

February 2014

HB 207: Tearing Apart our Division of Ag

Alaska Farmers Union opposes HB207 for a number of reasons. The first is that it will remove the Board of Agriculture and move it to the Commerce department. Second, in the process it also moves the powers of the loan fund. Third, it undermines the powers of the Natural Resource Conservation and Development Board. Fourth, it doesn't make good agriculture sense. AND, fifth, the Alaska Farmers Union board voted at the annual meeting to oppose it. How can you help? Let your voice be heard Feb. 5. Call the sponsor office for the meeting time at 907-465-5446 and let them know this does not make good business sense.

Letter to Senator Begich

Dear Senator Begich:

I am writing to you today to express the need for appropriate USDA Risk Management products for our farmers which address actual production and market peril in Alaska. Of particular concern is the lack of an appropriate crop insurance policy for Alaska hay producers. While hay is one of the most necessary (by dollar value) crops presently in Alaska, farmers that raise hay have no meaningful risk management tools available.

As the former Risk Management specialist for UAF Cooperative Extension Service and School of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences, I have seen firsthand the inapplicability of most USDA Risk Management products available to Alaska farmers. This, of course, is due to Alaska's curious place in the U.S., as well as the difficulty

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NUTRITIONAL ALASKAN FOODS IN SCHOOLS ALSO KNOWN AS NAFS

Pretty good deal for Alaskans right? Well, maybe not the best but it is a good opportunity for Alaska farmers and ranchers to recoup some of the money that is spent by local school districts (SD) on food. You know where almost 100% of that money has gone in the past? Yes, you are correct if you said to the food brokers of the lower 48 and Canada. Very little money is left in Alaska. Everyday you see the Sysco and FSA type trucks going around and around. If that money was spent right here on our local production, wow! So let's chew this around for a minute. A little history tells us that this grant came about through the hard work of Bill Stoltze and has been in existence for two years. Mr. Stoltze has almost always been a solid supporter of agriculture. This year it is in the governor's budget, yet to be approved but let's hope that happens. The purpose of the original grant was to create (allow) opportunities for local agriculture to sell to the school districts. This opportunity includes our local fishermen. Hey this is a great thing. We can put some of that money back in Alaska and not outside. Your local school district has the opportunity to put some of the money's back into their own community. For instance, one Delta farmer sells barley flour. There are a number of us that sell meat and vegetables. I know that our vegetable crop is mostly gone before school starts but the opportunity is there if you have vegetables available into the school year. I have suggested that SD's seek out local farmers and commit to purchasing some of their crop in the fall. One south east school district spends money at their local farmers market. The bottom line is it

is waiting for you to get involved, find more out, and get plans to supply set in motion. Your contacts are Debi Kruse at the state level, she is the grant manager, and Amy Pettit at the division. Or you can contact me and I will try to provide you with information. Here is my beef with the way the program is working. A large amount of the grant money is being spent purchasing fish products from Seattle based and other "outside" seafood companies that are marketing products with names like "Alaska caught Cod, fish sticks, and such" or similar names. These are the same companies that continually pay our local family fishermen a low price for their catch, then take that catch and process it in Seattle into a "Alaska" product and then taking advantage of this grant by turning that product around and selling it back to us. Now who is really getting the benefit of this grant and is that in line with the intended purpose of the grant? If I haven't explained it well just make a few calls and see where the bulk of the money is going. It is going "out of state". I have said a few things here but I hope you realize that we do have family fishermen on our waters who work hard just like you and I. They are not all the big long liners or those huge net people that have more bycatch to throw away than the target species. We do have an opportunity, and it is in the proposed budget. Just today I was asked if I could supply Alaska Jerky, not me but maybe somebody out there can. How about chicken? A large item on the SD's menus. I bet if a school district would contract with a local farmer the logistics could be done. Happy growing.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

To my friends and to a new year. Wow, there are lots of opportunities in the coming year all you have to do is Farm. What do I mean by that? You could say it is a four-letter word, but in most cases there is so much more wrapped up in the things that are flying at you on a daily basis. Have you ordered your seed? If not you had better do some planning and ordering. This coming month, one should be starting; onions, tomatoes, celery and a few more but those are my buddies. And here is my shortfall, flowers. I am sure there are some flowers to plant but although some people make good money with flowers I have never grown them commercially. The peony people are just waiting to see what comes up. Why am I so excited? Last year we had an early, cold cold winter and then way into spring it was cold and if I remember correctly my first planting outside was June 3. But hey, this year is going to be different. The warmest January on record (I hope) and next month I should be tilling, global warming is finally here and look at what an opportunity it has created for us! I say that tongue and cheek. Heck the water is supposed to rise and then we won't have to carry those buckets as far. All those friends that have big boats will be right close by and it will be easier to take a charter instead of the four hour drive to Homer. Don't get me wrong, there is nothing unpleasant about the drive to Homer or Seward. It is always fresh in my mind, perched on the tractor

LETTER (CONTINUED)

in helping policy makers (particularly those from other States) to understand the peril that Alaska farmers face.

Hay production is the underpinning of animal agriculture. It is bulky, expensive to transport, and demand is fairly stable. Unfortunately, due to a number of reasons, peril for Alaska hay producers exacerbates the production of animal products and is not stable in Alaska. These characteristics of the hay market (and dairy, beef, sheep, goats, and other herbivores) lead to instability in supply as well as price. This puts Alaska hay producers and consumers at a distinct competitive disadvantage with other areas of North America.

A well designed crop insurance policy that addresses the risk and peril of Alaska hay production is sorely needed. It is needed to address many issues unique to Alaska hay production, and also to provide appropriate economic incentives and alleviate peril for those who are engaged in hay production and consumption in Alaska.

Of particular concern is a USDA Risk Management product which addresses quality as well as quantity, and particularly the issue of damage after the crop is cut and before it is re-

seat, imagining if fishing what big fish I would catch. Before long reality sets in and I remember my skills at fishing aren't quite so hot, never quite getting the right motion down, flip float and swing, no even standing in the river it is, dig plant and cover. Now you know why I never catch any fish. That is why I leave it to our relatives the fisher families to bring home the catch. Believe me I don't know those guys from the TV series "The Deadliest Catch" but for some reason it always makes me think of farming. Catch/Grow, they are very similar. It may be early for some but for others we are way behind. If you are going to try for the "big cabbage" and \$2000.00 you need to get serious. I know one year the winner started her cabbage the first day of the year. It is too late for that but depending upon the variety you may want to be getting ready. Which reminds me, it is getting close to the National Farmers Union convention. It will be held in New Mexico this year, Santa Fe that is! The date is March 8-11 and the hotels are getting filled up. So if you want to hang out with some farm relatives from another area make your plans now. Contact Sue of the national office for help. If you have time check out our web page www.akfarmersunion.org and drop a line of what is going on in your area. You can always contact me by e-mail at bshu@mtaonline.net. Well, that's all for now so long and keep your furrows straight and if you don't plant you cannot harvest! -Bob

moved from the field. Extensive conversations with Alaska hay farmers have identified this time period as the most perilous to yield, quality, and value.

I know from my experience as the Risk Management specialist in Alaska that what I am proposing will cause the USDA Risk Management Agency to attempt to deny this type of policy to Alaska farmers. This is why it is necessary for the program to have a feasibility study by Alaska researchers acquainted with Alaska production, rather than Outside carpetbaggers. A feasibility study of the issue must be performed, leading to implementation of a policy suitable to ensure hay production in Alaska. Additional Risk Management products to address the risks that Alaska farmers face are also needed, including for peonies, rhodiola, as well as policies for conventional commodity crops.

I would be happy to discuss this issue with Senator Begich's office. About 10-15 years ago Senator Stevens procured a sizable expenditure to explore crop insurance feasibility for the Bristol Bay salmon fishery. I was involved with this effort. A similar effort will be needed in order to bring equity to Alaska farmers. *Hans Geier, AFU Secretary/Treasurer*

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