

Local Officials Getting Down on the Farm

As the fog lifted from the Middletown Valley on a stunningly beautiful Friday, September 8th, the Frederick County Farm Bureau, in partnership with the Frederick and Catoclin Soil Conservation Districts, hosted the third annual Soil Smart Farm Tour for federal, state and local government officials.

Attendees enjoyed a bus tour of four agricultural operations in western and southern Frederick County, to learn about each farm operation, explore the unique challenges each farm faces, and view their natural resources conservation practices.

The tour began at Valley Ho Farm, a multi-faceted dairy and cut-flower operation, managed by Chris and Jamie Derr. Their passion for agriculture was on full display as the two explained their origin story from working in other careers and agricultural operations to establishing their own. No less passionate, the two explained the current state of agricultural commodity markets and the financial risks they present to small and mid-sized operations. In a call to action, the Derr's commented on the challenging federal standards of marketing dairy products that ultimately affect the farm price of milk.

After showcasing their infrastructure and conservation practices, Jamie recalled the inception of her cut-flower business and the newly realized successes in agri-tourism from her ever-expanding enterprises. Jamie and Chris explained the necessity of diversification for risk management, and how officials ought to consider farm-level impacts when enacting new policies.

Following the Derr's, the group visited Needwood Farms, a multi-generational beef cattle operation that also offers custom deer processing services, owned and operated by the Pry Family. Attendees met on the site of what was once a bank-barn—of historic significance to Maryland's second governor—that has been converted into a covered feeding and manure storage facility with assistance from the Soil Conservation District. The ever-stoic Tim Pry led the discussion of their operation, yet was moved to tear-filled eyes when recounting his family's perseverance through difficult times and how proud he was of his family in their efforts to preserve their storied business and home. Throughout his address and tour of his pastures, the severity of the drought became clear as Tim and his father, Richard described how little grazing and winter feed remain. This, along with a vibrant discussion about the limiting local meat processing capacity, were the noteworthy challenges Tim described to policy makers.

After Needwood Farms and a delightful lunch at Othello Park, attendees ventured to the other side of Braddock Mountain to visit father and son duo, BJ and Brian Sweeney of Calico Land, LLC. Brian led the discussions as BJ continued managing the silage-corn harvest. He explained the trying circumstances of being a young, second generation farmer managing a beef, grain and

hay operation. Though Brian explained how his multiple off-farm jobs maintain a degree of liquidity for his agricultural operations, he cited the struggles of land access and cash-flow. No less, as an active member of the agricultural advocacy community, Brian warned of foreseeable consequences of upzoning agricultural lands, as well as natural resource contamination concerns from data-center development processes.

Finally, the tour concluded with Mehrle Mayne at Mayne's Tree Farm outside of Buckeystown. As one of the early agritourism businesses in Frederick, Mehrle offered a longer perspective of agriculture in Frederick. His noteworthy experience managing a public facing business with an array of agricultural enterprises was a welcomed perspective. A constant through business tenure is difficulty finding good help, having only worsened in recent years. No less, the theme across the tour stops, Mehrle petitioned policy makers to consider the impacts to the agricultural community of sweeping regulations. To conclude the tour and add a cool treat to a warm afternoon, a brief ice cream social ensued, provided by Rocky Point Creamery.

In all, the event served to strengthen the bridge between our government officials and our agricultural community. The levity of the event was coupled with meaningful interactions in which topics, unaddressable in other settings, were discussed with candor and clarity. Thank you to all who made this remarkable event possible.

Mark Townsend is an Ag Agent Associate with the Frederick County Extension Office. His areas of focus are agronomy and soil health. Mark can be reached at 301-600-3578 or mtownsen@umd.edu. This institution is an equal opportunity provider.