Farmers making impact on Baton Rouge economy

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Where the dollar counts — in the pockets of local people — the impact of agriculture in the Baton Rouge area is greater than that of the oil and gas industry, according to John L. Kennedy Jr., a vice president of Capital Bank and Trust Co. here.

In a presentation punctuated with folksy rural philosophy, Kennedy told members of the Downtown Kiwanis clubs this past week that last year "in the greater Baton Rouge area our farmers produced $143,589,000 worth of crops and livestock." This year the figure will be a little higher, he added.

"Do you know where our farmers spent this nearly $150 million?" he asked. "In big Baton Rouge, that's where. In Baton Rouge, that is where most of this area's farmers came to buy their cars and trucks and tractors; papa's clothes, mama's clothes and the kids clothes; the new television set; the stereo; the refrigerator; anything and everything that can be bought, our area farmers are going to be downtown and the shopping centers buying some of it.

"An economic study shows this to be a true picture of the impact of agriculture on our economy: 78 cents of each dollar spent by the ag sector was spent to other economic sectors of our area. By way of comparison, from Louisiana's other large industries, oil and gas, less than 58 cents of each dollar stays in the local economy.

"That's where we feel the impact (of agriculture), right in our hip pockets."

The impact of agriculture in this section of the state also is felt through LSU, Kennedy said.

"The total annual budget for LSU agricultural colleges, statewide, including research and extension programs, is $60 million dollars," he said. "An estimated $33.1 million is expended right here in East Baton Rouge Parish — more than half.

"Let's talk about LSU as an agriculture related enterprise. The annual LSU rodeo and livestock show is Baton Rouge's largest sustained event. For two solid weeks Baton Rouge is host to thousands of farmers, livestock producers, cowboys and cowgirls. For two weeks these people spend money. If you're a hotel or a motel or restaurant or club owner, you know they spend money.

"But while they are here they also buy clothes and feed and gasoline."

Of added economic value to the area, Kennedy said, is that the LSU Agriculture livestock facility is host to 112 events each year.

"The estimated value to Baton Rouge for hotel rooms and meals alone is $1,109,776," he said. Really, he added, the estimate is too low, since some 345,000 people visited the LSU coliseum.

"Baton Rouge, like Memphis, and New Orleans and Chicago, was founded and built mainly on wealth that agriculture produced. Our skyscrapers, our capital building, our offices and industry complexes rest on a foundation firmly laid by agriculture."

"In East Baton Rouge Parish, which is largely urban, the total value of crops produced (largely soybeans) was $12,752,041, Kennedy said. Livestock production was valued at another $6,193,790, he said.

"Only Pointe Coupee and Livingston parishes reported a greater crop value than East Baton Rouge. Pointe Coupee, with $30.1 million in crops — mostly soybeans and pecans — and $3.8 million in livestock — led the area parishes in total value. Iberville, which produces soybeans and sugar cane, was second with $20.7 million in crops and $2.5 million in livestock.

"Other parish valuations, by crop and livestock, were:

- East Feliciana: $4.9 million and $7.7 million.
- Ascension: $10.7 million and $2.2 million. (Livestock includes a burgeoning crawfish industry, Kennedy said.).
- Livingston: $12.2 million and $13.2 million.

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