

Challenges Facing Agricultural Producers and Processors

By David L. Cook

Phillips Lytle LLP

The thought of New York tends to elicit visions of skyscrapers and the Statue of Liberty as opposed to sweeping fields of crops. But the agriculture industry plays a vital role in the State's economy. In fact, New York State is the second leading producer of apples and the fifth greatest producer of dairy in the United States.

Those successes, however, are underscored by growing pressure from a number of factors that continue to impact the wider agriculture industry in the U.S. Issues related to labor, immigration, climate change and invasive species are creating some of the most crucial challenges in the industry in New York and beyond.

Labor and Immigration

Filling both seasonal and year-round positions on farms has proven to be a challenge for the agriculture industry. Undocumented labor has long been a vital asset to the industry, often serving as the linchpin from getting food from the field to the dinner table. The ongoing debate over immigration reform leaves the agriculture industry in a precarious position with one of their most important sources of labor. In addition, some special interests have sought to impose overtime rules on the industry, something from which agriculture was historically exempt. These efforts risk driving additional labor from New York, with workers moving to states that can promise the more lucrative hours to which they are accustomed. The great irony is that the dairy industry cannot set its prices in the face of higher costs of production because of government price controls.

Climate Change

Global crop yields are in decline. It is estimated that global production will decline 2% to 6% every decade going forward. Millions of acres are being lost annually due to drought, flooding, weather volatility, shifting seasons and other symptoms of a warming planet.

Statistics like these are daunting. Although Upstate New York is not seeing significant warming, we are experiencing increased rainfall which—although not obvious to most—can have a significant impact on production. Remember, food production is no longer a local affair. New York apples and milk, in great quantities, are exported across the globe. New York is a net exporter of food products.

Water scarcity, at present, is not a concern in New York. But excess rainfall often causes decreased water quality. As precipitation increases, existing systems that make up the water infrastructure that the agriculture industry heavily relies on to operate may become overwhelmed. More rain results in more runoff, and more runoff results in an increased amount of sediments and nutrients entering the water supply, making it unusable—or even potentially unsafe—without proper treatment.

For farmers in both dry and wet areas,



David L. Cook
Partner

maintaining a proper water supply means ever-growing costs; whether it's the increased financial stress of treating water supplies or offsetting the effects of a drought.

Invasive Species and Disease

A report from the National Academy of Sciences notes a global increase in the spread of invasive species. It is estimated that annual crop loss worldwide exceeds \$40 billion. New York has not escaped

the havoc non-native species cause. As a result, farmers need to constantly invest in new pest management techniques to combat the new species and fungus that threaten crops. Again, adding to higher costs and/or lower crop yields.

Invest in the Future of Farming

In the face of daunting challenges, New York's food producers and processors continue to lead in agricultural innovation. New York has some of the best agricultural schools in the nation. Growers and producers are constantly retooling and investing in the future to combat challenges with new technologies. By

enacting new policies, new practices and new technologies, agricultural enterprises can mitigate losses and offset the increased costs they face. Investing in agriculture today directly helps farmers ready themselves for these changes and stay ahead of the technological curve. Market trends and sustainability requirements will reward the farms that have a view of the future.

David L. Cook is a partner at Phillips Lytle LLP and concentrates his practice in the area of environmental law and litigation, specifically on agribusiness matters. He can be reached at (585) 238-2012 or dcook@phillipslytle.com.



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