Progression is defined as “the process of developing or moving gradually towards a more advanced state.” As time barrels forward, each institution, industrial sector or culture must adapt to societal needs. Agriculture is no different. The “traditional farmer” of our grandparents’ era gave way to “big agriculture” as we know it today. Smaller farmers were pushed out in favor of mass land cultivation to feed the world cheaply. Now, technological advances are once again shifting agriculture into the modern age. Big is becoming small as efficiencies and conservation move to the forefront.

What has brought on these changes is simply a shift in the market. As food prices over the last decade have been mostly stagnant, profit margins have continued to shrink for the average farmer. This is true despite the average American spending roughly 13 percent of their annual income on food each year. Shrinking profits make entering the agricultural workforce less attractive and therefore, harder to recruit new generations of farmers.

Fewer farmers means agriculture, like any business, is becoming more reliant on innovation and technology as it adapts to today’s fast paced economy. Clearly, industry leaders must work smarter not harder on how we grow our food. Combine this shift with renewed efforts for conservation, efficiency and maximizing land use, the current climate has become ripe for innovation. Innovation is an opportunity for West Virginia’s own agricultural sector to follow suit and tap into emerging market forces.

Where we as a state can make progress and grow our agriculture sector is by focusing on the industries where food dollars are concentrated. The majority,
and nearly half of each dollar spent on eating, goes towards retail, trade or food services. These are the businesses that deliver food to your table and already exist within all of our communities.

Food processing and production is the second largest sector bringing in roughly 39 percent of the market share. While West Virginia produces around $800 million worth of agricultural exports each year, we are only tapping into roughly nine percent of the production portion of the distribution change by solely growing food. The other 30 percent is in value-added manufacturing after the food leaves the farm to be processed, packaged, transported and reach a wholesale market. That means our state is missing out on vital economic development opportunities by not processing the food we grow within our borders.

Technology, which is making food production more efficient and less reliant on land usage, is only one part of the solution for shifting more food production to our state. We must also use existing infrastructure, redirect economic development efforts towards agriculture and develop a proper workforce.

Existing infrastructure includes technological development hubs, like the High-Tech Corridor, and our intuitions of higher learning. Not using these assets would be a crucial misstep for any industrial sector trying to redevelop itself. We also must tap into West Virginia’s “built-in advantages” like the abundant amount of natural energy being produced right under our feet. If we were to harness these resources, it would be puzzling why any food production company was not already considering a re-location to West Virginia.

To fill the jobs needed by these industries, West Virginia will have to prioritize an enhanced emphasis on developing STEAM (science, technology, engineering, agriculture and mathematics) careers. The good news is we already have a potential pool of candidates because of the great success we have seen through our amazing FFA and 4-H programs. These are the young people already stepping to meet the agricultural challenges of tomorrow. We just need to show them they can pursue careers right here in West Virginia.

As the next generation of American farmers shape the way we feed the world, West Virginia must not be a by-stander. We must help answer the questions of the day, as well as take advantage of the current shifts in the market. We must identify how technology and innovation can re-invent our agricultural industries. How we react to this shifting landscape will determine if we are able to move our state forward. If we do want to meet the progress necessary for a better state, our leaders must take an all-in approach to developing our economy through technological advances. Agriculture must and will be a part of that conversation.

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.