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POLICY REVIEW DAY 2022: A LOOK AT EMERGING ISSUES

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LEADER



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In late July we kicked off our policy development process at our annual Policy Review Day, identifying shared concerns, collaborating on solutions, and crafting meaningful policy that we can all get behind. We also heard comments from invited guest speakers.

Our keynote speaker this year was Dr. Mike Martin, who was appointed last August as the new State Veterinarian at the NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, where he oversees livestock health programs, poultry health programs, animal welfare and the veterinary diagnostic lab system.

Dr. Martin comes in at a busy and exciting time for the department with the opening of the Commissioner Steven Troxler Agricultural Science Center, which houses the Rollins Diagnostic Laboratory along with four other departmental labs. “A lot of our old facilities were dark and it was kind of depressing to work in to be fair. The laboratory space is on the north side of the [new] building and it’s almost all natural light, and so it’s really a very pleasant space to work in and be in,” Martin said. Within the lab itself he noted, “We have a state-of-the-art necropsy and diagnostic facility and even a viewing room that people can go into to view the necropsy space for teaching and training of students. It’s a great facility and I encourage everyone to make use of it.”

Dr. Martin spent much of his time discussing the State Vet’s office preparedness efforts to prevent or minimize the impact of disease outbreaks and their response during an outbreak. “The disease that’s been the biggest concern recently has been avian influenza. This is a disease that’s been with us for quite a while [but] ... it seems like avian influenza is getting to be ... maybe almost endemic to some extent in our country.” In 2020 there was an outbreak of avian influenza on 13 farms in the Carolinas, 11 of which were in Anson and Union counties. “This virus mutates really well and it can easily shift from low path to high path which makes it troubling even if it’s just a low path ... [but] it was something that we contained relatively well with good collaboration with industry and also our federal partners.”



“The 2022 outbreak that we are currently experiencing is a bit more troublesome,” said Martin. He explained that this outbreak actually has roots going back almost 10 years when a similar outbreak hit the western US and resulted in the loss of 50 million birds. Carried by migratory birds, the virus began showing up in the US again and the first case in North Carolina was confirmed on January 16th, 2022. “In North Carolina we ended up losing about half a million birds over nine commercial farms. We have just recently undergone virus elimination on our last house on our last farm, which basically means we have to take care of all the dead animals and dispose of them properly. We were very pleased with our ability to depopulate these animals quickly, effectively, humanely, and also dispose of them in a way that facilitated a positive element to public health and environmental impact.”

Dr. Martin also commented on the state’s preparation for and containment of the virus, saying, “We had a lot of outreach to industry, we were doing town hall meetings with growers, we were doing tabletop exercises with companies trying to keep this at bay. We were really proud of our field staff working collaboratively with industry, who did a top-notch job stepping up to the table providing resources and support to us as we provided it to them. And in that collaborative work and working with our USDA partners we were able to contain this and stop it in its tracks.” The current outbreak is smoldering in the west where farms are still seeing positive cases, which Martin says “is highly unusual for this virus being this far into summer ... showing that this virus is still really unpredictable.”

Avian influenza was not the only disease on the agenda, however. “African swine fever is a disease of great clinical significance and importance,” Martin said. “There’s a big globalization that has occurred since the time I was in vet school to now, and although we’ve had this disease in the Dominican Republic before [in 1978], we haven’t had it in this globalized market.” Now, African swine fever has returned to the Dominican Republic and Haiti, where natural disasters, civil unrest, and a lingering “bad taste” about the 1978 depopulation of swine on the island



have combined with global markets to pose a potential threat to the mainland US. “To control this disease is a monumental task ... so we have to prepare for it in the United States,” said Martin. “We’ve been doing lots of planning, and some of that planning includes our feral swine program. North Carolina is in the spotlight because of this program; it’s a relatively unique program we’re trying to start up.”

Dr. Martin went on to discuss chronic wasting disease in the wild deer population, saying they have been working closely with the North Carolina Wildlife Resource Commission to plan and strategize control measures for both wild and farmed cervid populations. He also mentioned that his office is testing vaccines for rabbit hemorrhagic disease virus, which is endemic in many western states but has not been found in the state yet.

Finally, Martin commented on the State Vet’s office response to natural disasters like Hurricane Florence, saying, “we try to work with the industry to provide support and ... be there to help get farmers back on their feet as well as deal with the immediacy of the issue.”

Looking ahead, Martin said, “We have to be prepared for anything ... and [farmers] can help me understand what the next issues are that I might not be keeping an eye on.” Martin added, “My message to you is that these disease events, whether it’s crop disease or animal ag disease, or a natural disaster – they’re going to happen so I would encourage everybody to be planning for it. Make a plan. Practice that plan if you possibly can. Review that plan on a regular basis, and make changes to that plan as it seems appropriate. Hopefully you’ll never need those plans, but if you have those plans ... then you’re that much further along and we can get through to the end even faster.”

Visit our YouTube channel to hear Dr. Martin’s full remarks!

After Dr. Martin’s speech, our members met in 20 advisory committees to review and discuss existing policy and to identify new areas of concern. Some notable issues and areas of concern discussed in those committee meetings were:

Energy costs and production: Limitations on the domestic production of oil, coal and natural gas have forced the US to rely more on foreign markets to meet our energy demands. In July (during Policy Review Day), the average cost of diesel in the US hovered around \$5.50 per gallon forcing farmers to pay \$500 or more per day for fuel for their tractors and other farm equipment. Committee members discussed the dangers of relying on foreign markets and the need for policies that promote increased domestic energy production.

Hybrid/electric vehicles impacts on road funding: North Carolina electric vehicle registrations climbed 17% while hybrids increased 7% in the first six months of the year. NC’s primary source of funding roads is through the state’s fuel tax. But owners of hybrid/electric vehicles avoid paying these taxes while at the same time we see the number of these type vehicles increasing daily. Committee members expressed concerns regarding how our state’s current funding approach for roads doesn’t capture this growing market of car owners and the need for policies that ensure all drivers share in the cost of funding our state roads.

Farm Bill measures to reduce volatility of commodity prices and account for rising cost of inputs: As “price takers,” farmers accept what the markets offer for the price of their commodities, but these prices often aren’t sufficient to cover even production costs that include things such as labor, energy, inputs, etc. Farmers discussed the US Farm Bill which is set to expire in 2023 and ways to protect programs in the Farm Bill that provide important tools for farmers to manage risks. In addition, committee members discussed how these programs might be revised to account for the rising cost of inputs, which farmers have no way of recouping. In some cases, inputs rose by 300% compared to last year’s prices.

Carbon credits for forestry: Climate discussions have taken a new tone recently, with many stakeholders and large corporations recognizing the role that working lands (forest and farmland) can play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. As a result, many companies are interested in purchasing carbon credits generated on forestland. Committee members are interested, but are concerned about having the right information to make informed decisions on what can be long-term contracts. In addition, committee members discussed the need for research to determine carbon sequestration values and fair payment amounts.

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 in December back in Greensboro at the Sheraton Greensboro at Four Seasons.