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URBAN-RURAL ~~DIVIDE~~ *Connection*

In today's world, it is perfectly natural to be skeptical of things you don't understand or identify with. And I'll admit the path of least resistance is to remain distant in our urban and rural silos. But, the solution to an urban-rural connection is through conversation, not division. Those of us actively engaged in agriculture should find ways to connect with consumers, tell our story, tell our truths, and tell our reasons for doing things the way we do. And we must also be open-minded to the constructive and actionable ideas that consumers put forth, because sometimes progress requires an outside

perspective. At the end of the day, our job is to provide a product that consumers want, so we would do well to consider their preferences.

And to urban consumers and those not engaged in farming, I would encourage you to be open-minded and trust the many good and responsible things our farmers are doing to grow your food and fiber. Let's start a conversation. Ask us questions. And listen to our answers.

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By Shawn Harding

Last month, the Raleigh News and Observer published an editorial entitled “Five goals, perhaps wishful, for North Carolina to pursue in 2020” in which they said shrinking the urban-rural divide in North Carolina should be one of our top goals for 2020. For those of you who didn’t see it, they said North Carolina today is two states – one of “fast-growing cities” and one of “rural counties losing population and struggling to maintain schools and local hospitals in the face of inadequate state school funding and no Medicaid expansion.” They suggested that state policies like expanding rural broadband access have helped, but that “much more needs to be done to connect rural areas through technology, health care, education and transportation.” The editorial pointed readers to a Charlotte Observer article from December 2019 entitled “Two North Carolinas: Cities grow at record pace while rural counties fall behind” which provided an in-depth look at the problems facing rural communities and explored a few solutions.

These are only two articles out of many that have been written on this subject, and I appreciate the attention that rural North Carolina is receiving. But I am bothered by the fact that agriculture’s role in rural communities – both keeping them afloat during tough times and as a vehicle for growth in the future – is barely mentioned.

We all know there are realities that cannot and should not be ignored: rural North Carolina is shrinking, aging, and falling behind economically and in quality of life. There are undoubtedly challenges that need to be addressed if we want to stop that divide from becoming a rift. The simple fact is that agriculture remains the foundation of our state’s economy, and that is especially true in rural areas. Farmers are tied to the land, so it is imperative that any solutions aimed at reinvigorating rural North Carolina involve agriculture.

The challenges farmers face are many: labor, low prices, healthcare, infrastructure such as rural broadband, and on and on. I know farmers have the spirit to succeed in almost any situation, but we should empower them to be the rising tide that lifts rural North Carolina. Take rural broadband for example. Today’s farmers are using technology to increase profitability by managing inputs and increasing yields. And consumers expect this: a recent study showed that 83% of consumers now consider sustainability when buying food. But with basic infrastructure like rural broadband lagging behind, how can farmers be expected to fully utilize precision technology? Or as Johnston County farmer Brandon Batten recently said on Twitter, “How can we be on the cutting edge of tech when we are cutting with a spork?”

“Agriculture is the greatest and fundamentally the most important of our industries. The cities are but the branches of the tree of national life, the roots of which go deeply into the land. We all flourish or decline with the farmer.”

Bernard Baruch

These challenges are part of what is driving this divide. But I find “divide” to be a negative word with negative connotations. And describing the state as two states lends credence to the idea that urban and rural populations are somehow separate from one another when in fact we are all connected. What I see is not two North Carolinas, but a state that is changing rapidly and needs to reflect on the things that bind us together and make us great.



I suggest that the path towards reconnecting our urban and rural halves is to first realize that we are not separate from one another – that we are in fact one North Carolina. We are in this together and we should learn to appreciate the many opportunities each half offers to the other.

As farmers and rural North Carolinians, we should embrace the growth of urban areas – this growth is bringing in new consumers, new businesses, and new opportunities for all of us. Young people may be leaving rural communities, but they are doing so in many cases to get a great education or begin a promising career.

As non-farmers and urban North Carolinians, we should be grateful that our state boasts a diverse and growing agriculture economy. We have access to so many locally grown foods and agricultural products that improve our quality of life and support our state’s economy.

I’ve just returned from the American Farm Bureau Annual Convention and I can tell you that both in North Carolina and across the nation our farmers are ready to do their part in reconnecting with our urban neighbors. An American Farm Bureau survey found that 88% of Americans trust farmers, and three out of four Americans want to know more about how their food is grown. But while farmers enjoy a high level of public trust, only one in five Americans trust modern agriculture highly and about 60% are skeptical. As AFBF’s Terri Moore put it, “Their hunger to learn more presents an enormous opportunity. They are the open-minded, waiting to be engaged by someone they trust. Bottom line: farmers are highly trusted to tell the story of agriculture and explain how production practices align with societal values. The opportunity is clear. The public is interested.”

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