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Testimony for New York Farm Bureau
Joint Legislative Hearing on the Governor's Proposed
2015-2016 Agriculture/Environmental Conservation Budget
January 28th, 2015

On behalf of New York Farm Bureau, thank you for providing our organization with the opportunity to testify here today. My name is Kelly Young and I serve as the Deputy Director of Public Policy at New York Farm Bureau. New York Farm Bureau is the state's largest general agricultural advocacy organization with close to 25,000 farm family members.

When looking at the Governor's proposed Department of Agriculture and Markets budget, we recognize the continuing economic challenges that our state faces and we are pleased that the Governor's proposed budget includes funding for critical statewide programs relating to animal and public health, on which the farm industry and food system depend entirely.

We are concerned, however, that industry promotional and research programs for the many commodities in the budget that serve as the economic development engine for the farm industry were either partially funded or not funded at all in the Governor's proposal. For a minimal amount of state investment, these programs are able to market New York products nationally and internationally. New York Christmas trees are now being sold in New York City, more apples are being sold in England, we are coming closer to beating Vermont in maple production and our wines are filling the stores on the West Coast and abroad.

Likewise, the research funded in the Agriculture and Markets budget is our industry's R and D budget, helping growers find the next value-added product to better sell what they grow, find ways to grow products better, or deal with emerging threats to what they raise. For example, maple water will be the next big energy drink or researchers will find new ways to grow sod using less water or fertilizer. I can't overestimate how critical research funding is to our maple, corn, vegetable, honey bee and Turfgrass growers in the State.

We are very concerned by the Governor's plan to increase the minimum wage to \$10.50 an hour in upstate New York. As you know, we are currently in the process of stepping up our state's minimum wage to \$9 an hour by the end of this year, which puts New York at the upper reaches of states that have a minimum wage above the federal minimum wage. Raising the state's minimum wage to \$10.50 will negatively impact farms by continuing to place our industry at a competitive disadvantage with other states and nations that have lower labor

costs. Labor costs are the single largest driver of expenses on many farms in New York. At a time when dairy prices are beginning to trend quickly downward and fruit and vegetable growers exist on a razor thin margin, we are going to penalize the very farms that can least afford the increase.

We are also closely watching the \$50 million that the Governor has set aside for the Hudson Valley and Southern Tier in his Capital budget. I am sure farmers in the Hudson Valley would support \$20 million for Farmland Conservation Easement Projects and that some farmers in the Southern Tier will welcome a farm economic investment program. This is especially true following the loss of development opportunities for the mineral rights on their land. However, dairy farmers in the North Country, fruit growers in Western New York and wineries on Long Island are left out of these programs and could certainly use similar economic investment.

We support the Governor's plan to repeal a number of "nuisance fees" for agriculture. While the amount of the fees to a grower or producer are not onerous, they are truly a nuisance to pay every time they apply for a simple permit to plant seed potatoes or apply for an H2A permit.

We also support the Governor's plan to fund improvements in the State Fair in Syracuse. The Fair is one of the primary ways consumers across the state are introduced to New York agriculture and, to put it mildly, the State Fair has fallen on rough times. Buildings are structurally unsafe and are dark and cramped for Fairgoers and exhibitors alike. This proposed investment in infrastructure at the State Fair will go a long way in sprucing up what should be the greatest showcase of New York agriculture in the State.

Similarly, county fairs across the state serve to connect consumers to the farmers in their communities and get up close and personal to agriculture. We support restoring the Local Fairs to \$500,000 in funding for fair premiums and also a new budget item of \$500,000 to be used for capital improvements across the state. Many of our fairs, located in the center of their communities, are dilapidated and overdue for significant improvements. This will not only make the summer fair experience safer and more pleasant, but help these fairgrounds draw other events to ensure their long-term sustainability.

New York Farm Bureau also strongly supports the Environmental Protection Fund which champions the partnership between agriculture and the environment by funding farm environmental programs. Programs such as the Farmland Protection Program, the Soil and Water Conservation District services, Agricultural Nonpoint Source Abatement Program, Invasive Species eradication, and Agricultural Waste Management Program are not just critically important to environmental protection but, in many cases, drive farm profitability.

Regarding funding for farm specific programs within the EPF, we are supportive of the Governor's proposed budget funding for the Agricultural Nonpoint Source Pollution

Abatement Program. The proposed 2015-2016 budget has this program slated to receive a funding of \$14.2 million. We are very pleased the Governor recognizes that funding for this program is critical as our livestock industry is operating at a pivotal time, as we look to make dairy farmers even more environmentally sustainable.

NYFB also strongly supports continued reimbursement funding for County Soil and Water Conservation Districts. The Conservation Districts serve as the front line technicians for farm projects including CAFO, AEM and stream bank restoration projects – especially during this cycle of strong winter and summer storms. The Governor's proposed increase in funding for this program is greatly needed. We also support the Governor's plans to fund research on how farms can better protect themselves and adapt to a changing climate. This will help farms better address and protect themselves from a new variety of pests and other weather challenges.

And finally, it has been recognized that farmland is the best stewardship use of land, as the impact from a farm on water quality and the general environment is much less than the impact on the environment of a brand new housing development. An additional benefit of the program is to provide the landowner with needed funding to allow for new farm investment in land, infrastructure or equipment to help prepare the farm for the next generation. As a result, we support the Governor's funding for the Farmland Protection Program in the Environmental Protection Fund.

Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have here today or at a later time following the hearing.

