



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

A publication of Bowles Rice LLP

Spring 2018



The Economy, Agriculture and Good Government

Kent Leonhardt, Commissioner of Agriculture
State of West Virginia

Kent Leonhardt was elected West Virginia's Commissioner of Agriculture in 2016. A retired Lieutenant Colonel of the Marine Corps with 20 years of service, he has spent the last two decades cultivating crops and raising sheep, cattle and goats on his farm near Blacksville, West Virginia.

Prior to becoming Agriculture Commissioner, Leonhardt served for two years in the West Virginia State Senate, representing the state's second senatorial district, which includes parts or all of the following counties: Marshall, Wetzel, Gilmer, Marion, Monongalia, Tyler, Doddridge, Calhoun and Ritchie.

Leonhardt earned a bachelor's degree in wildlife management from the University of Missouri and a master's in business management from Central Michigan University. He is a member of the Monongalia County Farm Bureau Board of Directors and the Monongalia County Livestock Association.

When you think of farming, what do you envision? I bet it's a vast field, full of corn, that goes on for miles. I highly doubt you think of the mountainous terrain of West Virginia. It is probably even more farfetched to think the average West Virginian realizes the impact agriculture has on the Mountain State.

Agricultural products, including timber, produce around \$5 billion for West Virginia annually. That amount makes up roughly nine percent of the state's gross domestic product. As impressive as that sounds, agricultural products produced in West Virginia only make up 10 percent of what residents consume in a year. That indicates a 90 percent opportunity for growth. This is only a small snapshot of agriculture in West Virginia, but it demonstrates how agriculture-based businesses profoundly



Commissioner Leonhardt taps a maple tree

impact our state. It's time we start taking these businesses seriously and provide them with the support they need to foster growth within their industry.

In 2018, the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) will focus on growing existing agribusinesses, as well as inspiring the next generation of entrepreneurs. To accomplish this, the department will foster partnerships to help producers explore their market opportunities. The first step, with the help of West Virginia Governor Jim Justice and the West Virginia University Extension Service, was the relaunch of the West Virginia Agriculture Advisory Board in July of 2017. The board and its steering committee are charged with developing a strategic plan for agriculture in West Virginia. To help guide the creation of this plan, the WVDA will conduct an economic impact study to gather a comprehensive outlook on the current state of agriculture in the state with the goal of determining industry gaps, barriers and opportunities for growth, growing sectors and any information related to agriculture and its economic impact.

It is already clear in West Virginia that we will have to think outside the box in order to turn the economy around. It won't happen overnight, and a single solution doesn't exist. The good news is, with innovations and new technologies, that farming in Appalachia is more viable than ever. These innovations do not require the same topographies of traditional farming, so the standard excuse of "we don't have enough flat land in West Virginia" is no longer acceptable or applicable. And with so many post-mine sites to be reclaimed and reused, this provides the perfect opportunity for innovative agriculture to be expanded in the Mountain State.



Meeting young people at the State Fair of West Virginia



Commissioner Leonhardt addresses the media at the FFA Ham, Bacon and Egg Show and Sale in Charleston, West Virginia

Appalachian farming, focused on niche, specialty crops, livestock alliances and new technologies, is a way forward for West Virginia. Whether it's expanding our maple syrup industry, working to increase food processing or creating a greater commitment to locally grown food and our West Virginia farmers, there are several areas where we can expand our agriculture industries.

The opportunity we are best positioned to take advantage of are farming methods that use the latest technological advances. Combined with our access to abundant, affordable energy supplies and all the

potential within that industry, West Virginia is uniquely positioned for transformative growth. The question is whether or not we take advantage of these opportunities. Will we fight back against creeping food deserts? Will we help our producers reach their full potential?

Taking advantage of growth can only reverse the economic and population trends West Virginia has experienced since the 1950s. If the Mountain State is to succeed, it will take good, common sense government, starting with the bureaucracy in Charleston that has refused to adjust over the last 60 years.

To combat wasteful spending, we must push forth bold initiatives to reorganize and simplify our government. Redundancies should be sought and eliminated, and authority split between agencies should be terminated. Policies formed during the Great Depression must be eroded. If businesses are to flourish, we must break down silos, collaborate more and bring forward-thinking to the state government.

It is now or never for the Mountain State. It is time for a serious effort to bring smart, efficient use to taxpayer dollars. It is time we redevelop our workforce, especially for our veterans. It is time we put West Virginia on the right path. My staff and I believe agriculture will be a part of the solution to West Virginia's biggest problems. Good government that works to grow, not hinder, businesses can bring better days to West Virginia. With the right vision, effort and initiatives, we can make the Mountain State a better place for generations to come. ▽