



## **NEWS FROM NEW YORK FARM BUREAU**

Contact: Steve Ammerman, Manager of Public Affairs  
518-431-5643 (Office) 518-573-3617 (Cell), sammerman@nyfb.org

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## **NEW YORK FARM BUREAU RELEASES 2016 STATE LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES**

New York Farm Bureau released its 2016 state priorities today that focus on improving conditions in New York State to allow for agricultural growth. NYFB President Dean Norton laid out the legislative agenda during a press conference call with the media that included NYFB's Public Policy Director Jeff Williams.

The number one issue for New York Farm Bureau this year is to strongly oppose the \$15 minimum wage. The plan would dramatically impact our farms competitiveness and cost them an estimated \$500 million in additional annual labor costs alone. That would be crushing in a year like this one, when milk and commodity prices are significantly lower.

President Norton noted that the average agricultural wage in New York State is \$12.39/hour, well above the current minimum, but an increase will force wages up across the board, including those already making more than the minimum based on skill and experience. Additional costs will rise as well for payroll taxes like unemployment insurance and FICA. Other expenses will come from increased costs for goods and services that farms must purchase.

"The Governor's minimum wage proposal makes New York completely uncompetitive with the other agricultural states. When Pennsylvania's minimum wage is \$7.25 and New York's is \$15, how can our farms and other businesses compete? The answer, unfortunately, is to reduce labor costs or shut down," said Norton.

Norton added that New York Farm Bureau will hold lawmakers accountable on this issue, and remind its members of how their representatives voted.

State funding for critical farm programs is also a top priority for New York Farm Bureau. The Governor included a number of things in his budget plan, which also includes his minimum wage proposal, which would help the farm industry. This includes increased funding for the Environmental Protection Fund, which will assist farms with water quality, conservation and farmland protection programs.

New York Farm Bureau also remains committed to securing funding to assist schools in starting up new FFA programs as well as for agricultural education programs. The USDA estimates that there will be 60,000 new jobs a year in the farming and food industries, and we will need to have a workforce ready to meet those demands to help grow the industries right here at home.

"We have an abundance of school districts looking to add chapters and this funding would help get those chapters off the ground and started," said Norton.

A third priority related to the budget is the investment in road and bridge funding for upstate New York. The Governor is committing \$20 billion to match infrastructure efforts happening in and around New York City. The parity in upstate-downstate funding remains a priority because our farms need access to good roads and safe bridges in order to transport their goods to market.

“Many of the bridges that cross the Erie Canal are no longer accessible to agricultural equipment and vehicles because of the weight limit and restrictions,” said Norton. “This increases time and costs for farmers who may have to travel miles out of their way to get to a farm field or deliver milk.”

Another new priority for our members this year is support for transferring farm assessment functions from the Department of Taxation and Finance to the Department of Agriculture and Markets. Agricultural land assessments are determined by Agriculture and Markets under Agricultural District Law. However, when it comes to administering the assessments, it falls to Tax and Finance which can create some confusion for assessors not well versed in Agricultural District Law. Moving the process to be entirely housed within the Department of Agriculture and Markets will not only streamline the process, but it would be a common sense move to improve a valuable program for our farms.

“There is a real sensitivity and understanding of our industry in the Department of Agriculture and Markets and we feel that assessment program and functions would be much better served in that department rather than Taxation and Finance,” said Jeff Williams, NYFB’s Public Policy Director.

Finally, energy is another major priority for New York Farm Bureau. Reducing costs and increasing efficiencies for farms, while also helping farms transition to renewable energy sources, provide many benefits for agriculture. The Governor’s initiative, known as Reforming the Energy Vision or REV, is looking to be a more market-based plan than current energy policy incentives. In the past, NYSERDA has worked with farms to open up opportunities for solar, wind energy and bio mass as well as increasing the use of anaerobic digesters on dairy farms. The digesters convert animal nutrients into electricity that is returned to the grid. New York Farm Bureau will work this year to ensure REV is implemented in a fair and effective way so that rural New York is able to take advantage of the programs available, and farms can contribute to a more resilient grid and power their neighborhoods.

“We are watching this process very closely, because at the end of the day, we want to make sure that farms who want to employ more renewable energy technologies are making out equally in rate pricing and that their efforts are economically viable,” said Williams. “At this time, we don’t know how this will impact farms or rate payers.”

New York Farm Bureau establishes its priorities every year beginning at the grassroots level. Members of 52 county Farm Bureaus voice their opinions and vote on public policy resolutions at the county level. Those make their way to State Annual Meeting in December where delegates cast their votes that determine the organization’s positions on legislative issues. The State Board of Directors then established the priorities.

\*Attached picture: NYFB’s State Board of Directors presented banners today to the capitol offices of Governor Cuomo, Senate Majority Leader Flanagan and Assembly Speaker Heastie. The banners, which were signed by NYFB members, ask the leaders “to keep the barn doors open” and say no to the \$15 minimum wage.