

Do you know how good it feels to say that I have some good news to share? Pretty good!

N.C. State Economist Mike Walden recently released his latest economic impact numbers for agriculture and agribusiness, and those numbers show that the industry has grown to \$95.9 billion, up \$3.2 billion from 2019 numbers.

Perhaps equally as important, this new number inches us even closer to the \$100 billion goal I have set for the industry. I know we will soon reach that milestone, and I look forward to setting a new and bigger goal.

Dr. Walden's report is something I look forward to every year. I am curious to see how the industry is doing, especially as we have faced many challenges along the way. I am proud that we continue to see growth in the industry and have every year since I took office. In comparison, in 2005, the economic impact of agriculture and agribusiness was \$59 billion.

In just the past six years, agriculture and agribusinesses have weathered devastating storms and flooding – some of the worst this state has ever seen. Commodity prices have been stubbornly low while costs seem to only go up. Add in trade issues and lawsuits and a global pandemic and it is quickly obvious just how committed and tough farmers and their families have to be to survive.

And yet, the economic impact of agriculture has increased over \$36 billion.

It really reinforces my belief that this is an industry with a bright future. Food and fiber production will always be essential. And, as our population grows, so does the market for food, housing and other amenities.

If you dive into Dr. Walden's numbers a bit deeper, the total economic impact breaks down into \$81.7 billion attributed to agriculture and food industry; \$4.4 billion in production of natural fiber and \$9.8 billion in forestry production.

As his latest numbers show, this is an industry that employs 789,000 people or roughly 17.5 percent of our workforce. It is an economic driver that fuels rural North Carolina and remains our No. 1 industry.

But agriculture isn't resting. We are continuing to steer this industry towards growth.

A few examples of that focus include broadband access, meat and seafood processing grants, food manufacturing and research.

There's been considerable discussion about using COVID money to help expand broadband access to our rural communities. This would significantly benefit farmers, agribusiness owners and our rural communities and I fully support efforts to extend access.

We are now in the third phase of funding for meat and seafood processing grants for small processing facilities, which will help create new markets for locally produced and sourced proteins.

And we continue to focus on recruiting and developing more food manufacturing opportunities in the state.

In addition, agriculture research on many fronts is focused on increasing yields, improving efficiency, fine-tuning production techniques and developing new crops and new plant varieties – all to improve farm profitability and sustainability.

I am excited about the future of agriculture and am encouraged by the continued growth of this industry. Like I said, it feels good to have some good news for a change.