

House ag chairman outlines priorities

HARRISBURG — In outlining his legislative agenda for the coming two years, House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee Chairman Samuel Morris (D-Chester) said easing the economic pressures on the state's dwindling number of farmers is the number one priority.

Morris recently presented an overview of the problems facing the state's agricultural producers at a recent meeting of the Council of Farm Organizations. Representatives of about 80 organizations attended the meeting.

"It is important for the General Assembly as a whole to take a serious look at the problems confronting agricultural producers in order to shape legislation to protect the producer from our current economic upheavals," Morris said. "The House and Senate Agriculture Committees should take the lead. However, while some solutions may come from the state level, other problems can only be addressed through cooperation on the state and federal levels."

Morris said one of the first orders of business this year will be the reintroduction of legislation creating a Pennsylvania Agricultural Development Authority, similar to the Pennsylvania Industrial Development Authority, to provide low-interest loans to families wishing to purchase land for farming or for family farmers who wish to expand their operations.

Funds for the program would come from a bond issue and would be loaned only to persons who meet strict eligibility requirements.

Morris said the program would "assist young people who are interested in agricultural careers while keeping land in agricultural production."

As another effort to keep farmland in production, Morris said he would press for some real estate tax reform. He said he would reintroduce legislation to revise the Local Tax Enabling Act to allow local option in shifting from real estate taxes to income taxes.

"The business use and occupancy taxes proposed in the last session would be tough on small businesses and farmers," Morris said. "I believe local taxing authorities should be given an option to create the best tax climate for their areas."

As the economic pressures on individual producers continue to mount, Morris said the legislature might consider some form of collective marketing and bargaining legislation. Although the proposal has met with mixed reactions among the farm organizations, Morris said the current problems will probably increase.

"Many people feel that collective marketing and bargaining agreements would isolate Pennsylvania's producers from those in other states," Morris said. "While it would be preferable to have a national program, there will be no federal legislation until a few states prove that it will work."

"Experience in other states which have instituted these agreements has shown that the producers are not isolated and have gained important leverage in marketing agreements."

Morris added that protection for

farmers who are confronted with the bankruptcy of a dealer or processor may require federal action, but some help can be provided at the state level as well.

"Producers should have the first opportunity to regain their losses in a bankruptcy proceeding," Morris said. "In many cases it is their products which are being held as assets by the bankrupt

company.

"In addition, some protections must be given to producers who are experiencing slow pay from wholesalers and processors. Some poultry farmers in the state are now waiting for 16 weeks to receive payments from firms which are experiencing their own economic difficulties."

Morris said other priorities include reform of the milk security fund which may be facing depletion as a result of pending bankruptcies of three milk handlers. He said problems involving sewage sludge disposal and regulations regarding erosion and stream pollution will also have to be addressed.



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