

Assembly Budget Committee Testimony

By Secretary Douglas H. Fisher

April 11, 2022

Good morning, Chairwoman Pintor Marin and Members of the Committee, I thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Department of Agriculture's budget with you today.

The Department's mission encompasses four major goals: Promoting the state's agricultural products and industry; ensuring healthy plants and animals for agriculture and consumers; preserving farmland and helping farmers conserve the natural resources that are so vital for their operations and to the public's well-being; and supporting food access and security through coordinating state and federal resources, as well as monitoring USDA school lunch and breakfast, and other community feeding programs.

The past several years have underscored both the importance and vulnerability of agriculture in our society.

The COVID pandemic's effects on supply chains, labor availability, changes in the ways people purchase and consume food, and perhaps most importantly, how we ensure that no resident of New Jersey is left food-insecure, adults and children alike, all shined a bright light on issues that had existed just beneath the public's consciousness even before 2020.

This sudden realization brought attention to the delicate balancing act that starts at the farm, makes its way through distribution and processing channels, through wholesale and retail, and ends with the ultimate consumer.

Agriculture walks a unique line in New Jersey, the nation's most densely populated state. New Jersey's agriculture occurs in large swaths of rural areas dotted around state, in suburban areas where it shares space with housing developments, and in our more definitively urban areas, where indoor agricultural production and community garden collaboratives are the more likely manifestations of the industry.

Wherever agriculture and related industries exist, the simple fact is that agriculture touches every New Jersey resident every day, from nursery to equine, to food, fuel, and fiber.

Agriculture in New Jersey is very much an industry that is aware of the impacts of highly scientific phenomena. We are at the forefront of battling invasive pests that threaten not only agricultural crops but also the wooded areas of our state, be they publicly or privately held.

For the past several years, our fight against the Spotted Lanternfly has drawn much attention, and the Murphy Administration has been proud to partner with the Legislature in that battle through our Division of Plant Industry.

More recently, we have done all we can to prevent the introduction in New Jersey of the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza, which has wreaked havoc through the poultry industry in nearly two dozen other states.

In that regard, our Division of Animal Health has worked in concert with many other agencies, such as the Department of Environmental Protection and Office of Emergency Management, to prepare for depopulating and disposing of large commercial flocks if that disease does reach us in New Jersey.

Another area where many New Jersey farmers exhibit a solid scientific understanding is in climate change. Farmers have long been referred to as “the original conservationists,” because they are keenly aware of how vital it is to properly manage land and water resources if their operations are to be successful over the long haul.

To this end, the Department and the in-but-not-of State Agricultural Development Committee have continued to develop ways to support farmers in these efforts. For example, the Department and SADC strongly encourage farmers to use methods such as no-till production and the planting of cover crops to help prevent erosion.

The Department is evaluating two primary areas of focus to increase farm resiliency in this matter: 1) improved soil and water management, and 2) preparedness in the handling and care of livestock after a severe weather event.

Both initiatives will require increased efforts and attention to work directly with farmers to prepare comprehensive farm conservation and engineering plans, as well as implement recommended practices.

Trying to spur more farmers to incorporate carbon-sequestration practices and other methods to help fight climate change would necessarily lead these discussions.

In the first area, the State Soil Conservation Committee and the 14 Soil Conservation Districts are evaluating climate-smart conservation practices for inclusion into the state Soil and Water Cost Share Program and the Conservation Cost Share Program.

In the second area, the ability to provide emergency guidance and support is a critical need as the state experiences increased severe weather events.

Approaches include a portable system for the safe handling and medical treatment of emergency-displaced livestock and the ability to provide pertinent information on disaster preparedness and mitigation strategies.

Beyond those measures, the Department maintains a mission of ensuring the state's agricultural products are safe, high-quality, and available to all residents, through retail markets or via healthy community feeding programs.

One important piece of legislation recently signed into law that will help our farmers is the "Locally Grown Law." Because there is no standard, nationwide definition of "local," retailers have applied it to agricultural products that come not only from New Jersey farms but also farms that are two, three, or even more states away.

The Locally Grown Law mandates that any produce referred to as “local” must come from a New Jersey farm, and anything not from New Jersey must have its origin state specified if the word “local” is used in promoting it.

This way, when fresh produce comes into the market, New Jersey farmers are likely to get the benefit of being advertised as “local” and their products will more likely be given priority by consumers.

Of course, when shoppers are seeking unquestionably “local” items, their best bet is to seek out the *Jersey Fresh* label.

The Department continues to make every effort to get more of our farmers’ products into the school lunch and breakfast offerings. That can sometimes be difficult, as our farms’ peak production months occur when school is out of session. But our farm-to-school efforts also include connecting school children with the idea of eating healthy farm products as much as possible.

Regardless, we also continue seeing improvements in the numbers of students who are receiving both lunch AND breakfast through the school feeding programs. This has been aided in part over the past several years by the introduction of the “breakfast after the bell” program.

The pandemic also provided us some lessons on reaching out to students for meals when school is not in session, and those lessons are being applied to our Seamless Summer Option programs to continue ensuring students are receiving healthy meals even during the off-school months.

The past two years have also seen increased demand for the services of community pantries, soup kitchens and other feeding organizations due to the pandemic’s impact on unemployment.

In light of the recent effects of inflation, it will be important to continue support for community feeding operations and for organizations that foster gleaning of farm products. Governor Murphy's proposed budget maintains the historical increases in funding that were introduced over the past two years.

There is no shortage of issues that keep the Department continually on its toes. There's not only those we currently must deal with to keep agriculture safe and productive, but the issues we must anticipate being important in the future.

These include things like increased Internet-based precision agriculture, the need to ensure that our rural areas have sufficient access to broadband communications, and anticipating the next impacts from invasive species, worldwide competition for food dollars, and protecting natural resources that are necessary to maintain productive agriculture.

I welcome any questions from the Committee members. Thank you.

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