or questions to a selected group of participants and then guiding them through a moderated discussion to gather in-depth insights about the topic.

Table 1: What are the reasons having agriculture in your community is important to you?

Focus Group Responses Categorized by Theme and Subthemes

| Benefit Theme Category | Percent |
|---|------------|
| Social/Cultural (143 Comments) | |
| Provides high-quality & local food | 29% |
| Contributes to community & quality of life | 25% |
| Maintains important heritage/tradition/work ethic | 22% |
| Promotes public awareness of importance of agriculture | 17% |
| Contributes to local food security and safety | 7% |
| | 100% |
| Environmental (94 Comments) | |
| Provides aesthetic benefits & open space | 60% |
| Agriculture is consistent with environmental ethic & wildfire | 31% |
| Agriculture is a clean industry | 10% |
| | 100% |
| Economic (71 Comments) | |
| Provides employment | 41% |
| Supports economy (including local) | 38% |
| Provides tourism benefits & opportunities | 13% |
| Contributes taxes & public services | 8% |
| | 100% |
| Other/uninterpretable/adverse impacts (30 Comments) | |
| Total Comments | 338 |

Table 1. Note: The emphasis in the focus groups was on identifying the different impacts of agriculture. We specified that we were interested in more than just the economic impacts. This table reflects the diversity of the responses in the respective categories and does not indicate any ranking of importance.

In the focus group discussion, many participants, especially those without ties to agriculture, tended to differentiate the impacts of agriculture by farm size and articulate the environmental and social contributions of small- and medium-scale agriculture. A significant proportion of participants expressed willingness to support family farms near where they live, through a variety of public policy initiatives such as buy local campaigns, public education, and farmland protection. Moreover, language used by the focus group participants reflects the complexity of attitudes and values people have regarding farming (corporate vs. non-corporate; family vs. non-family; large vs small; organic vs. conventional; local vs. non-local; industrial vs. craft). Non-farm participants tended not to favor farm enterprises they perceived to be large and "industrial," which they characterized as having negative environmental and social impacts. Those with this view tended to be interested in seeing public policies which support "family farms."

Our focus group results suggest that people in New York hold diverse views on agriculture, think that agriculture has many economic, social and environmental benefits, and that agriculture in New York can benefit from a large reservoir of support among the non-farming population. ▲

*Part II (Issue 17/May 2008) will highlight data from the Empire State Poll on this issue.

