

# Impact of Florida Agriculture

What do you think of when you think of Florida?

Agriculture is probably not at the top of your list in answering this question. But believe it or not, agriculture is second only to tourism in this state as far as its importance and impact to Florida's economy. And some economists argue that if you throw in the influence of the natural resource industry, the economic impact is greater than tourism.

Because I believe it's critical for Floridians to have a greater understanding of the importance of Florida agriculture and because it seems most people don't realize the size of this industry in our state (just consider how you answered the question at the beginning of this article), I thought I'd share some interesting facts on this progressive part of our state's economy. Primarily, I'm pulling information from a recent meeting I attended with Dr. Mike Martin, Vice President for Agriculture and Natural Resources with the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) and the winter 2002 issue of *Impact*, a publication by UF/IFAS.

The main components of Florida's economy are tourism, transfer payments and the agriculture and natural resources industries. Martin says, "The leading segment of Florida's economy, and its most stable segment, is the agriculture and natural resources industries, which include forestry, turfgrass, golf courses and natural ecosystems. According to Martin, "The annual economic impact of the agriculture and natural resources industries totals nearly 54 billion dollars, not including environmental or social impacts.

Let's consider some major players in Florida agriculture.

Florida's signature crop, citrus, brings a mere 9 billion dollars to the state's economy annually. Citrus generates more than 89,000 jobs in the state directly or indirectly through grove care, fertilizer sales and marketing. This multibillion-dollar Florida crop now enjoys a worldwide reputation for quality juice and fruit.

The other evening, I had a piece of strawberry pie after dinner. To be honest, at the time I wasn't thinking too much about the source of the strawberries, I was just enjoying the pie. But I am aware of the importance of this crop to our state. Florida, with more than 6,000 acres in production, is now the nation's primary source of winter strawberries. Even though we have some commercial production in our area,

most of this 167 million dollar industry is found in West Central Florida.

Tomatoes are another important Florida crop. Our state produces practically all of the fresh market tomatoes grown in the United States from December to May and about half of all the domestically produced fresh market tomatoes in the country. The state's 50,000-acre tomato industry produces a 400 million dollar return for our economy each year.

Environmental horticulture, which includes landscape plants, flowers, foliage plants and turfgrass, is no small part of Florida's agriculture. As a matter of fact, it represents the fastest growing segment of U.S. agriculture. And, Florida's nursery and landscape industry is now the nation's second largest. "The industry's strong backbone is characterized by small family-run businesses that have a combined \$5.4 billion impact on the state's economy," according to Ben Bolusky, executive vice president of Florida Nurserymen and Growers Association. "Perhaps more than any other segment of Florida agriculture, the wholesale, retail and landscape sectors enhance the environment and the aesthetic quality of life."

Row crops and forages cover almost a third of Florida's total land area, generating 1.5 billion in farm income. This portion of our state's agriculture includes everything from sugarcane in South Florida to corn, cotton, hay, peanuts, small grains, soybeans and tobacco in North Florida, as well as range and pasturelands throughout the state.

Florida livestock production generates more than 1.3 billion dollars in farm income each year. Did you know that in 2000, Florida's 240 dairies produced 2.46 billion pounds of milk from 157,000 cows?

Most people don't think of vineyards and wineries when they think of Florida. But our state has a \$5 million viticulture industry.

Close to half of Florida's 34 million acres consist of forestland. A recent study by University of Florida's Department of Food and Resource Economics pegged the economic impact of Florida's forest products industry at more than \$8 billion in output, \$3.6 billion in value added, \$2.7 billion in exports, \$2.2 billion in labor income and more than 68,000 jobs.

Finally, aquaculture, which includes the production of everything from alligators to aquatic plants and catfish to tropical fish, is one of the fastest growing segments of Florida agriculture. According to University of Florida's Department of Food and Resource Economics, there were 178 aquaculture producers in the state in 1999,

with sales totaling \$43 million.

The University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences has played a major role in the development, support and expansion of this very important part of our diverse state through its research, teaching and extension programs. We all have benefited from this vital industry. Sometimes we just need to be reminded.

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