Educate lawmakers on ag’s relevance

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By Vicky Boyd, Editor

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Only a handful of Florida state or federal legislators come from an agricultural background—Ben Albritton, Denise Grimsley and J.D. Alexander, to name a few—and have an understanding of the industry.

But just because they grew up on a farm doesn’t necessarily mean the industry can count on them on important issues. These lawmakers also have to answer to an urban voting majority and other interests.

In order to gain support from urban legislators, agriculture needs to continue to educate them about the importance and relevance of the industry, says Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam. It isn’t a one-time effort when a hot issue comes up for debate, either. It needs to be full time.

“We’re constantly nurturing that relationship,” he told attendees at the recent Florida Citrus Industry Conference in Bonita Springs. “So many of the issues that we deal with rely on the majority of the state, even though they lack an awareness of what our contribution is and why it’s relevant to them.”

Agriculture is one of what he calls the three economic pillars of the state, with tourism and construction the other two. Of the three, agriculture continues to be the strongest. “The future of Florida agriculture is the future of the state,” Putnam says. “Ag in Florida is not Old McDonald’s farm.” It’s a $100 billion industry that generates 100,000 jobs and ad valorem taxes for schools.

Even if lawmakers don’t understand the nuances of citrus canker or huanglongbing (HLB) research, they should understand trying to maintain domestic food production. If they allow agriculture to migrate to Mexico, Costa Rica or other locales, Putnam says it puts the country in the same situation as we’re in right now with Middle Eastern oil imports.

“It’s a matter of national security,” he says.

Labor will continue to be another hot issue until meaningful immigration reform is passed, Putnam says. In the meantime, federal congressional representatives face the newly introduced E-verify bill.

A coalition of Florida business interests, including agriculture, tourism and hospitality, banded together to defeat a similar state E-verify bill in Tallahassee last session. Having a stable workforce isn’t important just to agriculture, Putnam says.

“We need to drive home the point that this issue isn’t limited to just the ag industry,” he says. Hospitality and tourism also could be severely impacted.

Admittedly, all of this education and nurturing takes time on your part-time away from your operation and family. But ask yourself: Do I want the next generation, including my children, to be residents of a state that let one of the top industries die from neglect and inattention?
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