

## Keepin' It Real and Rural

Matt Ritenour, Marketing Specialist, MidAtlantic Farm Credit

By living or working in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley, an area rich with farming history, we know you appreciate what it means to "keep it rural." Whether it's breathing fresh air in wide-open spaces, sitting on your porch and hearing the crickets instead of the traffic, eating local fresh food from the land, or wishing upon stars that you can actually see in the night sky, you know what it means to be close to nature. Whether you live in the country or just go there on occasion, you "get it." At MidAtlantic Farm Credit, we get it, too. We've been helping folks keep it rural for more than 90 years.

### Keeping it Real.

We also understand the importance of top-notch educators and the role they play in developing the future of agriculture. Teachers often set our youth on the road to their chosen career paths. When teachers "keep it real" in the classroom and instruct on the importance of agriculture on a community and global scale, they are helping to preserve the rural lifestyle that many Virginians love. The rural lifestyle goes hand in hand with the state's leading business, agriculture. That is why MidAtlantic Farm Credit has proudly supported the Chamber's New Educator Breakfast for many years.

### Keeping it Rural.

If you ask many youth (maybe even some adults!) where eggs, cereal, milk and fresh fruit come from, many of them would give you the name of some large commercial chain store. However, behind all the fancy advertisements, coupons, and television commercials, you will find our local farmers! It is easy to misjudge the importance of this industry to our economy, but according to the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, farming contributes \$55 billion dollars in sales to the state's economy each year. In addition, farming provides more than 357,000 jobs. Value-added industries, that depend on farm commodities, employ an estimated additional 76,000 Virginia workers and produce \$26 billion in total output.

These value-added industries are ones many people wouldn't initially connect with agriculture. They include equipment and machinery dealers, feed and seed mills, veterinarians, laboratory technicians, biologists, micro-biologists, and financial service

providers. In addition, trade specialists (who bring buyer and seller together), insurance agents, extension agents, inspectors, fertilizer and pesticide manufacturers and environmental specialists are all intimately connected with the farmers who help provide our food and fiber.

Jobs directly related to agriculture include the farmers themselves and their farm workers, who plant, harvest, feed, milk, operate equipment or do many various jobs around the farm. Transportation professionals also play a key role in hauling agriculture commodities from farm to processor, along with workers in food processing plants and wholesalers and retailers of agriculture goods.

By learning about the value of agriculture in the classroom or through hands on programs like 4-H and FFA, students can be prepared to enter the working world with knowledge and expertise that will allow students to enter careers either directly or indirectly connected with this important industry. Comprehensive school curriculums prepare students for advance education opportunities and lifelong careers that influence the agriculture industry.

Providing this comprehensive education is very important as providing food and fiber in today's global economy is a complex and technical business. In order to stay profitable in this market, farmers must rely on technology and advancements in science as well as techniques which improve efficiency. There is also fierce global competition with other countries that are often less regulated in their farming practices. However, Virginia continues to be a strong hold in agriculture and is currently in the

top 10 nationally for agricultural exports. To put it in perspective, the Commonwealth exported a record \$2.3 billion worth of products in 2009, putting it 9th among all U.S. exporting states. Within our state, many of those products were produced in the diverse growing region that the Top of Virginia Regional Chamber serves. According to the 2007 census of Agriculture, Frederick and Clarke counties rank among the top in the state in several categories and had a combined total of nearly \$50 million in market value of products sold.

### Looking Ahead.

In order for our community to maintain its rich agricultural traditions and remain as a viable producer in the market place, younger generations of farmers must be available to transition into the role of the older generation. The average age of principal farm operators in our area is roughly 57 years of age. This figure highlights the importance of teaching youth about agriculture and ag-related fields while in school. The industry needs youth that are educated and interested in pursuing this important and vital occupation. Without farming, not only would the community lack fuel for our bodies, but our local economy would also suffer. Having a safe and local food source safeguards public health—it also maintains our quality of life while enhancing our environment.

So whether enjoying your rural lifestyle includes eating a delicious apple, having a nice steak with a glass of Virginia wine, or landscaping around your house, always remember the vital connection between education and the future of agriculture. "Hats off" to the educators who keep it real in the classroom so that you can keep it rural!



New Educators Breakfast 2009

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