

Department of Agriculture Budget Testimony – April 27, 2009

Good morning, Chairwoman Buono and members of the Committee. I want to thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of Agriculture's budget with you this morning.

It seems everywhere you look, there are examples of agriculture's renewed relevance to the world.

“Buy local” has become a food-retailing mantra. People eat food grown close to home because they feel more confident in its safety, and because trucks transporting it travel shorter distances, meaning far less pollution and a much greener world.

Now more than ever, we are tying our nation's energy independence much more to the farm. Whether it's solar panels on a barn roof, fuel from switchgrass, or manure turned into methane

fuel. We also talk about farms sequestering carbon in their soils to reduce global warming.

Community farmers markets have become commonplace – as likely to be located in our Hudson County cities as in our Salem County towns.

Schoolchildren who just a decade ago may have known the cafeteria as the home of limited one-meal choices and packaged junk food now have many more fresh fruits and vegetables to eat and 100-percent fruit juices and skim milk to drink, all aimed at lowering a skyrocketing childhood obesity rate.

There's hardly a health or environmental problem facing humans that doesn't have someone looking to fix it through agricultural means. And New Jersey is well-positioned to take advantage of this new reality. We don't have to go out and create an agricultural

landscape. It's already here because of much of the work that this Legislature has proactively supported.

It's here in the 10,000-plus, mostly family-owned farms that stretch from one end of the state to the other. It's here in a vibrant agricultural economy that produces everything from apple cider to baby zucchini, pumping a billion dollars a year into our economy in farm gate receipts alone, and tens of billions in the aggregate.

And it plans to stay here, with an aggressive farmland preservation program and an energized FFA and 4-H community that have made it exciting for young people to think about agriculture as a promising career choice.

The question today is this: Is the New Jersey Department of Agriculture ready to help this industry realize its full potential? Or are we going to let other areas of the country surpass the Garden State, which has made its mark as the number-two blueberry

producer, number-three cranberry producer, number-four peach, spinach and bell pepper producer, and on and on?

We have the farms. We have the farm families.

We have the staff, and the expertise required by an increasingly sophisticated constituency – our farmers.

Our ongoing efforts on New Jersey's food safety – during and after outbreaks of E. Coli in spinach and Salmonella in a number of products – have shown we need to and do respond quickly to keep foodborne illness outbreaks from unfairly hurting our farmers' business *and* proactively train growers and other food businesses in the essentials to prevent problems in our food system.

We've demonstrated our grasp of agriculture's future in the green energy world, by working with this very Legislature on measures to increase solar, wind and biomass generation on farms and by

partnering with the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service.

New Jersey Agricultural Education serves 60 certified agriculture teachers and several thousand students in 44 school districts. There are 37 FFA chapters with 1,950 students in the Garden State.

We can and do have the will to have a strong, efficient and bold state Department of Agriculture to lead the way to a 21st Century agriculture.

We can achieve an agriculture that powers both bodies and energy systems, sustains the health of our environment while improving the health of our children, and builds strong communities in both rural and urban areas by connecting the two in a framework that employs agriculture to improve our quality of life.

The Department of Agriculture aims to achieve these goals by focusing on the following areas. They are:

1. Surveillance and Regulatory: Inspecting plants and animals for the detection of diseases and the safety of the food source; third-party audits; review of food-distribution systems for compliance to regulations; inspections of fertilizer and feed; and licensing of milk and organic products.
2. Food Distribution: Commodity distribution; the Governor's Hunger Initiative; school breakfast and lunch programs, as well as summer camp and adult day care food distribution; and preparations for feeding people at emergency shelters in the case of a natural or man-made disaster.
3. Marketing, Research and Education: Branding agricultural products, such as Jersey Fresh; promoting our fruit, vegetable, dairy, equine, seafood and other sectors; research

into invasive pests and plant species, and controlling them with a minimum of chemicals; and educational programs.

4. Preservation and Conservation: Farmland preservation; stewardship of the land, soil and water.

By approaching the work of our divisions within the context of these priorities, we aim to make our state dollars go further.

However, because of the constituencies we both regulate and promote, we are in the unique position of being able to not only maximize our state dollars, but to use them to leverage federal dollars, other grant monies and exposure in private industry.

For example, the state money targeted for the construction of our new lab will enable the Division of Animal Health to expand its testing and diagnostic work.

Those tests aren't conducted for free. There's a fee that goes with each one. That money invested in the new lab serves as a catalyst for revenue generation there.

It also will result in our lab being accredited, which will mean the continuation of approximately \$750,000 in federal funding we now receive as part of the National Animal Health Laboratory Network, and should lead to even further federal funding when the lab is appropriately staffed. The accreditation could not occur under our current lab structure, and that federal funding would be lost.

The same kind of return on investment can be found in our Division of Marketing and Development. We have helped community groups looking to open a farmer's market with financial and technical assistance. That outreach results in additional exposure for the Jersey Fresh brand that the farmers coming to those markets display.

The vendors display that signage because they know consumers trust and want that brand. So the farmer, who has already paid a fee to participate in Jersey Fresh, now displays that signage at the community farmers market, effectively giving us additional advertising of the brand for a minimal expenditure of state funds.

We've gone from around 65 community farmers markets five years ago to an expected 120 this coming season. Each of those markets – with their abundant Jersey Fresh signage and farmer-ambassadors discussing New Jersey agriculture with their customers – acts as a Jersey Fresh ad seen by hundreds, if not thousands, of customers weekly throughout our growing season. It's an image that is clearly identified with our state.

Another example can be found in our Division of Food and Nutrition.

The money targeted for the Governor's Hunger Initiative would be worthy on its own for helping families struggling in this tough economy. But, because we target locally grown and produced foods through the State Food Purchase Program, it also is going back into our state's economy. That also helps us ensure that more is actually being spent on food by keeping transportation costs down.

Close to 7 million pounds of food, with an emphasis on buying it locally, went to the Emergency Feeding Operations that supply food pantries, soup kitchens and other feeding operations around the state.

Another key part of our feeding efforts is our school nutrition program, which feeds approximately 663,000 students throughout the state daily, including 341,872 receiving free or reduced-price meals.

The Department of Agriculture not only looks to spend each dollar wisely, but often uses those dollars to attract federal funding, to directly enhance our state's economy and to leverage industry involvement – all while helping New Jersey's residents realize the nutrition, health and quality-of-life benefits of maintaining a strong agricultural base in New Jersey

I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.