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## West Virginia Road Map to Agricultural Development

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**Charleston W.Va.** -- The West Virginia Agriculture Advisory Board and its steering committee set out last year to develop a five year-strategic plan for West Virginia agriculture. The final report released April 15 was a grassroots effort which included input from over 850 participants who either took a survey or attended one of 14 regional meetings. From the data gathered, the report concluded we must focus on specific areas to maximize the effort of agricultural stakeholders. The three main areas are connecting producers to market opportunities, creating infrastructure needed to grow the agriculture economy and developing the next generation of agricultural industry leaders.

Connecting producers to new market opportunities will help create new business, as well as scale up existing. To reach these markets, farmers must understand federal regulations as well as obtain crucial certifications like Good Agricultural Practices. Once these producers come into compliance, they will have to network in order to pool resources, as well as share knowledge of best practices.

Private market opportunities are not the only targets. Government institutions must throw their resources into the mix to help grow our agricultural sector. This includes building business clusters, as well government institutions themselves sourcing from West Virginia farmers. The Fresh Food Act and State Parks Farm-to-Table Dinners are a step in the right direction.

Once market opportunities are identified, West Virginia producers will need the proper infrastructure to tap into them. This includes the developing of co-

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ops for processing and selling to help producers tackle larger orders, expanding their capacities in the process. The next step in the supply chain is food distributors who have shown commitment to sourcing from local producers. Having the entire food network working together is key to growing West Virginia agriculture.

Transportation restrictions, like the federal rules regarding the transportation of meat across state lines, must be amended to foster growth. We cannot forget about non-agriculture infrastructure like broadband. Access to these all utilities, including the internet, are essential to the modern-day farmer. Luckily, the state legislature and Senator Shelley Capito are working towards fruitful solutions.

Infrastructure and market opportunities will all be for not without the next generation of agricultural leaders. The training grounds for those who will take up the mantle of feeding the world starts with FFA and 4-H programs. The good news for West Virginia, despite a shrinking population, FFA has seen all-time highs in membership. West Virginia is clearly doing something right, but we must do more to develop and spur interest in STEAM-based careers. Our schools should look to develop alternative education curriculums to meet tomorrow's workforce needs.

West Virginia should also explore creating business mentorship programs to pass down first-hand knowledge to the next generation. As more and more producers are finding their children do not want to take up the family passion, farmers are often desperate to find someone to take up their life's work. Veterans are a perfect group to pass knowledge and resources onto. Connecting the dots between those with knowledge to those with passion is how we grow a workforce. Farming can be easily act as the pilot project for these types of programs.

A lot of folks are doing great things to improve agriculture in West Virginia. What we were missing was a road map on how to work together. This plan has helped identify and prioritize agricultural issues which will have the greatest impact on our agricultural economy. What we must avoid is this plan becoming just another study to sit on a shelf and collect dust.

The creation and implementation of this plan will fall to the steering committee appointed by the Agriculture Advisory Board. This includes the West Virginia Department of Agriculture, West Virginia Farm Bureau, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, West Virginia Conservation Agency, WVU Extension Service, WVU Davis College of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Design and West Virginia State University Extension Service.

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But for this plan to be successful, we need all stakeholders to lend their expertise during execution. We look forward to the challenge. We look forward to working with you.

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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