

Build a bold plan for future of ag

Food for Thought

GOOD ideas often sprout via the inspiration and work of others. After studying New York's Farm Viability Institute and seeing firsthand positive results, I conclude Pennsylvania can learn much from its northern neighbor.

In fact, it must do so quickly if the Keystone State intends to preserve farming — not just green space. Farmers will do the job far more effectively, at far less cost than land preservation efforts.

To be blunt, Pennsylvania agriculture, as an industry, hasn't envisioned boldly enough. We have some necessary underwriting tools, but not the "tractor" linkage or power needed.

BITE-SIZED MORSEL

Envisioning the possible is the first step toward creating the probable.

Transitioning farms to the next generation requires exceptional next-generation skills plus viable business development plans. It's every bit as important as energy independence.

After witnessing many successes of New York's farmer-driven programs and seeing the ongoing struggles and funding lapses in Pennsylvania, I'm compelled to propose this: A farmer-driven nonprofit organization — a keystone source to direct funding of the on-farm value-added research and development needs of a diversified agriculture. "Fuel" it with an \$8 million line item in the state budget, perhaps funded by a specific revenue source to be determined by creative legislators.

A wild idea — not!

The New York Farm Viability Institute is a highly successful model of what can be. It does so via a \$5.7 million line item in the state budget that even New York City legislators enthusiastically support. If they can do it, Pennsylvania can do it!

The NYFVI works hand in hand with Department of Ag and Markets, Cornell, and other educational institutions. The objective is to support farm-based, value-added success. With 88%



of the budget spent for on-farm partnership grants, it's a win-win for farmers and grant partners. (This issue's cover story features one of many NYFVI-funded projects.) Most importantly, it's farmer-driven.

Pennsylvania sorely needs a farmer-driven funding source that meets farm-level R&D needs. It'll be tough for some to envision because it's a new, more expeditious way to get things done.

Penn State, the Ag Department and others may see it as money coming out of their pockets. But they'll partner in project funding to the degree they work to ensure project success. Key elements include:

- **On-farm innovation partnership grants:** Farmers would partner in research and development with professional business and finance experts plus Extension educators to develop successful business plans. Progress would be closely monitored for value-added outcome results.

- **Link to loan programs:** Capital requirements for innovation projects would have priority access to low-interest equipment and business development loans through the existing First Industries Fund and the Next-Generation Farmer Loan Program.

- **Assistance networks:** Encourage in-state educational institutions to expand incubator efforts to assist farmers in developing value-added enterprises.

- **Build successful enterprise models:** Communicating the successes is essential, as is creating enterprise models to be used by others.

A workable plan

Step one: The secretary of agriculture would form an executive study group to explore how NYFVI was developed and funded. That group would identify and assist an organization to begin development and secure a two-year USDA value-added start-up grant for, say, \$5 million.

Priority one would be developing the farmer/institute innovation partnership grant targeting value-added projects. These must be determined by key farmer leaders from: Farm Bureau; dairy, horticulture, vegetable growers; fruit growers, nursery/landscape. Ag department and university persons could serve only in an advisory capacity.

Pennsylvania Farm Link, an instrumental, behind-the-scenes nonprofit group, could be restructured for that role. It's already beginning to redirect its mission in that direction.

Step two: Build campaign momentum for creating a sustained \$8 million state line item in the fiscal-year 2010 budget. Yes, that would be a challenge, even though it's small change by today's political measure. Legislators are creative enough to find stable funding means. And I know you believe tomorrow's agriculture is well worth that investment.



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What now for mislabeled milk?

AFTER December's issue headed for your mailbox, Dennis Wolff, Pennsylvania ag secretary, put a hold on banning milk labels deemed misleading. (Story on Page 12 of December's issue.)

Why? Rutter's Dairy, York, Pa., mounted a major media campaign to "Call Governor Rendell." The attention drew much dairy processor support plus many "flies," including consumer-safety, animal-rights and vegetarian advocacy groups. And the governor's office was swamped. That's why.

Rutter's and others also threatened lawsuits. Ironically, this company was one of the last to urge its farmers to stop using Posilac, the recombinant bovine somatotropin and center target of this controversy.

In the heat of the fight, Rutter's President Todd Rutter slipped, linking rBST to the highly incendiary word

"steroid." Of course, that dragged the issue into the national spotlight of editorial commentaries.

Monsanto was cast as a "bad guy" for defending its technology investment. Yet those pocketing mega-millions and pumping far greater pressure into the fight against truthful labels managed to avoid the spotlight of scrutiny.

These milk marketers have only eroded public confidence in milk quality — nationwide. Guess who'll be hurt the most by that!

Now, the governor's office will be overseeing a review of the revised labeling regulations "in their effect and in the way they were promulgated," says press secretary Charles Ardo. That'll delay implementation at least three months.

Dairy folks out West smell opportunity in this brouhaha. As my *California Farmer* counterpart told me (tongue in cheek), "We hoped the rules would stand, as it would be a new market for our Real California milk."

Keep on dreaming!—John Vogel

