

Ag Interests Protected In Rendell's State Budget Proposals

ANDY ANDREWS
Editor

ROCKSPRING (Centre Co.) — Wednesday marked the birth of the eight-hour workday in 1862, noted one Penn State official. And one state official wants to bring all of Pennsylvania back to work with several agricultural economic initiatives that could revitalize the profitability of farming.

Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell noted that through the efforts of his administration, working with Penn State, Pennsylvania "can help grow our economy," he said to hundreds of guests during the Government/Industry Day Luncheon at Ag Progress Days.

Despite dealing with the headaches of a \$2.5 billion state budget deficit, Rendell noted that the "interests of agriculture have truly been protected."

State efforts include a fundamental effort to "re-engage Pennsylvania's young people in the business of agriculture," he said.

Rendell pointed to the work of the state's biggest FFA school, W.B. Saul near Philadelphia, and how those kids, "urban kids born in the toughest ghettos," are "on fire" with their interest in agriculture.

"Pennsylvania has no economy without ag," said Rendell. Agriculture contributes \$43 billion into the state's economy and remains the largest industry. The second largest is tourism.

For the youth, the state FFA has been granted a \$150,000 grant legislative line item.

Another critical item is the "Plan for Pennsylvania" espoused by the administration, opening up ag business loans for farmers. The first one, at \$200,000, will be going to a farm in Lancaster County.

The manufacturing equipment loan fund, open to businesses throughout the state, was closed to farmers at one time. But now it is open and allows "farmers to be more productive and add new technology," Rendell said.



Gov. Ed Rendell, second from left, poses with other state and Penn State officials. From left, Robert Steele, dean of the Penn State College of Agriculture Sciences; Rendell; Dennis Wolff, Pennsylvania secretary of agriculture; and Graham Spanier.

Photo by Andy Andrews, editor

Appropriations for crop insurance and farmland preservation are preserved, despite the budget problems. In June, 29 new farms totaling 2,700 acres were preserved. That brings the total to 2,195 farms, at more than a quarter million acres since the program began about 14 years ago.

The CREP program has been increased to \$410 million to farmers, to provide a new crop, said Rendell — "habitat on land." That includes \$326 million in federal and \$84 million in state funds. CREP is open to 23 counties in the Susquehanna River

Valley.

The program, noted Rendell, reduces 14.5 million tons of erosion to the Chesapeake Bay, protecting more than 200,000 acres of good farmland.

The final step, noted Rendell, is coming up with the solution to the high cost of property taxes and the low performance of rural public schools.

There has been no progress in the percentage of Pennsylvania students who read proficiently, even though other programs, such as science and math, have shown improvement.

"Pennsylvania is not producing a qualified workforce... in any endeavor," said Rendell. The state share of education dropped from 55 percent in the early 1980s to 34 percent, after the repeal of laws that provided more state share of the responsibility.

"Local property taxes go up and up and up and it's got to stop," he said. "Far too many farmers are land-rich and income-poor."

Rendell believes the new budget can be ironed out within the first couple of weeks in September.



Gov. Ed Rendell speaks to the media before the start of the luncheon Wednesday.

Farm Walk Set For Covered Bridge Produce

LEESPORT (Berks Co.) — Cover crops, purchasing seeds and planning for the following year and observing crop conditions are the topics that will be covered during a farm walk at Covered Bridge Produce, Oley, on August 28, 6:30 p.m. to dark.

Covered Bridge Produce is a farm that is organically certified. Markets are diversified and include a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) market, farmer markets and wholesale accounts. Joseph Griffin, farm manager, and Bob Jack, grower, will be leading the walk, according to Mena Hautau, extension agent.

The walk is part of a series, "Organic Agriculture in Southeast Pennsylvania" organized through Penn State Cooperative Extension. The tour will be take place rain or shine. Wear appropriate footwear. Participants may bring a bag lunch if coming directly from work. There is no charge and no preregistration required.

For more information and directions to the farm, contact Mena Hautau, Penn State Cooperative Extension-Berks County, phone: 610/378-1327, fax: 610/378-7961, email: BerksExt@psu.edu

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