

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Part-time farmers increase

We may be making a serious mistake by trying to determine how well farmers are doing by looking at average farm income.

First of all, it's an average, which can be terribly unreliable. It doesn't take into account the increasing value of a farmer's business. And even more importantly, it doesn't measure the off-farm income that surprisingly amounts to more than farm income.

That's right—farm families actually earn more money away from the farm than they do on the

farm. Slightly more than half of the farm sector's total income is from off-farm sources.

A third of all U.S. farms rely on off-farm jobs for more than 90 percent of family income. They produce a very small amount of farm commodities, but they're still farmers and they're still averaged in when it comes time to figure average farm income.

There's pretty good evidence pointing out that off-farm jobs tend to be a very stabilizing influence in agriculture, helping farmers even out the ups and downs of good

years and bad.

Off-farm incomes, which in many cases amount to part-time farming, make many farmers virtually immune to the economic problems of agriculture. In truth, most of these kinds of operators consider farming a way of life and would continue to live there and operate their farms even if they weren't making money.

And so we have two kinds of farmers emerging as we head toward the next century. Those who are growing ever larger and stronger and who are producing more and more of the nation's food output, and those who are clinging to an agricultural way of life through off-farm opportunities. There are still many caught in the middle who will perhaps make a decision in the near future, whether they are going to be in or out of big-time agriculture. But as the figures show, many of them already aren't that dependent on farm income.

It's obvious that if more than half of the farm sector's total income is derived from off-farm sources, then less than half must come from farming. And that's pretty silly when you stop to think about it.

It means that, on the average, farming is a part-time business—that it produces less than half of the average farm family's income. It's been described as the most

important job in this country, with dozens of people depending on the output of each farm worker. And yet, it's a part-time job.

This set of circumstances leaves me with the feeling there's plenty of opportunity for change in agriculture over the next few decades. If more than half the farm sector's total income is derived from off-farm sources, that means a lot of farm family interests and energies are devoted to something else. And that spells opportunity for the farm family that can concentrate on farming.

The family whose skills, talents and time are available around the clock right there on the farm can probably move ahead at a much faster pace than a family with members going off to town to work regular jobs. Farmer with no other income realize they must make it on the farm and take the necessary action. They add enterprises that utilize family labor. They cull and replace low producing livestock. They plant crops that fit in with family labor patterns and they do not shy away from challenges that tie them to the farm.

Obviously, they are more at the mercy of the perils of agriculture. They're more vulnerable to dry

weather, low prices, insect outbreaks, and the continuing cost-price squeeze. But they're also in a better position to do something about some of those problems.

It must be comforting for farmers to have good jobs in town so the good things of life continue even in a disastrous crop year. But in today's big-time agriculture, is it realistic to divide the important labor management resources between farm and off-farm interests?

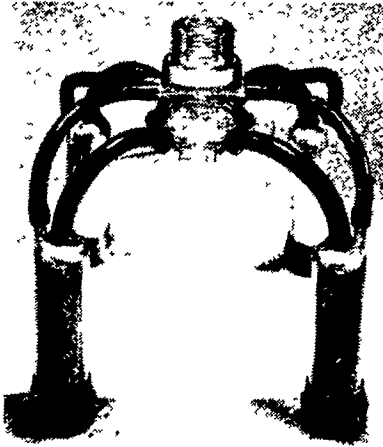
The figures I've seen don't say that big farmers have no off-farm income. But they do indicate that large operators are less likely to have other sources of income than small operations, who by their very size are forced to have other income.

No doubt there are many farmers, especially young ones, with off-farm incomes who are moving ahead in agriculture with the hope of eventually devoting full-time to farming. And that's a decision they must look at very carefully.

When do they give up the comfort of an extra income to sink or swim in farming? It's a decision that's easy to put off, but one that could be costing them in the long run.

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