



STATE OF MISSISSIPPI
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND COMMERCE
ANDY GIPSON
COMMISSIONER

Opinion Editorial

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Mississippi Agriculture Remains Strong in 2020

By: Andy Gipson
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The year 2020 will certainly be a year that will not be forgotten. Our usual way of life became anything but normal due to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, one thing remained the same – our farmers never stopped farming. They continued working to provide the food, fiber and fuel that we need to survive.

Despite the challenges felt by many in 2020, including our farmers and ranchers, Mississippi agriculture remains strong overall. According to Mississippi State University, the value of agriculture production in Mississippi was estimated to be at \$7.35 billion. This is up from \$7.01 billion in 2019 and marks nine consecutive years of production over \$7 billion.

Agriculture, the largest industry in our state, is a vital part of Mississippi's economy. The COVID-19 shutdowns reminded all Americans how important and essential agriculture is to our daily lives in providing food, fiber and shelter. During the onset of the pandemic, consumers demonstrated a renewed interest in purchasing and eating local products. Many consumers even began gardening for the first time. Farmers markets saw many new faces shopping weekly buying produce, meats and dairy products from local farmers. In order to connect consumers to the local farm products they so desire, the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC) developed the Mississippi Farm Marketplace, an online platform where farmers list their farm products for sale to the public.

The increased demand for local products significantly impacted local meat processors and livestock producers. The growing demand for local meats led to processors becoming backlogged and producers being put on waiting lists to get livestock processed. Some producers were put on waiting lists that stretched as far as nine months. The Mississippi Land, Water and Timber (LWT) Resources Board made it a priority to increase the processing capacity of USDA-inspected meats in the state. Through the LWT program, grants and grant/loan combinations were made available to existing USDA-inspected processing plants for expansion and towards the development of new plants, which can potentially double the amount of USDA-inspected meat processed in the state.

As with most other businesses, farmers found themselves faced with additional expenses as a result of the pandemic – extra costs to feed and care for livestock, rising input costs, added expenses for PPE to keep employees safe. To assist farmers who incurred additional operating expenses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mississippi Agriculture Stabilization Act (MASA) provided assistance to Mississippi producers from CARES Act funds. MASA had three separate funds within it: Poultry Farmer Stabilization Grant Fund; Sweet Potato Farm Sustainment Grant Program Fund; and Mississippi Supplemental CFAP Grant Program Fund. Through MASA, \$7,697,012 was distributed by MDAC directly to farmers as a reimbursement for expenses incurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce is continuing efforts to expand international trade and potential new markets for agriculture products including timber and forestry. While the pandemic kept the Department from traveling internationally for global trade activities, MDAC offered virtual trade missions through the Southern US Trade Association, which allowed companies to continue promoting their products in overseas markets. As we move ahead, we look forward to the export growth resulting from efforts including the signing of Letters of Intent with Taiwan to purchase Mississippi soybeans and corn and trade missions with China, India and Vietnam to promote Southern Yellow Pine logs from Mississippi.

Mississippi's food supply is abundant, plentiful and safe. We have our farmers and ranchers to thank for that. As we move into 2021, I encourage you to support our local farmers and ranchers. Shop at a local farmers market in your area; search the Mississippi Farm Marketplace (MSFarmMarketplace.com) for locally produced agriculture products; and visit GenuineMS.com for all things grown, raised, crafted and made right here in the great State of Mississippi. And, the next time that you have the opportunity, stop and thank a farmer for continuing to keep us clothed and fed.

Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce Andy Gipson

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