

News Release
12-20-13

The Six Billion Dollar Opportunity

A column by Walt Helmick, Commissioner of Agriculture

As I approach the conclusion of my first year as West Virginia's Agriculture Commissioner there are a number of things that have become crystal clear to me. Of the many things that I have come to learn is that we have a tremendous growth opportunity right before us in Agriculture, in fact it's worth \$6 billion.

How? Well things are never simple but the explanation is rather short and the facts are there to back it up. The USDA tells us that on an annual basis West Virginians are spending approximately \$7.1 billion on food products, yet we only produce somewhere in the neighborhood of \$600 million-we all can understand that math.

Now we could take those statistics and view them as something negative, but here at the WVDA that's not how we look at it. We view it as our chance to grow our Agriculture industry while keeping those dollars being spent on food right here at home.

I have traveled to dozens of places across West Virginia in the last 11 months to speak to those directly involved in Agriculture as well as those who need to know and I've said it many times...we must get to the point where West Virginians grow and produce our food on West Virginia land, to be bought and consumed by West Virginians.

Agriculture is the largest industry in the world and will continue to be. It's time for us to make sure we are doing everything we can to advance this industry in the Mountain State. It will take time, but we're going to take the next step.

One of the first ways we can achieve Agriculture advancement, while at the same time spending West Virginia tax dollars in West Virginia, is to begin producing more consumables for some of our biggest customers-state agencies and the public schools and higher education institutions.

Our prison system, and I'm not referring to the regional jails here, purchases more than 100,000 pounds of pork every year to help feed our inmates. Yet none of those hogs are being grown in West Virginia and we are writing checks to businesses in Ohio to do it for us.

I like our neighbors over in Ohio but that's not acceptable. We're going to see to it that those hogs are raised in West Virginia and that the money stays home.

We are actively pursuing options to make that a reality and have recently visited some small hog farms in North Carolina to view their operations and to gather information so that we can have something similar here. We're going to do it.

And that's just looking at the pork that the prisons need, I could go on down a long list that includes other staples like potatoes, carrots, cabbage and a variety of other crops.

In West Virginia our public school system, grades K-12, is spending somewhere in the neighborhood of \$100 million annually to feed our kids during each academic year.

I met recently with the State Schools Superintendent, Dr. James Phares, to discuss this and how we can go about changing the way we are doing business while providing a real economic development opportunity for our farmers and those who want to become a part of agribusiness. We had a great discussion. At the end of our time he asked

me what I wanted. Well, I turned that around and asked him what he wanted and he said two things-'We want good quality products and we want them at fair and comparable prices.'

We can do this as well, I'm confident. Now will it happen overnight, of course not, but we are working diligently to expand the general public's knowledge of these opportunities and to get our current farmers, and those who may be thinking about it, hooked up with those nutritionists and school officials throughout the state that are purchasing food.

This is just a brief look at some of the things we are focused on at WVDA and I intend, as I always have, to keep West Virginians informed on how we can continue to move forward for the betterment of our state and residents.