

COVER STORY

# LABOR PAINS

**The state ag industry is about to bust open, but only if it can find the workers it needs to go forward**

BY BILL WARNER

READING EAGLE CORRESPONDENT

**P**ENNSYLVANIA'S FARMERS are aging rapidly.

Meanwhile, the state's agriculture and related food industries are changing and growing.

What it all means is that the industry is on the cusp of an economic boom that could fizzle if it can't find enough qualified workers.

And that is a big concern in Pennsylvania, where farmers are retiring faster than they can be replaced and food-industry jobs are opening faster than they can be filled.

The state Department of Agriculture is trying to be proactive to make sure the industry's needs are met. In the nine months since Gov. Tom Wolf's administration came into office, a workforce development initiative has been created to support education and training programs for the ag industry.

Agriculture is paramount in Pennsylvania. The industry has 258,000 direct workers in the state and more than \$65 billion in total sales, including more than \$11 billion in production agriculture.

Mira Wellington fertilizes poinsettias in the Berks







**We're anticipating, in round numbers, another 100,000 jobs being added in agriculture in the food sector in the next 10 years. ... There's tremendous opportunity there. (But) we know we don't have enough bachelor of science graduates on an annual basis to fill that need."**

State Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding

Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding says the initiative is vital to keep Pennsylvania competitive on the national and global stages.

"We're anticipating, in round numbers, another 100,000 jobs being added in agriculture in the food sector in the next 10 years," he said. "That's (because of) retirements, replacements and new jobs. And that's just in Pennsylvania.

"There's tremendous opportunity there," Redding said.

However, he added, "We know we don't have enough bachelor of science graduates on an annual basis to fill that need."

The decisions that need to be

made have to be data-driven, he said.

"It's not simply saying, 'Yes, agriculture's important and we think it's gonna grow,'" Redding said. "We have to recognize that this is a question of how agriculture remains competitive in Pennsylvania. It's competitive only if we have a trained workforce."

The department brought in Scott Sheely, former executive director of the Lancaster County Workforce Investment Board, to oversee the initiative.

"We're trying to get a sense of what's the total picture; what's the big picture look like?" Sheely said. "Part of this is actually providing some better career

information as well. We're working with colleagues and other departments, but we have some things we want to do here in the department."

### Closing the gaps

Some things already have been accomplished. The department has had discussions with the Department of Education and the Department of Labor & Industry, and private industry, to see how supply can catch up with the demand for workers.

"To take the next step, what we've done is to identify some gaps," Redding said. "We have 22 priority occupations identified within agriculture and the food system. Only eight of

those actually have a defined career highway, meaning you can look at a particular occupation and follow through with your training and development, and credentialing, if necessary. That leaves a lot of others (occupations) that need development."

Somebody, he said, has to develop a highway career plan for students to follow.

"What we have to do to make this a really meaningful workforce initiative is close those gaps," Redding said.

### Myths and reality

And to shut the door on some misconceptions. Too many students and their parents think



Students in the Oley Valley High School food science lab experiment on ways to preserve sweet corn. Participating, from left, are junior Polly Prout, 16; junior Zaren Kerper, 16; and senior Nichole Millisock, 17. The agriculture industry is expected to grow rapidly in the next decade, creating demands for everything from growers to scientists.

# Aging workforce a worry on farm

**S**tate officials are concerned about the rising average age of farmers. And rightfully so.

According to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, the average age of a Pennsylvania farmer is 59.5, an all-time high. The national average age is 58.3. Thirty years ago, the average age of a farmer was about 50.

The aging farmer is a major concern for the new workforce development initiative of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, which is identifying career options for young people and providing training and education.

## Growing older

Average age of Pennsylvania farmers (principal operators):

2002  
**53.1**

2007  
**55.2**

2012  
**56.8**

Source: USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service

The oldest farmers in the state also dominate the two largest demographic groups, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service. There are 10,149 farms in Pennsylvania where the principal farmer/operator is 65 or older. There are 7,567 farms where the principal farmer/operator is aged 55 to 64. Together they make up 30 percent of farm operators who are at or near retirement age.

Retirement is around the corner for many of these folks, and the younger generation will need to step up and take over the family farm. They won't need a four-year college degree, but they will need certain skills.

"I have some kids who will be going back to the family farm when they're finished with school," said Phil Haussener, the ag-science teacher and FFA adviser at Cedar Crest High School in Lebanon County. "They'll be taking over the farm someday when mom and dad decide that they've had enough. And it's important for them to learn things like money management and dealing with employees."

Mena Hautau of the Penn State extension office in Bern Township says she is not worried about young people who were raised on a farm leaving agriculture.

"There could be some kids who never want to go back to the farm," she said, "but the reality is, their parents educate them and they do stay in ag because they get ag jobs. ... Kids who were raised on farms have really good work ethics, they know how to get dirty, they know how to get in there and get a job done."

— Bill Warner



READING EAGLE: SUSAN L. ANGSTADT

ulture  
:tor Kelly  
i teaches  
udents  
per way  
t a house

alley  
chool  
nores,  
ft, Alexa  
nacchia,  
lan  
15; and  
elly,  
k with  
fish being  
as part  
school's  
honic  
i.

of agriculture, and think of one thing: a farmer rising at 5 a.m. to milk the cows.

In reality, there is much more to agricultural and food-related careers: food manufacturing, distribution and transportation, mechanics, animal science, crop education, sales, service, and so on.

"I think we're imprisoned by our definition of agriculture in many ways," Redding said. "I would share the frustration that, when you say agriculture, society converts that to production agriculture and farming. When we talk about these 22 priority occupations, it is one of the 22, but it's not the exclusive one."

And a college degree is not needed to get a rewarding job.

"One of the things I try to encourage (students) to look at is — because many of them like machinery — we need mechanics to fix things," said Mena Hautau, an educator in the Penn State extension office in Bern Township for 21 years. "You will never not have a job if you know how to fix things. There are jobs where we need kids just not with college degrees, but we need kids with the vocational training."

There is a broad spectrum of jobs in agriculture and related fields. Kids just need to be pointed in the right direction, she said.

"All the mothers and fathers want their children to be doctors, lawyers and accountants because they're so afraid they





Oley Valley High School teacher Jeremy Deysher stands beside a new hydroponic system capable of growing 300 heads of lettuce.

won't make any money," Hautau said. "But the reality is there are so many good jobs that pay well in agriculture. They're quality jobs."

**The role of FFA**

FFA chapters in Pennsylvania high schools have a long history of workforce development. At Tulpehocken High School in western Berks County, Gene Kreitzer Jr. is the FFA adviser and teaches horticulture and ag mechanics. He says it's important to give students a broad view of ag and food careers.

"One agriculture topic I discuss with my classes is the fact that many agricultural jobs remain unfulfilled on a yearly basis," he said.

"Students have expressed interest in becoming diesel and auto mechanics and also auto-body technicians," Kreitzer added. "Those students more interested in the horticulture classes consider careers in the floral industry, nurseries and landscaping. Outside of my



Oley Valley High School sophomore Alexa Scatamacchia, 15, works with the lettuce being grown in a hydroponic system.

in agricultural courses are determined to become engineers, architects, animal scientists, plant scientists, geneticists and veterinarians."

At Cedar Crest High School in Lebanon County, the ag-science curriculum is divided into classroom/lab, FFA and a supervised

"We like to call it the three interconnected circles," said Cedar Crest teacher and FFA adviser Phil Haussener.

"That encompasses the entire agriculture experience," he said. "The whole goal is to prepare students for careers."

Haussener, in his third year

many students have been interested in veterinarian and vet-tech careers. For those not interested in attending a four-year college, there is avid interest in diesel mechanics and small-engine mechanics.

Haussener noted that the FFA also teaches life skills through Career Development Events, or CDEs, such as public speaking, job interviewing and business management.

"It's skills that any student needs to know, whether they're going into ag or not," he said.

But there are gaps in FFA and ag science, too. Of the 501 school districts in Pennsylvania, Redding said, fewer than a third have an ag curriculum.

"There's a lot of districts without any ag-science exposure at all," Redding said. "The closest that (a student) will come to agriculture is the lunch line. So we're trying to build (the workforce initiative) in a way that will have greater exposure to students." ☺

Contact Bill Warner: [billewarner@gmail.com](mailto:billewarner@gmail.com)

READING EAGLE: HAROLD HOCH