



New York Farm Viability Institute (NYFVI)

Rob Noble's remarks, delivered via Zoom 2/24/2021

Good afternoon, my name is Rob Noble, I'm a dairy farmer from Livingston County and the chair of the New York Farm Viability Institute. I joined the board in 2016 and have served on the dairy review panel since 2006.

Thank you for the opportunity to highlight the perspective of the Farm Viability board on the challenges and opportunities facing New York farms. Collectively, the ten-person board has more than 200 years of agricultural experience and has worked with almost every form of agriculture and every business model.

As I think about the issues facing farms, it seems that the universal challenge for all farms is how to embrace the necessary changes to be competitive while maintaining financial stability. In farming we need to be continually moving forward, it is about evolution and resiliency. Quite simply, any business that fails to evolve, fails. Resiliency requires not just fortitude, but financial strength.

What a farm needs to do to remain competitive will vary based on each operation. Some years the change is a small, incremental improvement to a growing practice, and at other times it's a bigger decision on entering new markets or changing crops. In either case, farmers need to know how to implement the solution and if the change makes sense.

While specific challenges vary by commodity, every year there is ongoing pressure for all farms to become more efficient, to do more with less, and to meet changing consumer demands--all while fighting diseases, weeds, and managing through the weather.

At the same time, new technology is creating endless opportunities in farming. But history has shown that not every new approach will succeed and farmers need help understanding which ideas are most valuable. Farm businesses have lean margins and new tools are often expensive.

Farmers need trusted advisors and independent applied research validation to understand the value of these new technologies for their business. **They simply cannot afford to get it wrong.** Just as importantly, **New York can't afford for our farms to get it wrong either.** The residents of our cities rely on New York farms, the foundation of our food system, for local, nutritious food. Rural communities understand the importance of agriculture to their local economies.

That's why, with the support of New York State, Farm Viability runs a competitive grant program focused on creating and sharing knowledge to improve the economic viability of New York farms.

The work that Farm Viability supports helps farms answer the question, "What changes can I make to get my business to the next level?"

Addendum to Rob Noble's comments on behalf of the New York Farm Viability Institute

This addendum to NYFVI Chair Rob Noble's testimony seeks to share insight that NYFVI has developed over time as we have worked to support New York farmers.

Our thinking is informed by the proposals we receive and the review panel's evaluation of the ideas. Over the last 16 years, the farmer review panels have evaluated more than 1,000 proposals as they sought support for their ideas to help benefit New York's farmers.

In almost all cases, the proposals that are the most competitive among the review panels, already have significant farmer input. The project applicants have done the legwork to know that the problem is important to farmers and that the proposed solution is of interest. NYFVI believes that this farmer involvement, prior to a project being funded is critical to its ultimate success.

Additionally, the organization conducts periodic surveys among farmers to better understand specific production challenges and opportunities. These surveys, as well as information gathered from other organizations about farmer's research needs, are all posted at www.nyfvi.org.

New York is fortunate to have such diverse agriculture. It creates benefits for the environment and helps ensure that New Yorkers have access to locally grown nutritious food. That said, this diversity creates a significant need for deep expertise across all of the State's commodities to ensure New York producers have access to the knowledge they need to adapt to a changing climate, fight pests, evolve their production practices and successfully market their products.

Meeting the ongoing needs of the agricultural community is particularly challenging as the needs within a commodity group can vary greatly based on the life cycle of a farm business. One of the questions we often incorporate into our surveys is:

Which of the following best reflects the situation at your farm?

- *Sell everything I grow, but not for enough profit*
- *Could sell more if I could grow more*
- *Grow more than I can sell*
- *Making a reasonable profit, and sell everything I grow*

This framework helps us see the wide range of challenges and opportunities facing a group of growers, even within a single commodity. By including this question, and sharing the research results, we help drive proposals to topics that are a good match for the grower community.

In many cases, farms are satisfied with their market and scale, but need to identify cost savings throughout their process to increase their margins. Projects that help support continuous improvement on farms are critical to their long-term survival. Examples of past NYFVI work include soil health management for tomatoes grown in high tunnels, precision feeding to maximize milk components, as well as a new FVI 2020 project focused on automating a procedure in the milk parlor to help dairy farms reduce labor costs.

Other farms, at a different point in their evolution, may be struggling to overcome challenges in producing their crops, particularly using the sustainable practices that many markets desire. Specific issues can include pests such as cabbage maggots, potato leaf hoppers, and onion thrips, or nutrient management. Solutions that Farm Viability projects have developed include biocontrols, new scouting regimens, new weed management solutions, and controlled release nitrogen. It's worth noting that in some instances a production challenge can be significant and of widespread concern across an industry. Mastitis in dairy cows, powdery mildew in cucurbits, and fireblight in apples are all ongoing issues that NYFVI funds project to help solve.

An interesting group of farmers to understand are the ones that believe they can grow more than they can sell. In our surveys this group often adds comments that indicate the challenge is identifying a profitable sale—meaning that they can find buyers, but not at the price they need to warrant growing more product. This challenge is why the Farm Viability funded work that GrowNYC has done to identify product needs and build relationships among growers and wholesale buyers is so exciting. Throughout the process, the work was clearly focused on identifying profitable opportunities to sell product—not just expanding production.

Through our surveys, we have also heard from a few farms who indicated that they are doing fairly well and making a reasonable profit. The opportunity for these farms is to consider new strategies that allow them to continue to evolve and grow their business. This might be using winter forages—a cost neutral approach to cover cropping—or learning more about producing hemp or malting barley. Exploring the costs/benefits of organic dairy production is also easier to do from a secure financial footing.

As our chair, Rob Noble said in his remarks, in farming we need to be continually moving forward, it is about evolution and resiliency. Quite simply, any business that fails to evolve, fails. Resiliency requires not just fortitude, but financial strength.

New York farmers are the foundation of the State’s food system. The residents of our cities rely on New York farms for local, nutritious food. Rural communities understand the importance of agriculture to their local economies.

NYFVI is proud of the work we have done to support New York farmers and would be pleased to provide ongoing input into the development of the road map. Please let us know how we could support your efforts.

Thank you,



David Grusenmeyer , Executive Director, NYFVI

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