

Commissioner's column

I'm happy to see spring return to North Carolina. I know we'll soon be seeing fresh North Carolina strawberries in grocery stores and at roadside stands, seasonal greens and vegetables will make their way onto the market and planting for 2019 will begin in earnest.

And, in another month we will be hosting the Got to Be NC Festival May 17-19 at the State Fairgrounds in Raleigh.

Where winter offers us time for reflection, spring bustles with activity and new energy. It is one of my favorite times of year.

As you can see from the photos and article above, we had a successful Ag Awareness Day in Raleigh. Despite being overcast and chilly, we had a good turnout for the event and were able to thank legislators for their support in 2018, while reminding them of the significance of North Carolina's agriculture and agribusiness industry.

I am proud of the way the day turned out and I am grateful for our all of our partners and sponsors who made the day happen.

It turned out to be a pretty busy day as Senator Brent Jackson held a press conference announcing the Farm Act of 2019. This act deals with state legislative issues involving agriculture, similar to the federal Farm Bill.

One of the measures covered in the Farm Act will be to establish rules for hemp production following the passage of the federal Farm Bill. The Farm Bill allows wide-spread production and no longer limits production to just pilot programs, which is what North Carolina producers had been operating under.

Under the Farm Bill, states would need to implement regulations to license hemp producers and to closely monitor the THC levels in the product.

The Farm Act Senator Jackson has introduced would allow North Carolina to comply with these federal measures, establishing the N.C. Hemp Commission, setting the qualifications to be licensed to grow hemp and defining penalties for producers who violate the law.

There has been explosive interest in hemp in the past year, with the number of licensed growers jumping from 124 to 634, the number of registered processors increasing from 44 to 413 and the amount of greenhouse production space jumping from 242,554 square feet to over 3.4 million square feet. I expect we will see even more interest because of the 2018 Farm Bill.

We want to be sure we have a program in place to ensure growers are producing hemp and not marijuana, and one that complies with the federal law. We know we can grow hemp in North Carolina, and this could be a potentially beneficial crop for farmers.

I appreciate the legislative efforts to help North Carolina become the gold standard for hemp production and processing in the country.

If you haven't marked your calendars for May 17-19 yet, please go ahead and add the Got to Be NC Festival to your things to do. I think you'll enjoy this unique event.