

AFBF President Robert Delano monitors farming's heart beat

BY JOYCE BUYP
Staff Correspondent

MOUNT POCONO — Ruggedly distinguished in appearance, Robert Delano projects the image of a head of a national organization.

But behind the head is a man who has spent his life in the organized farm sector, doing state-to-state field meetings, attending trade shows and conferences, and participating in the national program to help farmers improve their water supply.

Delano's resume is a long list of farm bureau leadership. He has served as president of the national Farm Bureau, and as president of the Virginia Farm Bureau.

Delano's first job was in the Chesapeake estuaries. He was in charge of the water supply program for the Chesapeake estuaries.

His election two years ago as the Farm Bureau head fit the final rung in the ladder he's climbed from the ground floor up through the organization's hierarchy.

After returning from the military service in the 1940s, Delano ran a dairy herd for over 15 years on the Virginia farm. When local farm groups first reorganized into a county Farm Bureau in 1949, the V.P.I. graduate was elected its first president. He progressed from there through state board membership, state presidency, membership on the national board, and then to national vice president.

"It's a challenging job," he admitted pausing to relax for a few moments after speaking to several hundred people at the March 30 opening breakfast of the annual meeting of the Baltimore Farm Credit district, held at Mt. Airy Lodge.

With a grin, he'd confessed earlier to that group the mixed

feelings he experienced leaving the farm on a sunny spring morning for another cross-country of the country on Farm Bureau business.

But the challenge, the pursuit of the best interest of the organization, is the fuel that keeps him going. That means national farm bureau leaders, both economists at the White House and policy questions from the farm bureau, with a heavy emphasis on the "underground" farm program discussion after the Farm Bureau convention.

The Farm Bureau Delano implemented the "Fisher Little" program, which comes to the forefront of the tough questions facing farmers as well as the general economy.

"We're not running around crying 'the sky is falling,'" he told the breakfast listeners while speaking on the nation's economic status and policies that AFBF sees as vital to help turn the depression around.

Support for the administration's economic recovery package gets top billing.

"Keep the tax cuts and kill the entitlement programs," insists Delano. "A ten percent cut in entitlements would cut the budget way down; every percent increase costs billions."

He'd like to overhaul USDA's crop set-aside programs, too.

"Program participation would be much better with some 'up front' money," he wagered. "Pay farmers to keep out wheat acreage, maybe at \$60 per acre, corn at \$100, and pay 15 percent ahead. The only incentive now is the target price, plus loans."

Massive grain reserves that continue building also worry Delano, who predicted "They'll come back to haunt us."

"Farmers can't store their way out of trouble," he continued,

noting current bin inventories of some two billion bushels of corn, and one billion of wheat, that will have to come on the market.

Delano figured the United States must stop being the world's grain reserve holder. One partial solution he cited was for lesser developed countries to establish their own storage systems, possibly using World Bank financing.

Underdeveloped nations already express concern over the U.S. long term supply commitments with grain buyers like the Soviets, Japan and Mexico, worrying that in a short year they may come away empty handed. Domestic storage for those countries would serve as a cushion against such lean-harvest, heavy demand periods, Delano observed.

Foreign trade interests continue to be a vital factor in the farm economy, he added. The European Economic Community, or Common Market, has agreed to let U.S. soybean products into their market with no levies attached. But Delano still sees EEC-government-subsidized products hurting American farmers.

"We can't compete with their treasuries," he fumed. He admitted casein imports, mostly from New Zealand, aren't doing the dairy farmers any favor either.

Following the Farm Credit speech, a handful of Virginia dairymen had buttonhole Delano to

discuss the possibilities of using a national quota system, since part of Virginia now markets milk under a state-run quota arrangement.

"Farmers across the nation aren't ready for a quota program," he asserted. Farm Bureau leans more toward the "aiding scale" program he said, adding that he doubts the support program will be lost but it must be tied into supply-demand pricing.

Delano, whose farming career began a long ago with the farm land system, is disgruntled by government overtures toward shrinking access by the farm lending cooperative to established capital markets.

The Farm Credit system is being included in a study of federal lending agencies, like Farmers Home and the Small Business Administration. That inclusion Delano labeled "inappropriate," and pointed out that the government already has too much impact on the amount of money in the markets where they're getting a larger share than business interests.

True eternal-optimist farmer at heart, Delano brightened, insisting that the news is not all bad.

"I think we're just about at the bottom of the economic situation, with more rapid improvement upward about the fourth quarter," he suggested. "And some

economists predict that the '80s will be a time of exciting growth."

He also forecasted brighter days in another direction. "Last year there was a slight increase in the number of farmers, plus a decrease in the average age level of farmers. That's a change from the past."

Conversation drifted back to the Virginia grain farm, now being managed by Delano's son who temporarily set aside his attorney career to run the operation. A daughter, who's a school teacher, and his Delano back home keeping tabs on the farm, round out the Farm Bureau's first family.

A thoughtful faraway look briefly crossed Delano's face as he prepared to leave the convention to catch a flight to Arkansas and another meeting that evening. The rest of his week is already booked full.

In these tough economic times, all farm families are making sacrifices.

In their support of the interests of the American Farm Bureau Federation, the Delano's of Virginia have made quite a few of their own.



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