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DFA shares ups and downs for farmers over the last year

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Monday, Feb. 22 was Agriculture Day in Canada and the Dufferin Federation of Agriculture (DFA) chair, Bill McCutcheon shared some of the ups and downs for local farmers over the last year.

The county's $100 million industry has seen both positive and negative changes for the 550 farm businesses, registered with the DFA over the last year.

For Dufferin's lamb farmers, everything's almost been business as usual, if not better, according to McCutcheon.

?We've experienced increase in demand, because there's not quite as much product coming in from New Zealand or Australia, so it's been really good on the lamb side,? he noted.

When looking to the region's crop farmers, it was a great growing season last year, leading to high yields. Corn prices also increased by $120 per ton.

?Not often do we have good prices and good yield at the same time in the county, so it was good,? McCutcheon lauded.

Early in the pandemic, the manufacturing process had to be changed for dairy farmers. There were no restaurants open so a lot of the dairy products that are usually made in bulk, had to be converted for retail instead.

On the poultry side, Dufferin's chicken farmers saw disruptions in demand for product. There was about a 15 per cent reduction in the quota they had to fill, as restaurants, who were a large customer, closed when the pandemic started last March.

?We had to get over those hiccups,? McCucheon said.

For hog farmers, kill capacity was an issue at first. McCutcheon told the Citizen he wasn't aware of anybody in Dufferin who had to euthanize their hogs, but in certain areas where abattoirs and processing plants shut down, they had this issue. In Canada, predominately the western provinces were impacted, particularly Brooks, Alberta.

Better Beef in Guelph, which is the largest beef processing plant in Ontario, was only closed Dec. 17 to 29, so there wasn't a large backlog of cattle.

In terms of offshore workers, they've been harder to find and hire at many of Dufferin's farms.

McCutcheon said one local agriculture producer who usually hires 11 offshore workers for the season was left with zero last year.

?That was pretty stressful for them because the work doesn't go away and you have 11 less guys to do it,? he explained.

McCutcheon said it's important to note that Dufferin residents shouldn't be concerned about not having food on the shelves, because the local system is very resilient. The county's farmers export many products, with 50 per cent of their cattle and hogs being exported.

?There would have to be major disruptions for there not to be beef or pork on the shelf and chicken too,? McCutcheon noted. ?We are going to feed Canadians first.?

When looking at the Dufferin farming community as a whole, McCutcheon says it's very diverse in the products grown and has

some unique farm businesses.

For example, Lennox Farms in the Honeywood area has rhubarb as their biggest crop and a large-scale greenhouse in Shelburne produces hydroponic tomatoes.

?There's all kinds of diversity, which I don't think, you usually see in agriculture,? said McCutcheon.

In closing, the DFA's PSA to the public is that as they approach planting season, be kind and considerate on the roads when you see farmers moving large equipment.

?We work some pretty long hours and we would just ask for some respect on the roads when we're trying to move some big equipment around, it can be a little stressful for them, trying to get where they need to go,? he explained.