



COUNTY OF BERKS, PENNSYLVANIA

Office of Agricultural Coordinator

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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LEESPORT --- PA Secretary of Agriculture George Greig addressed a crowd of fifty National Ag Day attendees at the Berks County Agricultural Center last Thursday. Celebrated in conjunction with the first day of Spring, this is an annual event that has been held nationally for the past forty years. In Berks County, the day is marked by a special event recognizing the importance of the farm and food industries, along with welcoming the first babies born at both the Reading and St. Joseph's hospitals.

As the featured speaker, Secretary Greig made his first visit to the Berks County Agricultural Center, although he has attended numerous events in the county since being appointed in February 2011. Along with updating the audience on Governor Tom Corbett's budget proposal, Secretary Greig mentioned several pieces of legislation that have been enacted that benefit farm families. One specific accomplishment dealt with eliminating the state's inheritance tax on working family farms, allowing surviving families to invest in their farms rather than paying burdensome taxes. Elimination of the capital franchise tax by January 2014 will also help Pennsylvania's largest business which is agriculture, the Secretary said, and will make us more competitive in attracting food companies to locate here.

Secretary Greig noted that farmers are benefitting from the Marcellus shale drilling both as landowners and more broadly since fertilizer plants are looking at the region because of the natural gas availability. With Philadelphia's international port being improved through dredging, the opportunities for food exports are tremendous, he said. "Opportunities in agriculture are fantastic," Greig commented. In 2011, Pennsylvania exported 61,000 head of dairy cattle; and in 2012, that number increased to roughly 73,000 head. Selling local foods using the PA Preferred branding program is also an advantage for Pennsylvania farmers and food manufacturers, Greig said, noting that 93% of people surveyed want to buy their food locally. "That keeps money in the community and benefits farmers," he said.

The county's farmland preservation program was applauded by Secretary Greig. He noted that more than 65,000 acres of the state's total amount of preserved farmland is in Berks County. "We need seven and three-quarter million acres of land to feed the people of Pennsylvania," Greig pointed out. "We have preserved 471,000 acres to date across the Commonwealth."

A hundred years ago farming was more labor intensive, commented the Secretary. Through innovations in agriculture, farmers found an easier and more efficient way to produce food. Fifty years ago, one farmer could feed 25 people. Today that number has increased to 144. Greig credits technological advancements for the productivity increases. "Tractors today cost as much as my farm cost 50 years ago," he said. Large equipment has replaced farm workers. "Immigrant labor fills some of the labor needs on farms," Greig said. "Most people don't want to do the physical work that farming entails."

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Greig pointed out that Pennsylvania is situated in the middle of 60% of the United States' population and 50% of the Canadian population. These people live within an eight hour drive, he noted. He is encouraged that Pennsylvania will continue to excel as an agricultural state and serves as a model for many federal programs dealing with food safety. Dairy product exports have increased by ten percent over the past five years, Greig mentioned. The Secretary has met with seven foreign countries who have come to Pennsylvania looking to import food since they can no longer feed their citizens.

"We are just a weather event away from not being able to feed ourselves," stressed Secretary Greig, in noting the importance of keeping agriculture a leading industry.

Transitioning family farms from one generation to the next was also part of the National Ag Day meeting last week. Darlene Livingston, executive director of PA Farm Link, shared information on how her organization helps families continue the farming enterprise, bringing older and younger farmers into the process. She noted that sometimes the best thing for the farm is transitioning it to a non-family member. Transitioning the family farm will be part of a workshop on April 18th at the Berks Agricultural Center.

After the meeting, Betsy Sattazahn, state president of the Farm Women Societies linked up BARN's Ag Day Baby baskets with the day's first arrivals.

"Sometimes it can be a bit nerve-wracking waiting for the hospitals to call and let us know the babies have arrived," said Berks County Agricultural Coordinator Sheila Miller. "I am sure it isn't even close to the feelings of the new babies' relatives, but trying to make sure our Ag Day advocates get to the hospital on time is sometimes challenging." Miller credits the Farm Women Society of Berks County for helping organize the gift basket filled with items that reflect the farm community. "A hand-knitted baby afghan made by Bethel Township farmer Sandra Manbeck, bibs, clothing, books, stuffed animals, a \$25 Redner's gift card, and many other items are gifts from the Berks Agricultural Resource Network and its members that hopefully will be a special memory for the lucky families," she said.

At Reading Hospital and Medical Center, Julia Elizabeth was born to Michele and John Baranczyk of Blandon on Thursday morning and weighed 7 lbs. 10 oz, was 20" long, and was one week early. At St. Josephs Hospital, Melissa Guardado of Reading welcomed Carmelo Anthonyray in the afternoon. He weighed 7 Lbs. 7 oz. and was 18-3/4" long.

For more information, contact Sheila Miller, Berks Agricultural Coordinator at 610-898-5482 or smiller@countyofberks.com.

Photos next page.

Photo:



PA Secretary of Agriculture George Greig presents Berks Agricultural Resource Network President Ray Davis with Governor Tom Corbett's National Ag Week Proclamation.



BARN President Ray Davis welcomes PA Farm Link Executive Director Darlene Livingston to the National Ag Day meeting on March 21, 2013.