

Study examines agriculture's economic impact on northwestern Ontario

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Unprecedented look at present and future food production in Thunder Bay, Dryden/Kenora, Rainy River and Cochrane areas

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by TREEENA HEIN

Just what role does agriculture play in the economy of northwestern Ontario, and what are its future prospects?

These and other questions will be answered in a study just getting underway, supported by the Northwestern Ontario Development Network, an economic development organization based in Thunder Bay.

Agriculture in the districts of Thunder Bay, Dryden/Kenora, Rainy River and Cochrane has never been the subject of a study of this kind, says Frank Scarcello, the network's agricultural study coordinator.

"In northwestern Ontario, the agricultural industry is often ignored when it comes to economic development discussions," he says, noting the decline of the region's two main industries, forestry and mining, tend to dominate local economic discussions.

The study, to be completed before the end of the year, will provide stakeholders with some solid information about their industry to back their efforts "to influence policymakers and to create a higher level of awareness for the agricultural sector," Scarcello says. It will also update studies of Algoma-Manitoulin, Temiskaming, and the Blue Sky Region completed in 2004.

Harry Cummings & Associates consulting firm in Guelph is conducting the study. Senior associate Don Murray says the firm will collect information on: farm numbers, type and size; demographics; technology use; off-farm income; local infrastructure; physical and agricultural characteristics; factors affecting land availability; "and much more."

"The study will also compile information on past and emerging trends, such as labour market trends, along with other circumstances that have a bearing on the capacity for agriculture to remain a viable sector in each district," says Murray.

A close look at socio-economic conditions in the study's target regions will situate the agricultural sector within the broader regional economy and define economic and human resource development strategies, he says.

The firm will also survey agriculture-related businesses and suppliers in the Cochrane, Thunder Bay, Rainy River and Kenora study area to determine the indirect economic impact of agriculture (sales and jobs).

“Agriculture is not a sunset industry,” says Murray. “It continues to be an important economic driver in the north.” **BF**