

New York Aims to Strengthen Its Farm Economy

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New York's Governor Andrew Cuomo recently announced two state Senate confirmations, Darrel J. Aubertine as commissioner of the Department of Agriculture and Markets, and Kenneth Adams as president and CEO of the Empire State Development Corporation (ESDC) and commissioner of the Department of Economic Development.

Announcing the two events simultaneously was not coincidence, but part of a plan to build collaboration between agriculture and economic development efforts within the state.

Agriculture is a \$3.6 billion industry in New York. The state ranks high in the nation in a number of agricultural areas -- second in apples and third in dairy production. The state ranks third also in the production of grapes, wine, maple syrup and cauliflower.

Capitalizing on and developing the success of such crops and commodities is the new commissioner's goal.

"Really there is a major, major role to be played by the agricultural community in economic development in New York State," said Aubertine in an interview with **Food Safety News** about his new post. "I believe this administration, (and) to his credit Governor Cuomo, has really recognized the role that agriculture is going to play."

The new commissioner served on the Senate Agriculture and Rural Resources Committees in his previous post, representing the 48th Senate District from 2008-2010. Aubertine served in the Assembly for five years prior to the Senate. A sixth generation farmer, his agricultural foundation is strong, as are relations with the state's agricultural organizations such as The New York State Farm Bureau, which welcomed his appointment.

"Farmers and our organization have had a great relationship with him through the years, and look forward to his leadership at a critical time in the food and agriculture sector in New York," said Dean Norton, president of the New York Farm Bureau.

"I think the economic development support we can lend to farmers and small businesses comes from our ability to develop a good working relationship with Economic Development here in New York State, and I think we're off to a good start," said Aubertine. "I certainly look forward to working with him (Commissioner Kenneth Adams) on economic development issues that will benefit large and small farms, farms across the state but also small businesses and large businesses as well, be they processing or retailing or trucking or any of the other components that touch the agricultural industry."

The commissioner said he wants the department to improve services to the agricultural community and to consumers. He said he's encouraged that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is tightening up its regulation of imported foods, because 70 percent of the recalls within New York are for imported foods. If the state spends less time on those recalls, oversight efforts can focus more on domestic products.

Prior to the commissioner's arrival, then Governor Paterson changed how kosher inspections were handled, transferring responsibilities of the Division of Kosher Law Enforcement to the general pool of 85 food safety inspectors. The shift saves the state nearly \$1 million in annual costs, but the move was not popular with those relying on the certification, who felt state inspectors might not understand the details involved.

"I'm trying to be proactive by educating all of our food inspectors on aspects of kosher," said Aubertine. "At the end of the day we will have a workforce of inspectors who are familiar with kosher, and I think we will be able to do as good a job if not better than we were doing in the past. I think there are some things that we can and are doing to advance the agenda of food safety here in New York."

In discussing the agricultural arm of the department's work, the commissioner spoke about the support the state's dairy industry lends other farm interests.

"Dairy farming, just by virtue of the fact that it's the largest sector of the agricultural economy of New York State really is the framework, if you will, that the other niche markets -- specialty crops, maple syrup, honey, (and) all the other commodities that are produced in this state -- actually take advantage of," said Aubertine. "They're able to access that framework, and by that I mean equipment dealerships, seed, feed, fertilizer, and all the infrastructure that supports any sector of agriculture in large part is supported by dairy."

However large, the dairy industry is not stable due to a number of factors, especially the volatility of pricing. The state lost 23 percent of its dairy farms between 2002 and 2007. Milk prices can fall below production costs even when fuel and feed expenses are low. Now that both are soaring, there's an acknowledgement of the need to help dairy farmers, and U.S. Sen. Kristin Gillibrand has recently proposed strategies to provide immediate support.

"There are any number of things we can do at Ag and Markets to help, not the least of which is to advocate at the federal level," said Aubertine, a former dairy farmer himself. "There's several pieces of legislation out there that relate to dairy."

Within the department's realm, he notes, the state can provide a venue for co-ops and individual producers. However, he said, not just dairy deserves the state's support.

"We can be supportive of really all commodities produced here in New York State, be it apples or some of the specialty crops, and again as I mentioned earlier, maple and honey, which I think all too often are overlooked," said the commissioner.

A significant agenda item is gathering input from farmers and farming advocates for the 2012 Farm Bill. Over the next month or more, a dozen or more forums will be held at the New York State fairgrounds focusing on different sectors of the ag community.

"We invite people to discuss their issues in any given segment of the farm bill, with the idea of putting together a comprehensive look from each of the different segments," said Aubertine.

Information collected will be brought to a regional meeting of state agricultural leaders that will take place in Vermont in early June.