

# Hartke reflects on his tenure

By JOANIE STIERS

**F**AMILY time is next on the agenda for Illinois' most recent agriculture director.

Charles "Chuck" Hartke, the governor's appointed director of agriculture since May 2003, worked his last day Feb. 29. The 63-year-old felt prepared to retire after 26 years of public service clocked in a combination of his time in the military, General Assembly and as

agriculture director.

He is planning on attending grand-kids' ball games, helping his son farm and spending time with his wife, who in November was diagnosed with breast cancer. Treatments are going well, he says, and the couple hopes to begin traveling this spring.

Hartke, a former farmer and now landlord in rural Teutopolis, began to lease the 800-acre family farm to his son while he served in the Illinois House

from 1985 to 2003.

Here, he shares his reflections with *Prairie Farmer*:

**Q: What is your proudest accomplishment as director?**

**A:** My proudest accomplishment was being able to hold it together. In the last five years, budgets have not been good to any agency in the state. Prior to me becoming director, there was a peak of 650 employees in the Department of



Agriculture. We were doing the same job, if not better, than my predecessor and ended up with less than 500 employees. We brought credibility and respect back to the county fair horse racing industry by doing drug testing. We managed to create a statewide veterinarian coalition for emergency response, and the state fair has managed to increase its sponsorship by 25%.

**Q: What issue created your most challenging time in office?**

**A:** Unbeknownst to a lot of people, we had a bomb threat one year during the state fair. I had to make the decision to go ahead with the concert because it was not a credible threat.

**Q: How did you work through issues largely viewed as negative to agriculture, such as the proposed gross receipts tax and possible elimination of the ag sales tax exemption?**

**A:** I don't think the elimination of the sales tax ever made it beyond a political scare tactic. The governor did propose a gross receipts tax, which would have been tough on agriculture. I played it that there were benefits to be received also. Many in agriculture do not have health care coverage or many spouses work off the farm to get the insurance for their family. You have to look at it and say, "OK, this is an opportunity for the state to provide health care coverage."

**Q: Did the electrical failure at the state fairgrounds affect the timing of your decision?**

**A:** No, not at all.

**Q: What is the most important issue the next director should address?**

**A:** There's going to be some real challenges for agriculture to remain profitable because of the explosion of land and input costs. Elevators are going to be struggling. There are so many capital needs throughout the state, and we need our share in agriculture to repair township roads and bridges, and improve the state's fairgrounds and laboratories. We must convince masses of people who are moving from cities to the rural areas that livestock are a necessary part of the economy in Illinois.

**Q: Who should be your replacement?**

**A:** That's the governor's call. I hope he suggests someone who is an active farmer, someone who loves agriculture and can communicate quite well not only with the agriculture community, but people throughout the state of Illinois and internationally.

**Q: Where is your future in politics?**

**A:** I hope to become a consultant to help clients explain to members of the General Assembly who have no concept about agriculture about the importance of some of the issues for those clients.

*Stiers writes from Williamsfield.*

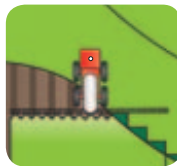
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