

Effort Underway To Revitalize State Direct Marketing Group

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LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.) — A number of Pennsylvania producer-retail marketers are in the process of revitalizing an idled, statewide direct-marketing association and are making an offer difficult to pass up — join for a year at no cost, and then decide if it isn't worth paying dues to continue as a member.

That was one of the actions approved during an organizational meeting held at the Pennsylvania/Mid-Atlantic Direct Marketing Conference and Trade Show, at the Willow Valley Resort and Conference Center, Feb. 17-20.

During the meeting, a new bylaw was adopted and temporary leadership installed.

The name is to remain the same — the Pennsylvania Retail Farm Market Association Inc. (PRFMA), an incorporated, non-profit association.

The core group, comprised mostly of those active in planning and supporting the annual multi-state Mid-Atlantic Direct Marketing Conference, has been working since last year with John Berry, a multi-county Penn State Extension marketing agent in southeastern Pennsylvania, and with the support of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.

Berry was named the acting executive secretary of PRFMA.

There are two positions left open on the board of directors — the group is looking for one person from the western region, and one from the northern region of the state.

Anyone interested in serving as a director should call Berry at (610) 391-9840. The board has scheduled another meeting for noon, March 23, in Room 309 of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture Building in Harrisburg.

It's no surprise that the association is receiving a jump-start effort by those already heavily involved in the business.

Direct marketing represents a segment of the agricultural business community that has been growing in recent years, primarily by branching out and away from the typical roadside stand at the end of the farm lane.

The marketing environment has changed for all agricultural products.

National, continental and global agricultural mass marketing competition has pressured farm-gate prices below cost of production in many instances, forcing out those unwilling to adopt new high production, low-return, management-intensive techniques, assume additional debt, or get involved in contracts.

There is little room in most of the traditional bulk-commodity production agricultural industry to successfully start-up an independent operation that focuses on generating income through traditional, mainstream raw-product sales.

Among all commodities, there are fewer, if any, opportunities to break into mass marketing today.

But, the alternative to mass marketing — niche, or direct marketing — has allowed many to earn enough to pay expenses and generate a decent standard of living.

Orchard operators who hold festivals, or extend some type of intimacy or special experience to customers, along with offering high quality products, are among those finding success.

Some are working directly with urban sprawl neighbors to grow produce for them — fresh, same-day picked vegetables and fruits.

Those producing vegetables and fruits, or meat and dairy products, through organic farming practices have found some measures of success as an alternative to mainstream production.

In fact, the organic industry is growing to the point that some companies have formed, as well as smaller cooperatives, to move beyond direct retail to mass



Pennsylvania representatives on the Mid-Atlantic Direct Marketing Conference Planning Committee review bylaw proposals and other materials prior to presenting them for consideration in the revitalization of the Pennsylvania Retail Farm Market Association Inc. (PRFMA). From the left is Warren Mathias with the state Department of Agriculture Bureau of Market Development; John Berry, PSU Extension multi-county market agent and acting executive secretary of PRFMA; Robert Ferber, president of PRFMA; David Hodge, treasurer; and William Lelik, an agricultural marketing specialist with the PDA Bureau of Market Development, serving as an informal advisor.

marketing.

Others produce quality product for direct sales to certain chefs and specialty restaurants, willing to pay a premium for top, dependable quality.

Some vineyard owners have discovered that, in addition to marketing their wines and grapes, the aesthetics of their farms can be used to set the stage for providing some

type of unique experience for customers.

The variety of offerings is as different as the people who own and run the farm enterprises, and the customers they serve.

For the individual with some farming experience and assets who can learn quickly to grow a variety of specialty crops well, the opportunity has been shown to exist to

earn a living through small-scale farming, especially in Pennsylvania and the other Mid-Atlantic states.

That's what a growing number of farmer-entrepreneurs have discovered — ways to be full-service, small businessmen in agriculture and generate per-acre profits to the point of successfully

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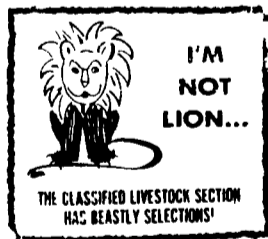
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