

House Agriculture & Rural Affairs

Testimony on Legislative Issues

Pennsylvania State Grange

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Chairs Causer, Pashinski and members of the House Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee.

Before I begin my testimony, I would like to publicly thank Representative Mark Keller for his years of dedicated service to the agricultural community. His knowledge of farming has enabled him to help the House better understand the difficulties and realities of farming over the years. He has announced that he is not seeking re-election this year. As one of Representative Keller's constituents, I know he will continue to work just as diligently in this last year of his term. Thank you Mark.

Thank you very much for inviting the Pennsylvania State Grange to present testimony on issues affecting our members and others in rural Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania State Grange has a venerable history in Pennsylvania, having been founded in 1873. Three years from now, we will be celebrating our 150th year of serving as an advocate for farmers and rural communities.

I would like to congratulate the bipartisan effort that led to the passage of the PA Farm Bill, a visionary set of proposals that represents perhaps the most constructive agriculture legislation passed in one year than I have seen in decades. Nonetheless, there is still work to be done.

Broadband is the Number One Issue

The number one issue for the Pennsylvania State Grange is universal access to high-speed Broadband in PA. You have already heard about the need and how the lack of universal access puts rural Pennsylvania way behind -- in production agriculture, in education, in economic investment, in health care, and in the conduct of everyday lives. That description sounds like rural America in the early part of the 20th Century before rural electrification. **Broadband is to this century what rural electrification was to the last – absolutely essential to rural PA.**

I would like to personally invite the members of the House Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee to a Broadband program here at the Farm Show on Thursday January 9 at 9:30 in the Monongahela Room on the Maclay Street side of the Farm Show Complex. It will focus on local Pennsylvania success stories on achieving universal Broadband.

These examples, plus the head of Maryland's Rural Council to explain how our neighboring state succeeded, give proof that despite the size and complexity of the problem, there is progress. I encourage you to please attend. Committee member Pam Snyder will be one of the panelists.

Despite this urgency, there are a number of bright spots that should be recognized. For example, the House passed **House Bill 305** sponsored by House Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee member Rep. Pam Snyder to require an inventory be done of state-owned structures to see if telecommunication could 'piggyback' and increase the areas of Broadband accessibility. As you know, this bill also was favorably reported by the Senate Communications and Technology Committee and awaits action by the full Senate.

Another is the creation of the bipartisan House Broadband Caucus last session by Representative Pam Snyder and former Representative and now Senator Kristin Phillips-Hill. This session, the Republican co-chair is Representative Rich Irvin, another member of this committee. Other members of this committee are part of that as well including both majority and minority chair, Representatives Mark Keller and Chris Rabb. Hopefully, this Caucus will help legislators stay focused on this critical issue.

An Example: Broadband and Rural Health Care

Broadband affects all parts of rural society. A recent example is House passage of **Senate Bill 857** sponsored by Senator Elder Vogel to set up standards for distance health care. As you know, his bill passed the House and was returned to the Senate but got bogged down because of another issue. The reason I mention this is that Telemedicine does not work where there is insufficient access to cell phones or the Internet.

Another rural health initiative is the Rural Health Redesign Authority (**Senate Bill 314** signed into law November 27, 2019 as Act 108) which seeks to help PA's rural hospitals. Part of this strategy is outreach to the community. How will that outreach be most efficient? Technology is an answer but without patients having access to high-speed Broadband, rural hospitals can not deliver information or Telemedicine effectively.

I could give many more examples including rural education, farm input industries, rural campground registration problems without Internet, and inability to market globally but you get the idea. Access to high-speed Broadband is essential to the well-being of rural PA.

What Now for Broadband?

The elephant in the room for Broadband is simply how to pay for it. Governor Tom Wolf has proposed taking out a \$4.5 billion-dollar loan to be repaid from a Marcellus Shale extraction tax. Some of that loan would go for Broadband expansion. Recognizing legislative differences on Restore PA, other ways of funding have been advanced. The Pennsylvania State Grange is not endorsing any one solution but simply wants the legislature to look at all possible options.

One idea advanced to the Pennsylvania State Grange is a monthly surcharge on each person's cell phone going into a dedicated fund which would in part reimburse telecom investment in reaching new rural areas. This could even be applied as matching funds. In rural PA, it is often the last mile of connectivity that is too cost prohibitive with too small of a return on investment for telecommunications companies. A partial reimbursement or matching funds might be the trigger that accelerates this expansion.

Another idea is to have the state require telecommunication companies to dedicate a certain part of their gross or net revenues to a Broadband Development Fund.

The House Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee should consider a resolution directing the Legislative Budget & Finance Committee or the Center for Rural PA to study what the revenue calculations might be for various options. Nationally, for example, the March 20, 2018 Media Tech Reviews predicts 276.7 million cell phone subscribers in the U.S. in 2020. Since cell phone subscribers typically have more than one cell phone, the actual numbers could be much higher. My staff could not locate PA-specific numbers of cell phones in use but a study could show the number of actual cell phones and estimate the potential revenue going into the dedicated funds to see if this is a viable approach.

Dairy Issues

The House Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee should take a collective bow for its stewardship of **House Bill 1223** sponsored by Rep. Lawrence through the House.

Creating Dairy Keystone Opportunity Zones should incentivize investment in PA-based milk processing facilities. The legislation offers two benefits to farmers in addition to helping a local economy. First, a regional facility means less travel expense for milk transport. Second, it will boost dairy farm revenues by allowing a greater over-order premium going back to the farmer. Currently, that revenue is often lost because the milk is produced in PA but processed out of state, meaning that the farmer loses out on the over-order premium income.

The Pennsylvania State Grange hopes that the Senate will make passage of this bill and its companion, **House Bill 1224**, a priority early in the New Year.

Another encouraging sign is the establishment of the PA Future Dairy Commission as part of the PA Farm Bill. This has the potential to identify areas where public policy can help the dairy farmer.

Unfinished Dairy Business

One thing that was unresolved in 2019 was the issue of milk hauling. As you know, Governor Wolf vetoed **House Bill 915** sponsored by Chair Causer. Another milk hauling bill, **Senate Bill 588** sponsored by Senator Judy Ward from Blair County, also passed the Senate and is now in this committee. The question is what will finally happen to resolve this issue. When severe winter weather comes, milk haulers must still pick up milk from local dairy farms since farmers generally do not have a large storage capacity. This milk must then be transported to processing plants without delay. The committee should re-examine this issue and decide if the need warrants more legislative action.

Agritourism

A third major item of importance to the Pennsylvania State Grange is passage of legislation limiting a farm's liability in agritourism and agri-entertainment as a way to diversify. Groups such as the PA Farm Vacation Association for example say that the threat of unfounded lawsuits is a major barrier for farmers desiring another way to keep the farm in business. Fortunately, Rep. Barb Gleim introduced **House Bill 1348**. It says that a farm which advertises potential risk in farming operations and takes reasonable efforts to keep visitors safe will not be subjected to a lawsuit without cause.

This legislation passed the House Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee unanimously on June 5, 2019. Now, our hope is that the full House will vote on it soon.

Conclusion

Obviously, there are many more issues of interest to the Pennsylvania State Grange. Time limits mean that I could only address three. We in the Grange look forward to continue being a resource for the General Assembly and to this committee. Thank you again for inviting us to testify.