

Commissioner's column

The 2019 legislative session is under way and there are several pieces of ag-related legislation that we will be closely following and requesting in the months ahead.

Hemp is one of the hottest topics in agriculture right now. I consistently get questions about this crop and its prospects for the future and the Industrial Hemp Commission is continuing to receive and approve new applications every month.

As of the end of January, we had 492 licensed growers, with 6,637 acres grown outdoors and 2.7 million square feet of production in greenhouses. There are also 322 registered processors.

For comparison, here's the numbers from last year at this time: 124 licensed hemp growers; 2,237 acres being grown outdoors and 242,554 square feet of indoor greenhouse cultivation; 44 licensed processors.

In the first two years of the pilot program we learned that we can grow it. We know it adapts well to tobacco production systems and vegetable production systems, so hemp fits North Carolina well.

The passage of the 2018 Federal Farm Bill marked significant changes for hemp production in the United States. Hemp is no longer considered a Schedule I drug under the jurisdiction of the DEA, which means the crop no longer has to be grown under a research pilot program. It is a legal crop to produce.

In this upcoming legislative session, we will take forward recommendations to adopt laws that align with the 2018 Farm Bill as it pertains to hemp production. While the Farm Bill spelled changes for production, it did not change the role the Food and Drug Administration has in regulating products containing CBD.

We'll be looking for oversight through the department for production and we believe it is important to have regulatory language and rulemaking authority for the processing and extraction of CBD oil. We'd also like to see access to grading services and marketing support.

I believe it makes good business sense with such a fledgling industry and potential emerging market that we have measures in place to assure consumers are getting a safe product produced under acceptable standards.

We will also be closely watching raw milk legislation. Last year's state farm act included a provision that allowed the sale of raw milk to owners in a cow share. Another bill recently filed, the Small Dairy Sustainability Act, would allow for the retail sale of raw milk.

Because of the public health risk of raw milk products, we are against the sale of raw milk and will work to repeal the raw milk provision. The N.C. Division of Public Health supports that as well.

Local food purchases and the connection between farmers and consumer are becoming more important to North Carolinians. This is helping our dairies. In 2018, our state added four new creameries, which is great news.

Our concern is that the risk of a foodborne illness outbreak associated with retail sales of raw milk could reverse what is the start of a positive trend for our dairy industry. We want to keep consumer confidence high and provide a safe, wholesome local product.

I hope you have seen the notice for Ag Awareness Day on the front of this and the February newspapers, and I am hoping you will join us.

2018 was a year to forget, but what we cannot forget is that together our voices are strong, that a thank you is easy to give and that we are all dependent on agriculture and farming to sustain us. On March 20, join together in this effort to build stronger farms and stronger communities by supporting agriculture.