

## Commissioner's column

I hope everyone is doing ok in the midst of this coronavirus pandemic and are safe. As I write this, we remain under the governor's "stay at home" orders, but the conversation is now including discussions on when we may be able to restart our economy and how people can begin to return to regular day-to-day activities.

This has been a difficult time for all of us. Too many people have lost their lives and lost their livelihoods. I offer my prayers of comfort for any of you that have lost loved ones, especially as we are unable to gather together and remember them. And I understand the uncertainty that comes from loss of income. I have been there before with my own farm.

I know we will get through this, but I also know it will come with tremendous personal loss, sacrifice and pulling together as a country. I hope it will also come with patience, acts of kindness, dignity and grace as every individual has their own personal challenges to overcome and no one knows what that may be for someone else.

All across this state, I know people are stepping up in their communities to meet needs. Often, we see the very best of people in the worst of times.

Throughout this issue of the Agricultural Review, you will see stories about how employees with the department continue to work on behalf of the residents of this state. Their work helps keep agriculture working, helps feed those in need and helps connect consumers with food. These stories represent just a small portion of the work being done every day. I wish we could tell every story, but I am especially proud of this issue of the newspaper for all the stories we have been able to tell.

I wanted to specifically mention our involvement with bulk chicken truckload sales across the state. We have assembled a team through our Marketing Division who have been working closely with processors, produce growers and other agribusinesses to facilitate these sales across the state.

These truckload sales help bridge a gap between farmers and consumers. With restaurants closed for dining, we have seen a significant shift in demand at grocery stores and farmers markets. Prior to COVID-19, it is estimated that over half of our meals came from restaurants. Now we are eating food we are preparing at home, at home. Grocery stores have done a tremendous job trying to keep pace with food demands, but additional distribution channels are still needed and truckload sales are one way to get food efficiently to people.

I don't know how many people are aware of the complexity of our food distribution system. There are essentially two systems, one focused on restaurants and institutional establishments, the other supplying grocery stores. The food is packaged and delivered differently for each segment.

It's why you don't typically see 40-pound bulk packages of chicken in grocery stores.

Truckload sales have been a blessing for many people who have not been able to source poultry. They are providing an affordable protein option for consumers and they have helped processors move product that was destined for restaurants, schools and other institutional sites.

Without the truckload sales, we would be seeing even greater food waste, staggering farm losses and the need to euthanize livestock because the market for these products has collapsed.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with the meat at these sales. It has been processed under inspection as required by law and is fresh and safe.

I have seen a lot of comments online from consumers thanking the companies for holding these sales. They are appreciative of the affordability and availability, especially with job losses and so much uncertainty. You can tell it is a relief knowing they are able to provide for their families.

Farm families feel the same way. They just want to be able to provide for their families by selling what they produce.

I appreciate everyone who has attended one of the truckload sales and who have purchased meat. You are helping make a difference for North Carolina farmers and agribusinesses.

You can find links to the websites and social media sites of participating companies on our COVID-19 page at [www.ncagr.com](http://www.ncagr.com) so you can look for sales in your own areas.

We will continue to work to coordinate and facilitate sales, host sales and work with farmers and consumers to get food products out until things return to some type of normal.

Hang in there, look out for one another and we'll get through this together.