

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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BOARD OF AGRICULTURE

2013 ANNUAL REPORT TO THE MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

February 26, 2014

Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
c/o Legislative Information
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Dear Senator Vitelli, Representative Dill and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry:

The following is the 2013 report on Board of Agriculture activities. The Board was established by the Legislature in 1998 to advise the Chancellor of the University of Maine System and the President of the University of Maine on matters concerning Agricultural Research and Extension. The Board met on March 27th, 2013 at the Cross State Office Building in Augusta in order for Legislators to attend the Board meeting at mid-day.

During the meeting the Board acknowledged the University service of Dr. Michael Eckardt as Vice President of Research, and his support of Agricultural Research and Extension.

Due to many recent Board appointments, most of the March meeting was devoted to briefing Board members on the purpose and key accomplishments of the Board, and briefings by University leaders on the current status of Agricultural Research and Extension programs. Dean of the College of Natural Sciences, Forestry, and Agriculture (NSFA), Dr. Edward Ashworth and Cooperative Extension Director, John Rebar briefed the Board on funding and budgets. With the uncertainty of the U.S. Federal budget and sequestration, both the College and Extension budgeted conservatively. Most USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture programs expected a 7.6% cut, however, at the time of the briefing, direct federal support to University agricultural research and extension programs were unknown.

Dr. Frederick Servello, Associate Dean for Research and Associate Director of the Maine Agricultural and Forest Experiment Station, briefed the Board on the recent history of joint College and Cooperative Extension faculty appointments. Joint appointments ensure that proven research is quickly applied in the field through Cooperative Extension. Choosing to make more joint appointments was an early priority of the Board. The Cooperative Extension connection helps ensure that University research is relevant to farmers because of the close interaction that occurs between the faculty member with a joint appointment and the industry segment they

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serve. Many key joint positions have been filled over the last dozen years. The faculty members help the University of Maine fulfill the research and public service, two parts of the tri-part mission of the Land Grant college that also includes teaching.

Dr. Servello also briefed the Board about The Northern New England Collaborative Research Funding Program which links the Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont Experiment Stations to collaborate on regional research projects. Today, most grants require multi-institutional proposals often with a multidisciplinary approach to an issue or problem. Linking the faculty of these similar sized Land Grant institutions across Northern New England helps to further support agriculture in the region.

Agricultural leaders discussed Ag. related bond issues with Legislators including a facilities bond for higher education that could potentially help to renovate laboratories and other related facilities; and, the bond to fund the Animal and Plant Diagnostic Laboratory. Legislators advised that it was very important to have match pledges from industry to demonstrate the importance of and commitment to the passage of the bonds.

Ralph Turner, P.E., co-owner of Laughing Stock Farm and UMaine graduate, spoke of the need for agricultural engineering support for the many new farmers coming into the business. Many times they do not have a technical background. This capacity has been lost in Extension and greatly reduced in the College.

John Rebar gave an update on Cooperative Extension. An ongoing concern is the continuing loss of base funding that results in the downsizing of the faculty work force and regionalization of programming. Recently Extension lost a large grant that funded the **Eat Well** nutrition program resulting in a large loss of staff. In the future, when retirements occur, and Extension is allowed to reprogram the base funds, their focus will be on the signature programs of 4-H Youth Development and the Maine Food System. Moving forward, Extension programs will be funded through a mix of grants/gifts, and public/private partnerships. Program delivery will continue to move to the internet, as the basic education and communication platform changes with less emphasis on delivery through county offices. The web interface results in greater outreach for fewer dollars.

Dr. Edward Ashworth gave the College of Natural Sciences, Forestry, and Agriculture update. The new School of Food and Agriculture, a merger supported by the Board, became official on July 1, 2013. Combining 3 small departments will provide critical mass and expertise to address agriculture and food from “farm to fork.” The Experiment Station provided some additional funding to assist in the Spotted Winged Drosophila solution effort, a new invasive pest that destroys soft fruits such as berries. Two plant pathologists are retiring in 2013. The college is planning to fill 3 positions, a plant pathologist, horticulturalist, and agricultural economist. The University will be exiting the Jacob Shur Plant Propagation Facility in Crystal, Maine.

The second Board of Agriculture meeting of the year took place on December 5th at the University of Maine. Based on Board input the agenda was different than past meetings

in order to focus on the technical aspects of food safety, as related to University research and Extension capacity and its interaction with the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (ACF).

Ron Dyer and Ronda Stone with the ACF Division of Quality Assurance and Regulations gave an overview of the types of food safety concerns they have seen with food storage, mobile vending, and value added food manufacturing. Sanitation is one of the biggest concerns. A number of pictures were shown of various food preparation areas illustrating unsanitary conditions including dead rodents. The Department is gearing up to assist in the implementation of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) where the key goal is moving from reaction to food safety outbreaks, to the prevention of food safety problems through education and change in practices. The ACF staff leans heavily on University technical expertise in the School of Food and Agriculture (SFA) and Cooperative Extension.

Dr. Brian Perkins with the SFA briefed the Board about the school's Food Science Research capacity that is focused on food safety. They have the ability to assist food producers to address microbiological, chemical and physical hazards. In the areas of pathogenic microbiology the research focus includes; risk assessment, developing intervention technologies to prevent microbiological contamination, developing biosensors and advanced technology for the detection of foodborne pathogens and toxins, and discovering functional ingredients of foods that protect human health. The school has and is working with numerous Maine produced foods.

Board members toured laboratories and the pilot kitchen in Hitchner Hall as well as interacting with more than a dozen faculty and technicians. UMaine staff gave an overview of the labs and programs that serve Maine food producers including; food safety, value added product development and product quality including sensory testing capacity. Board members were very impressed with the caliber and enthusiasm staff had for supporting the safe development of new value added food products.

The technical review of food safety capacity ended with a summary on how ACF department staff work closely with UMaine staff on assuring the safety of new and existing food products and food service establishments in Maine. There are numerous training opportunities for food producers to learn both the proper techniques and procedures to produce safe food, and how to develop food safety plans and meet inspection expectations. Board members were impressed with the level of professionalism and partnership between the ACF department staff and UMaine staff. This food safety program cooperation is an example of how public service employees work to both protect public health and enhance the Maine food economy.

Mid-day the Board briefed two new key administrators of the University of Maine, Provost Jeffery Hecker and Vice President for Research Carol Kim, on the diversity of Maine Agriculture and Foods and how the University is critical to furthering economic development of the food sector.

Provost Hecker assured the Board of UMaine's recommitment to the land-grant mission, community engagement and public research connections. Hecker did acknowledge that flat state appropriations are creating challenges. UMaine is aggressively working to grow the student body in the face of declining high school graduates.

Vice-President for Research Kim views the partnership between UMaine and the industries of Maine as key to keeping UMaine a player in agricultural research and education. Kim recognizes Maine's diverse agricultural needs are both a challenge and strength and that agriculture is a growth sector.

The Board continues to be a valuable vehicle for Maine's agriculture, aquaculture, horticulture and related food sectors to interact with University leadership to articulate what research and Extension capacity is necessary to both protect and grow Maine food production for the direct benefit of Maine citizens, and in support of both the economy and the environment of the state of Maine. The Board is well aware of the fiscal challenges of the state and the University. It is imperative to maintain current food related research and Extension capacity at UMaine, utilize existing resources in the most efficient way possible, and for the agricultural community to directly support these critical programs.

Going forward, it becomes more critical that the Legislature recognize and support the unique role that the University of Maine plays in the development of Maine's food and agricultural economy because of its tri-part mission of education, research, and public service as Maine's only Land-Grant institution. No other University in Maine has this explicit charge, a responsibility that goes back to founding principles in 1865. In addition to supporting the educational mission of the University of Maine, the University of Maine System and the Legislature need to fully support the research and public service missions as demonstrated by as the College and Cooperative Extension working with Maine agricultural producers. The education, research, and public service missions function as support for the betterment of Maine's citizens through the sustainable development of Maine's agricultural and food economy.

The Board is most willing to continue this discussion with the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry at your convenience this session.

Respectfully submitted,



David K. Bell
Chair