

Ag commissioner has much to be thankful for

By HUGH WEATHERS, South Carolina Commissioner of Agriculture | Posted: Monday, November 7, 2011 1:30 am |



PHOTO SPECIAL TO THE T&D

Areas at the new State Farmers Market include Judy's at the Market restaurant, a demonstration kitchen and retail outlets in the Corbett Building.

It is November, and so it's almost Thanksgiving. It is time for my annual look back at the year in agriculture and at the South Carolina Department of Agriculture's accomplishments. Since it is almost Thanksgiving - a favorite holiday at our house - what better time to list a few "ag and other" things for which I'm thankful.

It's been a relatively good year in production agriculture in South Carolina. Good yields in a number of crops, combined with good market prices, will push farm cash receipts in 2011 toward \$2.5 billion. Of course, it will be 2012 before we know that for sure. But we do know this: the ag sector of our economy is certainly one of the brighter spots to talk about.

But then the complex nature of farming causes some concern. While growers of commodities like wheat, corn and beans enjoy the favorable market opportunities, the livestock farmers, which are a major part of that

market, are enduring feed prices that make margins ultra thin. A major poultry operator in Georgia just announced bankruptcy last week.

On a personal note, the year certainly started off pretty well.

My wife, Blanche, accompanied me as I walked down the Statehouse steps to be sworn in for my second four-year term as commissioner of agriculture. It is a privilege to serve the people of South Carolina, and I am blessed to have family, friends and staff who have supported me along the way.

- **Economic development**

The economic impact of agribusiness, which is agriculture and forestry combined, has been measured at nearly \$34 billion a year, providing almost 200,000 jobs.

In our "50 by 20" strategic concept to reach a \$50 billion impact by 2020, we determined that a focused agribusiness recruitment effort was vital and that it should be staffed with professionals.

The S.C. Department of Commerce and the S.C. Department of Agriculture recently announced a partnership to create a new agribusiness project manager position. This is a major step in bringing new ag-related jobs and revenue to the state.

Agribusiness activities throughout the year, small and large, contributed to the growth and development of South Carolina's economy.

In May, we announced a small but viable new crop - South Carolina sweet onions.

Also in July and August, our first shipments of peaches since 1996 were sent across the border to Mexico, reopening that market for South Carolina's signature fruit.

And in August, Naturally Advanced Technologies of Vancouver, Canada

announced an investment in Kingstree to produce flax to be woven into cotton products. Flax gives farmers another crop option to grow during the winter months.

Two other announcements and start-ups in 2011 related to agriculture are significant.

Heinz Foods started operations in Florence in August, producing a gazillion (okay, actually 8 million) frozen meals a year. We'll work with them to get South Carolina farmers involved to supply the company a portion of their inputs.

We did much the same with Amy's Kitchen, which announced an investment in Greenville. This is their first location outside California, and they begin operations in 2011.

- **State Farmers Market**

I am really thankful for our new State Farmers Market - thankful because we see it being used as we had hoped. There are now more than 20 buildings at the market that are up and running.

Early in 2011, we dedicated our conference center in memory of well-known Charleston agricultural entrepreneur, T. Ashton Phillips.

The executive board room in the Phillips Market Center was named for agribusiness advocate Cathy Novinger of the Palmetto Agribusiness Council. Another feature added was the millstone fountain garden, for which Elizabeth Thrailkill of Fort Lawn donated the funds in honor of her husband, farmer and agribusinessman Earl Thrailkill.

While the Phillips Market Center is a state-of-the-art facility for hosting all sorts of ag-related and other events, the USDA Market News and Grading and Inspection Services stay very busy operating out of its new offices there.

Furnished with equipment provided by the S.C. Department of Education, the commercial kitchen is also used frequently to train school food service personnel.

Other areas now at the market include Judy's at the Market restaurant, a demonstration kitchen and retail outlets in the Corbett Building.

Of course, the farmers' sheds are the heart of the market and are very shopper friendly.

It's all part of the big picture to effectively serve the farmers of our state by creating opportunities for success.

The State Farmers Market is home to a great wholesale market as well. Early in the year, one of our large commercial wholesalers announced the company had won a multi-million dollar contract for the military, primarily because of its new facility at the market.

With a new market, you get new technology.

The Harvest Society was created to increase customer traffic through the market to farmers and vendors. Members receive text or email messages each week during peak season about the availability of produce and products at the market.

Another new feature is our partnership with Harvest Hope Food Bank to provide a collection site for produce at the market.

- **Certified S.C. campaign**

I am also thankful for our Certified S.C. Grown campaign, now 4-1/2 years old and 1,100 user members strong.

The first year, we hit the road running and launched the campaign with new logos, new web sites; the second year, we launched the Fresh on the Menu program; the third year, we launched a summer and holiday campaign encouraging folks to eat local produce and products in season.

And finally, this past year we matched wits with Ted and Matt Lee (the Lee Brothers), cookbook authors, in the Lee Brother campaigns - Lee Brother Your Supper in May and now Lee Brother Your Holiday.

Lee Brother Your Holiday is a contest for the best holiday recipes in the state. I know the people of the Orangeburg area have some great recipes to contribute.

- **Agriculture outreach**

Alliances and partnerships with other public and private organizations continue to prove beneficial to providing programs and services to the citizens of the state at a significant cost reduction in taxpayer dollars.

This past year, we began a Farm-to-School program through a partnership of the S.C. Department of Agriculture, the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control, the S.C. Department of Education and Clemson University.

The program focuses on increasing student health through eating fresh, minimally-processed South Carolina produce and supporting local farms and rural communities.

So, what's in store for 2012 and beyond? I think good things are.

Can the economic impact increase to \$50 billion a year by 2020? Yes, if we continue recruiting agribusiness expansion and development, continue finding new marketing opportunities and continue supporting research for new technology and new crops.

In the meantime, there will be upswings and downturns, but for the most part, agriculture will remain one of the most reliable and viable businesses on earth, and for that we should all be thankful.