

The State of Agriculture in Emmet and Charlevoix Counties

Prepared by the Local Food Alliance of Northern Michigan

A key goal of Emmet County’s Master Plan is to “maintain the existing rural character and increase the viability of our local agricultural community and forestry operations.” Charlevoix County’s 2009 Future Land Use Plan established a goal to “retain a sufficient quantity of prime farm and forest land to assure viable farm- and forest-related economic activities.” A common recommendation of many other plans, task force reports, and public opinion surveys over the past 10-15 years was to preserve and enhance farmland and the local farm economy.

What is the current state of farming in Emmet and Charlevoix Counties? What are the key challenges—and opportunities—to increase the viability of local agriculture? To help begin to answer these questions, this paper presents an analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Census of Agriculture from 1982 to 2012¹.

There are now more, but smaller, farms in our two counties than there were in 1982. Over the past 30 years, land farmed declined 18.5%, from 94,914 acres to 77,345 acres. Average farm size decreased from 186.5 acres to 132.5 acres, a decline of 29%. The past 30 years have also seen changes in the relative size of farms. In 1982, farms smaller than 70 acres made up about a quarter (27%) of all farms; in 2012 they were almost half (47%) of all farms in the two counties.

Size/Year	1982	1992	2002	2012
1-9 acres	17	15	31	51
10-49 acres	94	61	188	153
50-69 acres	35	28	42	68
70-139 acres	139	96	123	132
140-259 acres	110	80	105	112
260-499 acres	87	72	54	46
Over 500 acres	27	32	30	22
Total	509	384	573	584

Farmers are getting older, and there are more female farmers. From 1982 to 2012, the average age of farmers in the two counties increased from 50.9 to 59.0. In 2012, 23% of all farmers were 70 or older. In 2012, there were 100 female farmers in the two counties, up from just 29 in 1982 (but down from 131 in 2007).

The market value of agricultural products sold contributed over \$16.6 million to the two counties’ economies in 2012. This represents a decline of 18.9% in real terms since 1982. There was significant fluctuation over this period. In Charlevoix, the market value of agricultural products declined from \$10.6 million in 1982 to \$8.0 million in 1992 and to \$5.1 million in 2002, but increased to \$9.9 million in 2012. In Emmet, however, these values decreased throughout the past 30 years: from \$9.9 million in 1982, to \$7.9 million in 1992, to \$7.5 million in 2002, and to \$6.7 million in 2012.

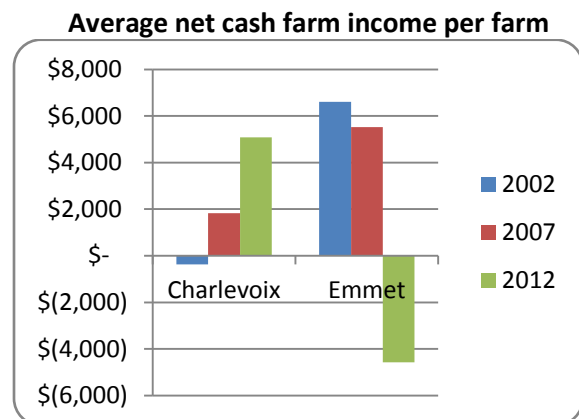
Over the past 30 years, **farming as the primary occupation declined from 47.2% to 41.4% of principal farm operators.** About the same percentage of farmers (34%) work only on their farm as those whose principal source of employment is off farm (38%). A total of 518 farm workers were hired in Charlevoix in 1982, but declined to 198 in 2012. On the other hand, hired farm

¹ All values are converted into 2012 dollars using the CPI inflation calculator of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

labor increased from 192 to 319 in Emmet over this period. **Hired farm labor payroll totaled \$2,595,000 in 2012** in the two counties combined. Average payments per farm worker were \$5,019 in 2012, an increase of 216.7% in real terms since 1982.

The mix between crops and livestock has changed dramatically over the past 30 years. The value of crops increased 127.1% over this period, from \$4.6 million in 1982 to \$10.4 million in 2012. At the same time, the value of livestock, poultry and their products declined 61.0%, from \$15.9 million to \$6.2 million. The value of vegetables and fruits has increased substantially, in real terms and as a percentage of overall crop sales. For example, sales of vegetables, melons, potatoes, and sweet potatoes in Emmet County grew from less than 6% of total crop sales in 1992 to more than 18% in 2012. In Charlevoix County, sales of fruits, tree nuts and berries grew from about 4% of total crop sales to almost 16% in 30 years. The value of products sold directly to individuals increased almost threefold in the past ten years—from \$548,000 in 2002 to \$1,565,000 in 2012. This increase was especially pronounced in Emmet County.

Average net cash farm income was \$3,118 in 2002 and \$3,677 in 2007, but only \$255 in 2012. These averages mask considerable differences between the two counties, as shown in the graphic. **Almost 70% of farms in the two counties experienced net losses in 2012.** Even the 31% of farms with positive net incomes in 2012 averaged only \$31,032—\$39,745 per farm in Charlevoix and \$22,319 per farm in Emmet.



In sum, farming is currently far from providing a sustainable livelihood for most farmers in our region. If we want our agricultural community to be viable over the long term, farmers—both full-time and part-time—need to earn more from farming. The high average age of farmers in our two counties means there will be a significant generational transition in the next decade or two. This is an excellent opportunity to revitalize our local farm economy. The recent shift in production toward fruits and vegetables, and increased direct sales to individuals, are encouraging and signal a move toward more intensive farming practices and higher value products. The trend toward smaller farms may be appropriate for this type of agriculture.

What can businesses and our community in general do to help improve our local farm economy? We can buy more food and other farm products from local sources. We can develop creative ways to make farmland, finance, training, and mentoring accessible to a new generation of farmers. We can explore ways to bring together farmers, processors, institutions like schools, health care providers and senior centers, and businesses such as restaurants and groceries to expand the amount of food, fiber, and other farm products they source locally. The result will not only be more viable farms, new business opportunities and more jobs. It will also be more healthful, nutritious, and better tasting food on our tables.