



**Remarks by Mike Feeney**  
**Chairman, PLNA Government Relations Committee**  
**Feeney's Wholesale Nursery, Bucks County**  
Pennsylvania Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee Listening Session  
Ephrata, Lancaster County, March 16, 2007

Chairman Brubaker, members of the Senate Ag and Rural Affairs Committee, staff and guests, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Mike Feeney, and I am the Chairman of the Government Affairs Committee for the Pennsylvania Landscape & Nursery Association (the PLNA). The PLNA represents nurseries, landscape contractors, garden centers, and other aligned businesses in Pennsylvania's \$5.6 billion landscape & nursery industry. Our industry is the fastest growing segment of Pennsylvania agriculture, and we produce Pennsylvania's leading cash crop.

As the owner of Feeney's Wholesale Nursery in Bucks County, I am proud to be a part of the Pennsylvania ag tradition. Farmers, nurserymen, agri-business owners, and other like-minded entrepreneurs carry on the proud tradition of farming in an era of increasing ambivalence from local governments and other policymakers who either do not understand agriculture, or do not care to. This is especially true here in the southeast, where agriculture and suburbia increasingly collide in a dramatic, and often unfortunate, fashion.

Realizing this growing disconnect between local policymakers and farmers, the legislature took decisive action in 2005 and passed HB 1646 which created the ACRE system. I applaud those present here today who either supported or voted for ACRE, and I have already seen its fruits borne out in the rescinding of actions by townships that have come to understand that they must not restrict agriculture in violation of state law.

Since the passage of the Right to Farm Law in 1982, much about Pennsylvania agriculture has changed. The growth of labor-intensive industries, such as landscape & nursery, fruit & vegetable, dairy, mushroom, and vineyard has been unprecedented. But with growth comes new challenges. Large operations with substantial workforces face townships unwilling to permit the building of housing on the farm -- for workers who cannot afford to live in nearby communities where average incomes may range into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Fruit and vegetable producers who would bring their produce to market face increasingly difficult challenges in an era of big retail. Township zoning officials, who often seek the highest property tax revenues, are loathe to call a greenhouse an agricultural structure. "It's a commercial structure," they tell my fellow

nurserymen, “and you’ll need to submit a stack of site and engineering plans before you build it.” This is the slow bleed reality that contrasts with the actual legality of what farmers are trying to do.

For many farmers in the southeast, the bad news is ever present. Less access to services, higher taxes, local government obstruction, and loss of farmland are all causing the ag infrastructure to slowly unravel. For the farmers who continue to farm, however, there is some good news – their fresh, locally-grown products are highly desired, and high-income markets abound in the communities nearby. But how can they sell their products, if access to retail stores is increasingly off limits? Fresh foods consumed by most Americans are shipped thousands of miles to retail -- 1200 miles for the average agricultural product. To compete, and keep their farms financially secure, farmers need to be able to update the farmstead. Large, air-conditioned, brightly lit, accessible stores with a full-range of food products available are necessary for farmers to effectively sell their locally-grown products. Too few farmers have been able to build, though, due to townships that obstruct such innovative solutions. Local government obstruction is done legally with endless studies, assessments, plans, hearings, and other bureaucratic impediments to building projects. If I tried to construct my building today, for instance, I wouldn’t get away with it! This hurts economic diversity, keeps fresh products away from consumers who desire them, and threatens the future of farming in the southeast. With legislative solutions, we could better supply our communities, and more easily deliver needed fresh products to Philadelphia and other urban and suburban communities in the southeast.

I have come here today to suggest that we consider decisive action to protect and preserve our farms in the southeast. Let’s look at the Municipalities Planning Code and the Right to Farm Law. Why not simplify building standards so farmsteads can more effectively engage in commerce? Why not explicitly allow farmers the right to build housing for workers on their land? How about defining what an agricultural structure is, and recognizing that in an era of labor intensive operations, a farm needs some office space for sales and management staff? Right now, many townships are preventing farms from converting unused barn space into office space. These are just a few of the needed reforms that we could consider. Remember, the safety and accessibility of fresh food, produce, and other agricultural products is at stake. We need to protect the farmlands we cherish for future generations. Let’s start the conversation now, before we lose more farms to development. Thank you.

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