

Farms, Food and You Podcast

One-on-One with NC State Extension's Rich Bonanno

[Music]

Dee Shore:

Rich Bonanno's loyalty to agriculture is clear. Over the course of nearly four decades, he's worn several professional hats, all of them connected to farming. Today, he serves as director of NC State Extension, an organization committed to helping North Carolina farmers succeed in raising the crops and the livestock that help feed, clothe and fuel our world.

I'm Dee Shore from North Carolina State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and in this episode of Farms, Food and You, Bonanno discusses the challenges facing North Carolina agriculture and the ways Extension is working to keep the industry at the forefront of the state's economy.

[Music]

Dee Shore:

First, a little background on Rich Bonanno. A native of Massachusetts, he's been a farmer, an agricultural extension specialist and president of the Massachusetts Farm Bureau.

When he came to NC State University in 2016 to serve as NC State Extension director and associate dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, it wasn't his first time at the university. In the 1980s, he'd been on the faculty in the Department of Horticultural Science.

He chose to come back to North Carolina because he wanted to continue making a difference in agriculture, and he knew that with Extension, he'd be in a good position to do that.

Extension in North Carolina is strong, and so is agriculture. Food, fiber and forestry industries in our state are worth \$92.7 billion annually and generate over 770,000 jobs. Maintaining that economic impact is critical, Bonanno says, especially in the face of significant agricultural stressors.

Rich Bonanno:

Over the last four years that I've been here at NC State, the changes that have happened are worrisome. I see an agricultural economy that has been overly stressed with weather – hurricanes and fires and floods. Those are things that can take you out so quickly and take an entire season's worth of work and effort and dollars and end it in what seems like an instant. Too many, too quickly.

That's combined with prices. It's unavoidable. We're in a global economy. It impacts everything we do – and even things that we can't control, like the value of our currency versus somebody else's currency.

We often talk a lot in agriculture that our farmers have all the same issues that any other business owner has, but on top of all of those things that you think you might be able to control as a business owner, there's a lot of things that you cannot control.

You cannot control Mother Nature, as a starter. And while a lot of other businesses can deal with labor and regulation and prices by picking up their businesses and moving them elsewhere, farmers do not have that luxury. And it makes a big difference.

So I've seen a lot of stresses on the agricultural economy, and when they happen as quickly as they've happened, to the level that they've happened, it forces people to really think about what they're doing.

Dee Shore:

Bonanno says the pressures raise difficult questions.

Rich Bonanno:

If they are going to be the last generation in a long line of family members that have farmed, how do they get out? If they get out, how much money did they borrow to get out? How much did they give up to get out? And how much did they saddle their family maybe two or three generations into the future for that decision to stay in?

I've just seen a lot of stresses on farmers, and I see that stress becoming worse and worse. And unfortunately, there does not seem to be an easy fix.

Dee Shore:

To help farmers cope, NC State Extension works in partnership with East Carolina University and North Carolina A&T State University, through the North Carolina Agromedicine Institute.

Rich Bonanno:

Farmer suicide rates are not where we would like them to be. Farmer stress is very high. So we've been trying focus in some of these areas. We work with farmers to try to help them, if they are in a stressful situation, because we don't want to lose farmers needlessly. And we want to make sure that if farmers have problems, that we're there to help them (with) making financial decisions, helping them with stress.

Dee Shore:

NC State Extension also works to ensure that farmers have access to the knowledge and technology they need to profitably sustain their farms.

Rich Bonanno:

Our core, basic job in agriculture is to provide unbiased research-based knowledge to farmers to help them make better decisions and improve their prosperity.

Now that comes with some pieces: One of those pieces is to make sure that we're also aware of what the needs of the industry are – through our connection with agriculture out in the countryside and out on the farms – to make sure that our researchers back on campus have a focus not just on grand paradigm-shifting research, but they're also focusing on the needs of the industry. And then once those needs are met, we can transfer that research-based information back to farmers and continue to work with them.

Dee Shore:

Meanwhile, Extension monitors changes in the state – changes in the population, for example, and in what consumers want and need from agriculture. Population growth, Bonanno says, brings new opportunities for North Carolina farmers.

Rich Bonanno:

There are people out there that have different needs, and if farmers are smart and they can take advantage of that understanding, they can see where they might have the ability to raise and market eggs differently, to raise and market chickens differently, to raise and market pork differently, to raise and market arugula differently – to hit a base that may be different and in many cases might be willing to pay more for a commodity.

Having a diverse population from the standpoint of where people live, what they like to eat, the amount of money they have, how they like to shop – whether it's a CSA or a farmstand or farmers market or a supermarket – farmers in states with population centers can take advantage of that kind of marketing.

And so we recognize that our local foods program and smaller farmer programs are geared a little bit differently, and the customer base is a little bit different. If we can get our farmers up to speed about how to serve that population, then there's a whole nother segment of the agricultural community that can do well.

Part of that is understanding one of those old sayings, "The last seven words of any dying organization is, 'We have always done it that way.'" And I think if you're going to survive and do better and be impactful, you need to recognize when you need to do things differently.

Dee Shore:

Doing things differently is what three initiatives Extension's involved with are all about. The North Carolina Plant Sciences Initiative, the Food Animal Initiative and the Food Processing Initiative are highly collaborative efforts with roots in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and Bonanno is excited about their potential.

Rich Bonanno:

The opportunities, the thoughts, the ideas, the things that are being thrown out right now by people on what we could achieve are things that are amazing to me. And then we've got the

collaborations, public, private collaborations, scientists willing to work together. It's something that when we bring the needs of the industry back to the researchers, the potential for getting something back that, as we might say up north, is wicked exciting is something that's really an outstanding thing.

And it's not just to put more toys on farms. It's not to put more things in front of farmers that cost money. It's all about profitability – putting something in front of them that means something, that makes a difference, that allows them to stay in business, allows them not to be in that situation that I was talking about earlier, the dark side.

We want to move towards a place where our technology and our new technology can really help farmers be profitable and to stay in business and keep that land in their families and provide opportunity for generations to come.

Dee Shore:

Bonanno is decidedly passionate about Extension's role in sustaining North Carolina farms, and he's proud of the creativity Extension educators have shown amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In all areas of Extension's work – agriculture, natural resources and community and rural development; family and consumer sciences; and 4-H youth development – these educators have found ways to solve problems and to reach people in new ways.

Rich Bonanno:

We really love doing in-person programming. We like for people to put their hands on things and to be able to get the sense and the smell and the closeup visuals and all the perspectives. But this was not a year for that to happen.

Our 4-H agents have had one of the most difficult tasks, because a lot of face-to-face activities with children have been curtailed. But I am actually amazed at how well it's gone, because we've been able to reach a much broader audience.

I'll give you a quick example. We do this embryology program in 4-H where the eggs go out to the classrooms and kids watch them hatch. It's part of a school curriculum. In Johnston County, the schools just brought all the eggs back to the county office because the schools were closing.

So the 4-H agent along with the livestock agents say, 'Let's just put a cam on this, and it'd be like watching the panda bear at the National Zoo.' And before we knew it, there was over 100,000 views of eggs hatching in the cafeteria of the Johnston County extension office. It was pretty amazing, and it just shows that there are opportunities out there.

Dee Shore:

Extension's family and consumer science educators also used the internet to reach new and existing audiences. There were online cooking classes and videos – plus countless articles and fact sheets on nutrition and food safety. These were designed to help people forced to make different choices about what to eat and where to get their food.

Rich Bonanno:

Some people in some families really rely on someone else preparing their food, and I think a lot of people were put in a position where, 'OK, I've got to feed my family. I'm home.' And they've got to be able to purchase food and be able to prepare it properly and correctly. And so I think that there was a lot of really helpful information.

Dee Shore:

Agricultural agents took a blended approach, conducting one-on-one farm visits when necessary and sharing information through email and the World Wide Web.

Rich Bonanno:

First of all, we still did a lot of face-to-face visits when farmers needed face-to-face visits. The university gave us a lot of flexibility to make sure that our field research and field extension programs were able to continue – that we were allowing our agents to do face-to-face visits with farmers when they needed to. Of course, if we can handle something online or on FaceTime or some other visual way, we did it. But if we had to make a visit, we did it, because food production is something that needed to continue.

One of the biggest things that we did differently on the agriculture side were virtual field days. We have field days that could be a small visit that might involve 10 to 12 growers at a very specific site, all the way up to our two largest field days, which is the Turf Field Day, which can have in excess of 800 people there, and then, out east, the Blackland Farm Managers Tour, which can easily have 600 plus farmers there.

Those field days could not take place in person. So they were done virtually, and we've got quite a suite of virtual field days available to the public, and I've heard lots of great reports.

Dee Shore:

Another way Extension is working to advance agriculture is by raising public awareness of farming and food production. Bonanno considers this so important that he didn't want to end our interview before driving home a point: Agriculture, he says, is critical not just for the future of farmers, but also for people's health, the environment, the economy and the quality of life in our rural and urban communities. And people need to know that.

Rich Bonanno:

One of the great things that we have in Extension, thankfully, is some ability to put together educational programming that I think can really help educate the public and really get them to understand that there is a reason why you have scientists work in the agricultural industry — that food is incredibly important and having fewer farmers on less land providing food for a growing population on this planet is no small task, and it cannot be taken for granted. It should not be taken for granted. And I want to be part of the education that takes place, for the consumers to understand that they should never take their food supply for granted.

[Music]

Dee Shore:

Thanks for listening today, and we hope you'll join us again for the next episode of Farms, Food and You. To learn more about the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and our podcast, visit go.ncsu.edu/farms. While you're there, share your thoughts. We'd love to get your ideas and to hear what topics you'd like for us to explore in the future.