



March 20, 2009

Farm Bureau Day

The voice of agriculture was heard in Tallahassee this week as hundreds of Farm Bureau members arrived in the capital city for Farm Bureau Day activities.

On Monday night, almost 200 Farm Bureau members gathered for a legislative briefing at the Antique Car Museum in Tallahassee. After President John Hoblick's opening remarks, Sen. Thad Altman, R-Melbourne, and Rep. Trudi Williams, R-Ft. Myers, discussed legislative issues. Ben Parks, Farm Bureau's Director of State Legislative Affairs, then briefed everyone on Farm Bureau's priority issues for this session.

Armed with information, Farm Bureau members ascended Capitol Hill Tuesday to discuss agricultural issues with their legislators.

On Tuesday morning, a group including President Hoblick, the state board's Executive Committee, and others from around the state met with the Speaker of the House, Larry Cretul, R-Ocala. Speaker Cretul has long been a strong supporter of agriculture and a friend to many in the industry. Farm Bureau thanks State Director Jeff Vermillion for setting up this meeting.

After meeting with the Speaker, the group was also able to talk to House Majority Leader Adam Hasner, R-Delray Beach.

That afternoon, President Hoblick and other industry leaders met with Gov. Charlie Crist to discuss the Future of Florida Agriculture Task Force's mission of sustaining agriculture in the state for the next 100 years.

After visiting their legislators, some Farm Bureau members participated in a private tour of the governor's mansion. Others toured the Supreme Court, with Justices Charles Canady and Ricky Polston as their guides.

The Farm Bureau legislative reception was held Tuesday evening at the Leon County Civic Center. Hundreds of members mingled with 35 state legislators as well as Commissioner of Agriculture Charlie Bronson, Chief Financial Officer Alex Sink, Secretary of State Kurt Browning, and Congressman Adam Putnam.

Our success is very much dependent on the participation of our members on a county level as well as our generous sponsors. We appreciate your continued support!

Ag Industry Bills

On Tuesday, the ag industry bills (SB 1974 by Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton; HB 1133 by Rep. Ralph Poppell, R-Titusville; SB 2312 by Sen. Charlie Dean, R-Inverness; and HB 1241 by Rep. Baxter Troutman, R-Winter Haven) passed unanimously out of the House Ag and Natural Resources Committee and the Senate Ag Committee.

HB 1133 was amended to provide that counties may not charge assessments or fees for stormwater management on lands classified as ag land, if the ag operation has a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit, an environmental resource permit (ERP), a works-of-the-district permit or implements best management practices (BMPs) adopted as part of a statewide or regional program.

Springs Protection Legislation

Springs Protection legislation in the form of SB 274 by Sen. Lee Constantine, R-Altamonte Springs, was heard on Tuesday by the Senate Environmental Preservation Committee. The original version of the bill created a pilot program for four springs: Ichetucknee, Rainbow, Silver, and Wakulla.

Among other things, the bill directed the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to establish total maximum daily loads (TMDLs) and develop basin management action plans (BMAPs), and also required the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (DACS) to adopt BMPs within the areas specified in the pilot program.

A strike-all amendment that passed in Tuesday's meeting, however, expanded the scope of the bill to include all counties with a first or second magnitude spring. The amended bill now requires that all agricultural operations in the 34 affected counties implement applicable BMPs, including those for nutrient management, adopted by DACS to reduce nitrogen impacts to ground water. By Dec. 31, 2009, DACS must adopt rules for equine, cow and calf and forage grass BMPs.

The amended bill also requires DACS to adopt by Dec, 31, 2009, revised rules for animal feeding operations, addressing requirements for lined wastewater lagoons, as well to develop and implement nutrient management plans, including the land spreading of animal waste not treated and packaged as fertilizer.

The amended bill also bans any fertilizer containing phosphorus from being applied to urban turf anywhere in the state on or after July 11, 2011, unless a soil or tissue test performed by DACS states it is necessary.

While Farm Bureau is very supportive of BMPs, we have serious concerns about the fiscal implications of this bill. Due to the state's budgetary uncertainty, DACS' cost-share dollars for BMP programs may not be accessible. If the financial burden is shifted strictly to landowners, agricultural operations will not be able to endure the high cost of implementing these mandates.

In these economic times, we feel that increasing the already-significant financial challenges faced by the ag industry – one of Florida's top economic engines – would in turn only increase the hardship on our state's economy.

On a more positive note, the bill also includes language implementing the Florida-Friendly landscaping principles, developed by the University of Florida, which Farm Bureau supports.

Springs protection is also addressed by SB 2120 (Sen. Charlie Dean, R-Inverness), which creates the Florida Springs Stewardship Task Force. This bill has not been heard in committee. Farm Bureau supports.

Workers' Compensation

In 2003, the Florida's workers' compensation system was in crisis. Rates were increasing; fraud was widespread; and compliance with workers comp requirements was poor.

After much debate, the Florida legislature passed legislation reforming the state's workers' compensation system, focusing on ways to control its cost drivers. The largest cost driver was abuse of the hourly attorneys' fees. After the passage of the legislation, the average rates for workers' comp decreased by 60 percent, mainly because of the marked reduction in litigation and attorneys' fees.

Recently, however, the Florida Supreme Court overturned the language limiting attorneys' fees for injured workers, saying it was too vague and resorting back to a standard that fees should be "reasonable."

As a result, Rep. Anitere Flores, R-Miami, and Sen. Garrett Richter, R-Naples, are sponsoring bills to clarify the original language and intent.

This week, HB 903 passed out of the House General Government Policy Council and will now go to the House Floor. SB 2072 has been referred to the Senate Banking and Insurance Committee.

Farm Bureau thanks members Michelle Williamson and Monty Knox for being willing to testify before the House Committee on Tuesday.

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