

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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January 9, 2006

Senator John Nutting
Representative John Piotti
Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
115 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333-0115

Dear Senator Nutting and Representative Piotti,

As Chairman of the University of Maine Board of Agriculture, it is my pleasure to report on our continued progress during the past year. The Board, as you know, was established in 1998 to provide citizen oversight into the agricultural activities of the University of Maine, including the College of Natural Sciences, Forestry, and Agriculture, the Maine Agricultural and Forest Experiment Station, University of Maine Cooperative Extension, and the research farms operated by the University.

Investment in facilities at the University farms continued this year, highlighted by a major upgrade at Blueberry Hill in Jonesboro. Activity and improvements at each of the farms is reviewed at each meeting of the Board. An ongoing concern of the University, and the Board, has been the need for substantial capital improvements at the Witter Center, both to keep it within Federal guidelines for research facilities and to keep the facilities operational. The bond package approved in November included \$800,000 specifically earmarked for the Witter facility, money which will help keep livestock programs at the University moving forward.

One major discussion point during the year was the need to make sure that there is ongoing support for livestock agriculture within the University. The Witter upgrades will be one important step. Another is a partnership with the University of New Hampshire to work on issues associated with organic dairy production and forage production. This research, under a grant from USDA, will integrate work at the Rogers Farm, the Witter Center, and the University of New Hampshire. This is the kind of systems-based, multi-partner project in which the University of Maine can be a leader.

We learned, as did the rest of the University, that Dean Bruce Wiersma will be stepping aside at the end of this academic year. A search committee has been formed, and agriculture and natural resource industries are well represented in the process. We all would like to thank Dean Wiersma for his continuing commitment to the natural

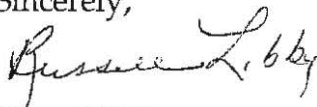
resource sector, and his willingness to reach out to all sectors of the industry on a continuing basis.

Maine, like the rest of the country, is watching the continued discussions in Washington about whether research should be formula-funded (every state gets a proportionate share) or wholly competitive with great interest. Formula funds allow small states like Maine, and specialized commodities, like potatoes or strawberries, to get a share of the Federal research dollars. A shift to wholly competitive grants would leave most states, including Maine, on shaky grounds when it comes to base funding, which in turn would endanger the financial stability of the research farms and much of the infrastructure agriculture relies on for research. Dean Wiersma, along with his counterparts from other states, fought a proposal to switch to wholly competitive funding last year, but it is an issue which is likely to arise again.

Finally, the Board established as its priority for 2006 the development of a research agenda for Maine agriculture. While some of the commodity groups have individual research committees and strategies, this is the first time we've attempted to sit down as a group and identify opportunities for Maine agriculture to move forward while focusing specifically on the role of the University and the research and extension system. Maine is fortunate to have an accomplished group of researchers and extension professionals who are dedicated to helping farmers and food processors in Maine do a better job. We'd like to help shape some of the long-term activities of the University through this process. We also see it as a critical element in identifying opportunities for Maine to move forward in the years ahead since we continue to believe that the natural resources are a critical component of any sustainable economic development strategy for the State.

I know that the members of the Board of Agriculture, along with Dean Wiersma and representatives of the University of Maine, would be happy to meet with you and discuss the issues raised in this report or any concerns that you might have as a Committee.

Sincerely,



Russell Libby,
On behalf of the Board of Agriculture

Russell Libby
MOFGA
PO Box 170
Unity, ME 04988
rlibby@mofga.org