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It's Time to Invest in Agriculture

Charleston W.Va. -- When you get to be my age, smart investments made decades ago start to pay off. Much like our personal finances, the State must make wise investments to ensure future generations can avoid tough budgetary decisions. We must avoid is intertwining the budget with the success of certain industries.

When the coal industry, the foundation of the State's budget for decades, was suddenly subjected to crippling regulations, lawmakers were faced with an impossible dilemma; dip into the Rainy-Day fund or make tough cuts for a balanced budget. If previous lawmakers would have made solid investments during the height of the industry, present day lawmakers would have not been left to clean up the mess. To guarantee we do not fall into the same predicaments of recent years, the Governor and Legislature must start working towards a brighter future through diversification. Agriculture is one those investment opportunities we shouldn't pass up.

It is time to invest in our children's future by creating policies that reverse the atrocious health trends prevalent today. We know healthy eating habits are formed at an early age. We also know our school systems are crucial in the formation of these habits. Decades ago, cooks and fresh foods were replaced with heat-and-serve methods that prioritized efficiency and cost over quality and health. Yes, the switch saved money in the short term, but in the long term it has contributed to some of the unhealthiest citizens in the United States. As health care costs continue to consume the bulk of the state budget, we can now see that these short-term savings have led to unintended consequences.

It may be too late for those who have made their way through the primary education system, but we have a chance to positively affect the next crop of students. Let's

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focus on policies that expand healthier, fresher options for our students. Let's teach children how to how make better choices. Let's allow our school cafeteria cooks to make healthy food from scratch.

Access to food is not a unique problem to our schools. When you hear about the rising number of "food deserts" in Appalachia, you might expect our landscape to be barren, lacking any vegetation. Despite having abundant, fresh water and lush river valleys, the number of West Virginians that reside in these food deserts continue to climb each year. As "big box stores" decided it's not profitable to stay in our communities, their departure have put a strain on our citizens' ability to find fresh, healthy foods. This is devastating to the quality of living for these folks. However, we can turn this bad situation into an opportunity.

West Virginia ranks 8th in apple production, 19th in broiler chickens and 39th in cattle. At the same time, West Virginians consume \$7 billion more food than we produce. There is a clear economic opportunity before us. Sadly, very few of these raw products are processed here in the Mountain State. Why? The main reason is that we lack processing facilities. Without infrastructure enhancements, products are being shipped out of state, leading to potential job loss, not to mention increasing the chance of contamination.

We need better infrastructure beyond roads if we are to scale and expand our industries. It's time we start investing in local producers. Let's find ways to encourage state institutions to source from West Virginia farmers. We should promote businesses who show commitment to their fellow Mountaineers. It's time we do a better job of connecting producers to the distribution chain. We must provide more tools to our small businesses and entrepreneurs, while ensuring regulations are fair and balanced.

Our call to the Governor and the Legislature is we need to start looking towards the future. It's time we start pursuing policies that have long-term payoffs. Our economy must diversify. Why not start with the people who produce our food? West Virginia leads the nation in small, family-owned farms. We know we have people who are waiting to grow their businesses, but we must start treating agriculture like any other industrial sector.

If you believe agriculture should be part of our effort to diversify our state's economy, lend us your voice. Tell your elected officials to join our cause. It's time we invest in agriculture.

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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