

Grange Applauds Investment in Ag in PA Budget

The Pennsylvania state budget for the fiscal year, which began on July 1, was signed into law by Governor Josh Shapiro on July 11. It contains a \$2.73 billion increase over the last state budget, reaching \$46.9 billion. Supporters applaud provisions such as the billion-dollar increase for education, while detractors say that the increase will mean higher taxes.

For the most part, agriculture was a winner. In the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture budget, not a single state-funded line item was decreased. Overall, state funding in the PA Department of Agriculture increased by 25.9%. The General Government Operations budget increased by 12.1%. Notably, the PA Preferred budget was increased by 24.2%.

A bright spot was the Commonwealth's re-commitment of support for the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. Last year their budget was slashed; not because of their program, but they became a casualty in an ideological culture wars dispute between UPenn leadership and state legislators. The veterinary program is receiving \$31.56 million and its companion, UPenn's Center for Infectious Disease, is receiving almost two million dollars. The restoration of this funding was a priority for the Pennsylvania State Grange.

Another key provision of the agriculture budget is funding towards the establishment of an animal diagnostic lab in western Pennsylvania. Matt Espenshade, Master of the Pennsylvania State Grange, shared Grange members approval of this expansion of service.

"Recent outbreaks of highly infectious diseases within animal agriculture have shown how critical rapid detection truly is. Surveillance and containment have become our best defenses, and having regional testing capabilities is vital to protecting our currently underserved farmers," said Espenshade.

The budget also includes \$31 million to help poultry farmers that were impacted by the hi-path avian influenza (HPAI) crisis pay for testing and get reimbursed for losses to their flocks.

Another plus was the establishment of a brand-new program, the PA Agriculture Innovation Fund. This \$10 million program will stimulate and help implement farm and agri-industry development of new technologies and operating system innovations.

The Pennsylvania State Grange and other agricultural groups were unsuccessful in getting a funding increase in the state budget for Penn State University's College of Agricultural Sciences and Penn State Extension. Funding remained flat at \$57.7 million.

"While appreciative that the budget was not cut, a stationary budget means that Penn State must absorb the tremendous inflation costs and expenditures from the past three years without receiving the additional resources from the state to confront them. The Pennsylvania State Grange will continue to press for comparable funding for these key institutions relative to their in-state counterparts," said Espenshade.

The budget contained other items of interest that have been supported by the Pennsylvania State Grange.

Telemedicine in Pennsylvania is now further supported by the law. Senate Bill 739 requires insurance companies to pay for health care services provided remotely. Given the shortages of doctors in rural Pennsylvania and the distance barriers to receiving in-person care, telemedicine provides critical access to much needed health care services. For many years, the Pennsylvania

State Grange has supported telemedicine as a key benefit of its push for wider broadband implementation.

Since the General Assembly will not return to Harrisburg until late September, that means a limited number of session days before adjournment in November. Among the issues that could be addressed are two bills of interest to the Pennsylvania State Grange that have a chance of passing this year.

House Bill 2309 would help dairy farmers by helping them in accessing the Dairy Margin Coverage Program, a type of insurance that covers dairy producers if the profit margin on milk falls below a critical level. The legislation has passed the House and is in the Senate Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee.

House Bill 2241 addresses the threat of lithium batteries initiating fires. When discarded, many batteries still have enough power to ignite a fire in a landfill or storage area. This legislation sets up a system where consumer education combines with enough proper recycling facilities to reduce the risk of fire. This legislation passed the House and is now in the Senate Environmental Resources & Energy Committee.

Given the role farms play in providing habitat for Pennsylvania wildlife, House Bill 2108 would place a farmer on the Game Commission Board of Directors. This legislation passed the House and is in the Senate Game & Fisheries Committee.