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NEWS FROM NEW YORK FARM BUREAU

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NY FARM BUREAU UNVEILS NATIONAL PRIORITIES

Federal GMO labeling, food safety and trade issues are included in the public policy agenda

New York Farm Bureau leaders met with members of New York's congressional delegation this week in Washington, DC. They discussed the organization's member approved public policy priorities that will be the focus of federal activity in 2016. Following the visits, New York Farm Bureau President Dean Norton and Elizabeth Wolters, NYFB's Associate Director of National Affairs, held a press conference call with reporters this morning to publicly unveil the priorities. The priorities are listed below.

GMO LABELING

New York's visit was timely with next week's expected markup of Senator Pat Robert's bill that would establish national standards for the labeling of products that contain genetically modified organisms (GMOs). GMO labeling is an important issue in New York State as a proposed bill looks to create a statewide label for ingredients created with the assistance of biotechnology. This disregards the clear scientific evidence that shows the food is just as safe and nutritious as ingredients bred using more traditional methods. New York Farm Bureau opposes a statewide approach because it would create a patchwork of labeling laws that would prove costly for New York farmers and consumers alike. Because of the concern, New York Farm Bureau is currently supportive of Senator Robert's bill.

The Chairman's proposal is centered on a strong foundation to protect interstate commerce and prevent state-by-state labeling laws. It will direct USDA to initiate formal rulemaking to set definitions and standards for the labeling of products that may contain ingredients derived from agricultural biotechnology. The bill also contains an educational component to inform consumers about the safety of GMOs.

"Public policy must be based on sound science and not on fear and misinformation shared on social media," said Dean Norton, New York Farm Bureau president. "Broad or individual state labeling requirements out there today undermine the public's trust in the safe and nutritious food our farmers grow, without balancing the benefits that GMOs provide to our environment and to hungry populations around the world."

Regulations

New York Farm Bureau has long been in opposition to proposed changes to the Clean Water Act (CWA) that members believe broaden the jurisdiction from navigable waters to also including dry land. The new “Waters of the U.S.” rule will vastly increase the scope of the CWA and put an undue burden and more regulatory control on farmers and their land with no benefit to the environment.

Both houses of Congress voted in a bipartisan fashion to repeal the rule. Unfortunately, the President vetoed the measure. That doesn’t mean this issue is settled. The Sixth Circuit Court has issued a stay based on legal concerns. While it works its way through the legal system, New York Farm Bureau will continue to work with Congress to find a solution on the matter along with advocating for more comprehensive regulatory reform.

“More regulation is being heaped on businesses across the United States, and it is infringing on our ability to be successful and provide jobs, food, fuel and fiber in a sustainable way in this economic climate,” said Norton.

New York Farm Bureau was also successful this year at the American Farm Bureau Federation national meeting in Orlando, FL to pass a resolution in the national policy book related to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). NYFB is in support of allowing third party accredited individuals as well as NRCS staff to complete wetland determinations. This will help to reduce the amount of time farmers have to wait to have a determination completed. Currently, the delays of up to a year hinder what farmers can do with their land.

Immigration Reform

New York Farm Bureau has long been saying that we need a stable workforce on our farms or else the rural economy and our local food supply will ultimately suffer. Despite the political climate in Washington and the current presidential campaign, immigration reform remains a top priority for New York Farm Bureau. It is time to end the immigration stalemate and pass reform legislation that addresses short and long-term farm labor needs.

Because of the unlikelihood of that happening in 2016, New York Farm Bureau is changing its focus this year to look for reforming the H2A seasonal guest worker program. This includes modernizing the application process to use electronic submissions as opposed to the current paper applications that must be mailed to the U.S. Department of Labor. In addition, New York Farm Bureau is looking for opportunities to open up the H2A program to dairy farmers who need help year round.

“When we don’t have labor, crops get left on the trees and on the ground,” said Norton. “We need to work to find avenues to make it easier to find people willing to come to the United States to provide the labor we need for harvest or planting time.”

Until this is completed, New York Farm Bureau will work with Congress to minimize negative impacts of farm labor shortages and will oppose a mandatory E-Verify program unless and until a new comprehensive agricultural guest-worker program is in place to provide farmers with workforce security.

Food Safety Rules

Food safety is another top priority for New York Farm Bureau. Our farmers already participate in a host of food safety programs and audits, and the FDA is in the process of implementing new food safety rules as part of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA).

New York Farm Bureau is monitoring the implementation, particularly those dealing with produce and animal feed, and will be working with the FDA to balance the compliance burden with an actual public health benefit.

“It is important that the FDA works with New York State to provide both the necessary funding and training that will help educate our farmers about their new responsibilities,” said Elizabeth Wolters, NYFB’s Associate Director of National Affairs. “We also will be monitoring the roll out so the rules will be applied fairly and consistently across the country so as not to put New York growers at a disadvantage.”

Federal money should also be used to provide adequate training of inspectors and provide for inspections for foreign farms. The United States must ensure foreign farms and the goods that they produce are held to the same standards so as not to make domestic farms non-competitive and offshore our food production. If we are to be able to compete on the world market place, our farmers’ hands cannot be tied by our own rules and food should be safe regardless of where it comes from.

Trade

With a growing export market for a number of things that we produce in New York, New York Farm Bureau will continue to support the next generation of trade negotiations that remove unscientific barriers and high tariffs and provide new opportunities for our farms. This includes the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) agreement with the European Union.

The TPP agreement is expected to increase cash receipts and net exports from New York by \$111.4 million and \$66.2 million per year respectively. It is estimated that the increased marketing opportunities for New York’s farmers and ranchers will add more than 500 jobs to the New York economy.

“These trade agreements are great for our farmers to improve access to markets,” said Wolters.

New York Farm Bureau will also continue to oppose limitations on the use of geographic indicators. Restricting geographical names for food, like feta and parmesan, would inhibit the marketability and competitiveness of U.S. food products.

“New York agriculture is a large part of the state’s economy. We have nearly 36,000 farms and more than 200,000 jobs in totality when you include processing and on farm jobs. We are working to continue to make sure farmers are here and the landscape is prosperous,” said Norton.