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Ag leaders seek vision for Illinois agriculture

BY KAY SHIPMAN

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The best way to capitalize on Illinois' agricultural resources and talent is through planning, according to three state ag leaders.

Efforts are under way to generate support for a "Vision for Illinois Agriculture," led by Illinois Farm Bureau President Philip Nelson, Illinois Agriculture Director Chuck Hartke, and University of Illinois Dean Bob Easter of the College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences (ACES).

"It is a very critical time period for us to put our thinking caps on and think, 'What type of infrastructure do we need, what value-added agriculture is going to be enhanced, and what opportunities are staring producers in the face?'" said Nelson.

Easter agreed: "There's a growing sense agriculture is in a transition that is significantly driven by growth in the bio energy economy. That has a potentially major impact on Illinois."

Agriculture in other states, especially Indiana, has benefited from state strategies. Nearly a year ago, the Illinois Agricultural Legislative Roundtable learned Indiana shifted its focus to top job-generating ag industries, based on data and not assumptions. Indiana leaders were surprised to learn hardwood trees are a major Indiana industry.

Illinois agriculture is well prepared because many sectors already work together through the Legislative Roundtable, Nelson noted. The state also has a sizable agribusiness community whose input will become increasingly important, he added.

A wide range of opinions will be vital, according to Hartke.

"We'll see tremendous change in Illinois agriculture in the next 10 to 15 years," Hartke said. "It is important to prepare for change, and this (effort) will give us insight into collectively what we all are thinking."

Collective thinking also will help individual sectors sustain each other. As U of I leaders make decisions on research, education, and Extension, "it's important for us to have a sense of what the (ag) sector's vision is for the future so our efforts are supportive of that," Easter noted.

Nelson looks for agriculture to gain support from outside the industry. "I hope there is a greater understanding and appreciation of the role agricultural has in the state, and that it is a major driver of the economy," he said.

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