

## NY Assemblyman Magee Holds Ag Roundtable at Geneva

October 22nd, 2001

CONTACT: Linda McCandless, [llm3@cornell.edu](mailto:llm3@cornell.edu), 315-787-2417

by Linda McCandless

GENEVA, NY: New York Assemblyman William 'Bill' Magee (D-111th) held a roundtable discussion on "The Viability of NY State Agriculture" at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, in Geneva, NY, on Oct. 4. This was the second of three roundtables the chairman of the NYS Assembly's ag committee has scheduled around the state.

Among the invited guests were farmers and growers as well as major players in the ag community, including representatives from NY's Department of Ag & Markets, the Wine & Grape Foundation, NOFA NY, the NY Farm Bureau, NYS Apple Association, NYS Vegetable Growers, FarmNet, NYS Hort Society, NYS Farmers' Market Federation, the NY Christmas Tree Farmers, Cornell University, the Farm Credit and other lending agencies, SUNY Morrisville, and Cornell Cooperative Extension.



New York Assemblyman William 'Bill' Magee (D-111th) holds a roundtable discussion on "The Viability of NY State Agriculture" at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, in Geneva

[Download 300 DPI jpg photo](#)

Magee challenged the assembled group of 35 to spend the first hour identifying the problems facing agriculture in the state and the second hour talking about solutions and what the state could do to help. "New York City restaurant chefs tell me 80 percent of their clientele want New York products, but the chefs can't get them," said Magee. "I know opportunities are there for New York farmers. The question is, how can we capitalize on them."

The events of Sept. 11 were a sobering note to many comments made during the session. The 2001 budget has not been finalized in Albany-and many in the group felt strongly it should still be a priority-but the consequences of the Sept. 11 attack on New York's current budget and the 2002-2003 budget could only be surmised. Many voiced concern that it was going to be critical for agriculture to "echo a strong unified voice about the importance of the

ag components in the state budget" and "pick priorities" in what was characterized as "this whole new world."

Jim Trezise, president of the NY Wine & Grape Foundation, announced his organization's celebration of "New York Cuisine," efforts to raise visibility of New York products by pairing wine from 35 New York wineries with 20 restaurants and 12 retail stores in New York City. "It's time to buy New York," said Trezise. "We can build New York by buying New York products and services, and supporting the jobs of New Yorkers." He was the first to identify two problems that were mentioned throughout the meeting: the lack of brand identity for New York agricultural products, and the lack of a really good transportation network to get the state's foods and wines to important markets, particularly those in New York City.

Jim Allen, president of the New York State Apple Association, seconded Trezise's complaints. "New York is not the #1 apple in The Big Apple," said Allen. He cited the high cost of doing business in NYC, but felt "the time was right" to go after market opportunities in New York City.

Another issue cited several times was the loss of profitability felt by many New York state farmers. Many in attendance perceived its cause not "free" trade but "fair" trade. Some voiced concerns about competition from growers in Canada and Mexico, who out-compete New York farmers on price in "everything from tomatoes and cucumbers to Christmas trees." George Lamont, president of the NYS Hort Society, said, "We want free and equal access to markets. New York farmers cannot import apples into Canada. Access to markets should be reciprocated."

One important factor affecting profitability is crop devastation caused by wildlife. Complaints focused on one species and one species only: deer.

"The economic damage to the apple industry in the Hudson Valley because of deer is over \$2M/year," said Lamont. He would like to see the state institute a fencing program where the growers would erect high-tensile deer fences around their orchards and the state would pay for the materials. Similar programs already exist for a Graze NY program available to New York's sheep and goat farmers.

Zoning was another big issue. More local zoning boards need to recognize the "right to farm." They also need to recognize the need for small- and trailer-type housing for migrant labor in agricultural communities. It was reported that some towns are pursuing restrictions on intensive livestock operations.

Kathryn Boor, associate professor of Food Science at Cornell, was the sole voice at the roundtable representing New York's agricultural food processors. Speaking on behalf of the New York cheese manufacturers, she warned that processors were threatening to leave the state because they were anticipating a 60 to 80 million lbs of milk/month shortfall for cheese production. "These processors need a guaranteed supply," she said. There are 7,000 dairies in New York, but the number continues to shrink and few people, even if they do have the ambition, can afford the initial capital investment to put on the dairy cows and build the sophisticated milking parlors.

"If farming is profitable, there will be farmers in New York," said Laura Pedersen, who was representing the NYS Vegetable Growers. "Some of the issues facing processors are the same issues that face agricultural producers." She cited the price of power, the cost of labor and high taxes as three drawbacks to doing business in New York.

Lee Hudson, a commercial egg farmer, also complained about New York's seemingly endless paperwork-"miles and miles of it, often from competing state agencies"-and there was vigorous head-nodding around the room.

Magee was praised by many speakers for his ongoing support for agriculture. And he was optimistic about the visibility of agriculture in the legislature. "In the last two years, more and more representatives understand that they are talking about agriculture when they talk about upstate New York." He said more farmers should become "conservation-minded" to take advantage of the public's "great passion to preserve open spaces." Magee said he had met with both New York senators about including more money for New York farmers in the federal US Farm Bill. He also noted that he had tried to introduce legislation requiring "country of origin" labeling, but "supermarkets resisted it." He has introduced legislation to create AgriDevelopment Zones, much like Empire Development Zones, that will aid in economic development.

Raymond Cross, president of SUNY-Morrisville, addressed the issue of ag education and some of the programs his institution might institute to bring more young people into production agriculture. He also talked about their research into 'energy co-generation' that might power greenhouses, thereby allowing New York farmers to grow more vegetables in the winter. This project addresses the year-round supply issue that prevents large distributors from buying New York state products.

Ric Zimmerman, deputy commissioner of the NYS Dept. of Ag & Markets, noted that the state had programs that addressed some of problems, but agreed more could be done, particularly to enhance the distribution infrastructure. Programs mentioned included Come Farm in NY, the Pride of NY, Grow NY, the Farmers' Market Grants program, the Farmland Viability Grants program, and programs that help farmers work with Farm Credit. He strongly suggested that more farmers get on local town boards to affect regulations that might impact the future of agriculture in their home communities.

The roundtable ended at noon with a tour of the Station.

[NYSAES](#) | [Publications](#) | [Latest](#)  
Contact Webmaster: [webmaster@nysaes.cornell.edu](mailto:webmaster@nysaes.cornell.edu)

