



State of New Jersey

## **BOARD OF AGRICULTURE**

### **MINUTES OF MEETING**

**February 19, 2025**

**(Wednesday)**

Public meeting notice was certified by communication on February 13, 2025.

Pursuant to N.J.S.A. 10:4-6 et seq. adequate notice of this meeting has been provided by giving written notice of the time, date, location and to the extent known the agenda of this meeting. At least 48-hours in advance this notice has been posted on the third floor, Riverview Plaza, Trenton, New Jersey; mailed to the Newark Star Ledger; the Camden Courier Post; the Trenton Times and filed with the Office of the Secretary of State.

President Bob Blew called the New Jersey State Board of Agriculture to order at 10:00 am. Board members in attendance included President Bob Blew; Vice President Lisa Specca, Kurt Alstede, David DeFrange, John Hart, Stephen V. Lee, IV, Rick Gardner and Joel Viereck. The meeting was held via TEAMS, Trenton, NJ.

Also in attendance were Secretary Wengryn; Assistant Secretary Joe Atchison, Nancy Wood, Division of Marketing & Development; Tameko Webster, Chris LaRegina, and Jeff Wolfe, Office of the Secretary. Also in attendance were Holly Sytsema, Ashley Kerr, NJ Farm Bureau, Dr. Brian Schilling, Rutgers University; Julie Hawkins, NRCS, Jeff Burd, NJ Beekeepers and Linda Walker, NJ Department of Agriculture.

### **PUBLIC COMMENT**

Former Board President Holly Sytsema commented that tree mitigation issues continue to be a problem and noted that it was critical that the IRA funding be released that had already been set aside for these issues. In addition, she reported that Sussex County did experience an extreme ice event on Saturday, February 15 into Sunday, February 16 where they experienced  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch of ice and numerous trees came down during the event along with widespread power outages that affected most of the area. She asked that the Board keep this issue in the forefront as there are trees down all over and she does not want it to become even more dangerous because of weather issues. She noted concern that with all the trees down they are just like tinder and fear that wildfire could be the next problem.

She thanked the Board for their time.

Secretary Wengryn asked State Conservationist Julie Hawkins if there was any update on the funding. Ms. Hawkins explained that the Agency is still on a pause for all funding and that they are waiting for additional guidance and would report back as soon as there was any movement.

Board member Steve Lee reported that there was a press release from the Governor's Office and DEP Commissioner LaTourette regarding a series of actions that will emphasize the importance of wildfire safety, mitigation, awareness, response and training. These actions will help reduce wildfire spread as New Jersey heads into the spring wildfire season amid continued dry conditions statewide.

Board member Kurt Alstede reported that there was a large number of producers who were funded through the first round last year for ash tree removal project through NRCS and were approved and have expended the monies to fulfill the project requirements and in many instances have paid the contractors hired to do the work and now cannot be reimbursed for something that has already been approved.

Board member Rick Gardner reported that Warren County had also experienced a bad weather event and there were many power outages and probably 90% of them were from ash trees falling. He noted that much of the acreage in Warren County is in the Highlands region. When you get into the protection zone, DEP does not allow for any removal, and this creates a bigger problem.

President Blew noted that there would be an additional opportunity for public comment before the end of the meeting.

President Blew then asked Secretary Wengryn to take over to discuss the most recent State Agricultural Convention and address some of the format changes, etc.

Secretary Wengryn reported that the Department changed much of the format of this year's Convention, starting later Wednesday, in part to allow the Next Generation Ag Summit to get underway and added some meetings throughout the week. The Convention started with the Underserved Farmers Network Resource Seminar on Monday; our Board meeting was held on Tuesday afternoon; on Wednesday we had our Leadership Meeting; and there were some educational sessions, etc. He is looking for feedback on whether we should be doing more of that. Explaining the role of the Department and its programs, what each of our divisions do. In addition, he reported that there was a lot of nervousness over the resolutions process, but we finished an hour early on Thursday, much to everyone's surprise. So by planning things ahead and doing the policy work ahead of schedule, that really paid off on the last day, but he really wanted to get the feedback from the Board members on how they thought things went so that going forward we can continue to do better.

President Blew stated that the Leadership meeting was an excellent opportunity for the leaders to speak to each other and suggested that that was something that we should try to do semi-annually, even if the meeting was held on Teams. It was a good opportunity for those groups to see what some of the common issues and common goals are. In addition, he noted that the meeting that Board member Steve Lee organized for the Atlantic, Burlington and Camden Counties to all meet was also a very productive meeting and noted that he would like to see more regional cooperation like that. He too noted that the extensive work that was done prior to the Convention by the Resolutions team made it possible to finish

early. It was also noted that if the delegates had more time to review the resolutions prior to the Convention, it would be helpful.

Vice President Specca commented that the scheduling was difficult because there were so many things going on at the same time. She noted that the Legislative Listening session was an excellent opportunity for delegates and other interested parties to speak with those present. She felt that the Legislators found the session very informative.

Brian Schilling commented that avoiding certain key scheduling conflicts like the Leadership Meeting and Legislative Listening Session in addition to sessions organized for the VGA is always going to be difficult. He also noted that the fact that we have an extraordinary chairman of the Resolutions Committee in Bill Cutts and a great team of people at NJDA on the Resolutions team made all the difference in finishing early. It was noted that some discussions seemed to be abbreviated because many were concerned about the time factor.

Rick Gardner commented that he too felt discussions may have been limited but noted that the discussion really helps to educate the delegate body, and the Ag Convention is the only time of the year when all of agriculture is together so we might not really want to shortchange any opportunity for full disclosure and discussion on some very significant issues. He too commended the Resolutions Team for their hard work.

Vice President Specca also noted that many people complained that during the State Board meeting, the audience could not hear what was being said and for all the previous discussions about AV, perhaps we needed to have microphones. In addition, she commented that it was embarrassing when Dean Laura Lawson spoke, and her presentation could not be seen. She also noted that the awards part of the dinner was awful. People couldn't hear, there was talking, wait staff standing in front of people and making a lot of noise and those that were being honored were trying to acknowledge the group and no one was paying attention and suggested we find a way to either move the awards to a different time or not have other entertainment.

Joel Viereck also commented that the noise at dinner was and has been a problem, even people sitting in front were not able to hear. He noted that there was talk that there were not enough seats at dinner, however, there were seats but many of those left were single seats. He noted that the coordination of the event needs to be more cohesive. He stated that it seems like we are being pulled in too many directions and makes it hard to get to everything.

Steve Lee commented that as part of the Convention Committee he listened to all the comments and noted that he appreciated the efforts of the Department staff that worked on the Convention. He noted that some of the things that need to be worked on are more procedural and structure related. He noted that we will only get better by looking internally at how we do things and how we can enhance this experience for the delegates, attendees and whoever attends and that he is already looking forward to planning the next one. He also commented that Chief of Staff Tameko Webster needs to be more involved as she has a lot of experience in putting together events and she should be instrumental in what we do going forward. In addition, he commented that perhaps the awards need to be moved to the

business session of the meeting, the noise at dinner takes away from the spirit of the award and the respect that the recipient deserves by having it at the dinner.

Kurt Alstede announced that in January of 1988, he received his Outstanding Young Farmer Award during the Convention session and noted that he felt that it was a great place to receive the award as the setting is more formal than the dinner.

David DeFrance commented that there was some confusion regarding seats for dinner and noted that in the past the hotel was able to set up an extra table quickly and perhaps that is what should have been done. There may need to be more tables that are not reserved for those who want to sit together but that are not with an organization. We need to make it work for everyone but noted that the Department staff did an excellent job trying to make it all work. He also noted that we need to be supportive of our community and noted that going forward maybe we need to make some additional changes and work with the Committee and leadership of any organization that we may be working with in the future.

Assistant Secretary Joe Atchison reported to the Board that for clarification purposes, 315 tickets were sold for dinner, the room was set for 330 people. He noted that the Board is welcome to make any changes to the Convention that they would like to see, he did note for clarification that the awards did used to be given during the Business Session of the Convention and that several years ago, the State Board members at that time felt that they should be given during the dinner, so again, we can make any changes that the Board would like to see going forward.

Jeff Burd, NJ Beekeepers, sadly reported that during the Trade Show, several jars of award-winning honey were stolen from their booth at the Trade Show. The issue was brought to the attention of the hotel staff, and they did not seem overly concerned. It was noted that the situation should be brought to the attention of the VGA planners as they have signed the contract with the hotel. He also noted that he heard from a couple of other vendors that had some things missing also.

Secretary Wengryn thanked everyone for their comments and noted that we got a lot of good feedback, which was the point of having this meeting while everything was still fresh in our minds.

#### **RESOLUTION FOR EXECUTIVE SESSION**

N.J.S.A. 10:4-12(b) (7), the Board will discuss a matter involving pending or anticipated litigation or contract negotiation other than in subsection b.(4) herein which the public body is, or may become, a party or matters falling within the attorney-client privilege. The Board will not disclose the contents of this part of the discussion because it falls under attorney-client privilege.

ON the MOTION of Joel Viereck, seconded by Rick Gardner, the Board voted unanimously to enter into Executive Session.

#### **MEETINGS**

The next meeting of the State Board of Agriculture will be held on Wednesday, March 26, 2025 beginning at 1:00 at 200 Riverview Plaza, Trenton.

**ADJOURNMENT**

ON the MOTION of Kurt Alstede, seconded by Rick Gardner, the Board voted unanimously to adjourn the regular meeting at 12:35 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Edward D. Wengryn", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Edward D. Wengryn