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The Impact of Agriculture: It's More Than Economic (Part II)*

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The character of farming in New York State has evolved, and the number of residents deriving their livelihoods directly from agriculture has declined to a small fraction of the population. However, our survey data suggests almost unanimous agreement among upstate New York residents that agriculture is important in the state, with more than half of respondents choosing reasons other than economic ones.

In last month's Rural New York Minute (Issue 16/April 2008) we discussed the non-economic benefits of agriculture for local communities identified by participants in a series of nine focus groups held in three counties in NYS. The focus groups were designed to gauge public and agriculture-industry understandings of a range of possible non-economic benefits that agriculture provides to local communities. Our results suggested that people in New York hold diverse views on agriculture and believe that agriculture has many economic, social and environmental benefits. In this month's issue we report on data gathered from upstate New York State residents in the 2004 Empire State Poll in which we examined their opinions on the importance of NYS agriculture, and why agriculture might be important to them.

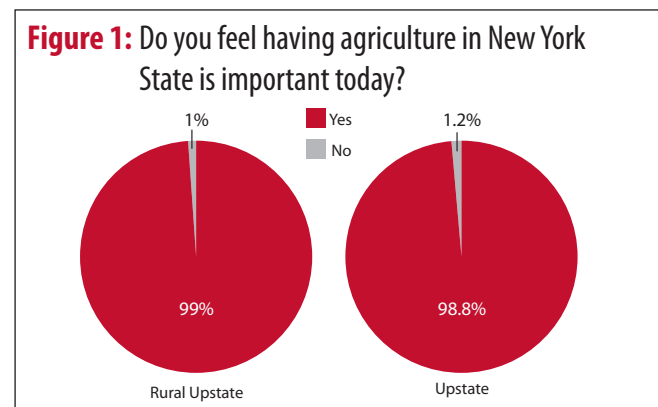
We included two questions in two surveys of New York State residents conducted by Cornell University's Survey Research Institute. The first survey was answered by 420 randomly selected respondents from the upstate population. The second survey was answered by 200 rural residents. The second survey was commissioned by the Community and Rural Development Institute (CaRDI) to compare rural residents' opinions with those of upstate residents in general.

The survey participants were asked "Do you feel having agriculture in New York State is important today?" The virtually unanimous response, for both upstate residents and rural residents specifically, was "yes" (see Figure 1). One hundred ninety seven of the 199 rural participants who answered the question said "yes" as did 395 of the 400 upstate participants. Only one participant in each of the surveys

said they "didn't know." This finding is consistent with the results of our focus groups reported in last month's issue.

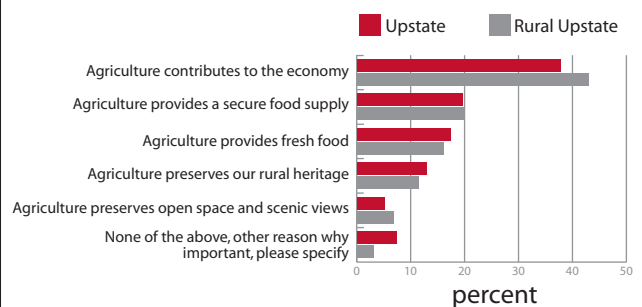
Survey participants were then given a list of possible reasons why having agriculture in the state might be important to them. Then they were asked to choose which of these they thought was most important. The most frequently selected reason was that agriculture contributes to the economy, chosen by 43% of the 193 rural participants and 37% of the 392 upstate participants who answered the question (see Figure 2). Nearly 20% of participants in both surveys identified agriculture's role in providing a secure food supply as their most important reason, followed by the provision of fresh food.

Smaller proportions of participants chose preservation of open space and rural heritage as their primary reasons that agriculture in NYS is important. These findings might appear to differ from the focus group findings, but the differences are most likely due to asking Empire State Poll survey participants to limit their response to one reason, whereas focus group participants offered an average of about six reasons each. Nevertheless, while open space and rural heritage issues may be important as indicated by the focus groups, topics related to food and economy hold center stage in upstate residents' perceptions of the importance of agriculture.



Source: 2004 Empire State Poll

Figure 2: The most important reason why having agriculture in the state might be important to you



Source: 2004 Empire State Poll

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 one of the non-economic effects as being the most important. 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. ▲

* Please see Issue 16/April 2008 for Part I of this 2-part series. A selected bibliography for this issue is also available on the CaRDI website.

