

PA Council Of Farm Organizations Addresses Ag-Related Legislative Issues

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HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — Drought assistance, emergency drought guidelines, Clean and Green regulations, and this year's Annual Cornucopia were all discussed at the Pennsylvania State Council of Farm Organizations' meeting held Wednesday at the Pennsylvania Capitol in Harrisburg.

Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Samuel Hayes, Jr., highlighted recent projects the Department has been emphasizing.

According to Hayes, 70.6 million dollars have been dedicated to assisting farmers with the 1999 drought. Five million went for the hay assistance program, while 5.6 million went for the crop insurance assistance program. The remaining 60 million will be allocated as direct payments to farmers suffering from the drought.

"Both the governor and legislators want the 60 million to go out as soon as possible," said Hayes. "The advanced payments have already been made, and the intermediate payments are going out this week. The final payments will go out just as

soon as we get all of the final reports from counties that are behind in providing us with their information."

According to Hayes, the only qualifying criteria of the drought assistance program is that farmers must have had more than a 35 percent crop loss due to the drought.

Hayes also addressed emergency regulations that the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency is establishing in regards to water usage during drought emergencies.

"We want to keep an eye on these regulations because they could affect parts of the agriculture industry. For example, food-processing companies use significant amounts of water.

Traditionally, agriculture has always had an exemption from these regulations," said Hayes. "But, as the regulations become more extensive, that could change."

According to Hayes, the department is working with legislators, the Emergency Management Agency, and food processing companies to make sure that regulations aren't so restrictive that they prohibit agriculture processing.

"Production agriculture will be fine under these regulations," said Hayes. "But we have to realize that we can't have one without the other."

Another issue that Hayes addressed was food safety regulations at county fairs and in the dairy beef and dairy product industries. "We're applying the same principles from our egg quality assurance program to milk and dairy beef to make sure we don't have a problem like the Jack-In-The-Box incident, where people were harmed from foodborne illnesses."

Hayes also addressed the consolidation of the Clean and Green regulations affecting farmers. The department hopes to publish the proposed regulations and rules soon.

"Currently we are reviewing informal public comment on the regulations," said Hayes. "There have been incidents across Pennsylvania where the farm population has been questioning whether the counties have been interpreting the regulations as the legislators intended. We want to make sure that the county assessor in York County is interpreting the regulations the same as the county

assessor in Warren County is."

Jay Howes, director of policy development for the House of Representatives Ag Committee staff, also discussed legislature affecting agriculture.

Howes discussed the modification of the drought crop loss legislature, which freed up funds to distribute all of the 60 million available. The modifications also opened up the crop insurance program to any producer, not just those who participated in the 1999 crop loss assistance program.

Howes also highlighted two other legislative issues the Ag committee is working on. The first is an ag technology bill that would provide low-interest loans for installation of irrigation systems. The second involves two bills that address land use issues.

"They're making language modifications to these bills, and we need to keep an eye on them," said Howes. "It's important that the agriculture land exemption language stays the same."

In his comments, House encouraged the Council to support Ken Rutt, who is up for reelection to the state conservation board. The Council voted to send a letter of approval on Rutt's behalf.

Council members also brought up other issues dealing with Pennsylvania agriculture during the meeting. Some of those issues included new pesticide regulations, the Environ-

mental Protection Agency's proposed water runoff rules, funding for vocational agriculture programs, and potential changes to the state inheritance tax regulations.

The group highlighted the success of the recent Annual Cornucopia. 192 people attended the event held in the rotunda of the Capitol building. 117 legislators, along with their staffs, came to the event to network with 75 farm organization representatives and guests.

During the meeting, the Council filled the vacancy on the executive board. Gary Maurer from the Pennsylvania Young Farmers' Association was nominated to fill the position.

Vice President Curtis Kratz from Moyer Packing Company led the meeting and encouraged the group to form a new committee to coordinate more activities benefiting the agriculture industry.

"Everything this group has done in the past has been really good, but we need to do more," said Kratz. "We have the opportunity and expertise to do something more to better agriculture in Pennsylvania."

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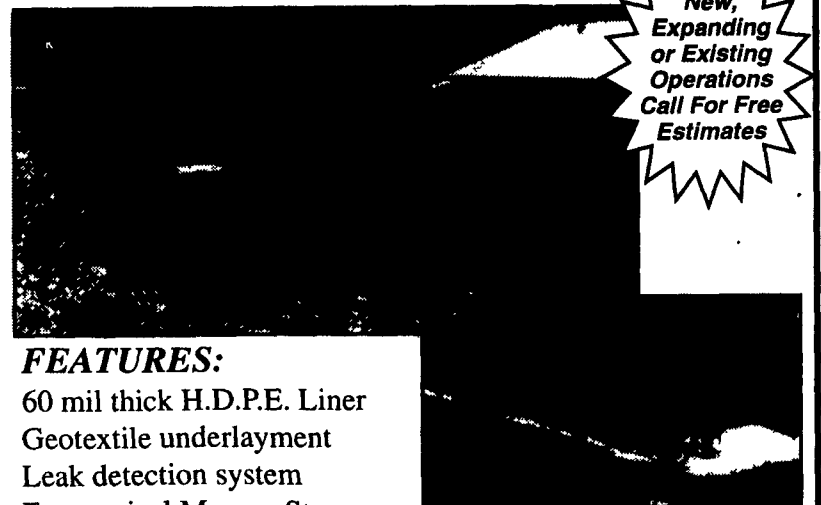
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