

# Ohio Urbanization Offers New Agricultural Opportunities

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio is becoming more urban, but that does not necessarily mean the end of agriculture, said Jeff Sharp, an Ohio State University Extension rural sociology specialist.

"It's a mistake to think that nonfarm people moving out of metro areas and into the country signals the end of agriculture," Sharp said. "Increasingly urban areas offer a diverse and creative landscape with some exciting opportunities for agriculture. There are some positive adjustment strategies that some Ohio farm operators are adopting to tap into the market potential of being near large numbers of people."

With increased development, the demand for landscaping materials, such as trees, shrubs and flowers, also increases. Ohio farmers have responded to this demand, Sharp said. The number of Ohio farms with nursery and greenhouse sales has increased 79 percent since 1978, from 1,572 farms to 2,812 farms.

In 1978, 12 percent of all farms in the core counties of the largest metropolitan areas reported some nursery and greenhouse sales. By 1997, 17.8 percent of farms in these areas reported nursery and greenhouse sales. In the fringe counties of metropolitan areas, the percent of farms with nursery and greenhouse sales has grown from 1.9 percent to six percent. Total nursery and greenhouse sales in five core or fringe metro-

politan counties — Lake, Lorain, Franklin, Lucas and Clark — rank in the top 100 counties nationally.

Increasing populations also allow more opportunities for farmers to sell agricultural products directly to consumers, through farm markets, pick-your-own operations and other similar arrangements, he said.

About nine percent of metropolitan farms in Ohio reported some type of sales directly to consumers in 1997, compared to about six percent of nonmetropolitan farms. Core counties of the largest metropolitan areas had the highest proportion of farms, 11.2 percent, with direct sales.

While the number of farm operations reporting some type of direct sales grew only 3.8 percent between 1992 and 1997, total sales directly to consumers grew 14.3 percent, from \$24 million to \$28 million, Sharp said. In metropolitan Ohio, the growth was from \$14 million to \$18 million, or 22.2 percent.

Licking, Mahoning, Lorain, and Portage counties all had more than \$1 million in total sales directly to consumers in 1997. Licking, Mahoning, and Lorain rank in the top 100 counties nationally.

While sales directly to consumers comprise less than one percent of the state's total agricultural sales, it appears to be quite popular in northeastern Ohio, where more than 10 percent of the farms in the region

report some direct sales, Sharp said.

"Some folks engaging in nursery and green house sales and direct sales to consumers may not come from traditional farm backgrounds, but they are entrepreneurs who like that kind of work and are taking advantage of an opportunity," he said.

These new urban-oriented farmers can start out small, while maintaining an off-farm job, he said. Then, once they have developed a market, their operation could become full time.

"Urban agriculture is a drop in the bucket of Ohio agriculture compared to traditional agricultural production," Sharp said. "But, it is seeing growth, and community leaders and development professionals might want to pay closer attention to it, because urban-oriented agriculture can contribute to an aesthetically pleasing landscape and can make a solid contribution to the local economy."

Ohio has historically been one of the largest states and is the seventh most populous state in the United States, trailing only California, New York, Texas, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. The statewide population density of 244 people per square mile is the ninth highest in the nation, behind New Jersey, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, New York, Delaware, and Pennsylvania, all located to the east. And, Ohio has the fifth largest rural

population.

The fastest growing areas of Ohio since 1980 have been those outlying or fringe counties of the state's three largest metropolitan areas — Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Columbus. From 1980 to 1998, these areas have grown approximately 20 percent, while the statewide average growth during this time period has been only 3.7 percent.

Urbanization does have obvious negative effects on agriculture. As more people move into an area, farmland can be converted to nonagricultural purposes, and the land can become fragmented into small plots. This may hurt the ability of larger farm operations to effectively use the land, Sharp said.

The difficulty of raising livestock in heavily populated areas may be one factor in total sales from livestock and their products declining 40 percent in Ohio, in inflation adjusted dollars, from 1978 to 1997, he said. Livestock sales, adjusted for inflation, declined 52 percent in metropolitan Ohio and only 32 percent in nonmetropolitan areas.

Since 1978, Ohio's land in farms has declined 10.7 percent, with the greatest declines occur-

ring in the largest metropolitan areas — a 24 percent decline in core counties of the largest metropolitan areas and 15 percent in the fringe counties.

But despite a smaller average farm size in metropolitan areas, the average, self-reported worth of these farms equals, and in some cases exceeds, the average value of nonmetropolitan farms. It appears some metro farmers are intensifying their production and taking advantage of urban market opportunities to either sell high value products — such as landscaping products from nurseries — or sell products directly to consumers, Sharp said.

"When more people move to the country, farmers can choose to either disinvest in their operations, assuming they will sell to a developer in the near future, or see it as a new opportunity to adjust, be creative, and adapt," he said.

A full report by Sharp titled "Agricultural Change by Metropolitan Character in Ohio: 1978 to 1997" can be found on Ohio State University's Swank Program in Rural Urban Policy website at [http://www-agecon.ag.ohio-state.edu/Faculty/Programs/Swank/index.html](http://www.agecon.ag.ohio-state.edu/Faculty/Programs/Swank/index.html).



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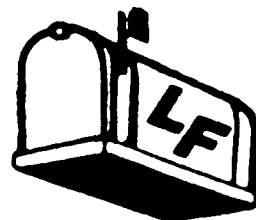
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