

What does Agriculture Mean to New Mexico?

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When I think of what does agriculture mean to New Mexico, it is necessary to understand the definition of agricultural which extends beyond traditional programs. Agriculture is too important of a topic and should be taught not only to the relatively small percentage of students considering careers in agriculture and pursuing vocational agriculture studies. Agricultural literacy is having a person understand that the food and fiber system includes its history and current economic, social, and environmental significance to all New Mexicans and Americans. People need to have the knowledge of nutrition to make informed personal choices about diet and health. New Mexico needs to produce informed citizens that are able to participate in establishing the policies that will support a competitive agricultural industry in this state, country, and abroad.

Most New Mexicans know very little about agriculture, its social and economic significance in the United States, and particularly, its links to human health and environmental quality. Few systematic educational efforts are made to teach or otherwise develop agricultural literacy in students and adults of any age. Although children are taught something about agriculture, the material tends to be fragmented, frequently outdated, usually farm oriented.

Agriculture is more than farming. It's more than planting and harvesting crops. It's more than growing livestock and poultry, more than milking cows and selling fruits and vegetables. Agriculture starts with the growing and harvesting of food and fiber. It ends with almost everything we eat, wear, and use and therefore helps make us who we are. Food comes from plants and animals. Fiber is the raw material from which clothes made. We get fiber from animals (wool, leather, silk) and from plants (cotton, flax). Forests give us tree fiber, or timber that becomes houses, furniture, fuel, and hundreds of other things. Sod fields landscaped parks and lawns, flowers Christmas-tree farms, and even golf courses count as agriculture, too.

Agriculture is everywhere in New Mexico. There's no way you could live a day without it. When you woke up this morning in a bed with sheets, it was an encounter with agriculture. Sheets are made of fibers from cotton plants. Did you wash or shower with soap? Oil from corn and soybeans and fat from cattle went in to making that soap. Did you eat cereal, eggs, milk, bacon, pancakes, buttered toast, or juice for breakfast? Thank agriculture again! And how did you get to school or work? If you bicycled, bussed, or rode in a car, the tires were made from synthetic rubber plus products from cattle. Steris acid, a byproduct of beef, makes tires run cooler and last longer. Your vehicle's fuel may have contained ethanol, which is 10 percent corn alcohol. At school or work, you're probably used a wood pencil to write on paper, which come from another agriculture crop – trees. Corn and soybean by products helped hold the ink on the paper in your books. Everything around you that you can trace to food or fiber is agriculture!

New Mexico's agricultural, history is long and diverse, from very early planting and trading of corn and squash to cattle drives. The livestock industry remains significant to New Mexico's economy with over 1.5 million head feeding on rangeland and feedlot. Today agriculture continues to expand its contribution to the state's economy and recognition. Alone in Torrance County where I live, in 2010 the main livestock raised was 41,000 cattle. 6,100 sheep and lambs were also raised. The main

crop production is alfalfa hay of 11,000 acres harvested. According to the 2009 figures cash receipts from marketing in the state of New Mexico Livestock, Livestock products and crops harvested brought \$2,678,292.00. This figure does not include total receipts of cash receipts for livestock grazing based on analysis of administrative data and census of agriculture.

Agriculture can contribute to the health and beauty of Earth. People in the past were very aware of the role that agriculture played in their lives. Most men, women, and children worked on the land. It meant survival. Agriculture still means survival. That will never change. But as time goes on, fewer and fewer people have close contact with farming or the land. They seldom think about their own and the world's total dependence on agriculture. Today only about two out of 100 Americans work in production agriculture, or what we call "farming." Yet each of those American farms produces food and fiber making the U.S. the largest food exporter in the world. Agriculture has a massive impact on the New Mexico economy. Along with its related occupations, agriculture is the nation's largest industry. It generates billions of dollars each year; one out of every five jobs depends on it in some way. Our citizens must be agriculturally literate to make responsible decisions affecting this giant lifeline. New Mexico and the United States as a whole have workers that get those products in to a form that we can then move to our supermarkets, lumberyards, drugstores, clothing shops and Christmas-tree lots.

The vast tracts of land in New Mexico provide a wealth of natural resources for farming, ranching, and manufacturing. New Mexico's economy is as diverse as its cultural roots. New Mexico's ability to produce a variety of fruits, vegetables, nuts, grains, and nursery products help the state enjoy growth of local Farmers Markets. Agriculture is one of the state's principal industries with cash receipts and directly supports over 23,000 jobs in the state. Agriculture is an important part of our daily lives here in New Mexico and is often taken for granted, but in these uncertain times, it should be remembered that American Agriculture is not only important for obvious reasons – food, clothing and shelter, but, the industry also plays an important part in homeland security.

When we stop to thank our New Mexican farmers and ranchers who work day in and day out to provide a safe, abundant and affordable food, fiber and fuel supply, we should also take a moment to thank these same individuals for serving as first responders and as the front line of defense in the effort to protect our food and water sources. We as New Mexicans need to understand and appreciate the amount of work that people in the agriculture industry do on a daily basis to produce the nation's supply and learn more about agriculture in their area of the state and the people who produce the commodities we enjoy.