

As we start 2020, I thought it was a good time to look back at some of the highlights of 2019 for the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

I'm not going to touch on every division of the department in this column, but I may share more at a later date.

It was a busy year, and I am proud of the work we have done, particularly in terms of distributing disaster relief funds that were approved by the N.C. General Assembly. My directive was to get checks out as quickly as possible so farmers would have funds to plant this year.

In December, we sent out checks to farmers in Western N.C. who qualified for disaster assistance from hurricanes Florence, Michael and Dorian. It was the last area of the state to receive a federal disaster declaration following the storms. We anticipated Western counties would be included, so there was funding available. Around \$8.5 million went to Western N.C. farmers, bringing the total payout for the year statewide to over \$211 million.

I cannot thank legislators enough for their support of North Carolina farmers. This assistance has helped keep many farms in business that may not have been able to after the devastation of 2018.

This was a big project, but other areas of the department have been busy, too.

Our Agronomic Services Division processed 287,759 soil samples; 52,353 nematode assay samples, which was up 2 percent over the previous year; 18,254 plant samples and 15,652 waste samples.

Soil sampling is what the division is most well-known for, but this year the division has gotten a lot more attention from sweet potato producers as they have sent in samples for testing for the guava root knot nematode, a newer pest for sweet potatoes.

We anticipate more requests for testing because of this highly destructive pest.

Our Small Farms program made 807 personal farmer contacts and handled over 300 inquiries about hemp from small and minority farmers.

The Small Farms program also secured \$250,000 in federal conservation program payment for farmers statewide. Staff also help successfully host over 300 attendees for the Minority Farmers and Landowners Conference.

Hemp continues to be one of the topics we get the most questions about across the department. This emerging crop has kept our Plant Industry Division very busy this year.

Interest in this crop continues to be explosive, with 1,378 licensed growers, 17,286 licensed outdoor acres and 6.67 million licensed square feet of greenhouse space.

The Plant Industry Division has also worked actively with sweet potato producers on the Guava root knot nematode issue to be sure they adhere to the regulations on movement of products in the United States and overseas. This is an emerging issue and one Plant Industry staff will continue to be engaged with in 2020.

Plant Industry also implemented a cotton seed pilot program for 2020 because of some planting issues with low grade cotton seed in early 2019. In 2020, Plant Industry will be sampling seed arrivals to build a database of test results so N.C. cotton producers are aware of seed quality used in their operations.

Our Standards Division visited over 22,000 commercial and retail locations to conduct inspections on scales, fuel dispensers, LP-gas tanks, installation and trucks. They also inspected fuel samples for quality, price scanning systems and packages for correct net content.

Inspectors were successful in finding a number of gas pump skimmers in 2019, and alerted law enforcement to those pumps since we do not have jurisdiction on that.

Finally, I want to mention the Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund.

A total of 26 perpetual conservation easements totaling over \$5.5 million for 4,073 acres were awarded. Eight agricultural development projects and agricultural plans were awarded \$311,000. The trust fund awarded a total of nearly \$5.9 million, which leveraged an additional \$13 million in matching funds from federal, local, nonprofit and private sources.

Happy New Years to each and every one of you. I hope our agricultural community continues to rebuild in 2020, and that this will be our best year yet.