

NJDA Address to the Assembly Budget Committee

Tuesday April 23, 2013

Chairman Prieto and Members of the Committee, I thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Department of Agriculture's budget with you today.

The Department's mission encompasses four major goals:

Promoting the state's agricultural products and industry; ensuring healthy plants and animals for agriculture and consumers; preserving farmland and helping farmers conserve the natural resources that are so vital for their operations and to the public's well-being; and ensuring nutritious, healthful school lunch and breakfast programs, as well as other community feeding programs, such as The Emergency Feeding Assistance Program, or TEFAP.

The Garden State's diverse agricultural landscape changes from region to region and even from farm to farm within each sector – with major concentrations of fruit and vegetable operations in the South, an array of horticultural operations dispersed throughout the state, the dairy farms of our northwestern and southwestern corners, the equine operations in the central and northeastern counties, or the aquaculture and fishing of our coastal areas. Each looks to the Department for diverse resources in order to remain a major contributor to the state's economy, and for programs that afford protection to our citizens.

This past year, our farmers faced severe weather patterns that culminated with Superstorm Sandy in late-October. That "superstorm," with its heavy winds and rainfall and a significant tidal surge, followed directly by a Nor'easter tested agricultural operators throughout the state, but most notably the operators, along the coastline, especially aquaculture.

Some lost everything, not just the product they were cultivating to transfer to shell beds, but their structures and, in some cases, even the ground under those structures.

The storm also tested the Department's capabilities to help not only farmers and agricultural operations, but all domestic and farm animals of this state and their owners, as well as all the people who were forced by floodwaters to leave their homes and live in shelters.

For the second time in two years, NJDA had to mass-activate its plan for moving thousands of pounds of surplus food from our state's two USDA warehouses to shelters, where volunteers from emergency feeding operations prepared it for evacuees. This cooperation among state, federal and non-profit organizations was successful in feeding displaced residents for more than a week until they were able to return home.

The storms also tested the soundness of the Department's plans to ensure that pets and other animals are not abandoned when disaster strikes. Our network of County Animal Response Teams, or "CARTs," which are coordinated at the ROIC through the Department's Division of Animal Health ensuring that pet-friendly shelters were available for those who would otherwise not leave their homes for fear of what would happen to the pets left behind. Success often depended on how prepared each shelter venue was to deal with a new, large and unexpected population of animals on their properties.

We are continuing to expand our efforts to deal with emergencies such as Sandy, as that preparedness is as important to our constituents as are our everyday activities. We aim to better prepare the CARTs in all counties to be at the top of their games and to further our coordination efforts with county agriculture boards to get fast and accurate damage assessments from each county when a storm hits.

Of course, we have our routine, daily duties. In a highly urbanized state like New Jersey, with nearly 9 million people in our own state and a close-in market of millions more in many large, nearby cities, New Jersey needs every bit of agricultural production it can muster, so that the advantages of that diverse marketplace can benefit our farmers and the bounty of our farms can nourish our citizenry.

Each year, the consuming public turns more and more to our local farmers and fishermen to provide more for their needs. The local-food movement shows no signs of ebbing. The Department's challenge is to support our state's agricultural operators to ensure they can meet that consumer demand and be as successful as possible. We meet that challenge by being a more-nimble, smarter, more efficiently managed workforce.

Our constant commitment to cross-training employees and working with partners in the agricultural industry and academia helps stretch state dollars beyond what they merely might be able to pay for in a less-creative environment.

Due to the constrained state budgets of recent years, we have accessed more federal resources to accomplish our mission. However, we now have budget issues in Washington that have resulted in fewer federal resources in many areas.

This requires us to be even more creative about electronic-based interaction with our constituents, like our web-site, our web-based payment systems for school food-service operators or real-time communications, including social media for both our industry partners and our state's residents.

The recent years of down economic times have meant that more and more New Jersey residents depend upon our community feeding programs that serve those who otherwise would go hungry. By leveraging the State Food Purchase Program, in which state funds are used to buy food for those community feeding programs, we keep the money spent on those items here in New Jersey, and at the same time bolster our farm economy.

This year also saw an improvement in our efforts to provide breakfast to more school students. New Jersey was one of only 10 states nationwide to see double-digit increases in the number of students receiving school breakfast. This was achieved because we approached the issue from a logistics standpoint instead of a funding one. By enlisting the help of Education Commissioner Cerf, we got more schools to incorporate school breakfast in the first-period classroom, removing the time constraints of moving students from the classroom to the cafeteria and back in order to receive breakfast.

On another front in the effort to get more of our healthy, nutritious foods to under-served populations, we are helping the City of Camden implement the first phases of the FreshMobile Pilot Program passed by the Legislature in early-2012. The City has chosen a non-profit through the RFP process to run the program, and that non-profit has bought a vehicle, using privately donated funds. We all are aiming to have that vehicle begin bringing fresh fruits, vegetables and other farm products directly to Camden residents this year.

New Jersey also continues to be a national leader in agricultural marketing. We are among the Top-10 agricultural states in the production of nursery stock, blueberries, cranberries, tomatoes, bell peppers, peaches and more. The new FDA rules for the handling of produce will challenge many of our farmers, as they contain new record-keeping, sanitation and other requirements farmers previously have not seen. We remain committed to working with the FDA and surrounding states to ensure farmers can meet these new challenges.

We also have been successful, from the supermarket to the farmers market, with the “Jersey Fresh” brand and the related brands like “Jersey Grown” and “Jersey Seafood.” Retailers of all kinds – from high-end supermarkets to community farmers markets to restaurants – leverage our state funds through the marketing chain to promote New Jersey products. This year, we are introducing a brand-new “Jersey Fresh” campaign entitled “Another Great Season,” which plays on the dual meaning of the word as a sports season and a produce season. I recently addressed the New Jersey Food Council about it and those retailers were very excited about the campaign.

When retailers spend their own money to put the “Jersey Fresh” or other state branding logos in their advertising circulars, they leverage promotional funds into far more exposure to consumers than we as a Department can afford to generate on our own.

The growing emphasis on developing rural-to-urban food systems has resulted in partnerships with other state and federal agencies to connect rural farmers with existing urban food processors, opportunities to create new food-processing facilities, and inroads at established or new retail and restaurant operations. These all benefit the farmer, creating new, nearby markets for their products. And they benefit the urban areas through the creation of new jobs.

In addition to the work that directly helps farmers, the Department is equally committed to its protection responsibilities – whether helping to feed those who are nutritionally at risk; working to eradicate invasive pests or plant and animal diseases; or conserving farmland and other natural resources.

Some of our missions require very specialized knowledge and expertise. New Jerseyans have become familiar over the past several years with the Brown Marmorated Stink Bug, an invasive pest. The explosion of the stinkbug's population has resulted in it now becoming a major crop pest as well as a nuisance to homeowners, as it searches out food sources of any kind. We are currently raising a colony of them at the Insect Lab so that we can determine the most effective beneficial insects to combat the stinkbug and reduce its population.

We also just recently declared our state's second Asian longhorned beetle infestation as completely eradicated. ALB is a major destroyer of trees, particularly maples, which make up a significant portion of our urban shade trees. Just as we did in the earlier, smaller Hudson County infestation, we surveyed for five years in the Middlesex/Union County area. More than 20,000 infested and potential host trees were removed, and we found no indication of the beetle still existing there, so the eradication declaration was issued by the USDA.

The next pest we are gearing up for is the Emerald Ash Borer, which already has devastated forested areas in many states. We are surrounded now by states that have reported infestations of the Emerald Ash Borer, and we will be involved in that battle as well.

Our Divisions of Animal Health and Plant Industry, working in conjunction with the Department of Health and Senior Services, have moved into the new laboratory building in Ewing, and are now better equipped to detect and respond to diseases like avian influenza, brucellosis and tuberculosis so they don't become established in animal populations, giving them the opportunity to make the jump to humans. This also enables us to do more of our plant and animal testing in-house, instead of sending those tests to labs in other states. We can focus on providing analytical testing that is not offered in New Jersey's private sector.

We also can better detect mycotoxins – toxic substances produced by types of mold – that can concentrate in field grains after heavy

rainfall. We can do more to keep them from making their way into our human or animal food streams.

The Department also is heavily engaged in helping farmers be good stewards of the resources they depend upon for their livelihoods and our residents depend upon for a good quality of life.

Keeping farmers working the land also means making sure that farmland remains available. With the release last year of \$73 million in farmland preservation monies approved by voters in 2009, and combined with county and local Farmland Preservation programs, continues to move toward the long-term goal of an agricultural landscape in the Garden State. In 2012, we saw the preservation of the 200,000th acre of farmland under the preservation program.

The Department remains committed to maximizing and leveraging its available resources – whether they are in the form of funding, partnership opportunities or the ability to adapt our workforce to

whatever work is needed – in order to foster a strong and sustainable agricultural industry and to support the health, welfare and nutritional needs of the citizens of New Jersey.

I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time, and I thank you again for this chance to discuss our budget.

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