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December 18, 2018

2018 – A New Awareness for West Virginia Agriculture

Freshman college quarterbacks in their first season make a lot of mistakes. But every year after, they continue to hone in on their craft becoming the field commander of their dreams. Here at the department, we are finishing up our sophomore year. Just like that quarterback, we feel we have hit our stride after tremendous growing pains in our first year. In 2018, we have accomplished numerous goals and objectives on our path to becoming a more efficient, as well as responsive agency that helps spur economic growth in the Mountain State. Here are just a couple of our most proud successes.

We did a lot of planning this past year. As a former intelligence officer, planning ensures missions are completed and soldiers get back to their families. As the Commissioner of Agriculture, plans help identify weaknesses and strengths, as well as opportunities for growth. The West Virginia Agriculture Advisory Board has set out to create a 5-year strategic plan for how to grow the agricultural economy in West Virginia. Five hundred people completed a public survey in addition to over 400 people who attended community stakeholder meetings to provide input. Our next step is to bring this data to the Legislature as we develop a final plan for early next year.

The WVDA, in collaboration with the West Virginia Department of Education and West Virginia University Extension Service, announced a partnership to expand market opportunities for farmers. Under a USDA Farm to School Implementation Grant, we will work together to develop a strategic plan for farm-to-school in West Virginia. The goal is to increase the availability of fresh foods in West Virginia

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schools, as well as new market opportunities for West Virginia farmers. We have a lot of hope for these efforts, but we can guarantee these plans will not sit on a shelf like so many other studies do. We promise to set achievable action items that help grow our agricultural economy.

Speaking of new market opportunities, in 2018 the WVDA relaunched the West Virginia Grown program. My team and I knew this program was being underutilized; we set out to revamp the program with new benefits and branding. Our first step was to gather input through online surveys and stakeholder meetings to help guide the expansion of program benefits, as well as bring new stakeholders into the process. After two rounds of voting, totaling more than 2,400 responses from producers and the public, the WVDA revealed the new logo for West Virginia Grown. We are already working through a second phase to incorporate what we are calling “affiliate members” to expand the branding’s reach. This will include restaurants, retail establishments and grocers who show a true commitment to local products. We know there is a \$7 billion opportunity for growth through local food production; it is time we go after it.

As far as local health initiatives, we sought out partners and relationships in 2018 to expand on success stories. We know our efforts are working because partners have told us the department has never had this strong of a collaborative effort. In conjunction with Wheeling Health Right and Food Justice Lab WVU, we kicked-off the first year of the FARMacy Program on June 1st at the Wetzel County Hospital in New Martinsville. The program is encouraging patients to use produce in lieu of prescriptions for healthier outcomes. We also worked with the West Virginia Farmers Market Association, the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources and the West Virginia State Parks System to host eight farm-to-table dinners from June 14th to September 27th. Each event took place at a state park restaurant, pairing locally grown produce and products for menu items. Both programs are great examples on how to expand local, fresh food options for rural communities.

We say it all the time, but nothing is ever accomplished without the right team in place. I cannot be prouder of the folks we have brought into the department. Our team identified weaknesses within our own staff and structure then sought out qualified candidates to fill those gaps. It started with our division directors who have put into action a new, overarching philosophy beneficial to our objectives and missions. As we continue to grow and learn from one another, we promise to do everything possible to help write West Virginia’s comeback story. We are proud of what we accomplished in 2018 and we look forward to expanding on those successes in the coming year.

Kent A. Leonhardt
West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials who sits on the Board of Public Works.

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