

## Ebert Comments, Ag Progress Days, Joint House and Senate meeting

Good morning, members of the Senate and House Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee. My name is Rick Ebert, and I am president of Pennsylvania Farm Bureau and also a full-time dairy farmer from Westmoreland County. I want to offer some thoughts today on several legislative issues we are tracking.

First, on behalf of our farmers, I want to thank members of the House and Senate for the strong investments in agriculture in this year's budget. Programs like Penn State Extension, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture and others help farmers make smart business decisions, particularly in time of low prices. In addition, we are pleased to see the attention that was given to the crisis faced by our dairy farmers, including new state grants for on-farm value-added processing and marketing studies, and other measures that were advanced in June. We know there are limited steps that state government can take to solve the dairy crisis, because it is so intertwined with supply and demand economics. But the measures that Pennsylvania has taken is helpful and appreciated.

As we look to the future, both over the short and long term, we feel there are further steps state government should take to help our farm families meet these current challenges.

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau's chief legislative effort this session is to ensure that farmers who are operating agritourism businesses are granted reasonable civil immunity for their businesses. We believe Senate Bill 820 strikes a reasonable balance between identifying the hazards that a farmer cannot take away from their businesses, while protecting the public's right to seek damages in cases of truly negligent actions. Farmers in neighboring states like New York and Ohio already have very similar protections from civil liability.

I don't believe it is right, or fair, that our farm families operate at a competitive disadvantage to their neighbors. We believe it is reasonable to give Pennsylvania farmers the same basic level of civil liability protection.

Now more than ever, farmers are looking to diversify, and agritourism is a great option for many farmers, because it taps into that growing interest in local foods. However, the biggest barrier that farmers face with starting an agritourism business is the cost and availability of insurance. Many carriers in the state are hesitant to write affordable policies for agritourism because of civil liability. Passing Senate Bill 820 would remove a significant barrier that farmers are facing in starting a new line of business, and it would be another way for state government to help farmers in these tough economic times.

I also want to discuss two longer-term issues that we feel state government must address in the coming year.

First, expanding broadband service throughout Pennsylvania will transform opportunities in rural communities. Telecommuting is not possible in large swaths of rural Pennsylvania. It's tough to attract new business ventures, or people looking to relocate to rural areas, without reliable internet services. Rural health systems cannot take advantage of the costs-savings offered by telemedicine. Many rural children cannot complete on-line homework assignments from their homes. And our farmers cannot take advantage of the latest technology that is transforming agriculture.

Quite simply, state government has to invest time and resources into delivering reliable high-speed internet service into rural Pennsylvania. Whether its creating public-private partnerships, or creating grants and loans for "last-mile" infrastructure, Pennsylvania government will need to make financial investments in expanding broadband services into more areas. We cannot let rural Pennsylvania further slip behind in the digital divide.

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau is ready to work with lawmakers at the state and federal level to make this a reality.

Lastly, Pennsylvania farm families have continued to invest their own time and resources to improve the environmental practices on their farms. Whether its switching their cropping strategies to include no-till, or investing in new manure storage systems, farmers are making those necessary changes that improve water quality and soil health. However, the degree of nutrient reduction that needs to happen in order to achieve goals set in the Chesapeake Bay cleanup plan are daunting. Realistically, they won't be achieved without a serious increase in commitment of financial and technical assistance.

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau is participating with several groups forming recommendations for the next phase of the Chesapeake Bay WIP 3 plan. One solution highlighted in those meetings is the need to significantly expand forested buffers along creeks and streams. The best estimates suggest that transforming an additional 25 percent of agriculture land into buffers will reduce phosphorus going into waterways by nearly 50 percent. However, the cost of reaching that goal will be around \$45 million dollars.

Farm Bureau believes the state will need to create incentives that offset some of the cost of taking land out of production for the creation of buffers. A loss of farmland, even a 35-foot-wide strip of land along a creek, does hit the bottom line of farm families. We believe the creation of an incentive program to help farmers pay for the productivity lost through forested buffers may further encourage voluntary participation in the agriculture community.

Ideas to provide landowners developing forested buffers with income and property tax breaks and other financial incentives, help landowners develop creative land use plans to generate additional income through buffer enhancement, and amending REAP and other existing conservation programs to encourage and accommodate buffer development will encourage the level of landowner participation needed to move Pennsylvania toward reaching its Bay reduction goals.

Farmers will need state government to provide guidance and assistance to help us meet these next set of challenges. A significant number of farmers are already making strides on their own to improve their conservation practices. However, I think we all have to be practical as we face down a rather daunting set of conservation challenges imposed by the Chesapeake Bay watershed cleanup. Farmers are willing to do their part, but they will need help to meet these future challenges. Thank you for giving Farm Bureau the opportunity to offer our perspective on these issues. I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.