The Maryland Farm Bureau Hotline

Legislative proposals that impact Maryland's farm community

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State Update

Maryland Rural Enterprise Development Center Website

Just over a year ago, Dr. Nick Place and the folks at the UMD Cooperative Extension launched the MD Rural Enterprise Development Center. Maryland Farm Bureau endorsed the program as a matter of policy during our annual meeting. Over the past year, Ginger Myers has been working with extension agents across the state to put together a comprehensive set of materials to help current and beginning farmers research their business and finance needs. This week the MREDC website was uploaded. You can log on at www.mredc.umd.edu . You will find an incredible amount of information on farm business planning, legacy planning and next generation farmer financing. The Dream-Plan-Implement page takes you step-by-step through the process of starting your new farm enterprise. There is also a comprehensive section on food processing – including who to contact to get the right licenses and permits if you want to begin on-farm processing. There is a distance learning page where you can download podcasts, participate in webinars and view videos about how to improve or begin your farm business. There is also a Hotlist of alternative ag enterprises, where you can get expert information on agritourism, forest and natural resources, horse boarding, grape growing, urban agriculture, value-added and more. Check out the site and certainly recommend it to folks looking for information on new farm ventures.

USDA Assigns Senior Advisor to EPA Bay Program Office

In an effort to provide a more complete picture of the work being done by Bay area farmers, the USDA's NRCS has assigned 32-year veteran Dana York to serve as a Senior Advisor to the EPA's Chesapeake Bay Program office in Annapolis. Dana will also serve as a counter point to Chuck Fox, who was recently appointed as a special Chesapeake Bay coordinator at EPA's headquarters. Dana wants to make sure Chuck Fox and EPA understand the economic realities of farming and use reasonable timeframes when targeting the installation of new practices.

In meetings with MFB staff, Dana explained that she will be working to increase working lands conservation. Dana has a number of goals as she helps to develop a new strategy for analyzing agricultural practices in the watershed. Chief among them is verifying a "baseline" to determine what farmers have already done in the Bay cleanup effort. She will also be working with the staffers who put together the Bay Model to identify more precisely where BMPs are being used. One of the biggest criticisms of the model from the farmers' perspective is that it does not accurately reflect the practices that are already in use – particularly those that were not paid for by the state or federal government.

Dana is very interested in meeting with farm groups throughout Maryland to discuss how to improve or incentivize the use of conservation practices, how scientific studies of similar watersheds suggest we should target priority areas, and how best to get BMP-use reflected in the Bay model. County Farm Bureaus looking for a speaker for their annual meetings or banquets this fall might want to consider Dana York. Call Val Connelly at (410) 922-3426 or email valeriec.mdfb@erols.com for Dana's contact information.

National Update

Farm Bureau Opposes Proposed Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Tax

The U.S. Senate Finance Committee put forward a multitude of proposals to pay for healthcare reform. One of these proposals is to impose a federal excise tax on sugar-sweetened beverages. Farm Bureau policy clearly opposes using any tax on any commodity as a means of paying for healthcare coverage. This tax would cover carbonated and uncarbonated beverages, including sugar-sweetened soft drinks, fruit and vegetable juices, sports drinks, iced teas, iced coffees and flavored milk. Sugar, high-fructose corn syrup and other similar sweeteners would all be covered, but non-caloric sweeteners would not. The proposal does not provide a specific tax amount, although others have estimated that a tax of three cents per 12 ounces could raise as much as $50 billion over 10 years.

DOL Suspends Changes to H2A Program and Announces Updated Wage Rates

The U.S. Dept. of Labor (DOL) announced on Friday, May 29 that it is suspending the final rule of December 18, 2008 to the H2A Temporary Agricultural Guest Worker Program for nine months effective on June 29, 2009, and in the meantime is reinstating the previous rule. The DOL supports its decision to vacate the final rule because the administration of the final rule was difficult due to insufficient training of the technical staff responsible for implementing the H2A program. In addition, the DOL claimed that it had insufficient resources for new systems that it believes the final rule required. The DOL will review matters in nine months and then announce its intentions.

The DOL augmented the suspension announcement with another announcement describing the updated Adverse Effect Wage Rates for 2009. The number of both H2A employers and H2A guest workers has rapidly increased in just the past four years, and is now a major source of seasonal employees, especially for labor intensive sectors such as fruits and vegetables, nurseries, etc. Traditionally, there are fewer workers willing to work on farms than there are jobs available. By suspending the final rule, certain categories of employment are eliminated from the H2A program during the suspension: Christmas trees and logging. "Incidental activities and packing" are not excluded from the H2A program because, these activities were allowed in the previous H2A program.

Local Update

Farmstead Creamery Zoning Goes into Effect in Baltimore County

Zoning legislation, supported by the Baltimore County Farm Bureau and designed to allow on-farm processing of milk on dairy farms in Baltimore County, went into effect on June 3rd after securing passage earlier this spring. Triggered by an ongoing legal dispute between a local dairyman and his disgruntled neighbor, the Baltimore County Farm Bureau along with a county-formed ad-hoc committee of stakeholders came together to examine this zoning issue and work with the Planning Department and County Council to draft the measure.

The amendments to the County zoning code in Bill 34-09 define a farmstead creamery as an establishment that is part of a commercial dairy farm, where dairy products such as milk, cheese, butter, ice cream and yogurt are made, processed, or prepared and classifies such a venture as permitted as of right in the County's agricultural zones. Provisions of the bill also reiterate the County's position that such an operation, when in compliance with all applicable rules and regulations, shall not be considered a public or private nuisance, allowing for increased protection from baseless nuisance suits. Amendments to the original legislation require the majority of the milk used by the creamery, on an annual basis, must be produced on the premises, on adjacent lands, or on land farmed by the same producer within 25 miles. Additional stipulations related to the amount of milk processed, signage, square footage of the retail operation, and packaging were included in the zoning change. While some of the amendments were not supported by the agricultural community, overall, passage of such a measure can be viewed as a positive step in removing unnecessary barriers to value-added ventures and direct marketing of local agricultural products.

Maryland's farmers find themselves in a unique position situated amongst a large percentage of the nation's population with DC, Baltimore, Wilmington, Philadelphia, and New York City all within a day's drive. For the agricultural producer willing to direct market his/her products, access to such a significant consumer base at a time when buy local trends continue to expand tremendously can mean the difference between operating in the red and operating in the black. Because farming is a business, agricultural producers face the same market vagaries, credit concerns, and supply and demand curves as other entrepreneurs, but in most cases farmers are price takers, not price makers. Simply put, to the extent that a farming operation is able to shorten the route and cut out the middlemen between themselves and the end consumer, they have greater control over the ability to operate profitably. One of the keys to direct marketing is the ability to handle, process, and sell the crop directly from the farm and these amendments ensure that very option for the county's dairy farmers. - *Contact Kurt Fuchs at kurtf.mdfb@erols.com for more information*.