



Legislative Watch

Issues important to today's dairy farmers

MMPA calls for Legislature to Overturn Executive Order

Michigan Milk Producers Association (MMPA) is calling for legislators to overturn the Governor's recent Executive Order that eliminates the current authority of the Commission of Agriculture to oversee the Department of Agriculture and hire the director of the department.

"While we agree that our state government needs to make changes in order to operate as efficiently as possible, we do not believe the transfer of this authority in any way improves efficiency of state government," says MMPA President Ken Nobis. "In fact, we strongly believe that this approach will negatively impact the strongest, most viable industry in Michigan's struggling economy."

Governor Jennifer Granholm signed an Executive Order on October 8, that scales down the role of the Commission of Agriculture from a public body with oversight and accountability functions to an advisory role.

At this time of economic distress, agriculture remains one of Michigan's shining gems. The diversity of products grown is second to California, and many individual commodities, including milk production, rank in the top ten nationally for production. "We believe the current structure of MDA and the Ag Commission is a major reason why agricultural output, food manufacturing and ethanol production is a \$71 billion

business with over one million jobs," remarked Nobis.

"The industry has risen to this level by having a process that allows the Ag Commission to operate as a public body with oversight and accountability functions," says Nobis. "This process has served the agriculture industry well for decades. It has helped strengthen ties between the agriculture sector and government allowing for

continuity and consistency of programs."

MMPA is calling on state legislators to overturn the Executive Order because of the risk it creates for the future of Michigan agriculture. "The change has no impact on the state budget situation and denies the transparency and accountability that the people of Michigan deserve," says Nobis.

Concerns regarding the Governor's Executive Order (2009-45):

- The Executive Order removes the accountability and openness in the Department of Agriculture and its policy making process. The Agriculture Commission would only fulfill an advisory role, stripping the Commission of any of its previous authority.
- The elimination of the Agriculture Commission's role does not save taxpayer dollars nor increase government efficiency.
- It unfairly concentrates and centralizes the power in the Executive Office and diminishes the input of citizens and the agriculture community as a whole.
- The Executive Order changes to the Department of Agriculture limits stakeholder involvement in program revisions, and rule and fee discussions. This directly affects the ability to effectively and fairly manage the state's diverse and complex agriculture industry.
- We support the present bipartisan commission system that has been in place for more than four decades, including authority for the Agriculture Commission to employ the MDA director. This system has allowed for continuity and consistency of programs affecting Michigan's \$71.3 billion agriculture industry.

National Dairy FARM Program Launch

NMPPF, with support from Dairy Management, Inc. (DMI), formally launched the National Dairy FARM Program: Farmers Assuring Responsible Management during the 2009 World Dairy Expo in Madison, Wis., unveiling key components of the voluntary, nationwide program designed to bring consistency and uniformity to animal care through education, on-farm evaluations and objective third-party verification.

“Dairy farmers are passionate about the care they provide to their animals. The National Dairy FARM Program takes that producer passion and quantifies it to tell the story of dairy animal care to our customers and consumers,” said Jamie Jonker, vice president of scientific and regulatory affairs at NMPPF.

“This is a very thorough program that was created with input from all sectors of the dairy industry, including producers, veterinarians and other animal care

experts. It includes current best practices, innovations, and advances in technology.”

The dairy industry has an excellent track record of responsible management practices, said Jonker. “This program simply offers producers an avenue to demonstrate and validate their commitment to doing what’s right,” he said.

Jonker provided an overview of the program and the National Dairy FARM Program Animal Care Manual, which details best management practices for a variety of issues, including animal health, facilities and housing, animal nutrition, and transportation and handling. The content of the manual is consistent with the principles and guidelines of the National Dairy Animal Well-Being Initiative, which was introduced in 2008.

Participating producers will be provided with training materials that include a comprehensive animal care resource manual, a

quick-reference user guide, an animal care instructional video, and other educational materials. An on-farm instructor may be available from a producer’s cooperative or other source, said Jonker.

Through a statistical sampling, a certain number of participating dairy farms will be randomly selected for third-party verification.

On-farm evaluations will begin in 2010; third-party verification will follow in 2011, said Jonker.

To participate, producers, co-ops, processors, and state and regional dairy producer organizations can contact NMPPF. Costs of the program are still being determined. Implementation of the program, including cost, will depend on whether participants join the program through a co-op or proprietary processor, or as an individual producer.



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the environmental community. The combined efforts of these groups created enough controversy in the Michigan House of Representatives to result in the animal production groups being informed that unless we all could compromise, the legislation would not be brought up for a vote.

We were then at an impasse, because none of us were even sure what some of the other groups involved wanted to see changed in the legislation. But the clock was still ticking. HSUS had let it be known that it was going to start collecting signatures for a ballot initiative starting the first weekend in October if we couldn’t reach agreement. The egg and pork producers, knowing that they had the most to lose in a ballot initiative, started negotiating with

HSUS to gain a better outcome for their industries than what would result from a ballot initiative. HSUS promised that as a result of the agreement there would be no ballot initiative at this time.

I wish we could have been successful in our original intent to pass legislation that is user-friendly to everyone. HSUS, however, is a well-run organization, and we fully understand the implications for our fellow animal industry members. They didn’t have many choices. Although they are not happy with the results, they were at least able to avoid the alternative.

So where does that leave the dairy industry? Some questioned why we were involved in efforts to impose more regulations on ourselves when we weren’t even the target this time. That is a fair

question. The answer is that not only do these initiatives impact all areas of agriculture, but also we have to prepare for what lies ahead. We recognize the need, at some point in the future, to provide the people to whom we sell our milk assurances that we do treat our dairy animals in a responsible manner. We have fielded questions already about whether or not MMPA members have protocols in place for proper treatment of their cows.

When National Milk Producers Federation publishes the final rules of the National Dairy FARM program, we will study them to decide whether or not we can expect the members of MMPA to cost-effectively adopt those guidelines on our farms.

Ken