

Assistant Secretary's Report to the New Jersey State Board of Agriculture
September 27, 2023

Potato Exports – Plant Industry Division and Division of Marketing and Development staff met with New Jersey's largest potato producer this month to implement a compliance agreement permitting the safe export of New Jersey potatoes to Mexico. Based on an operational work plan with USDA APHIS, an audit of the potato producing facility was conducted by federal and state cooperators. Once the audit was completed, members of the Rutgers Agricultural Experiment Station provided on-site training for grading inspectors to identify various high and moderate pests of concern. USDA APHIS established the proficiencies for this training. Federal inspectors may now base their pest freedom certification on observations made during the grading process allowing New Jersey potatoes to enter Mexico. A recent spike in interest from Mexico in U.S. potato exports for chip production drives this effort. Mexico requires that U.S. potato producers adhere to a compliance agreement with the USDA which describes the conditions and criteria used to ensure plant pest freedom and quality.

Farm to School – The Food and Nutrition Division's Farm to School team announced the winner for the "Best in New Jersey Farm to School Award" is the Joseph Capello School, which embodies a whole school culture of Farm to School. Its program can be seen in the garden where students are learning to grow their own food, in the cafeteria where they are served the food from their garden and local farms, and in the classroom where teachers are providing hands-on education through gardening, and taste tests. Also, in Farm to School, Coombs Barnyard in Salem County is the winner of the "Farmer Recognition Award" and Upper Pittsgrove School in Salem County is the winner of the Full Bloom Award.

Live Bird Market HPAI Detection – On September 14, 2023, a quarantine (KC-23-01) was implemented on a live bird market in Union County due to the detection of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). The birds at this market were sampled as part of the Division of Animal Health's routine live bird market surveillance on September 13, 2023. No sick or dead birds were identified by the inspector or market staff. A press release was distributed, and surveillance of linked live bird markets is ongoing. One linked market was found to have sick birds on September 18 and samples were collected by the inspector. The National Animal Health Laboratory Network (NAHLN) completed the HPAI testing the same day and reported negative test results. Exposure to wild birds, some sick and dying, is a common thread amongst some identified HPAI-infected premises in New Jersey and numerous other states. Within the live bird marketing system, tracing to determine the supply flocks associated with the Union facility has been completed and these flocks will have follow-up in hopes of identifying the source of infection. The NJDA DAH worked in collaboration with state and federal partners to coordinate the response and surveillance activities.

Ag Education – Erin Noble, State Program Leader for Food, Agriculture, and Natural Resources Education and Dan Delcher, an Agriscience Teacher at Essex County Schools of Technology - West Caldwell Tech Campus, attended the first in-person training of the National FFA's 2023-2024 State Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Collaborative. New Jersey joined New York, Indiana, Illinois, North Carolina, and New Hampshire. Together they took a state readiness inventory and evaluation. Through this collaborative New Jersey FFA will develop and begin implementation of a clear, comprehensive, and peer-reviewed plan to grow a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive FFA within the state.

Jersey Fresh – Marketing and Development Division staff are shipping and delivering point-of-purchase materials to retailers, writing articles, continuing to publish and disseminate Jersey Fresh social media updates. Staff also continues to assist commodity councils in marketing support including marketing assistance for the New Jersey Apple Council with its social media and photo contest, and New Jersey Sire Stakes with coordination of advertisements for industry publications.

School Nutrition Program – The Food and Nutrition Division’s School Nutrition Unit kicked off September by welcoming all its sponsors back to school with the annual “Back to School” memo, which includes program requirements and changes for the new school year. The Division also highlighted “Back to School” with a visit to Oliver Street School in the Newark Public School District on Thursday, September 14, 2023.

Nursery Inspection Program – Plant Industry Division nursery staff continue performing their annual nursery inspections to ensure plants are free from injurious insects and disease pests. Division staff conducted inspections at 189 nurseries throughout the month. Program staff completed the first of two group nursery inspections that took place in one of Monmouth County’s largest tree farms during August. There were 32 phytosanitary inspections completed during the month that certified plant material for shipment to other states or countries. There were two federal inspections of 582,000 horticultural seeds and 250 plants to Canada and Costa Rica. In addition, there were 30 domestic shipments that included 13,507 plants, 576 plug plants and 9,497,578 bulbs to California and Washington State.

Emergency Planning and Preparedness – Regional state and federal collaboration have been a focus of the state’s animal emergency response planning. An NJDA Division of Animal Health veterinarian attended the Southern Agriculture and Animal Disaster Response Alliance (SAADRA) webinar which reviewed the USDA’s National Security Division, Office of Homeland Security, and its contribution to food/agricultural resilience, security, response, and recovery efforts at state and federal levels. Also, an NJDA DAH veterinarian attended a monthly meeting that is an effort to revive a Mid-Atlantic Emergency Response Consortium (MAERC), which includes Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. One reason for the mission to re-establish the MAERC is to enhance regional emergency preparedness and response. Along with New Jersey’s largest commercial egg layer facility, there is a plan to conduct a Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) exercise with NJDA DAH, USDA Veterinary Services, and the commercial company. The date of the exercise is to be determined but will be primarily run remotely to simulate the real-life circumstance of the first few hours after a detection of HPAI at such a facility. In anticipation of this exercise, the Emergency Preparedness Coordinator has drafted a custom exercise manual and updated the state’s incident command system (ICS) chart.

Commodity Inspection and Grading – Marketing and Development Division commodity inspection and grading staff are conducting all requested USDA Terminal Market and Shipping Point inspections (average of 500 per month); scheduling and conducting USDA on-farm Third Party Audits; collecting animal feed and fertilizer samples (100 per month); updating Animal Feed and Produce Safety Inventories; verifying Qualified Exempt Farms for Produce Safety Rule; developing SOP’s for Produce Safety grant; verifying Produce Safety Farm inventory with in-person visits; conducting produce safety inspections; working on FDA contract inspections for Animal Feed for 2023-2024; and preparing risk evaluations for Produce Safety inspections.

Farmland Assessment – A farm in Sussex County contacted the Division of Agricultural and Natural Resources to clarify farmland assessment regulations regarding cannabis cultivation since it decided to lease a portion of its 77-acre property to a cannabis farm. Division staff contacted the Division of Taxation which stated the acres where the cannabis is being cultivated should be removed from total farmland assessed, yet the property should still be farmland assessed on the remaining acres. Since it is a preserved farm and they are looking to build a barn outside of the exemption area, they were directed to the State Agriculture Development Committee.