TRENTON — Even as ever-more farmland gives way to development, the appeal of farming appears to be growing in the Garden State. Charles Kuperus, who heads the state Department of Agriculture, says an increasing number of youngsters and career-changers are going back to the land.

Kuperus, whom colleagues call a “true farmer,” says interest in winemaking and growing organic vegetables is particularly hot. Many who go such routes “choose it as a second career,” he says, “or like a change of pace in life.”

Meanwhile, the price of New Jersey farmland rose 6.3 percent last year to an average of $11,900 an acre, more than five times the national average, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. And the number of local farm markets in the state is booming.

Last month the agriculture department launched a Web site, www.jerseyageducation.nj.gov, aimed at students interested in careers in agriculture and others who might be interested in teaching the subject.

Kuperus says the main sources of agriculture’s appeal are direct access to markets and a diversity of opportunities ranging from fruits and vegetables to shellfish to raising sheep. “We are not a one- or two-crop state,” he says.

On the other hand, says Kuperus, the state’s strict environmental regulations and uncertainty about the availability of water for irrigation can make things difficult for farmers.

“You do it because you love what you do, and you love the obstacles and the result of overcoming them,” says farmer Kenneth D. Harris, who owns the Marlboro Farm Market in Bridgeton. “It’s a tough way to make a living. My next day off is a half-day on Thanksgiving and a full day on Christmas.”

The number of local farm markets in New Jersey has more than doubled from 40 in 2000 to 103 today, according to a study by the Rutgers Food Innovation Center in Bridgeton and the state agriculture department. That growth was three times greater than the average national rate.

“There is absolutely incredible demand for locally produced goods due to food safety issues,” says Diane Holtaway, associate director of the Food Innovation Center. “It’s not only the product that intrigues consumers at community food markets, but the shopping experience and the activity going on there. Customers also get to talk to the growers every week.”

Through the markets, says Harris, “the state’s farmers are capturing more of the retail dollar” by selling directly to consumers and cutting out middlemen.

Harris says he started direct marketing of his crops nearly 30 years ago. “Other farmers looked down on it before it was cool,” says Harris. “Business is good” these days, he says, because “people love fresh produce.”

Harris owns 150 acres of farmland in Cumberland and Cape May counties, where he grows peaches, nectarines, fall vegetables, winter squashes and sweet potatoes, and sells them through three community markets he owns, including one in Bridgeton and two in Cape May.

David Boone, executive vice president at the Flemington offices of First Pioneer Farm Credit, a farmers’ cooperative bank based in Enfield, Conn., says his New Jersey operations have grown smartly in recent years. He says First Pioneer loans to the state’s farmers grew from $460 million at the end of 2006 to $503 million a year later, and currently stand at $558 million.

In addition, Boone says First Pioneer has invested what he calls early stage or “quasi-equity” capital in five New Jersey farms under a program called “FarmStart” that the bank launched two years ago. He says the loans could be converted into an ownership position. “We are investing in young, beginner farmers,” he says. “It’s a five-year investment.”

Peter Furey, executive director of the New Jersey Farm Bureau, says farmers are plowing back their profits into “value-added sectors that include the wine industry, cranberry and corn as it relates to biofuels.”

Rising food prices have little to do with growth in farm investments, adds Furey. “Those high prices are risk-laden, volatile and offset by very high input-cost increases,” he says, referring to fuel, fertilizers, packaging and farm labor.

Kuperus says it will take a while to assess the impact of rising food prices on the farm business. “After this current season is done,” he says, “we will be able to see retrospectively if food prices went up enough to offset the increases in input costs.”

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