

By Rose Laudicina, Staff Writer

Despite the country's struggling economy, Orange County has seen tremendous growth in a major industry in the area in recent years. That industry is agriculture.

At the Orange County Agricultural Summit on Monday, a group of about 70 farmers gathered at the Big Barn Convention Center in Hillsborough to hear about changing agricultural policies, share ideas and learn about new services.

"This is one of the only districts in the country that has more farmers now than it did 10 years ago," Rep. David Price said.

In its 14th year, the summit draws farmers from all over the county who specialize in different types of agriculture.

The summit gives the county's growing community of farmers a place to come together alongside county and state officials not only to learn about the new trends in local agriculture but also to celebrate its place in Orange County.

"This summit is as relevant today as it was 14 years ago, when it was started," said Bernadette Pelissier, chair of the Orange County Board of Commissioners.

"It is something where all of us come to learn the trends of local agriculture."

One of the biggest trends discussed at the summit was the increasing demand for locally produced food.

"The community is driving the demand for locally grown food," Pelissier said, noting how people are realizing that buying local helps both the local economy and the environment.

Price also discussed the growing national trend of restaurants promoting the use of local ingredients and how farmers' markets are increasing in popularity and profitability.

"This is no longer just a Carrboro thing," Price said about interest in locally grown food.

Jack Tapp, founder of Busy Bee Apiaries, also spoke to the group about the demand for locally produced products while telling the story of his business.

"I am a living example of the American dream," Tapp said, explaining how he started beekeeping as a hobby, but it turned into a profitable business.

In addition to selling his line of Vintage Bee Creamed Honey both nationally and internationally, he sells and ships bees to help farms with pollination.

Tapp said the key to the success of his business was finding a niche in the market, thinking creatively and focusing on marketing his product, which he feels is the weakest part of the agricultural industry.

"Thinking outside the box and staying local is the name of the game," he said.

Matthew Roybal, manager of the new Piedmont Food and Agricultural Processing Center in Hillsborough, believes his center can help local farmers market their product and make connections.

"We hope to bridge the gap between growers and retail producers," he said.

Roybal said some companies, such as Amy's, which makes organic vegetarian frozen meals, have approached him to inquire about getting local produce.

Through the center, Roybal said he hopes he can help increase demand for farmers' products, thereby helping the local economy.

"We all win when agriculture thrives," Price said.