

# UNION COUNTY'S ECONOMY IS ROOTED IN AGRICULTURE

**A**griculture is the largest single component of the economy in Union County. Ample farmland, a skilled workforce and a rapidly improving road system for distribution means food processed from Union County farms is reaching the customers' tables at an increasingly rapid rate.

Crops and the poultry industry accounted for \$411 million in economic activity in 2019, the last year for which measures are available. With Tyson Foods and Pilgrim's as the county's largest agriculture employers, 50 million chickens were processed in Union County and put out to market that same year, says Ron Mahle, Assistant Director of Economic Development for Monroe-Union County Economic Development.

"Union County is consistently one of the top agricultural producers in the state, from wheat, soybeans and egg layers, our county ranks 3rd in the state for agri-business related cash receipts," Mahle says. "This incredible production rate provides for significant employment in agriculture."

Tyson Foods and Pilgrim's alone account for over 2,500 local employees. Circle-S-Ranch is a state leader in the production of turkeys. Other employers in the agricultural sector include H&H



Farm Machine Co., which makes sprayers for fertilizer and feeding, and Latham's Nursery Inc., a large wholesale greenhouse with 90 acres of container production of various ornamental landscape plants.

Union County's reputation as a great place to do business recently attracted Duke Foods who brought its first NC production facility to Monroe. Duke manufactures branded and private label chicken salad, pimento cheese, and salad dressings.

Duke Foods invested approximately \$5 million dollars into a new facility and has created approximately 50 jobs so far,

while expecting to reach 300 within the next several years. The Monroe facility will initially produce products for a variety of spreads, snack dips, and fresh salads to the Charlotte market, but could grow to serve an even greater variety of products.

Knowing the value of the agricultural sector to Union County's economy, Monroe-Union County Economic Development incorporated agriculture as one of its four areas of focus in every work plan since 2013.

"We want to do everything we can to support our agriculture related industries, which in turn helps all our local farmers", states

## AGRI-BUSINESS

Chris Platé, Executive Director of Economic Development, "we are working diligently to develop a comprehensive, vertically integrated strategy that enables our community to retain our enviable value chain of agri-businesses. We look to find all ways both large and small to capitalize on all the opportunities to grow this sector."

Agri-Business is typically thought of as product that is grown for consumption by humans or animals, but there is also another large crop, timber. Edwards

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**CHRIS PLATÉ** | Executive Director of Economic Development

Wood Products and Carolina Wood Products process timber for pallets, furniture grade hardwoods, construction mats and several other products. These companies provide tremendous career opportunities and focus on sustainable practices that will maintain the plentiful "timber basket" that exists within Union County.

Diversity is the key to any business sectors success. Union County's agri-business segment is extremely diverse and robust, being a leader in the State of North Carolina with row crops, livestock, equine, food processing and timber. From the established farms to the growing factories, agriculture and agri-business will remain a long-term asset for this county.



# UNION COUNTY IS DEVELOPING ITS AGRI-BUSINESS VALUE CHAIN

Union County has four areas of focus in its economic development work plan. Logistics and Commercial Development are two, but it is Precision Manufacturing and Agri-Business are where the real competitive advantage lies for Union and its municipalities over its competition. Within the Precision Manufacturing area, Aerospace is the king. This did not happen by coincidence, but through a comprehensive economic development strategy that began back in 2002. Since that time, aerospace related investment has exceeded one-billion dollars and is currently the largest geographic concentration of aerospace firms in the State of North Carolina.

Monroe-Union County Economic Development is working hard trying to see if lightning can strike twice with its Agri-Business Initiative. Like with the successes of aerospace, it is a complete community effort to seek to develop an agri-business value-chain that would incorporate producers, processing facilities, markets, restaurants to consumers.

“With a strong focus on companies from the agri-business sector, Union County has diversified and recruited companies that process and create value-added processes to the crops and protein grown here,” said Chris Platé, Executive Director of Monroe-Union County Economic Development. “It sustains the agricultural community here, while providing strong employment opportunities throughout the county.”

Since the agri-business initiative began, Union County has successfully located 10 projects that have invested approximately \$65 million. To increase the focus on the agri-business sector, Monroe-Union County Economic Development has recently added a new staff member with dual agri-business degrees to its ranks, further enhancing the knowledge base to recruit these types of businesses.

## Broad Community Commitment

Union County’s office of the NC Cooperative Extension, a part of NC State University, is an integral partner with the economic development team in order to make this a successful endeavor. Cooperative extension is about providing research-based information through public outreach programs focusing on youth development; agribusiness; agriculture; food, nutrition and health; and natural resources.

The NC Cooperative Extension office for Union County has spearheaded some innovative efforts under the leadership of Andrew Baucom, Union County Extension Director. Whether it has been working directly with producers to enhancing awareness through mobile applications, the Extension office’s team and the economic development office hope to provide vital links between the business community and the agricultural community.

## AGRI-BUSINESS

Starting in January 2021, Union County began participating in Visit NC Farms App administered by the NC Department of Agriculture. In the first five months of the implementation, Union County has become one of the top 10 most active counties in NC (based on views). This free app connects local NC residents to local producers and businesses that want to support locally grown and sourced foods.

“It is a new marketing resource for agri-tourism across the state,” said Andrew Baucom, “The goal is to foster greater appreciation and support for the agricultural community throughout the state and provide education of our food sources. So far, the App has created a greater mindfulness for our local agri-businesses, including the Union County Farmers Market, East Frank Superette and Kitchen, Franklin Court Grille, Peaceful Meadows Farm, and Boy and Girl Farm.”

The Extension office has also worked to create the Union County Local Foods Program. This program’s goal is to support small farm production in Union County and provide an outlet for residents to acquire locally sourced fresh fruits, vegetables and protein. Union County has three market locations, two in the City of Monroe (Downtown and US Hwy 601 North) and one in the Town of Stallings.

The Union County Local Foods program has a dedicated coordinator that manages the Local Foods Program, but also a new effort known as the “Union County Food Hub.” The Food Hub connects local businesses with small farmers to create a direct sales opportunity for crops grown locally. Simply explained, the producers bring their merchandise to the main Farmer’s Market in Downtown Monroe, where it is then sorted, packaged and made ready for pick-up by those businesses utilizing the service. Users include restaurants, bakeries, and other retailers’ outlets are the primary targets for the direct sale. Just a few months since being created and it has already generating impressive results. One example, is the creation of a direct sales pipeline supporting the sale of over 100 dozen eggs per week.

Finally, Union County Board of Commissioners supported the creation of a Special Events Center located near Jesse Helms Park and the Union County Ag Center. This facility is to provide space for the community and outside groups to host agricultural events that are focused on education and outdoor recreation. The facility will be completed this year. The main “open-air” portion of the building is approximately 26,000 square feet, while the indoor portion is approximately 12,500 square feet. One example on how this facility will support the modern agri-business community, is enabling the Union County 4-H to host local and statewide events from livestock shows and demonstrations to robotics competitions.



UNION COUNTY FARMERS MARKET

Food HUB

-Support Fresh - Support Local-



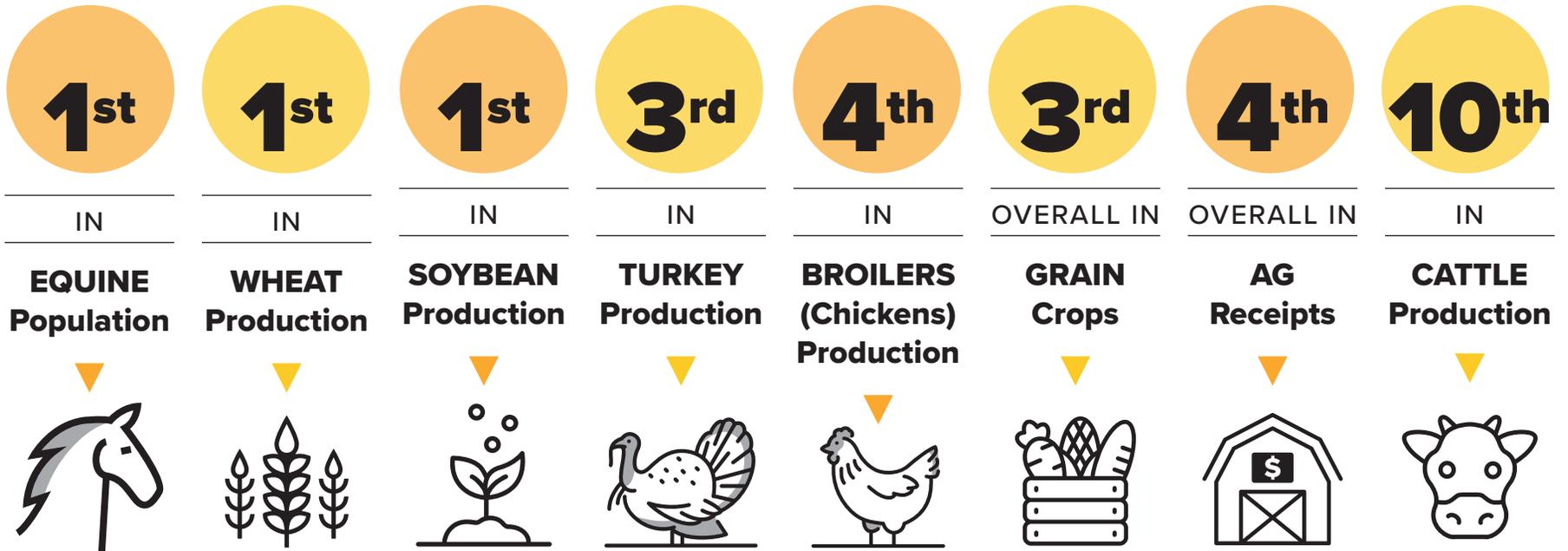
- Support Fresh - Support Local -



**AGRI-BUSINESS**

# UNION COUNTY STATE RANKINGS

(as of 2019)



**46%** of Union County's land is in a **FARM** designation.



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