WVDA Laboratories Vital to WV Food System

There are three basic necessities for life; shelter, water and food. Each is vital to survival, but food is at the forefront of our daily lives. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Lunch plans give way to debates between coworkers. Dinner is a time for families to bond. Regardless of your pallet, food influences our mood, the ability to complete certain tasks and determines our quality of life. Despite the importance of food, most Americans give very little thought on how commodities make it from the farm to our gullets.

The lack of thought stems from a trust in the food system. This trust has grown over time because of the certainty that exists within the market. Certainty allows us to shop at our local grocery store and have faith the commodities being sold are safe. It permits us to go about our daily lives knowing the foods we eat today have little chance for possible contamination. Food security is something most of the general public doesn’t have to contemplate regularly.

Here at the West Virginia Department of Agriculture, food is at the forefront of our minds with many of our employees performing tasks crucial to the food chain of our state. This requires the Department to retain seed, livestock, plant experts, as well as biochemists, microbiologists and veterinarians. The average citizen may not realize how good these staffers are at their jobs because they are the unseen protectors of a safe, reliable food system.

WVDA labs provide crucial consumer protection to our citizens. They verify the quality of seeds, ensure animal feed and pet foods are true to ingredients listings and offer support to new, emerging industries such as industrial hemp. These labs have responded when called upon by the State Police to investigate adulterated foods, as

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well as testing foods for large scale national events. Every day our staff aims to bring confidence to the food and agricultural markets of West Virginia.

If a disease outbreak did occur, West Virginia is blessed to have quality, accredited labs that are ready to respond. This is due to the amazing work WVDA employees have strived for under the Food Emergency Response Network (FERN). Having one of the ten USDA designated labs in the country means our citizens have direct access to the tools needed during these emergencies. Response would be swift and effective, saving lives and the state economic dollars. This is only possible because of the excellent of labs we have under the WVDA; which is entirely due to the staff, not the facilities.

We clearly have a lot to be proud of when it comes to the WVDA laboratories. Maybe I am biased, as the Commissioner of Agriculture, but without a trusted food system, our citizens’ quality of life would surely suffer. Despite the great work our staff produces, the facilities they work in are no longer up to par. Buildings built in the 1950s and refitted for Department purposes 40 years ago are no longer adequate. Many Commissioners have examined this issue but failed to reach a possible solution. That is why we have endlessly pursued all options to find a way to upgrade our laboratory facilities at Guthrie. We can no longer afford to kick the can down the road if we are to maintain the food system, we all enjoy. Finding a solution to the Guthrie laboratories is long overdue.

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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