

ECONOMIC BRACE

By Matt Ottinger

Agriculture Shines in Orthopedic Capital

Water access. Fertile soil. Space. And good old-fashioned hard work.

These are some of the ingredients that have made Kosciusko County one of the most quietly productive regions when it comes to supplying seed, protein and even energy to the world. That may surprise those who simply know the Warsaw area as the “Orthopedic Capital of the World.” In fact, Indiana Farm Bureau reports the county contains more than 1,200 farms employing over 7,900 workers.

The casual observer also may be unaware of these facts:

- Creighton Brothers Farms (Atwood) produces 1% of the United States’ eggs, while housing three million hens
- Louis Dreyfus Commodities (Claypool) operates the nation’s largest fully integrated soybean processing and biofuel plant, with an annual production capacity of 60 million bushels of soybeans and 100 million gallons of biodiesel
- Milford-based Maple Leaf Farms is the largest duck producer in the U.S.
- CTB, Inc., a global designer, manufacturer and marketer of agricultural systems, is expanding its operations in Milford this year, investing over \$7 million to construct and equip a 45,000-square-foot facility on 127 acres. The company plans to add 80 new jobs by 2017
- Tom Farms (Leesburg) is one of the largest suppliers of seed corn and related services to Monsanto Company, as well as a major supplier of corn and soybeans to processors and livestock operations

All in the family

Many agricultural operations in the county are hardly newcomers to the scene. Bishop Farms in Leesburg – which grows corn, soybeans, wheat and seed corn (for Pioneer) on its 4,500 acres – has been in Bob Bishop’s family since 1833. It was homesteaded by his ancestors, and the deed was even signed by Martin Van Buren (our country’s eighth president) in 1837.

He touts the area’s abundant water supply as a critical asset allowing for irrigation, noting the county itself has over 100 lakes. Yet it’s the local community’s collective will that is a critical seed in blossoming a strong farming climate.

“It’s a lot of small communities that stick together and help each other out,” he asserts. “And when a need arises – if you have a tragedy or a disaster and you need help, people just come and help out. That’s a great asset for the ag community.”

“There’s a lot of progress being made in trying to inform the orthopedic industry about the importance of agriculture and what

it means to this county. If you took ag out of the county, it would be in a world of hurt – no matter how much orthopedics you have. We pay an awful lot of taxes.”

The area’s willingness to support agriculture paid dividends in 2007 when Louis Dreyfus Agricultural Industries opened its first Indiana plant in Claypool. The facility now employs around 100 workers.

“This location provided us access to the Norfolk Southern Railroad main line,” notes Jeremy Mullins, commercial manager. “There is also a very good supply of soybeans and a large demand for soybean meal. The local community welcomed us with open arms, which was the deciding factor.”

He stresses that the future looks bright for biodiesel, with demand increasing as the quality improves.

“Biodiesel is sold to companies that use diesel fuel: truck stops, oil companies, etc.,” Mullins elaborates. “It ships from Houston to New York Harbor and many places in between. Biodiesel is blended with diesel fuel to run in any diesel engine, like buses, farm

Louis Dreyfus Commodities’ soybean operation in Claypool produces 100 million gallons of biodiesel annually and employs about 100 people.





Creighton Brothers has been family owned since 1925. The Atwood company is one of the nation's top egg producers and is moving toward the future by adding an agritourism component and exploring new housing styles for its chickens.

equipment, construction equipment and semis.”

Louis Dreyfus also shares its wealth by giving back via its Million Meals program – a partnership with Indiana Pork and Feeding Indiana’s Hungry.

“(Million Meals) provides protein-rich Indiana pork to Indiana’s hungry,” Mullins relays. “Farmers can deliver their beans here in the name of Million Meals, and the money for the beans will be paid to the program. It’s basically a way for farmers to make a donation. We also work with Harvest for Health and the Kosciusko County Community Foundation with similar programs.”

Egg-ucating the public

Biting into a salad tossed in Hidden Valley Ranch dressing or a Weight Watchers muffin could also provide a small taste of Kosciusko County as Creighton Brothers’ eggs are used in myriad foods.

Vice President Mindy Creighton Truex also spends a great deal of effort on community and educational outreach and laments the negative coverage that the industry sometimes receives. Her farm is building an agritourism component to facilitate tours and further education about what occurs on its 10,000 acres.

“For people that have been to Fair Oaks Farms, it would sort of be like that but not on that grand scale,” she expounds. “But it will help educate people on poultry and egg laying and the different styles of housing (for hens).”

A soft opening was slated for June.

“We have a bus tour coming in October and want to attract locals on an everyday basis, as well as bus tours of people who want to learn about our industry,” she says. “There will also be a multipurpose and banquet room, and we’ll showcase our history and display information. We’ll also have a café in there with egg-related food items.”

Truex believes Creighton Brothers’ focus on agritourism and farm tours will help bring the public into its operation, as will continued partnerships with K-12 schools and colleges.

“One thing I want to do as much as having the kids come out – and we’ve talked to the new superintendent in Warsaw schools and I’m good friends with the superintendent in Tippecanoe Valley – I want to work with their educators as much as the kids,” she notes. “We want the kids to understand the real story of agriculture; it seems ag sometimes becomes a scapegoat – even in the classroom. So we want to work with the educators so they’re telling the right stories, whether they do it in the classroom or bring the classroom out to the farm. I want them to all be friends of agriculture.”

She also looks forward to explaining how the farm coexists with the Northern Indiana landscape.

“For all the negativity toward agriculture about run-off into the lakes, streams and rivers, most of our ground is on a watershed – if not directly next to the river – and it’s one of the cleanest in the U.S.,” Truex offers.

People power

Tom Farms was founded in 1952. President and CEO Kip Tom is a principal figure in Indiana’s economy through his work as an agribusiness leader and a board member of the Indiana Economic Development Corporation. (Also see the January/February 2010 *BizVoice*[®] to read a feature on Tom Farms.) According to Tom, the county’s natural resources and access to talent give it an edge over other areas, although the industry continues to change.

“We have a manufacturing mindset in the area, and when I look at the talent we hire on the farm today, we don’t hire a tractor driver. We hire somebody who actually understands how to operate computers.

“They don’t drive tractors; they operate several computers in that tractor cab to do their job,” he clarifies. “We’ve actually hired people out of the orthopedic device industry as operators. That’s not to say we have enough. There’s a war for talent. In farming before, you never had to worry about that because you just needed someone to operate equipment, but now we need skilled operators and skilled employees.”

Bishop adds that finding local talent for the farms takes work, but the aptitude exists.

“I look for young men and women who are motivated to want to learn about agriculture,” he reveals. “I spend a lot of time teaching – not just manual labor, but why we do it and what we do it for. I find people like that either through local FFA chapters in our county or someone who went to Purdue (University) and is willing to come back and work on a farm and put some of the things they learned to good use – and have a desire to benefit the community.”

Repairing fences

While the future is bright for the industry in Kosciusko County, challenges persist.

“Industry-wide, our biggest concern is bio-security and animal welfare,” Truex articulates. “On the welfare side, even if it’s just a perception, it’s a challenge. I’ve been going to meetings for 15 years (and hearing animal rights groups attacking agriculture on every front). But it’s tough to tell your story on a mass scale. In the industry, one

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undercover video or bad food safety incident can wipe out years of those one-on-one positive conversations with people. Even if it's not from your farm, it still affects you."

Creighton Brothers continues to explore various housing styles and cage-free options for its chickens, and it evaluates research on the psyche of the birds.

Bishop, who also owns a trucking company, adds that a notable challenge in the area is deteriorating roads. Furthermore, a complex regulatory climate is also a massive hurdle for farmers.

"A big challenge (in agriculture) is all of the government regulations we have to go through as small businesses," he offers.

Truex adds, "We have more acronyms of places we have to report to and keep happy, and try to keep our customers happy."

Presidential Quack Fact

Ducks from Maple Leaf Farms (in Milford) were enjoyed by President Barack Obama and guests during the main course of his inaugural luncheon in 2009. Organizers wanted to honor Abraham Lincoln's roots as it was also the bicentennial celebration of his birth, so game and vegetables from his boyhood homes were used.



Growing the industry (Grace)fully

Truex also expresses gratitude for an ongoing educational partnership with Winona Lake-based Grace College and Theological Seminary – namely the school's Center for Lakes and Streams program.

Bishop recalls spending 16 years as a classroom teacher while farming on the side until the farm became a full-time endeavor. He sees the importance of education in enhancing agribusiness in the region and is helping Grace's business school cultivate new curricula focused on that side of the industry.

"We're working to develop an ag business degree to entice local students who want to stay in the industry and may not want to go away to a large university," he divulges. "If you have a degree in agribusiness, you can get along in the ag community with people who specialize in other areas as well."

Jeff Fawcett, dean of Grace's business school, notes the course offerings are still in the development phase and the school hopes to make the degree available in fall of 2016. The courseload would include standard business courses like accounting, marketing and business law, but he also anticipates offering topic areas such as farm management, agricultural economics, financing farm operations, commodity marketing and sustaining a family business.

"Our desire in the business school is to do whatever we can to help our community prosper," he concludes. "When you look around Kosciusko County, there's obviously all the orthopedics, but when you consider the enormous agricultural entities here, we had to ask, 'Why are we not preparing students to serve right here in this tremendous ag community?' We want to see what we can do to benefit these businesses in our county."

RESOURCES: Bob Bishop, Bishop Farms, at (574) 453-4499 | Mindy Creighton Truex, Creighton Brothers, at www.creightonbrothersllc.com | Jeff Fawcett, Grace College, at www.grace.edu | Jeremy Mullins, Louis Dreyfus Commodities, at www.ldcom.com | Kip Tom, Tom Farms, at www.tomfarms.com