

Community-Level Impacts of Idaho's Changing Dairy Industry

What was the study about?

This report analyzes the community-level impacts of Idaho's changing dairy industry, and specifically, that part of the industry involved in milk production. It was funded by a grant from the Idaho Dairymen's Association to the University of Idaho.

How was the survey designed?

We used a three-part methodology: personal interviews with 63 individuals across a broad spectrum of professional and thematic areas, including government, business, education, faith, social services, justice, and agriculture; a telephone survey of a random sample of southern Idaho households; and third, analysis of data from secondary sources, including federal, state, and private non-profit agencies.

What did we learn?

Impact on local economies. The growing dairy sector has contributed to economic growth in south central Idaho, whether measured by job numbers, unemployment rates, per capita income, or other commonly used economic indicators. However, child poverty rates are higher in the dairy region than the state as a whole. So, too, are the proportions of youngsters eligible for reduced price meals at local schools.

Impacts on crime. Little or no evidence suggests that growth in southern Idaho's dairy industry has caused an increase in felonies. Felony rates are higher for Hispanic individuals than for non-Hispanics in southern Idaho, although over time, the Hispanic felony rate is declining.

Impact on schools. The changing dairy industry has two main impacts on schools: many school districts in south central Idaho are coping with the increased ethnic diversity associated with growth in the dairy industry and the increase in Hispanic students means some districts are growing when they would otherwise be losing students.

Impact on health care. Interviews with health professionals in southern Idaho did not indicate disproportionate use of health care services by the Hispanic population in general or employees known to work in the dairy industry

What are the next steps?

The dairy industry has brought jobs and people to towns that otherwise would likely be in decline, as are many farm-dependent communities around the country. It has also imposed some degree of costs, most notably on schools and less so on justice systems. Overall, communities are better off economically, but they struggle to adjust to the challenges of a changing and growing population.

¹ Authors are: Director, Office of Community Partnerships; Associate Professor, Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology; Project Manager, Social Science Research Center; and Research Associate, all at the University of Idaho.