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# POLICY REVIEW DAY 2021

*A Spirit of Unity*



# the **LEADER**

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*In late July we renewed our policy development process at our annual Policy Review Day, which took place at the Raleigh Convention Center (where this year's Annual Convention will be). Every year – save for one – this process has been the unofficial kick off to our tradition of identifying shared concerns, collaborating on solutions, and crafting meaningful policy that we can all get behind. As our Executive Vice President Scott Whitford said, “Our members are able to express themselves, what’s important to them, what’s important to their farming operations, and where we need to be as an organization.” But Policy Review Day is more than that – it’s also a family reunion of sorts. It’s an event that our volunteer leaders look forward to as a time to meet with one another, share stories, and catch up on each other’s lives. I have no doubt in my mind that not having that in-person connection last year made all of us appreciate even more the camaraderie and fellowship we enjoyed at this year’s event.*

We had a number of guest speakers, and we want to thank all of them for taking the time to come to Policy Review Day to share information with our members. One of those speakers was NCD&CS Agricultural Services Assistant Commissioner Sandy Stewart, who provided an update on the state of agriculture in North Carolina from the response to the pandemic and the strength of the ag economy, to the opening of new NCD&CS facilities:

**On the economy:** “Our state’s largest industry has grown to \$96.9 billion. How did we do that? Pork exports to China were up 20% last year. Poultry exports were up 20%. China

is also back in the tobacco market. And closer to home I think people found a new appreciation for where their food comes from and how important farmers are in their local communities.”

**Response to the pandemic:** “NCD&CS and all of ag hit another gear when the pandemic hit. We’ve assisted the livestock industry and all farmers in NC in every way we possibly can. NCD&CS staff have worked closely with [the NC Department of] Health and Human Services, Extension and many other partners where we could to ensure the safety of our farmworkers, food systems workforce, and the overall marketability of ag products.”

**New NCD&CS facilities:** “One of the most exciting things we have going on in NCD&CS is the opening of the Steve Troxler Agricultural Sciences Center. This new state of the art laboratory building that will house the regulatory divisions of Food and Drug Protection, Veterinary Services, Structural Pest Control & Pesticides, and our Standards Division. It’s an incredibly complex building that has to maintain temperature and humidity to very tight tolerances. It’s also a beautiful building, and I hope all of you will be able to see this new facility that is there to serve agriculture in NC.”

We also heard remarks from the Dean of the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences at North Carolina A&T University, Dr. Mohamed Ahmedna. Dr. Ahmedna shared how the college survived and thrived despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a number of exciting projects and facilities they have been working on:

**On the growth of their program:** “We were successful this year in introducing our interdisciplinary PhD in agriculture and environmental sciences. That will give us the depth of research and innovation to investigate specific topics of importance to you and find durable solutions. We also reached 24 memorandums of understanding with community colleges across the state. That is a great thing for our community colleges because those students can go on to seamlessly finish their four-year degree at NC A&T without any problem.

**Focusing on engaging young people:** “We have continued to find more resources to bring in more young people to the ag sector. We received funding from USDA for the 1890 Center of Excellence for Student Success and Workforce Development to recruit, retain, and graduate the next generation of food, agriculture, and environmental scientists in North Carolina. Our faculty also started providing ag courses for middle school and high school through the NC virtual school. Those are very important at exposing those young minds early on to the prospect of a career in agriculture.

**Providing resources to the farming community:** “Our extension is all across North Carolina . . . with a special

emphasis on small and limited resource farming operations. We provide about half a million contacts with those small farmers and at any single time we are serving about 2,100 small farmers across the state. Sometimes that can make the difference of them staying afloat. We also introduced the Small Farms Resource and Innovation Center that is designed to provide a one-stop shop for small farmers to help them troubleshoot the issues they are facing. We continue to be impactful in our community not only in the form of the research that we do, but also our focus on sustainability of small farmers.”

The Dean of NC State’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Dr. Richard Linton, also joined us to share some news about new facilities and how the college has responded to the pandemic:

**Response to the pandemic:** “Over the last year and a half we’ve taught in different ways, we’ve developed new technology to be able to utilize Extension to get our message out to farmers, and we’ve also continued to do research in very difficult times. We’re making a difference getting students back into NC State. We created alternative pathways, whether it be through the community college system, the Ag Institute, or all the [other] inventive programs we’ve created. We’re now one of the top programs in the country with almost 1,000 graduate students to be able to support our graduate work and research, and we continue to grow about 2 to 3% every year in our undergraduate students.”

**Reinvigorating the Ag Institute:** “Where we’re challenged and where we’re worried is in the Ag Institute program. [Enrollment] is down about 30% pre- versus post-pandemic. A lot of that is down to the hands-on learning that is critically important to that program, and also access to the internet. We’ve had the good fortune of receiving a \$1 million grant from the GoldenLEAF Foundation to build out recruitment programs to build up and better equip that program to levels we’re accustomed to.”

**New facilities coming online:** “Just last week with NCD&CS we celebrated the opening of a new Produce Handling Facility which will focus on food safety practices. And on the twelfth of April, we’re going to have a party for what I believe will be a landmark event in agriculture. And it’s not that the Plant Sciences Building is this incredible building that’s going to be able to support research, extension, and education, and recruit the best people in the world, and create opportunities for industry to want to work with us more. It’s the change that this addition has made in all of us. We’ve all been working together towards the goal of being best in the world at something, and that is the change and feeling that I want to celebrate.”

Visit our YouTube channel to hear full remarks from our guest speakers!

After the guest speakers had finished, our members met in 20 advisory committees to review and discuss existing policy and to identify new areas of concern. Some of the top issues and areas of concern discussed in those committee meetings were:

**Farm Labor:** Farm Bureau continues to be an active member of the Ag Workforce Coalition steering committee, participating in weekly steering committee meetings and coalition outreach on Capitol Hill. Areas discussed are the importance of Adverse Effect Wage Rate calculation reform and access to a stable workforce for all of agriculture. On the Senate side Ag labor negotiations are underway, with staff from Senator Crapo, Tillis, Bennet, and Feinstein.

**Feral Swine:** Each year, feral swine cause about \$1.5 billion in damages to agricultural crops, landscaping and historic sites nationwide. They also carry diseases that pose significant risk to livestock. Due to the size of our state’s commercial hog industry, we are classified as a level four state for feral swine threat, which is a big concern for our Swine Advisory Committee. The Committee recognizes the detrimental effects a disease outbreak could have on the industry and therefore has put forward several new areas of concern to be considered by the members. These include potential support for funding a position dedicated to the eradication of feral swine and how to protect a landowner’s ability to eradicate feral swine and prevent the development of sport hunting for feral swine.

**Property Rights:** Committee members discussed the importance of voluntary agricultural districts and recent changes to the right to farm law. They reaffirmed their support for the right of farmers to make decisions on the use of their own land and they raised concerns about programs that force landowners to grant the general public access to their property.

**Climate Change:** As the climate change discussion continues, there has been a growing recognition of the positive role that agriculture can play in reducing emissions and sequestering carbon. As a result, voluntary carbon markets are gaining in popularity as corporate America tries to reduce its environmental impact. However, existing carbon markets are confusing and not profitable for most farmers, which has resulted in limited participation from agriculture. Farm Bureau is working with our government leaders to enact policies that increase the profitability of climate-smart agriculture practices for all farmers, while ensuring the future viability of farming operations.

As always, we thank everyone who gave their time to be a part of this process. We urge you to continue to be involved in the policy development process this fall at your county annual meetings and at NCFB’s Annual Convention at the Raleigh Convention Center in December.