

**Committee on Agriculture and Rural Affairs
Committee on Labor and Industry
Pennsylvania State Senate
Testimony on Agricultural Workforce Development
Dennis C Wolff, Secretary
Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture
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Chairman Brubaker, Chairman O'Pake, Chairman Gordner, Chairwoman Tartaglione and members of the Agriculture and Rural Affairs and Labor and Industry Committees, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss labor and workforce development issues in our state's leading industry. The Department appreciates that you see agriculture workforce needs as a priority and we look forward to working with you to address those issues. Pennsylvania workers are blessed with a wealth of competing job opportunities, thanks in part to Governor Rendell's successful economic stimulus package. Farm wages have increased in order to compete with other jobs, insuring that hired farm help can now expect more than minimum wage as the norm on Pennsylvania farms.

The farming industry continues to explore ways to offer competitive jobs for workers in the U.S. labor pool and to become less dependent on large-scale immigration of workers to fill our agricultural jobs. We will still need immigrant workers in Pennsylvania for the foreseeable future, especially because of our large fruit and vegetable, mushroom, dairy and landscaping industries—all of which are labor intensive ventures requiring many workers. However, the greatest workforce success story of agriculture is the reality that labor by so few can safely feed so many. The nation no longer needs half its workforce to be on farms. The trade-off is that those who remain in agriculture must be highly skilled and the field must work to attract qualified individuals.

Agriculture is a Unique Field

Agricultural workforce development needs should be considered in their unique context. Just as many other family-owned businesses are primarily staffed by the family members themselves, farmers provide as much as two-thirds of the labor on our 58,000 farms. Consider that most farmers live where they work, and their children usually help with farm chores or, at a minimum, play near large equipment. Thus workforce development must include safety training for -and about- children. When we discuss agricultural workforce development, we also discuss it within the context of the next generation of farm entrepreneurs, and attempt to determine who will likely own the farmland and who will work it.

In the past, considerations for a workforce whose first language wasn't English pertained primarily to the sectors of agriculture with seasonal labor requirements, especially fruit and vegetable growers with a limited window to get fragile crops harvested. Today all sectors of agriculture depend on workers for whom English is a second language. This has raised training needs for employers as well as employees. This need has been

repeatedly raised by the Department's Fruit Task Force, Dairy Task Force and Seasonal Farm Labor Committee.

Another cultural consideration for agricultural workforce development is the needs of the Amish community, for whom the very best workforce training web site would be useless. Training for this population requires face-to-face interaction and years of building trust.

Finally, we can't talk about agricultural workforce development without recognizing the historic role of land grant universities and the Cooperative Extension in providing professional development opportunities for farmers to learn new technologies and management practices. As a rule, the Department has tailored our programs, such as the Center For Farm Transitions, Farm Safety Grants and Amish IPM Training, with all of those considerations in mind.

New Career Opportunities Require Education and Training

Pennsylvania agriculture is blessed with a temperate climate and a wide diversity of crops and livestock, and new opportunities are emerging all the time, requiring constant training. One such opportunity is the silver lining of the suburban sprawl we have experienced over the last 30 years: a tremendous growth in our turfgrass, landscape, nursery and floriculture sectors. Another is the market demand for organic foods, which has been growing in Pennsylvania at 20% per year. That demand can only be met locally if more producers commit to a three-year transition process to become certified by USDA, during which time they must learn new management skills and practices. And, the Governor's Renewable Ag Energy Council has identified renewable energy as a rare opportunity for farmers to both lower their production costs and create a new revenue source from crops and biomass. Taking advantage of the opportunity will require a significant commitment to training. Our first step, though, is to educate people about career opportunities and attract them to the field of agriculture.

Governor Rendell and I have worked to change the image of agriculture. It is not a tradition of the past. It is a dynamic field. Our industry already offers many high-skilled, high-wage jobs. People can start at the entry level and work up to some great careers. It's still possible to become a successful, independent business owner in agriculture. We should work together to tell this story to everyone. Elementary and secondary schools should introduce agriculture as an important industry in Pennsylvania and encourage career exploration. The Department has attempted to strengthen our relationship with schools through several initiatives, including our agricultural education web site, www.marketplaceforthemind.com. This site provides students and educators access to an abundant amount of information on agriculture, opportunities for employment and lesson plans that meet the Commonwealth's academic standards.

Another key to drawing individuals to careers in agriculture is to revamp our industry's approach toward workforce development. Agricultural workforce development will be most effective when an industry-wide effort to recruit, develop, and place talented and productive employees emerges. While four-year and graduate degrees in our field have

been developed or expanded, we must place an equal emphasis on building educational programs at the secondary, certificate, technical, and associate degree levels that support careers in agriculture. Agricultural training programs should be closely coordinated with producer groups so that curriculums are kept up-to-date. Systems for matching employees with employers must be developed. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture has invested in research being conducted by Penn State to explore the workforce needs of dairy and horticultural farmers, in order to identify the most important labor problems as perceived by farmers, identify challenges and benefits of agricultural employment as perceived by current and potential farm employees, and to describe differences in farm labor efficiency and opportunities to improve efficiency.

The perfect example of a successful approach to workforce development is the relationship between the Pennsylvania Center for Dairy Excellence and the Lancaster Workforce Investment Board. Funded through grants, The Center and the Board have worked together to develop a training consortium for agricultural producers. Together, they have developed an agribusiness education program focused on dairy farm management issues and delivered the training through targeted training sessions, consultant training programs and the development of training documents and materials.

We must view agricultural employment in a new light. It no longer means just hiring someone to help out on the farm. Hands-on agricultural skills can be used to teach reading, writing, math and science. Agricultural employment requires recruiting, training and job placement.

I would like highlight two extremely successful workforce development and agricultural education projects taken on by the Department. The first is a new high school veterinary assistant program that is designed to encourage students to pursue a career in large animal veterinary practice. Collaborating with PDA and the Pennsylvania Veterinary Medical Association (PVMA), the Dauphin County Technical School (DCTS) now offers a course to students interested in pursuing a career in veterinary medicine. The program also includes an industry-recognized credential process, the first of its kind in the nation. In their final semester, students have the option of completing an on-site work study program and declaring a specialized area of interest. The ultimate goal is to encourage the students to go on to college to become a large animal veterinary technician or a veterinarian. The DCTS veterinary assistant program continues to grow. What began as an idea to supplement Governor Rendell's agriculture education and workforce development initiatives has transformed into a unique and innovative program that is gaining national attention. Eighteen states have shown interest in replicating the DCTS veterinary assistant program.

I am also pleased to report that the newly formed agribusiness program at Harrisburg Area Community College is off to a great start. The major specifically targets adults in job transitions, those already in the industry looking to upgrade their skill sets, and also high school graduates looking to further their educations in agriculture and/or agribusiness. We define agribusiness as pertaining to the entire food system, a value chain that begins with the farmer and ends with the consumer. HACC's objectives are

twofold: to provide continuing education to prepare learners for specific training offered by industries in this region of the commonwealth and also give students a bridge to four-year degrees. The full program is being offered at Harrisburg's Wildwood Campus with several classes now available at the Lancaster Campus.

One of the most exciting aspects of the major is the 'College in the High School' effort that allows qualified high school juniors and seniors to select special courses taught by their local agricultural educators who have been qualified by HACC. Students who successfully complete the class work earn three college credits which can be transferred to approximately 70 percent of the colleges and universities throughout the United States.

HACC also now offers an associate's degree in ornamental horticulture, one of the fastest growing segments of agriculture. This program is a collaborative effort among HACC, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (PDA), the Pennsylvania Landscape and Nursery Association (PLNA), and industry. While working on their studies, students will earn PLNA certification. Dovetailing with all these initiatives, Delaware Valley College will be delivering an MBA of Agribusiness starting the spring of 2007.

In order to compete with the salaries offered by other industries, we should help farmers to continue to increase their productive output per worker, thereby increasing profitability. We also need to help farmers to explore innovative ways to expand their income or to expand their savings related to new technologies, such as renewable energy. Farmers must be able to compete with other employers by having the ability to offer health insurance to their employees. People today choose jobs that provide health insurance over those that do not, even if the wage is lower. Jobs in the field of agriculture need to be perceived as secure and competitive in order to attract individuals to them. People also need to see the field as one that continues to evolve and will be dynamic as technology changes. Continued research into labor-saving technologies will enable farmers to provide higher wages and we should explore incentives for those technologies.

In summary, I hope that my testimony has helped you to better understand some of the challenges Pennsylvania agriculture is facing today in the area of workforce development. While only one percent of Pennsylvania's population is living and working on farms today, one in seven Pennsylvania jobs still depends on the food industry. Viewing agriculture in its broader context as a \$45 billion industry, our workforce development needs are clearly important to the Commonwealth. Finally, just as the renewable energy field will create opportunities for farmers to diversify their sources of income and save money, so will it create exciting new career opportunities. Time will tell what those jobs will be. I have included a news release from Penn State about that topic with my testimony.