March 6, 2008

THIS WEEK:

No other industry is helping to reinvigorate Michigan’s struggling economy better than agriculture, and there’s never been a better time than now to bring Michigan agriculture home. That’s the message dozens of Michigan farmers and nearly 30 agricultural organizations will deliver to state legislators when they gather in Lansing on March 19 for the fourth-annual Ag Day at the Capitol. For more information, contact Rebecca Park, (800) 292-2680, ext. 2049, Bob Boehm, ext. 2023 or Tonia Ritter, ext. 2048.

County Farm Bureaus across Michigan are gearing up to celebrate National Agriculture Week, March 16-22, and National Agriculture Day, March 20, in their local communities. Also in observance of the special occasions, winners will soon be selected for the Michigan Farm Bureau (MFB) Promotion and Education Committee’s annual third-grade poster contest. For more information, contact Deb Schmucker, (800) 292-2680, ext. 3213.

Consumers are embracing the idea that buying locally produced food is good for their bodies and the planet, and so comes a new opportunity for Michigan farmers to connect with these customers, and vice versa. For more information, contact Ken Nye, (800) 292-2680, ext. 2020 or Bob Boehm, ext. 2023.

State Rep. Dick Ball (R-Laingsburg), pictured center, was among the many legislators who sampled corn dogs and other Michigan food products at last year’s Ag Day at the Capitol. Here, Ball poses with leaders and staff of the Michigan Corn Growers Association and the Corn Marketing Program of Michigan. See the following news release to learn what’s in store at Ag Day at the Capitol 2008.
Ag Day at the Capitol to stress agriculture’s importance to Michigan

March 19 event celebrates ‘Michigan agriculture: Bringing it home … Michigan grown’

LANSING, March 6, 2008 — No other industry is helping to reinvigorate Michigan’s struggling economy better than agriculture, and there’s never been a better time than now to bring Michigan agriculture home.

That’s the message dozens of Michigan farmers and nearly 30 agricultural organizations will deliver to state legislators when they gather in Lansing on March 19 for the fourth-annual Ag Day at the Capitol.

United by the theme, “Michigan Agriculture: Bringing it home … Michigan grown,” Ag Day at the Capitol participants aim to raise legislators’ awareness of the agriculture industry’s significant contributions to the state’s economy, and help lawmakers develop a deeper sense of appreciation for the industry. The event coincides with National Agriculture Week, which runs March 16-22, and also aims to promote agriculture’s many benefits.

“Michigan’s agriculture industry is not without its challenges. Producers are coping with increased costs for production necessities such as fertilizer, along with increased regulatory burdens and outside influences that threaten accepted agricultural practices. Even so, agriculture is a growth industry in Michigan that shines bright amid the bleak outlooks for Michigan’s other traditional industries,” said Tonia Ritter, manager of the Michigan Farm Bureau (MFB) State Governmental Affairs Department.

Ritter points to a recent economic study by Michigan State University (MSU) that shows since agriculture’s economic impact on Michigan was last analyzed in 2004, agriculture and its broad food and energy industries have grown from contributing $60.1 billion to Michigan’s economy annually to $63.7 billion. She adds that the study by MSU’s Product Center, a division of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, used 2006 data for its revised reporting, so the economic impact could be considerably more once data from the 2007 Census of Agriculture has been compiled.

“This study is evidence of agriculture’s tremendous growth potential, and it may be a conservative estimate at that because data for the 2007 Census of Agriculture is still being collected,” she said. “Even so, the study reveals some fascinating points, such as the fact that Michigan’s agri-food and agri-energy industry grew at a robust rate of 5.9 percent for the two-year period from 2004 to 2006, whereas the state’s economy overall grew only 4.8 percent for that same period.”

Other facts that Ag Day at the Capitol participants will share with legislators include the following.

• Michigan produces more than 200 agricultural commodities, making Michigan rank second, just behind California, for the state with the most diverse agriculture industry in the nation. In addition to grains, meat, dairy products, vegetables and fruit, other Michigan-produced agricultural commodities that might not immediately come to mind include Christmas trees, flowers, maple syrup, turfgrass and mint.

• Agriculture is Michigan’s second largest production sector behind the automotive industry.

• With its support industries, agriculture collectively employs about 1 million people, or about 1 in 4 Michigan residents.

• The direct economic impact of Michigan’s agri-food system is $38 billion. The direct economic impact of the agri-energy system, primarily the production of ethanol, is $378 million.

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• Michigan agriculture’s growth rate from 2004 to 2006 was led by farming, which experienced a 6.4 percent increase, and ethanol production, which experienced a 692 percent increase due to the number of ethanol plants in the state growing from just one in 2004 to five today.
• More than $37 million would circulate within Michigan weekly if each week every household spent just $10 of their current grocery budget on local food products.
• 98 percent of U.S. farms are individually or family-owned — NOT corporate-owned which is a common misconception.

**Ag Day at the Capitol activities**

Ag Day at the Capitol activities kick off in the morning with Michigan farmers visiting each legislator’s office for one-on-one conversations with lawmakers and their staff about agriculture’s importance to Michigan. At these meetings, the farmers will also invite legislators to sample Michigan food products and learn more about individual commodities at a trade show-style Michigan agriculture “showcase” in the Capitol.

For the showcase, agricultural sponsor organizations will line Capitol hallways with informational booths and serve legislators a variety of Michigan food products ranging from corn dogs and asparagus roll-ups to ice cream, pickles and grape juice.

**An eco-friendly way to bring Michigan agriculture home**

Also at the showcase, legislators will receive an “ag bag” made from recyclable fabric that they can tote from booth to booth to stock up on additional agricultural products, such as packages of dried cherries, flower seed packets and “Udderly Wonderful” soap.

“Besides being eco-friendly, the bag represents how bringing Michigan agriculture home is easier than ever,” said Ritter. “We’ll be encouraging legislators to stock up at Ag Day at the Capitol and fill up with Michigan food products when they shop.”

The spirit of Ag Day at the Capitol will also spill over into a breakfast meeting of the Lansing Ag Club that same day, where commodity and agri-business organizations will host Speaker of the House Rep. Andy Dillon (D-Redford) and Senate Majority Leader Sen. Michael Bishop (R-Rochester).

**Event sponsors**

A list of agricultural sponsors for Ag Day at the Capitol follows. In addition to these organizations, Ag Day at the Capitol has the bi-partisan support of sponsors from each legislative chamber. This year’s legislative sponsors from the Senate are Sens. Gerald Van Woerkom (R-Norton Shores) and John Gleason (D-Flushing), and from the House, Reps. Jeff Mayes (D-Bay City) and Goeff Hansen (R-Hart).
2008 Agricultural Sponsors

Cherry Marketing Institute
Corn Marketing Program of Michigan/Michigan Corn Growers Association
Dairy Farmers of America
GreenStone Farm Credit Services
Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program
Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station and Michigan State University Extension
Michigan Apple Committee
Michigan Aquaculture Association
Michigan Asparagus Advisory Board
Michigan Bean Commission
Michigan Carrot Committee
Michigan Cattlemen’s Association
Michigan Christmas Tree Association
Michigan Equine Partnership
Michigan Farm Bureau
Michigan Floriculture Growers Council
Michigan Food and Farming Systems
Michigan Milk Producers Association
Michigan Nursery and Landscape Association
Michigan Pork Producers Association
Michigan Potato Industry Commission
Michigan Soybean Promotion Committee
Michigan State Horticultural Society
Michigan State University Product Center
Michigan Sugar Company
Michigan Turfgrass Foundation
Michigan Vegetable Council
National Grape Cooperative
Wine Michigan
County Farm Bureaus gear up for National Ag Week/Ag Day this month

Winners to be chosen soon in fifth-annual MFB poster contest for third-graders

LANSING, March 6, 2008 — County Farm Bureaus across Michigan are gearing up to celebrate National Agriculture Week, March 16-22, and National Agriculture Day, March 20, in their local communities. Also in observance of the special occasions, winners will soon be selected for the Michigan Farm Bureau (MFB) Promotion and Education Committee's annual third-grade poster contest.

Established more than 30 years ago, the unofficial holidays are designed to help Americans develop a deeper appreciation for the agriculture industry's vital role in food, fiber and now energy production.

“Promotion and Education Committee volunteers from Michigan's 67 county Farm Bureaus look upon National Agriculture Week as a well-timed opportunity to take agricultural outreach programs to the non-farming public and to educate local residents on how agriculture touches their daily lives. The food we eat is just the tip of the iceberg!” said Deb Schmucker, manager of the MFB Promotion and Education Department.

At the heart of National Agriculture Week/National Agriculture Day activities are well-established Farm Bureau programs, such as Agriculture in the Classroom, which has local farmers teach farming-related lessons at area elementary schools, and Project Rural Education Day, or Project RED, which also targets elementary students but is usually held off site so that children can observe livestock and farm equipment up-close.

A number of county Farm Bureaus take their message to more mature audiences through a wide variety of activities ranging from public service announcements on local radio stations to informational placemats in local restaurants and gift baskets of Michigan food products for parents of babies born on National Agriculture Day.

County Farm Bureaus also play a role in helping to promote and select local winners for the state Promotion and Education Committee's statewide poster contest. Now in its fifth year, the contest encourages third-grade students to create hand-drawn posters reflecting a special theme. This year’s theme is “F.A.R.M.: Feeding and Reaching Many.”

“In choosing this year’s theme, the Michigan Farm Bureau Promotion and Education Committee felt it appropriate to help children better understand how the food that winds up on their dinner plate and the plates of their family members, friends and neighbors starts on a farm,” said Schmucker. “With food so plentiful in this country, it’s sometimes easy to overlook that we count on farmers to feed us, and each farmer today can feed 143 people, reaching people across the country and the world.”

Poster entries were due to MFB this week. The MFB Promotion and Education Committee will select three state-level winners. The first-place winner will receive a $100 savings bond; second- and third-place winners will each receive a $50 savings bond. In addition, the students' winning artwork will be published in an upcoming issue of MFB's member newspaper, the Michigan Farm News.

Many county Farm Bureaus congratulate their local winning artists in a variety of ways, from gift certificates and pizza parties to farm tours and public displays of the top entries in local restaurants and newspapers.

To learn what your county Farm Bureau is planning, contact your county Farm Bureau office. Contact information is available online at www.michfb.com/counties. For more information about agriculture education and promotion, consult the MFB Promotion and Education Web site at www.miagclassroom.org.

-30-

Editor's Note: County-level activities celebrating National Agriculture Week/National Agriculture Day make great photo opportunities! For help localizing stories or connecting with local farmers, contact MFB County Communications Manager Jeremy C. Nagel, at (800) 292-2680, ext. 6584.
New MarketMaker Web site connects Michigan farmers, customers

Farmers encouraged to register food products, agri-tourism activities on site

LANSING, March 6, 2008 — Consumers are embracing the idea that buying locally produced food is good for their bodies and the planet, and so comes a new opportunity for Michigan farmers to connect with these customers, and vice versa.

Michigan MarketMaker makes the connection online, and it's free. Farmers are encouraged to register on the site, http://mimarketmaker.msu.edu, as soon as possible.

Developed by the University of Illinois, the MarketMaker program has a distinct advantage over similar Web sites that connect farmers with buyers, said Tom Kalchik, associate director of Michigan State University’s (MSU) Product Center, which, through the Product Center’s Venture Development Office, brought the MarketMaker to the state.

“What we like about this program is that it also includes a whole bunch of census data, so producers can identify a market for themselves. For example, if you’re interested in selling directly to a restaurant in neighborhoods where people make more than $100,000 a year, you can go to that market, identify which ones best suit you, look at each one and contact them for sales,” Kalchick said.

The easy-to-navigate Web site went live around the first of the year and is already getting thousands of hits each month.

Michigan is the eighth state nationwide to adopt the Web site. Indiana and Ohio are expected to come online soon. The advantage of a multi-state network, Kalchik said, is that the local connection needn’t be the only connection.

“If a producer in southwestern Michigan is interested in the Chicago market, he can simply go to the Illinois MarketMaker Web site and take it from there.”

Wholesalers and retailers looking for a specific item can use the system too, which makes the Web site ideal for all stakeholders, said Ken Nye, a horticultural specialist with Michigan Farm Bureau’s Commodity and Marketing Department.

“MSU’s Product Center should be commended for bringing it here, because it looks like a great system for both buyers and sellers,” said Nye, adding that a system of this kind meets member-developed Farm Bureau policy supporting value-added activities in Michigan and the Product Center. “This Web site is good not only for people selling fruits and vegetables, but also for livestock producers and people who want to promote or find places with agri-tourism. We just hope both sides will use it.”

According to Kalchik, MSU will soon announce producer meetings to help farmers register for the service, although the system is simple enough for even novice Web users to operate.

“We’d like to get 10 percent of Michigan producers, or about 5,000 farmers, using this,” he said. “Then we’ll focus on the downstream industries, the restaurants and retailers, to make them aware of it. The third focus will be on consumers, so they can be made aware of how to find what they want, and where.”

Kalchik said Clemson University intends to apply for a national science grant to track the economic impact of the Web site.

“The one thing I struggle with is that it's hard to track what kind of commerce it creates,” said Kalchik. “We don’t have good figures now, but I know from conversations with producers that they like it.”