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Oklahoma water wars

By Trent Loos

For as long as I have attempted to be an advocate for American agriculture, I have struggled to understand why most don't appreciate the economic impact that agricultural operations have in rural communities. The standard multiplier, to the best of my knowledge, continues to be seven times. For every dollar generated by the local farming operation, it turns over seven times in the community. The Iowa Development Authority tells me that every dairy cow in a county has a \$7,000 economic impact on that community.

As we really gear up to hit 2008 rolling, I have committed to do everything possible to explain to non-farm folks the benefits of farming. I understand that people are quick to shun the economic advantages, if they think a pig farm will stink; but let's face the fact that the migration of young people out of rural America will only turn around if we start telling it like it really is. The bottom line is that new money and new opportunities are vital to sustaining rural America.

Most of this really hit me two weeks ago when Dr. John Lawrence, Iowa State University Professor of Ag Economics, joined me on my Rural Route radio program. He stated that ethanol production has generated more "new" money and opportunities than anything to come along in our rural communities for a long time. He stated that a 50 million gallon ethanol plant will consume 15.1 million bushels of corn, providing 35 direct jobs and 98 indirect for a total of 133 total regional jobs.

Compare that to a beef feedlot that consumes the same amount of corn annually and feeds 250,000 cattle. This entity provides 140 direct jobs. For a farrow to finish swine operation to feed that much corn, they will need 75,000 sows and directly employ nearly 400 people. So while ethanol plants are good for sustaining rural communities, look at the economic impact of other industries that could use the same amount of corn by feeding it to livestock.

I suggest that it is high time we start sharing the economic incentive of livestock agriculture with our county and state government officials and our fellow residents. Take, for example, the complete ignorance of the benefit of the poultry business to the economy of Oklahoma. The poultry industry directly employs 12,000 residents of Oklahoma and generates \$453 million in farm receipts, resulting in over \$3 billion going into the Oklahoma economy. All of this seems to pale in comparison, in the eyes of some government officials, to the importance of floating on the Illinois River in Oklahoma, which generates a mere \$9 million annually in direct economic benefits.

You see, in 2005 Oklahoma Attorney General Drew Edmondson sued 14 Arkansas-based poultry companies for polluting the Illinois River watershed with chicken litter. Edmondson, instead of doing his real job of prosecuting criminals in the state of Oklahoma, has attempted to create a windfall in state earnings by targeting poultry companies owned by out-of-state entities. He can't file any criminal charges against contract producers in his state because the chicken farmers have followed the application laws set forth by the state of Oklahoma. A better question might be, why doesn't the Attorney General fulfill his actual duties and start locking up some real criminals?

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Barley - WCE	↑ 205.1000
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Wheat-cbot	↑ 8.9200

A quick search of criminal drug use in eastern Oklahoma shows us that prosecutors can't get their cases processed because of pile-ups in the courts and in the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation's (OSBI's) state crime labs, a situation the Tulsa World called "an incredible expanding black hole of backlogged cases."

OSBI's Tahlequah crime lab, which serves eastern Oklahoma, has more than 1,200 methamphetamine cases pending. In rural Adair County alone, the number of backlogged drug cases includes two from 1997, five from 1998, 44 from 1999, and 53 from 2000. In 2004, 168 were arrested in one district and that number was up to 299 in 2006. The District 27 Task Force deserves some credit for the morass; its members made 577 drug arrests in 1999, more than 350 of them for methamphetamine offenses.

Now guess what. All of the above meth lab busts took place in the Illinois River watershed. These criminals are handling phosphorus to make their product. Am I to believe that drug cooks are so careful that they can ensure that their waste materials and ingredients never enter the watershed? As preposterous as you think that sounds, the potential is certainly evident to suggest that the illegal drug business is doing more to contaminate the water supply in Oklahoma than the poultry industry. The source of the increased phosphorus in the water supply has not actually been determined; poultry operations have simply been the only target.

Perhaps if these drug cases were to get prosecuted and convicts were to be put behind bars, other meth producers would feel the pressure to get their operations out of the area and water quality would improve. And since most meth producers aren't contributing in a positive way to the economy through sales tax payments or income tax reporting, let's just assume that keeping hard-working, tax-paying poultry operations in these rural communities would be more beneficial than continuing to allow meth producers to go without prosecution.

Senator Jim Inhofe has recently suggested a real solution to the ongoing lawsuit involving the Water Wars of Oklahoma, including using mediation to solve ongoing disputes and come to terms that both parties can agree upon. He has also included a provision in the farm bill suggesting that the Secretary of Agriculture develop a Poultry Sustainability Research Council, which will look at new ways to utilize nutrients from poultry operations. Time will tell if the powers that be in Oklahoma truly want to make a difference in improving the lives of Oklahoma residents or if we are witnessing one of the great abuses of power that I think is unfolding. No matter, I hope the entire agricultural community is tuned in to what is happening in northwest Arkansas and northeast Oklahoma. Your future may depend on it.

Editor's note: Trent Loos is a sixth generation United States farmer, host of the daily radio show, Loos Tales, and founder of Faces of Agriculture, a non-profit organization putting the human element back into the production of food. Get more information at www.FacesOfAg.com, or e-mail Trent at trent@loostales.com.

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