

Farming Grows In Southeast Pa.

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The decade of the 1980s was a period of rapid economic and population growth for much of the eastern half of Pennsylvania.

Growth meant change for many rural communities and residents. For example, growth created new employment opportunities and an expanded tax base for municipalities. But these benefits were balanced by new environmental challenges and difficulties for local governments in providing necessary public services.

Among those affected by change were thousands of families who traditionally earned their livelihood from farming. For some rural families, growth meant opportunity to profit from the sale of land which became increasingly valuable for commercial and residential development. For other farm families who desired to continue farming, rapid population and economic growth meant new challenges.

Penn State agricultural economists conducted a study to better understand why farmers leave agriculture in areas experiencing population growth and development pressures.

This study focused on five southeastern Pennsylvania counties: Berks, Bucks, Lehigh, Northampton, and York. These counties were chosen because they are important agriculturally and they are close to growing metropolitan areas.

During the period 1978-1987, they experienced decreases in both farmland acreage and value of agricultural production (see table). The loss of acreage and production partially reflects the heavy pressure for development in all of them.

A mail questionnaire was completed by 153 current farmers and 96 farmers who had recently stopped farming.

Respondents gave multiple reasons for leaving farming — lack of farm profitability was the common reason. Belief that their type of farm operation was no longer profitable was more prevalent among former farmers than current farmers.

Profitability may be related to farm type. A larger percentage of the former farmers were milk producers, and a larger percentage of the current farmers were grain growers. At least part of the loss of dairy farmers was due to the government dairy termination program, which provided financial incentives for dairy farmers to sell their herds.

The response "could make more money by selling land" was the second most important reason given by former farmers for leaving farming. Among current farmers, 89 percent said they believed that they could make more money by selling their farm than they could by farming the land.

It is important to keep in mind that not all farmland sold goes into development. Less than 50 percent of the land sold by former farmers in this study is currently being developed. Nevertheless, the tendency for development is significant. Even among current farmers, 66 percent have been approached by developers on a regular basis. The growing tendency toward development is important because farmers located

next to development were more likely to leave farming than those not so located, other factors being equal.

In most cases, problems such as increased vandalism, traffic congestion, and difficulty in obtaining farm supplies and services were not reasons to leave farming. However, with respect to vandalism, only former farmers said they frequently had problems with livestock being harmed.

Other than this severe instance, it appears that vandalism problems are tolerated at certain levels. For example, littering, although not a reason for leaving farming, was a problem frequently experienced by about 40 percent of both former and current farmers. Traffic congestion was frequently experienced by about 26 percent of both current and former farmers, while trespassing was frequently experienced by about 18 percent of former farmers and 20 percent of current farmers. Receiving complaints about the farm (regarding farm noise, spray, odors, dust or blowing debris) had a slightly negative impact on the likelihood of staying in farming, although the majority of respondents never received such complaints.

Lack of available labor was cited by 37 percent of the former farmers as a reason for leaving farming, and former farmers relied more on hired labor than did current farmers. Of those who did hire labor, 74 percent of both current and former farmers said hiring had become harder during the last five years — the main reason offered was "workers can get paid more elsewhere."

Credit was also more difficult for former than current farmers to obtain, and more of them relied on credit. Former farmers experienced more difficulty with availability of markets and agricultural information services than did current farmers. Increases in property taxes were perceived as a problem even by those farmers who are in the "Clean and Green" preferential taxation program.

The presence or importance of off-farm income was not directly related to the probability of leaving farming, although 42 percent of respondents and 32 percent of spouses had off-farm employment. Of those who held off-farm jobs, 53 percent of current farmers said it was very important in their decision to continue farming and 59 percent of former farmers said it was important to their household while they were farming. Almost 32 percent of the former farmers saw higher pay in off-farm employment as an incentive to leave farming. These results suggest that off-farm income was a significant factor for many farm households, but was not necessarily either a transitional phase-out of farming or a significant force keeping those in farming.

The survey results indicate that many Pennsylvania farmers remain committed to farming despite real or potential difficulties. Sixty-two percent of current farmers surveyed said it was likely they would still be farming five years from now. Current farmers tended to have more positive attitudes toward farming in their area, and would encourage others to farm there as well.

Commitment to farming extends beyond the individual farmer, with more current than former farmers responding that it was important that their land continue

to be farmed after they cease doing so themselves (55 percent and 43 percent, respectively). The majority of both current and former farmers expressed satisfaction with being a farmer, and viewed farming as not just a job

but a way of life.

Programs such as farmland zoning or the purchase of conservation easements may indeed result in the preservation of farmland, but these programs are not broad-based enough to address the prob-

lems of individual operators, farmers unable to obtain necessary farm labor or to earn a reasonable return on their investment will ultimately go out of business, even though their land may continue to

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Table Changes in farmland acreage and farm product sales for study counties, 1978-87

County	Changes in farmland acreage		
	1978-82 (acres)	1982-87 (acres)	1978-87 (% change)
Berks	- 7,685	- 10,184	- 7.9
Bucks	- 5,439	- 26,954	-27.6
Lehigh	- 10,029	+ 1,629	- 8.0
Northampton	- 7,999	- 15,578	- 21.4
York	- 5,001	- 21,640	- 8.7

County	Changes in farm product sales ¹		
	1978-82 (\$1,000)	1982-87 (\$1,000)	1978-87 (% change)
Berks	- 4,909	- 21,347	- 15.1
Bucks	- 10,459	- 5,133	- 24.9
Lehigh	- 12,016	- 410	- 25.7
Northampton	- 8,335	- 9,938	- 42.0
York	- 4,003	- 15,305	- 16.2

Source: U.S. Census of Agriculture
¹ Calculated in 1982-84 dollars using consumer price index

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