

Ag nominee talks about challenges and the future

STATE COLLEGE — While farm leaders in Harrisburg took turns criticizing and complimenting Governor Dick Thornburgh for his agriculture secretary nomination this week, Dr. Richard E. Grubb, quietly went about his university business at Penn State.

Although the senior university official remained reluctant to grant interviews to the press prior to his confirmation hearings in the Senate, Grubb did agree to speak briefly to Lancaster Farming about some of his general thoughts on Pennsylvania agriculture.

In accepting the nomination last week, Grubb called the opportunity to serve as secretary of agriculture both "an honor and a challenge." When asked about the challenges of the job, Grubb elaborated on some of the larger challenges facing the state's farmers.

Agricultural challenges

"To provide leadership at the state level for the state's most important economic industry is a real challenge," says Grubb. "Farming itself has changed so drastically in the past decade or two, that we have to be very supportive in terms of information and programs."

"It's not enough today to be a good crop manager or a good livestock manager, a farmer has got to also be a good financial manager," he adds.

And in that area of finances, Grubb believes a new challenge has presented itself, partly because of the recent media blitz on farm debt.

"Although farmers in Pennsylvania are under financial

pressure, in my own opinion they're in a better fiscal position than the national average," continued Grubb. "For example, I think we have a lower debt-to-asset ratio."

"However, because of the publicity, banks are awfully cautious to lend money to farmers and this creates a cash flow problem.

"This is a real challenge. We have got to build confidence among our banking community, for example."

Other challenges arise, says Grubb, because of the myriad factors that impact on agriculture today.

"Farming's a complex business," states Grubb, "There are many factors involved. Some of them are national, some of them are international in scope, and some are simply reflecting local conditions."

"Then if you look at other factors ... falling or rising land prices, interest rates, shifting markets, surpluses in some commodities and even changes in the world economy can impact on the farming industry."

One specific example offered by Grubb is the country's changing nutritional habits, which are felt directly on the farm.

"You know I about die when I pick up a leading national business magazine and on the cover is a plate with an egg and a strip of bacon.

"And when it talks about cholesterol, you have to ask what impact is that going to have on our poultry industry or swine industry?"

"So farming's a very complex



Richard E. Grubb

business. That's why it's a challenge."

Future looks bright

But these challenges in no way dim Grubb's view of the future of Pennsylvania agriculture.

"If you look at Pennsylvania agriculture, ... I think the future looks awfully bright for several reasons.

"First, look at the diversity of our agriculture, ... and then couple that with what I think is our natural climatic and soil conditions that are so desirable for agriculture."

Then the final ingredient, states Grubb optimistically, is the proximity of the metropolitan markets. "The markets ... are right here at our doorstep, so we don't have the tremendous transportation costs of getting our produce clear across the country," he says.

"You put all those together, the very makeup of our farm community, I think we can compete better than any other state in the nation," he emphasizes.

No specifics now

Other than comments about challenges and the future of agriculture, Grubb refuses to get into specifics on any department programs or current farm issues in the state.

"You know I do have my opinions, but for me to talk about what the department should be doing could be a criticism of what they are doing," remarks Grubb.

"I really shouldn't get into that because I have no official capacity with the department of

agriculture. Once confirmed I will be happy to get into these issues," he says.

Refuting the criticism

Paralleling his reluctance to comment on any specific department of agriculture programs or any specific farm issues, Grubb is also very cautious in his remarks about PFA's criticism of Thornburgh's selection.

"The Pennsylvania Farmers' Association is a fine organization," says Grubb. "There are many fine agricultural organizations around the state.

"I think the leadership of the PFA certainly has every right to have their prototype of who's going

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Farm groups split

(Continued from Page A1)

Blake said they have already contacted the Senate leadership to inform them of the Grange's support of the Grubb nomination.

The state Senate will have 25 legislative days to confirm the governor's nomination. When the Senate reconvenes on May 28th, the nomination will be in its fourth legislative day.

PFA leader Keith Eckel said they will also take their argument to the state Senate and urge PFA members to talk to their senators and lobby for a nominee who can understand the needs of farmers.

When asked who his organization supports for the agriculture post, Eckel said PFA does not want to name other individuals, although the candidate should meet their criteria of activity in production agriculture and knowledge of agriculture issues and the department.

But Moyle, of the governor's press office, said that in discussions prior to the nomination decision, PFA would submit only one name for the post, that of Deputy Agriculture Secretary Chester Heim.

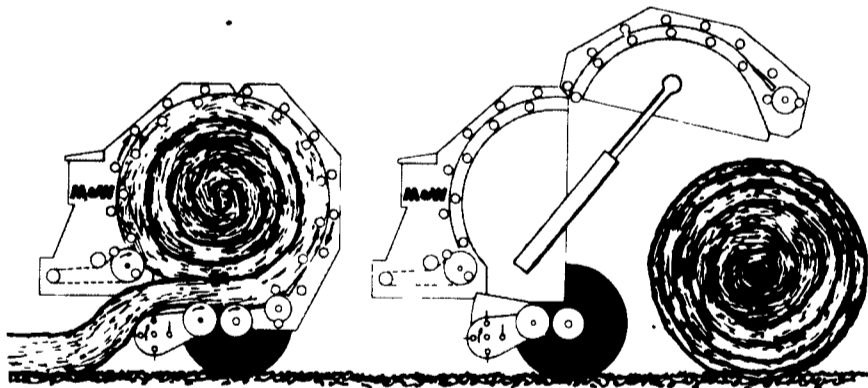
Eckel also denied that he had any interest in taking the nomination. "I believe a farm leader as president of the largest farm organization in the state is a far more effective representative of the needs and interests of farmers."

While PFA and the State Grange took sides on the nomination issue this week, the Pennsylvania Farmers' Union remained neutral on Grubb's selection.

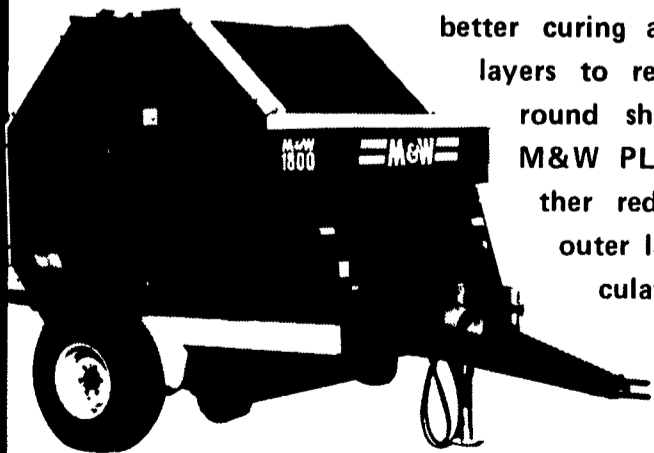
PFU representative Cheryl Cook stated that PFU leaders had no comment about the nomination until they could meet with Grubb and learn more about his qualifications.

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