

Agriculture's impact far more than economic, study says

June 25 2008, By Susan Lang

Agriculture is important, of course, for generating jobs and income. But it has a host of non-economic benefits, too, according to a Cornell study that asked New Yorkers about the value of local agriculture.

Agriculture improves quality of life, the researchers concluded from more than 50 people in nine focus groups in three New York counties, by preserving open spaces for wildlife and bucolic views, providing a buffer to development and offering recreational access and a local source of fresh food, while preserving a highly valued heritage and its traditions.

"There is growing evidence of agriculture's positive impacts on rural economies," said Duncan Hilchey, a senior extension associate in development sociology at Cornell. "However, the non-economic benefits of agriculture for local communities have received comparatively little attention."

Hilchey and three colleagues have published "The Impact of Agriculture: It's More Than Economic (Part I and II)," in the Rural New York Minute, a free monthly online publication produced by Cornell's Community and Rural Development Institute.

Part I reports on the results from the focus groups. Part II reports on the findings of two surveys of 620 New York state residents conducted by Cornell's Survey Research Institute on whether agriculture in New York was important to them.

Virtually all of the respondents said that agriculture was important, and while about one-third said that the most important reason was economic, many cited non-economic reasons.

"Even though the economic impacts of agriculture tend to be the first to come to many people's minds, about half of the respondents chose non-economic effects as being the most important," said Gilbert Gillespie, a senior lecturer in development sociology and a co-author of the articles. "Identifying and bringing these non-economic considerations into discussions of issues along with the economic considerations may be important for mobilizing support of local agriculture."

"We believe that local public officials should take heed of these findings," concluded Hilchey, "and weigh carefully any policy decisions which might negatively affect their farm community, since our evidence suggests farms, farmers and farmland are key pieces of a social, economic and environmental mosaic which binds people and communities together."

Source: Cornell University

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