

Officials: Ag, aviation have room to grow

By **BOB MONTGOMERY**
Assistant News Editor

Aviation-related jobs may have outpaced the growth in farm employment in recent years, but both have solid futures, local officials say.

"Actually, we can see an interesting convergence of the two industries in the proposed wind farm in the desert," said Wayne Harris, director of the Albemarle Economic Development Commission.



Harris

Agriculture has long been the region's main economic driver, but its pace of growth has been surpassed in recent years by the aviation industry.

A 2006 study commissioned by the N.C. Department of Transportation showed that conservatively, the total economic impact of the Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Regional Airport exceeded \$17 million.

"Keep in mind the study was completed before the DRS (Technologies) and Telephonics facilities were opened," airport Manager



CATHY WILSON/THE PERQUIMANS WEEKLY

Local pilot Craig Craft sprays an area field in his crop-dusting plane. Area officials say there is plenty of room in the local economy for both aviation and agriculture to grow.

Scott Hinton said, referring to the two companies that have opened facilities near the airport and have plans to expand at the adjacent aviation commerce park under construction. "I would argue that the (economic) impact is already great," Hinton said. "I certainly expect that it will grow as our country moves forward during the economic recovery."

Harris said the aviation-related industry's total impact on the region

has grown in the past half-dozen years to about \$87 million.

That includes 240 jobs at DRS Technologies, where the average salary for workers is \$53,000 and the annual payroll is \$12.7 million.

It also includes the Weeksville-based TCOM airship manufacturer, which employs 190 workers (150 of whom were hired in the past three years) and has a total economic impact of about \$69 million.

That doesn't count the \$24 million contract extension DRS recently was awarded by the Coast Guard to continue maintenance support, engineering and program management on a fleet of HC-130, HC-144 and HU-25 aircraft. The extension actually is the second of a three-year \$67 million contract initially awarded in 2009 that continues through 2012.

The continued growth of the area's aviation industry shouldn't have much

effect on agricultural jobs, Harris said.

"Aviation produces a very high economic impact on a relatively small footprint, so there is no danger its growth will have more than an extremely minimal impact on agriculture," he said. "And actually, we can see an interesting convergence of the two industries in the proposed wind farm in the desert (area of western Pasquotank County)."

Recently, the world's largest wind-energy company filed an application with North Carolina regulators to build what would be the state's first utility-scale wind turbine project on a stretch of farmland referred to as the "Desert" in Pasquotank and Perquimans counties.

If approved, Iberdrola Renewables' wind turbines would generate enough electricity to power up to 70,000 North Carolina homes, as well as light up every house in Pasquotank County and several neighboring counties.

The proposal calls for up to 150 utility-scale

wind turbines, creating up to 400 construction jobs at the start and 20 permanent jobs.

The counties could receive tax revenues and local landowners would receive lease payments.

"The farmers in that area will continue to farm almost unobstructed while collecting an estimated \$1 million in lease payments from the wind turbine operator," Harris said.

One of the key benefits of the new industry is that it won't require local aviation workers to acquire a new and completely different set of skills.

"Many of the components in a wind turbine, from composite blades to the turbines themselves, require exactly the same skills as what are required in the aviation industry to manufacture and maintain," Harris said.

Hinton said he believes there's plenty of room for both aviation and farming to grow and contribute to the local economy.

"The two industries are not mutually exclusive," Hinton said. "We should continue to build our economy around our strengths. Aviation and farming certainly meet that criteria."



Hinton

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Wind energy, farming compatible

By **REGGIE PONDER**
Staff Writer

The prospect of wind turbines coming to Pasquotank and Perquimans counties offers an opportunity for a new convergence of the Albemarle's agricultural heritage and its more recent ventures in aviation technology.

Of course, agriculture and aviation have been intertwined for decades through crop-dusting. The aerial application of agricultural chemicals remains a familiar sight in the area.

In recent years, aviation technology has become a growth industry in the area, with companies like DRS Technologies and Telephonics investing millions of dollars in facilities at the Elizabeth City Regional Airport and Elizabeth City and Pasquotank County



PHOTO COURTESY LEGNER FARMS

Legner Farms in Livingston County, Illinois produces soybeans and corn on acreage that also contains energy-producing wind turbines.

joining forces to develop an Aviation Commerce Park across Consolidated Road from the airport.

DRS overhauls Coast Guard aircraft and Telephonics works on aviation radar systems for the Coast

Guard and other clients.

But as agriculture remains an important part of the region's economy, the farming heritage and aviation-related innovations may find a common home in the wind energy industry.

Asked recently about the possibility of future connections between aviation and agriculture, Elizabeth City Regional Airport Manager Scott Hinton replied that "the one emerging technology that is related is wind turbine farms."

Iberdrola Renewables, an international company with North American headquarters in Portland, Ore., and a wind farm operation in Pennsylvania, has looked at property in the "desert" section of Pasquotank and Perquimans counties as a prospective site for 50 or more wind turbines — pos-

sibly up to 150.

The company's goal is to have the turbines in place that can put power in the electric grid by the end of 2012.

An Iberdrola official told Pasquotank County commissioners last year that usually the company will lease 80-100 acres per wind turbine. Once construction is complete, farming can take place up to about 60 feet from the wind turbine, according to the Iberdrola official.

Hinton explained that while wind turbines are not part of aviation in the strictest sense, the turbines are essentially an adaptation of aerospace technology.

He pointed out that with some cross-training, a technician accustomed to overhauling aircraft could work on wind turbines.



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