The Agricultural Advantage of the Tri-States

Tri-State Development I Culver-Stockton College

Agriculture and food production are often described as part of the region's heritage, but current data confirms they are also among its most future-facing economic assets. In the combined footprint of Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri, the three states together generate roughly 16 percent of all U.S. agricultural sales, with Iowa ranking near the top nationally for corn and Illinois doing the same for soybeans. For economic developers, these rankings translate into concrete opportunities: a deep supplier base, world-class production capacity, and an ecosystem that can support everything from on-farm innovation to advanced food processing.

At the regional level, the Tri-State area's 30,540 farms steward more than 10.8 million acres, including about 2.9 million acres in corn for grain and 3.2 million acres in soybeans. Counties such as Knox and Fulton in Illinois, Mahaska and Wayne in Iowa, and Audrain and Shelby in Missouri stand out for significant row-crop acreage, while Macon and Pike in Missouri, Mahaska and Wayne in Iowa, and Adams and Fulton in Illinois are among the leaders in total farmland. This scale provides not only raw commodities but also a compelling narrative for agribusiness recruitment, value-added processing, and transportation and logistics projects.

The employment picture underscores just how concentrated this sector has become locally. Regionwide, agriculture (NAICS 11) accounts for about 2 percent of all jobs, while food manufacturing (NAICS 311) comprises nearly 6 percent, far above the national share of about 1.4 percent in food manufacturing. In several counties, the share is even more pronounced: Cass County, Illinois, for example, records more than half of its jobs in food manufacturing, while places like Ralls County, Missouri, also show double-digit concentrations. For site selectors and business leaders, these numbers signal a workforce that understands production, logistics, quality control, and regulatory requirements specific to food and ag.

Livestock and animal agriculture add another dimension to the region's story. Across the Tri-State counties, there are more than 800,000 head of cattle and over 3.6 million hogs, supporting feed, veterinary, transportation, and processing activities. Counties such as Pike and Mercer in Illinois, Mahaska and Louisa in Iowa, and Audrain and Shelby in Missouri contribute substantially to these inventories, reinforcing the region's role in beef and pork supply chains. This mix of crop and livestock production allows the region to capture more of the value chain and to support complementary sectors like cold storage, packaging, and equipment manufacturing.

The holiday season offers a natural moment to connect these data points to everyday experience. Many of

the ingredients that show up in seasonal meals trace back to Tri-State fields and facilities. National food brands and restaurant chains are increasingly looking for resilient, regionally diversified supply networks, and the Tri-State region's combination of production strength, transportation assets, and midwestern reliability positions it well to meet that demand.

For economic developers, the challenge and opportunity is to turn these strengths into actionable strategies. That can mean helping existing processors expand, supporting entrepreneurs who want to launch new value-added products, or working with state and federal partners to improve rural infrastructure that underpins the farm and food economy. It can also mean telling a clearer story to outside investors: this is a region where agriculture does not sit on the sidelines of the economy, it sits at the center, powering jobs, exports, and community vitality season after season.