

# Sustaining Farming on the Urban Fringe



Monthly Highlights from the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station

October, 2006

## Agricultural Leadership

*People are our Most Valuable Extension Education Product*

*Jack Rabin, Associate Director for Farm Services, NJAES*

Since 1995, Agricultural Leadership may be Rutgers' most valuable extension education contribution to New Jersey's farm community. Leadership is vital. Ray Blew, Sr. of Centerton Nurseries remembers the difficulty identifying a new Secretary of Agriculture candidate in the early 1980s, during his service on the NJ State Board of Agriculture. This shared concern for a new generation of agricultural leaders gave rise in 1995 to the New Jersey Agricultural Leadership Development Program (NJALDP).

Each two-year NJALDP class includes 25 younger farmers and allied professionals. The sixth two-year class is now in progress. By 2007, 150 men and women will have completed the NJALDP since its 1995 inception - community members who are confident, articulate, and engaged in supporting their future. Your future.

Over the last few years, I invariably find NJALDP graduates among the professional men and women I encounter. Every time. Last week at a NJDA Wholesale Vegetable Industry Task Force meeting, Alex Tonetta of Tonetta Farms (Class 2), Joe Marino of Sun Valley Orchards (Class 2), and Ben Casella of NJ Farm Bureau (Class 4) were publicly working on behalf of their farming industry. Phil Neary of Sunny Valley Int'l. (Class 2) serves on this Task Force. NJDEP is currently proposing amending and re-adopting NJ's Agricultural Water Use Certification Regulations. Many NJALDP member farmers and professionals took time submitting written comments on this regulatory issue vital to our industry this September. Most recently Bill Randolph (Class 1) was voted onto the State Board of Agriculture.



*NJ Assemblyman Doug Fisher, Cumberland/Salem Counties (center), Chair of the State Assembly Agriculture Committee with Bobby Blew of Centerton Nurseries, Inc. and Crystal Taylor of H&S Dubois Farms, Elmer.*

In my view, the most "limited resource" on New Jersey farms has never been water, soils, or investment capital. It is human capital - people. It is exercising managerial and community leadership skills. Urban fringe farmers are overwhelmed managing their operations while also challenged by land use conflicts, community and state regulations threatening their viability, or assaults on their property rights. Who articulates farmers' interests and engages in the policy process? Farm community leaders do.

**Who are the NJALDP partners?** Rutgers Cooperative Extension conducts the NJALDP in cooperation with NJ Agricultural Society/NJDA and NJ Farm Bureau. An Advisory Board guides the program. The primary partners, like Rutgers Cooperative Extension, support the salaries of staff, clerical, and facilities.



*NJ State Senator Leonard Lance, Hunterdon/Warren Counties (center) with (left to right) Eric Blew of Oak Grove Farm Pittstown, Meredith Compton of Peaceful Valley Orchards Pittstown, Ben Thompson of Pioneer Farm Credit, Flemington, and Nicole Goger, NJ Farm Bureau staff.*

**Who coordinates the program?** Mary Nikola, Ed.D., Rutgers Cooperative Extension Director of Leadership and Organizational Development, is our NJALDP coordinator.

**What is the cost of program tuition?** Each class groups' expenses are about \$120,000. This is \$4,800 for each farmer and ag related professional adult "student" during the two-year experience. This is a bargain considering the length and intensity of the program, which includes a capstone international agricultural—and cultural—learning trip. International capstone trips included destinations like Mexico/CA, Chile, Germany/Netherlands, Costa Rica, Spain, and Italy. Our NJALDP graduates not only become better farm enterprise managers, better educators, better resource managers, better input suppliers, or better researchers, they see the world from a broader global competitive view.

**Where do the funds come from?** Each participant pays \$3000 in tuition. Grants are obtained. NJALDP depends on generous gifts and donations from groups like County Boards of Agriculture and from private individuals like E. Ralph Hostetter, Chairman of American Farm Publications.

Every NJALDP class sees the political process,

with learning experiences at the New Jersey Statehouse and Washington, D.C. Members experience how farm policies emerge, and have become New Jersey's leading spokespersons. When written or testimony comments are invited on proposed legislation, I observe it is our, and your, NJALDP graduates who are testifying, writing letters to the editor, or hosting farm tours. They are confidently and fully engaged in maintaining the position of your farm-to-fork interests at the local, state, and national level. All over New Jersey, more NJALDP members are serving on local boards.

All farming and allied enterprises in NJ are conducted on the urban fringe. There are more interactions and potential conflicts between everyday citizens, and the families engaged in crops, livestock, farm markets, landscaping, fishing, aquaculture, or other production and services. We bump into each other, in both positive and negative ways, on New Jersey's roads, and in New Jersey's public policies.

What are NJALDP's future challenges? As Alex Tonetta and Joe Marino noted, "You make a sacrifice. You lose money to participate," with time spent away from the enterprise. While extremely worthy, setting aside the time challenges young people. Participation suits farm members and professionals with family members covering for them. In the future, the NJALDP may need to incorporate the time constraints of single owner/operators by creating a September through May program with fewer 2-day experiences. Funding is a challenge that you can help with. If you would like to make a gift to support NJALDP, community leaders, people who grow things in our world, please contact Mary Nikola, nikola@rcer.rutgers.edu, (732) 932-5000 ext. 611 or Jack Rabin at rabin@aesop.rutgers.edu (732) 932-5000 ext. 610. An impact evaluation of the NJALDP can be found at <http://www.joe.org/joe/2005december/rb5.shtml>