

Newly minted director touches on hot issues

By JOSH FLINT

IN this economic climate, taking the reigns of any government organization means facing increased scrutiny. For Tom Jennings, who was appointed Illinois Department of Agriculture director in October, the state's continued political infighting makes things even tougher.

Despite Illinois' budget crunch, Jennings says funding is still available for groups willing to demonstrate a need. As for the ag sector, Jennings promises to fight for every dollar.

"We'll be able to hold our own, and it's my duty to get in there and secure funding for our programs," he adds.

That being said, budget cuts have been necessary to keep Illinois from sinking further in debt. In many cases, Jennings says taxpayers need to realize there isn't enough funding to cover state appropriations.

"Everybody is vying for their piece of the pie," he adds. "We

Key Points

- Jennings is confident ag will get the state funding it needs.
- Grain Insurance Fund remains healthy at \$5.3 million.
- Nearly 50% of producers are on board with premises ID.

could make the appropriations and not be able to have the money anyway. So, we want to be up front about this."

Of IDOA's approximately \$100 million budget, Jennings estimates 46% is passed through to partners such as the Council on Food and Agricultural Research and University of Illinois Extension.

Grain Insurance Fund

Over the past couple of years, volatile grain prices have caused a number of Illinois grain elevators to close up shop. While this used to be a major concern, most farmers have slept more soundly since the formation of the Illinois

Grain Insurance Fund in 1983.

Despite market volatility, Jennings says the fund remains healthy with a balance of more than \$5.3 million. The fund's maximum is set at \$6 million.

In 1983, IDOA had approximately 800 licensed grain dealers on its books. Today, there are 340. With fewer, larger elevators in play, Jennings says each one is handling a bigger portion of Illinois' grain production. However, he believes the fund's \$6 million is still adequate.

"This thing has been working for 25 years," he adds. Since Jennings started as a grain warehouse examiner in 1978 and served as bureau chief of warehouses, he's had quite a bit of experience in guaranteeing elevator solvency.

Premises registration

This year, IDOA initially required livestock producers to register their premises with USDA or else they would not be allowed to show animals at the

Profile: Tom Jennings



TOM Jennings, 52, graduated from the University of Illinois in 1978 with a degree in agricultural economics. When he took a job with the Illinois Department of Agriculture as a grain warehouse examiner, he never dreamed he would one day become director.

"Frankly, I had no idea what was in store for me when I graduated from college," he adds.

Although he grew up within the city limits of Springfield, Jennings says he got "lucky" when he married a farm girl. Since he was 18, Jennings has been an active livestock producer. In fact, he's still involved in a small family farming operation, which raises cattle, horses, forage and row crops.

Within IDOA, Jennings has served as the department's chief of staff, manager of the Division of Agriculture Industry Regulation and bureau chief of warehouses.

He is a board member of the Illinois Propane Education and Research Council, a past member of the Agri-Business Committee of the Illinois CPA Society, and current chairman of the Fertilizer Research and Education Council.

State Fair. Amid public outcry, IDOA backed down on its position and made premises registration a voluntary practice.

Jennings says the initial requirement was put in place to protect livestock owners. "It's nice to know when you get all of these animals together, you can respond and contain an outbreak should it occur."

Even though the program is on a volunteer basis, Jennings says IDOA has more than 14,000 premises registered. This represents approximately 48% of livestock premises in Illinois.

USDA recently commended IDOA on its efforts in bringing Illinois livestock producers on board with the program.

Thus far, Jennings says hog producers have been the most responsive to the program, with close to 100% registered.

Looking ahead, Jennings' commitment to premises registration exemplifies what he hopes to accomplish during his tenure as director. "As the Illinois Department of Agriculture, we need to make sure we're being proactive, not reactive," he says.

