

Spring is such a busy time of year, and nowhere is that more evident than on a farm. There are crops to be planted, crops to be protected, markets to open, visitors to welcome, weather to watch and the list goes on and on.

It's one of the reasons I love farming – there's a new challenge every day.

We've been busy in the department, too, working to set up Phase 3 of the Increasing Meat Processing Efficiency and Capacity grant program. You can find more information on this program on page 3 of the paper. This time around, we have \$2 million in grants and projects can also include value-added processing. May 14 is the deadline to apply.

Funding for all three phases of this program comes from federal CARES Act monies distributed to the state. Our goal is to help independent meat processing and seafood business increase their production or capacity, which in turns benefits the farmers and fishermen using these facilities.

In the end, we hope to strengthen the availability of local meats and seafood. This gives consumer access to more local meats, provides more marketing opportunities for farmers and stimulates the local economy through jobs and product sales.

I have gotten a few reports back about improvements and additions that have been made in the initial phases of this program. Several businesses have reported that they are already seeing significant increases in production and sales, which is great news.

Pamlico Salts Oyster in Engelhard anticipates hiring more workers and doubling sales in 202, based on record weekly sales.

Bay Brothers Seafood in Plymouth purchased and sold 31,000 pounds of fish in February, which is double its expectations for the entire year.

Fresh Catch Seafood in Wanchese noted that the addition of a retail freezer has improved accessibility of product to retail customers. The company saw 86 new customers and 30 returning customers in February. Sales in February have also jumped significantly.

I am hopeful we will see even more increases in local sales and production as more consumers discovered the high quality of local meats and seafood.

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If you are making your to-do list this spring, I'd remind you to add get a COVID vaccine if you have not already done so. Gov. Roy Cooper recently announced the rolling back of most restrictions beginning June 1, except for wearing masks. Gov. Cooper did indicated he would roll back the mask restriction if two-thirds of the state's population was vaccinated.

Earlier, we announced the plan to open the State Fair in October and the Mountain State Fair. Getting vaccinated can help us all get to a point where we can begin some feelings of normalcy.

I encourage you to get the shot.