

National Agriculture Day

25 February 2012

Fellow Legislators,

On March 8th it will once again be National Agriculture Day, and my opportunity to remind my colleagues in the House and Senate of the importance of agriculture to New Hampshire. We in the legislature sometimes do things that we think are good for our constituents without fully understanding the consequences to other sections of our state or our economy, such as agriculture.

Many of us in the legislature are from the more urban areas of the state and see less of the agricultural sector than do others. For almost all of us we have long lost our ties to the land. The average New Hampshire citizen is 5 generations removed from the farm. No wonder we do not see the importance to our economy of agriculture. As long as our nearby Market Basket has everything we want to eat, we do not think about where our food comes from.

Agriculture is not a few old farmers wearing suspenders and chewing on a corn cob pipe. It is an industry larger than most of us realize. Farmers do a lousy job of promoting themselves. Did you know there are 4166 farms in NH? That is a lot of farms, an average of 18 per community. If Hudson has two, how many than are in Walpole? Between 2002 and 2007 we grew the number of farms in the state and the number of acres under cultivation. Our farms are smaller than they used to be and many are up side roads and behind the trees, so we do not see them. Did you know that of the more than 3000 counties in the US, Hillsborough County Ranks Number 37 in direct sales of Farm Products to Consumers? Rockingham ranks Number 38 in the country. Hillsborough County, in spite of having New Hampshire's two largest cities, has 600 of those 4166 farms.

When you look at agriculture as an industry it is an eye opener. If you take the total output of farm products, add to it the jams, jellies and other food products, add the agri-tourism piece like bed and breakfast on the farm, farm stays, weddings on farms, conference centers on farms, farm catering, wine and cheese trails, etc., and then look at the infrastructure that exists to support the farms, it turns out to be the third largest industry in the state behind tourism and healthcare. Our infrastructure consists of the John Deere dealer, the folks that sell the farm equipment, the folks that repair the equipment, the large animal Vet, the fertilizer dealer, the pesticide salesman, the fuel dealer and the truckers that move products to and from the farm. It is not 4166 farms but 4166 small businesses that pay their business and real estate taxes and hire thousands of people.

This industry needs the support it gets from organizations like the Farm Bureau, Small and Beginner Farmers, New England Farmers Union, Northeast Organic Farmers Association, but most importantly the Department of Agriculture, Markets and Food and the UNH Cooperative Extension. The College of Life Science and Agriculture (COLSA) provides the education for the future of our industry. Recent severe cuts at COLSA, UNH Cooperative Extension and the UNH Veterinary Diagnostic Lab are putting the industry at risk. I cannot over emphasize the benefit this industry gets from those three UNH organizations.

I will be asking for your help over the coming months to ensure that we do not close the only Veterinary Diagnostic Lab in the state, that we support our major effort to implement State Meat Inspection, and that we keep Cooperative Extension working for our farmers. Be careful of the unintended consequences of legislation that may affect our food supply and our food safety.

Our constituents are more and more demanding local, fresh, wholesome food. This is good for all of us and the growing agriculture sector in New Hampshire. I would ask that you visit farms in your area and ask what we can do for them. Buy local, shop at nearby farmers markets and support the infrastructure that helps them make a living. "If you ate today, thank a farmer."

Bob Haefner
Chair of the Committee on Environment and Agriculture