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Ag opportunities surface in planning

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FarmWeek

Illinois agriculture industry leaders last week took the first steps in developing a strategic state plan.

The Vision for Illinois Agriculture drew representatives from many sectors of the agricultural industry, higher education, and government to Bloomington for the group's first meeting.

"We've got a lot of ground to plow," Illinois Farm Bureau President Philip Nelson told the assembled leaders.

A strategic plan for Illinois agriculture would: improve its competitiveness; grow the industry within the state; and be implemented by government, universities, ag organizations, and agribusiness. Several basic topics surfaced repeatedly during the discussions.

Those included:

*d **Transportation.** Illinois has several advantages with its railroad, river, interstate, and airport transport systems. The state also faces challenges to maintain and upgrade those systems. How might the state ag industry capitalize on that advantage?

*d **Land/natural resources.** The state's soil and climate offers great production capability; however, there are competing uses, including development, for farmland. How can agriculture make the best use of and protect its natural resources?

*d **Chicago and its suburbs.** The city and suburbs offer markets, provide finance and food processing, major media outlets, and political power. However, many urban residents don't understand how food and fiber is produced. How can Illinois agriculture best work with people in Chicago and the suburbs?

*d **Higher education/research.** Illinois is set apart from other states by having four universities with ag programs and major agricultural and technology research laboratories. How can these strengths be used for the best advantage of the state's ag industry?

The next step in the planning process will be to compile the information from last week's session and to highlight potential subjects for further study.

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