

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — The leader of the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau (PFB) has called for action by the General Assembly on legislation to protect property rights and implement local tax reform. PFB president Guy Donaldson also recommended legislative action to reform the civil justice system and to make Pennsylvania part of the Northeast Interstate Dairy Compact.

Donaldson issued the call for action during a banquet March 30 attended by about 300 farmers and state legislators at the Ramada Inn on Market Square in Harrisburg. Earlier in the day, the farmers had

visited members of the General Assembly to voice the farm organization's support for legislation on issues affecting agriculture.

PFB is a voluntary, statewide organization representing 25,247 member families in 54 county farm bureaus.

Calling voter approval of the "homestead" exemption referendum last fall a "giant step forward," Donaldson outlined what Farm Bureau believes are the correct ingredients for local tax reform. "A tax reform package must have the flexibility for the local municipality to be able to pick the

'right mix' of taxes to meet local needs," he said. That mix should include property taxes, income taxes and sales taxes, he added.

"Farm Bureau wants local tax reform with meaningful reductions in real property taxes," he declared. A sure way of achieving this is by providing universal reductions in assessment value and the rate of taxation, Donaldson said. "Any interpretation of homestead provisions should include the farmstead property including farm buildings located on the farm being used as the farmer's primary residence."

Farm Bureau also believes nui-

ance taxes, such as the per capita, personal property and occupation taxes, should be eliminated. A final ingredient is giving taxpayers the right to vote on local tax rate increases and the incurring of local debt, Donaldson said. Farm Bureau supports local tax reform legislation, S.B. 2, plus the addition of a property tax exemption for "farmstead" farm buildings.

Farm Bureau is supporting a legislative package, S.B. 1248 - 1250, to protect property rights from state regulatory encroachment. "The three bills would re-

quire state agencies to assess the impact of proposed regulations on private property, before they become regulations," Donaldson explained. The bills would also give the Independent Regulatory Review Commission the power to reject regulations that constitute a "takings" of private property without compensation. In addition, the bills would allow a property owner who successfully files a "takings" claim in court to recover up to \$50,000 in attorney's fees.

Turning to another priority issue for Farm Bureau, Donaldson said, "The dairy industry across the nation continues to undergo severe financial strife for many different reasons. Dairymen here in Pennsylvania are looking at a self-help type program to improve their market situation. A large factor in this equation is the Northeast Dairy Compact which will enable dairy farmers to receive a more profitable price for their product." Farm Bureau supports S.B. 170 which would enable Pennsylvania to join the Northeast Interstate Dairy Compact, which currently operates in six New England states. New York state must also join so Pennsylvania can be "linked" to the Compact states and Congress must approve expansion of the Compact.

Secretary Hayes Provides Avian Influenza Update

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — Agriculture Secretary Samuel E. Hayes Jr. this week announced that a flock of 80,000 laying hens in Lancaster County has been confirmed positive with the N7N2 avian influenza virus. A site quarantine has been imposed, covering 300,000 birds.

"This flock was discovered through the intensive testing

which we continue to conduct," Hayes said. "We are disappointed and continue to stress the need for maintaining the strictest biosecurity."

This flock is immediately outside the area that was under quarantine from May through September of last year. The flock will not be destroyed.

To date, 21 flocks have been

determined to have the N7N2 virus, affecting a total of 2.6 million birds.

Hayes praised the poultry industry's strong cooperation with the Agriculture Department and said surveillance will continue.

Last June, Gov. Tom Ridge signed legislation to appropriate

\$5 million for poultry producers affected by the outbreak. Some of those funds remain available for affected owners.

Hayes stressed that the H7N2 virus is no threat to human health and that poultry products are safe for human consumption.

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If the Compact was in force today, Donaldson said, "The consumer would not be paying more for milk and milk products. However, the farmers' share of the retail dollar would increase."

Farm Bureau is also working with the Civil Justice Coalition to reform the civil justice system. Persons who are injured and are successful in a lawsuit, "Often are better off financially than what they were before they were injured," Donaldson said. "The system was not designed for creating wealthy individuals." This aspect of the civil justice system needs to be reformed, Donaldson said. Frivolous lawsuits are another problem which clog the court system and boost the cost to doing business in the state. The Civil Justice Coalition plans to introduce legislation that will reduce the number of frivolous lawsuits, Donaldson said. "It will place a cap on punitive damages. This legislation will also ask the defendant to pay only for the damages caused by the defendant. It will not ask a defendant to pay a larger percentage just because others don't have the money."

Donaldson urged legislators to support Farm Bureau's position in all four of the issues he discussed — local tax reform, protection of property rights, the Northeast Interstate Dairy Compact, and civil justice reform.

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