

STATEMENT OF THOMAS MAURER  
PENNSYLVANIA SENATE AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE  
LISTENING SESSION APRIL 5, 2007

My name is Thomas Maurer. I am the chairman of the Lebanon Valley Food and Farming Association and a pork producer in Lebanon County. I have lived in the County for 33 years.

From the newspaper coverage of these Listening Sessions, it is evident that you have heard a variety of concerns. One issue, however, seems to be ignored and it will trump all of the other concerns if we fail to recognize it or deal with it in a meaningful way. **It might be called the right to eat.**

The spectacular growth we have experienced over the last 150 years, but particularly since WWII, would not have been possible without abundant, cheap oil and gas. Our food system is no exception. Food production, processing, distribution and the infrastructure that supports it all rely on cheap energy.

The era of cheap energy is over. Energy prices may fluctuate, but the trend will be upward regardless of what we do. The only question is how fast. That will depend on how fast China and India increase their

demand. And at some point, the world will run out of oil. The issue is not if, but when.

Some would like us to believe that alternative energy will save the day. But each of the alternative technologies was developed in an era of cheap oil. Ask yourselves, can these technologies stand alone? Can they be built, operated, maintained or repaired without oil? Can the energy they produce be distributed to where it is needed without oil? Some, like nuclear power, are political hot potatoes.

Biofuels are the current rage. Even if we assume that the energy generated is greater than the energy required to produce it, an assumption that's questionable at best, biofuels will only meet a small percentage of our energy needs. What do we do for the rest?

One of the first consequences of biofuels is that corn prices have been pushed to record levels. The economic wizards tell us the outlook for corn is strong. I'm not an economist, but something smells bad.

First, there are too many well-financed interests that need cheap corn. I have already read about the expressed hope for reduced tariffs on imported corn to drive down the price.

Second, corn is a commodity. I can envision that once farmers are committed, i.e. the seed's in the ground, projected record yields will be the justification for a sharp drop in corn prices.

There is another issue. High corn prices will encourage crop farmers to plant corn on any acreage they can. This will reduce the acreage in other crops particularly hay. I have already heard that one hay producer has indicated that he will be plowing all but 30 acres of the 200 acres he had in hay last year in order to plant corn. So even with good yields, it seems that hay prices will go through the roof.

Although current alternative energy technologies may have some short-term benefit, we still have not dealt with what happens when oil runs out or becomes unprofitable to extract, refine and distribute. We cannot stick our heads in the sand and just pull them out every so often to champion the latest politically expedient, feel-good program. We cannot afford another debacle like the steel industry collapse of the 60s and 70s, where politicians made careers of telling the folks in the Rust Belt that the U. S. steel industry will rise again.

The situation we face is far more serious. We have no energy policy. We have a "cheapest gas possible" policy. However it's worse than that. We seem to be looking for ways to perpetuate the lifestyle of the

last 50 years, for the next 50-plus years. Maybe we can do this. Maybe we can't. But is it responsible to go blindly forward in a fog at 70 mph, run into a wall and then find out we can't?

As leaders we need to be planning how to feed our population without cheap fuel. We need to take off the rose-colored glasses and look critically at our food system. What is evident is that without cheap fuel, the only thing that makes sense is a local/ regional food system and economy. We in Pennsylvania have the resources to accomplish this. But to get there, we can't have leaders who only tell their constituents what they want to hear.

The transition from cheap fuel will be problematic even if we start seriously addressing it now. But if we wait, we will lose the opportunity of influencing the outcome. So what do we do?

- Review State, County and local laws, ordinances, programs, etc. and determine what impact they have on PA's ability to feed its population
- Direct PDA and Penn State University (and other state organizations and schools) to research low fuel-requirement approaches for feeding PA's population and fortifying diversified local economies

- Develop taxing policies that reward food production that occurs closer to where it's consumed. (This will make farmland closer to population centers more valuable for growing food rather than houses)
- Require land development to include provisions for a local source for the food its population will need (Also preserves farmland without government money)
- Encourage open, unpatented research for alternative energy options that can be built with private funds and are self-sustaining, i.e. no government money (if it needs public money, it's not stand alone)

This is a difficult task. But business-as-usual will be worse. A leader is someone who gets people to go where they need to go, not where they want to go. I'd like to finish with a story.

Several weeks ago a friend of ours took my wife and me to see a play at LVC (Lebanon Community Theater will be performing it in July). It's called Urinetown and is set in a unisex public bathroom. I agree. It sounded weird to me too.

The story is that a water shortage and related water contamination required everyone to use pay, public facilities. A dastardly, big

corporation controlled all public bathrooms and, with the help of a corrupt politician, got legislation passed severely raising the bathroom fees. Sound familiar? The population rebelled and threw out the dastardly company and the corrupt politician. Sound familiar? The victorious population gleefully resumed business-as-usual and in a short time, all died because there really was a water problem. How is the oil issue different?

Thank you