

Fruit Grower Takes Helm of NY Farm Viability Institute

The new leaders of the New York Farm Viability Institute believe the best way to move agriculture forward is to continue doing what has worked in the past for the eight-year-old institute.

"Things are not going to change a whole lot," said Appleton's Jim Bittner, who was elected chairman of the NYFVI board of directors in April.

"We're going to keep doing what we're doing: funding applied research and Extension projects that farmers need to make themselves profitable in the future. The thing we do best is to identify the projects that producers have said will help them and then hold project leaders' feet to the fire."

Bittner grows apples and stone fruit on the shores of Lake Ontario. He replaces John Lincoln, a dairy farmer from Bloomfield, as chairman of the NYFVI, a farmer-led non-profit group that awards grant funds for applied research and outreach education projects that help farms increase profits and provide models for other farms.

Lincoln remains a member of the NYFVI board, representing New York Farm Bureau, of which he is a past president. The NYFVI board is composed of members from a wide variety of commodity groups.

Bittner represents the New York State Horticultural Society. He is joined on the institute's board by Dave Wood (NYFVI Dairy Committee), Larry Eckhardt (New York State Vegetable Growers Association), Steve Griffen (Empire State Council of Agricultural Organizations), Ron Robbins (New York Corn and Soybean Growers Association) and Ted Stetler (New York Nursery and Landscape Association).

"I think we've done a real good job of making sure that we have worked with all segments of agriculture from one end of the state to the other," Bittner said. "Big farms, small farms, it doesn't make a difference."

"How we're able to make sure we're successful at it is: Anytime someone says, 'What about this group?' we say, 'Come on in and join a committee.'"

Griffen, a sod producer in Stillwater who serves as the NYFVI board's vice chairman, agreed.

"Apiary, maple syrup, organic dairy, commercial dairy, turfgrass, floriculture — we're trying to touch on every part of agriculture in New York, every size and every production effort," Griffen said.

Since its origins in the 2003 Farm Bill, the NYFVI has distributed more than \$15 million in grants to fund research projects that serve agriculture in New York. That money has produced \$7 in increased sales, increased capital investment and reduced production costs for every \$1 invested, plus more than 700 new

full-time, part-time and seasonal farm jobs.

The newly constituted NYFVI board will look to guide the organization after a challenging two-year period that saw institute-funded programs hampered by budget cuts in Albany. The 2011-12 budget saw funding restored to the NYFVI, but Bittner said there is more work to be done to ensure a steadier funding stream in years ahead.

The key will be to continue to tell the NYFVI story, and fortunately, it has a good story to tell.

"We've got to make sure everybody knows us," Bittner said. "A lot of what we do is upstate economic development, and that's an important buzz word with the governor and legislators. We've got to point out to them that if you're really interested in the economy of upstate New York, you need to be interested in the New York Farm Viability Institute."

"Agriculture is the driver for the upstate economy, and everyone says that. This is the way to help that. ... That's the real message we're trying to get through the next year."

Griffen said he looks forward to trumpeting that message.

"We've got a great track record," he said. "We've returned \$7 to the farmer's bottom line in increased sales or decreased expenses for every dollar of investment. That's good

value for their buck. We'd like to try to tell more of those stories."

"I think that's why we were funded this year. We did a better job of that."

Bittner said as important as state funding is in the equation, the NYFVI also needs to explore new avenues.

"We're 100 percent funded with money from New York state," he said. "There are programs in the (federal) Farm Bill we're eligible for. We got our start with the Farm Bill. We have to get the federal government in the mix. We can't just be funded by New York state. We have to look at the Farm Bill, and we also have to look at some private funding."

Building support for NYFVI at the state and federal levels will involve continued coalition building both inside and outside of agriculture.

"I think there are still a lot of producers across New York who are learning about the institute and what we do," Griffen said. "That's going to take a major effort."

And there are constituencies who should be supporting NYFVI but are not yet.

"There are groups who are interested in the rural landscape, local food and open space, and we have to show them the real way to do all that is to help make farmers economically successful," Bittner said. "If you can do that,



Jim Bittner

then the land will be preserved and then you'll have local food. But if the farmer isn't successful, it's not going to happen."

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