

RMJ

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Looking to the Future

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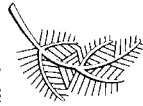
Center for Rural Policy and Development

600 S. Fifth Street, Suite 211 • Saint Peter, Minnesota 56082
(507) 934-7700 • (877) RURALMN

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Editor's note

Marnie Werner

When we started approaching authors for this year's Rural Minnesota Journal, we explained to them that the focus of agriculture and forestry should be not so much on these two topics themselves but the impact they have on the communities dependent on them. What we got was an interesting mix of discussions, ranging from the issue of water quality policy to Minnesota's place in the global marketplace.

When I consider the role agriculture and forestry have played in Minnesota's history, it's tempting to think that role has diminished over the years to some bit part in today's economy, and looking at the numbers of people involved, that would seem to be true. One hundred years ago, more than half the people in the state lived on farms; today that number is more like 2%. Forestry was a tremendous force in settling the state and constituted Minnesota's first major economic boom, but today there are no longer miles of timber floating down the rivers to the major lumber mills. But these changes shouldn't fool anyone.

No one knows how times have changed more than a farmer or someone in the forest industry. New technology, the financial landscape and that overarching issue of the day, climate change, have had an impact in the last ten years like at no other time. In fact, as I was editing the articles for this edition of the Journal, I was struck by how many of the seemingly different articles ended up being about climate change and the role agriculture and forests can play. The Journal starts with a discussion of biofuels beyond ethanol, which ones are economically viable and to what degree. Next, we go to a discussion from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture on the remarkable role Minnesota's agricultural industry plays in global markets and how it continues to grow with inroads into China and Vietnam. Articles follow on forestry and water policy and their impact on the state's economy. Then railroads: shortline rail

companies are making a comeback, but a variety of situations are posing roadblocks.

Whether you agree that climate change is happening or not, carbon sequestration, the practice of trapping greenhouse gases in the form of carbon, is a major front-burner issue in national and international policy, and it turns out that agriculture and forestry are inherently involved. The next article presents scenarios on just how. An article on the Conservation Reserve Program discusses how perceptions of it have changed over the years and how its role could change again. And finally, The Hormel Institute presents us with the ultimate in cutting-edge technology, finding therapies and preventatives for cancer through food.

I was driving out along a county road one evening, thinking how the giant green combines silhouetted against the sunset looked like dinosaurs roaming across the landscape. That's how some people outside of rural Minnesota, and even some living here, think of agriculture. But those who know modern agriculture know that this is about as close as farming comes to the age of dinosaurs today. These giant creatures are guided by GPS technology and complex spraying formulas, and the brains of the outfit, the farmer inside, is consulting the Internet to check weather and market prices and what's going on in Brazil and Russia and how that might affect the price of corn here in six months.

That farmer is also paying close attention to Washington, D.C., keeping track of how new issues like climate change legislation and cap and trade regulations may affect operations and the bottom line. And should he — or she — be looking at ways to diversify into other markets, beyond ethanol and into pharmaceuticals, and should some of those unplanted reserve acres go into a cover crop that could be sold for cellulosic biofuels? The same can be said for forestry. While it's in the middle of a major change right now, it's still a key industry and will evolve and change as it has before.

Indeed, agriculture and forestry are far from dinosaurs. After 200 years, they keep adapting to the same landscape in new and different ways, and these articles will give some insight into just how they're doing so. We hope you enjoy them.