

Written by Gallupsun Staff
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National Farmers Market Week this week got me thinking about the economic and cultural importance of not just the state's 75 farmers markets, but of New Mexico agriculture more broadly.

On the economics side, New Mexico agriculture is a \$4 billion-a-year sector. But the true financial impact of agriculture in the state is much bigger. Four billion is a measure of the value of agricultural commodities at the farm or ranch: things like live cattle, raw milk, and unprocessed wheat. Turning those commodities into the products that most people no longer make for themselves – such as when milk gets turned into cheese, and when wheat gets turned into flour – adds several billion dollars more to the system.

In fact, researchers at New Mexico State University recently estimated that agriculture and food pro-cessing, combined, “accounted for \$10.6 billion (roughly 12.3%) of New Mexico’s \$86.5 billion gross state product (GSP) in 2012. In addition, the two industries directly created 32,578 jobs and 18,308 jobs in related support activities for a total of 50,886 jobs statewide.”

Given the slim profit margins in agriculture, farmers and ranchers are always looking for new efficiencies. That fact bears out in some interesting ways. For instance, recent news stories about our declining chile acreage ignore the fact that New Mexico chile growers are now growing more chile per acre than they were 25 years ago. They and other growers have adopted things like laser leveling, drip irrigation, sensor technology, and satellite imaging – all of which contribute to more efficient water use by both plants and farmers. But traditional flood irrigation – watering crops by applying water to the surface of the ground in which they’re growing – has its own merits. Research conducted at NMSU¹ shows that as much as 58 percent of the water applied to some of New Mexico’s major crops via flood irrigation returns to the aquifer. With these “return flows”, as they’re known, water gets filtered as it percolates through the ground. Then it’s available for others, including municipalities that provide drinking

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water to the bulk of the people reading this...perhaps you.

Even if you dwell in an urban area, chances are that agriculture exists nearby. Data released by USDA last year showed that there are nearly 25,000 farms, ranches, and other such agricultural operations across New Mexico. That figure covers a wide range of sizes – including small farms with \$1,000 worth of production a year – as well as ethnic backgrounds, ages, and crops. And agricultural diversity translates into a diverse economy.

While a dollars-and-cents approach is helpful when talking about agriculture and its water use, it ignores the tremendous cultural contributions farming and ranching make to New Mexico. What would this region be like without the people who have called this place home for centuries and even millennia, thanks in part to the Three Sisters of beans, corn, and squash? How different would the meaning of *la comunidad* be in northern New Mexico without the water-sharing approach of our acequia system? What water would sustain our state's wildlife populations if not for the rainwater that sheep and cattle ranchers catch in dirt tanks to water their animals year-round?

And what would a Saturday morning in your community feel like without the vibrancy of your local farmers market? The state's 75 farmers markets are all the more important when you consider the high rate of food deserts (low-income communities with limited access to grocery stores) here. Many of these markets are now participating in a program called Double Up Food Bucks, which allows recipients of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to double their purchasing power of fresh, local food at the farmers market. That's good for low-income families, farmers and ranchers who sell at the market, and communities that will see those dollars spent and re-spent locally.

I often tell people that farmers and ranchers take water – a substance that begins with zero calories, zero protein, zero fiber – and make it nutritious. If you'd like to consider directing water away from agriculture, I ask you to please save that thought for the next time you sit down to eat. Would you be willing to part with the enchiladas that were made using New Mexico chile, onions, and cheese? Neither would I. New Mexico's unique cuisine is dependent on New Mexico's unique agricultural heritage. And while our unique cuisine is something we have access to whenever the craving hits, it's coveted by those who live elsewhere. Eating New Mexican food is an important part of the experience tourists come here looking for.

I grew up on a ranch in northern New Mexico. I know how hard agricultural work is, and how

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thankless it may seem on tough days – but in the end, it's still one of the most rewarding things people can do for themselves, their families, and their communities. Thank you to all the past, present, and future farmers and ranchers across New Mexico, and thanks to everyone who stands in strong support of them.

Sincerely,

Jeff Witte