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Pennsylvania Retailers and Growers Discuss Challenges of Getting Pennsylvania-grown Products into Stores During Agriculture Summit

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania — Food retailers, agricultural leaders and farmers joined Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding for the Pennsylvania Food Merchants Association (PFMA) Agriculture Summit, October 11 in Harrisburg, to discuss bringing more locally grown products to supermarket and convenience store shelves. The event, hosted by PFMA in partnership with the Pennsylvania Department Agriculture (PDA), focused on helping farmers and retailers work through the challenges of getting the products to stores for consumers who are demanding locally-grown and locally-produced items.

Secretary Redding moderated the discussion with Emily Best, Tuscarora Organic Growers Cooperative; PFMA Chairman Jeffrey Brown, Brown's Super Stores; Brian Moyer, Penn State Extension; Joe Watson, Produce Marketing Association; and Darrin Youker, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau.

During his welcoming remarks, Redding noted Governor Wolf's interest in the state's food system and sourcing products locally. "What can we grow, produce and market here in Pennsylvania," Redding asked participants. "From farm to plate, consumers want to know who's feeding them. We have the opportunity to provide even more Pennsylvania-grown products so retailers can offer the fresh, local food their customers prefer."

"We are pleased to get these discussions started with agricultural leaders and farmers," said Alex Baloga, PFMA president and CEO. "Our members want to get more local products into their stores and it is our hope that this discussion will help develop great business partnerships with local farmers and producers."

Some retailers already work successfully with growers, but they would like to offer more local products, utilize technology to help extend the growing season and locate new partners. Growers and producers have logistical, certification, packaging and marketing challenges, and retailers have a difficult time connecting with qualified producers.

"Consumers are telling us that they value local above organic, so I think it begs for a local section, a Pennsylvania-grown section in all our fresh departments, where customers can buy a variety of locally-grown goods," said PFMA Chairman Jeff Brown, Brown's Super Stores, Philadelphia. "The question is how do I take all these small producers and growers and have a single program that I can commit to with merchandising, signage, and know your farmer — because it is about the person. They would like to know who is responsible for their safety and their quality. They want to know the farmer who grew that product."

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2-2-2 PFMA Ag Summit

Emily Best, general manager of Turcarora Organic Growers Cooperative, who assists nearly 50 organic fruit and vegetable growers to distribute their products, said consumer price sensitivity is becoming an issue and can make it more difficult to get buyers to purchase items that they can buy elsewhere for a cheaper price.

Joe Watson, vice president of domestic business development for the Product Marketing Association, saw great success with retailer-producer partnerships during his 32-year tenure at Rouses Markets in Thibodaux, La.

“Transparency and understanding the abilities of the producer and your needs will go far to having a long-standing, profitable relationship,” he said.

“We stand ready and willing to help our members move into new markets,” said Darrin Youker, director of state government affairs, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, which provides advocacy for 62,000 member families. He noted that retailers already carry many Pennsylvania-grown and Pennsylvania-produced products and they should market them as local.

Brian Moyer, program associate at Penn State Extension, talked about farmers’ challenges, which include proper food safety training and infrastructure. Penn State Extension offers courses for farmers, including Growing for the Wholesale Market and General Agricultural Practices.

Audience members brought up some excellent points during the discussion. They included proper training on food safety, protecting brands, sustainability, traceability and ways to decrease food waste. Attendees agreed to establish a work group to further discuss these challenges and to develop solutions and partnerships. They plan to meet again during the Pennsylvania Farm Show, January 6-13, 2018 in Harrisburg.

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PDA Mission Statement:

The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture is committed to a sustainable and safe supply of food and agricultural products in the commonwealth – from the farm to the table – and to being good stewards of the land and Pennsylvania’s natural resources. The department promotes the viability of farms, protects consumers, and safeguards the health of people, plants, animals and the environment.

PFMA:

The Pennsylvania Food Merchants Association advocates the views nearly 800 convenience stores, supermarkets, independent grocers, wholesalers and consumer product vendors. PFMA members operate more than 3,200 stores and employ more than 150,000 Pennsylvanians. For more information on PFMA, visit www.pfma.org.

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