

OPINION

COMMENTARY | STATE SEN. TOM O'MARA, R-BIG FLATS

The great central task of a better land

As communities and organizations around the globe celebrate Earth Day on April 22, it's worth noting that the recently enacted state budget continues a series of critical actions started several years ago that bode well for the short- and long-term future of environmental conservation in New York.

Having chaired the Senate Environmental Conservation Committee from 2015 to 2018, when we began advancing much of the current groundwork, it brings to mind on this Earth Day the words of former President and legendary conservationist Teddy Roosevelt, that "the great central task" is to leave "even a better land for our descendants than it is for us."

The new budget continues a fully funded Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) to support critical initiatives including clean air and water projects, flood control and restoration, and open space preservation. It makes great environmental and economic sense. Studies have shown that for every dollar of EPF funds invested in land and water protection, the state and localities get back seven dollars in economic benefits.

The EPF enjoys an impressive record of government investment. It strengthens a broad segment of New York's citizens and communities like very few governmental programs ever have. In short, strengthening the EPF within the context of the entire state fiscal plan covers a lot of common ground in order to achieve a great deal of common good.

The fully funded EPF surely remains a highlight, but the budget carries on other important work as well. For instance, the state's multi-year investment in drinking water infrastructure remains an action helping localities undertake long-overdue infrastructure improvement projects like sewer and municipal water line repairs. It has become particularly timely as drinking water quality concerns and crises regionally, statewide, and across the nation have become increasingly acute.

Other actions assist local parks, trails, and waterfronts; help step up the fight against invasive species; enhance farmland conservation; encourage smart growth communities, including renewable energy initiatives; and continue farm-to-school strategies to connect local schools to local farmers. We also continue to make critical investments to identify, monitor, and work to prevent the spread of Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) threatening lakes and other waterways regionally and statewide.

In a critical, non-budget action, in late March the Senate and Assembly gave final legislative approval to a measure preventing the proposed Circular EnerG incinerator project at the former Seneca Army Depot from moving forward. I have appreciated and welcomed the opportunity over the past two years to join many legislative colleagues to fight for this legislation's enactment. This proposed trash incinerator has stood as a serious threat to the quality, health, and overall safety of many communities throughout the Finger Lakes and Southern Tier regions.

The action to stop it is a great credit to the environmental advocates, winery owners, farmers, business and community leaders, and every concerned citizen who have worked together to lead the charge against it. We want to be known for our wine and our tourism, not for landfills and garbage truck traffic.

On the environmental front, we have had and we will continue to have differences. We will face controversies and disagreements. We must remember that the challenges and crises we face are more difficult than ever. It is equally true that the governmental and political context in which we have to confront these challenges and crises is more highly charged than ever – a fact that often does not make the task easier.

Nevertheless, we have a responsibility to stewardship and conservation. We have a responsibility to do our best to address the challenges, to work through them, and consider and negotiate them in a balanced, deliberate, fair, serious and sensible way.

ANOTHER VIEW



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OTHER VIEW | ONEONTA DAILY STAR

Must balance worker rights with needs of farmers

A state senator from Queens is leading an effort to bring the rights of farmworkers on par with other workers in the state.

Sen. Jessica Ramos has introduced the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act, which would grant collective bargaining rights, workers' compensation, unemployment benefits and overtime pay to farmworkers.

"In New York, there is a Jim Crow-era law still on our books that denies human beings – mostly black and Latino, tax-paying New Yorkers – parity with nearly every other worker in this state," Ramos, who heads the Senate Labor Committee, said in a statement.

On the face of it, we agree. Why shouldn't the people who produce our food get the same benefits as other workers?

But the reality of the situation is much deeper. The impact these changes would have on small family farms could be devastating, if enacted on their own.

"It is imperative urban lawmakers understand rural issues and the reality that exists on farms for farmworkers before

they vote on the legislation," the Farm Bureau said in a statement.

The farm lobby opposes the proposed mandates, noting harvesting crops is time-sensitive work conducted amid unpredictable weather conditions. Some farmers have said they would have to consider cutting jobs or closing their operations should the mandates be imposed on them.

That is why it is important that all sides be heard.

Three hearings are scheduled on the bill – in Morrisville in Madison County, Loch Sheldrake in Sullivan County and in Smithtown on Long Island.

We agree with several Republican lawmakers who say more hearings are needed – especially in northern and western areas of the state.

"Considering the grave harm it could have on our state's small family farms, hard-working farm employees and consumers, it's unfathomable that entire geographic regions and sectors of agriculture are excluded from the discussion," Sen. Rob Ort, R-North Tonawanda, said.

Sen. Betty Little, R-Queensbury, urged that

hearings on the Ramos bill be conducted "all across the state."

"This is an issue that could severely impact our agricultural industry, causing a ripple effect throughout the state's economy," Little said.

In a joint statement, Ramos and Sen. Jen Metzger, D-Rosendale, chairwoman of the Senate Agriculture Committee who represents a portion of Delaware County, said they anticipate "a balanced and respectful discussion" and noted they will accept written testimony as well.

But it is sometimes hard to get the full message across in the written word.

Little, Ott and the Farm Bureau cite an analysis by Farm Credit East that suggests the legislation would reduce net farm income in New York by 23 percent.

That is something our struggling family farms can't handle.

Chenango County Farm Bureau President Bradd Vickers said he recently traveled to Albany with Duane Martin, his counterpart at the Delaware County Farm Bureau, to lobby

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Suit correct to challenge landfill

To the editor,
Three clear-eyed environmental groups are suing the NYS Department of Conservation (DEC) and the Town of Campbell regarding the proposed expansion of the Hake's Landfill. Campbell approved a related zoning change and the DEC is still reviewing the application. The plaintiffs hold that the DEC and Campbell each violated requirements in their environmental impact statements (SEQR) by not scrutinizing the available scientific evidence showing high levels of radium and radiation at Hake's, by not reducing the risks posed by radioactivity and by not giving full attention to why the radiation detectors at the entrance are ineffective. The suit points out that if the monitors were effective, there would not be radium breakdown in the landfill leachate. (If monitors aren't tripped at entry, they may have been manipulated by off-gassing radon from loads before trucks pass through.)

Before considering this landfill's expansion request, the DEC needs to acknowledge the existence of known toxic levels of radiation in the leachate derived from Hake's own tests, do further testing, find the source(s), e.g. contaminated fractured rock, and investigate why radiation is

slipping by the monitors. After doing this, I believe the DEC will not approve the expansion.

I'm grateful to these groups, the Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter, People for a Healthy Environment, Concerned Citizens of Allegany County and local individual petitioners for trying to protect the public from the dangers of radiation exposure and hope their lawsuit is successful.

Karen Biesanz, Corning

Farm bill fails to protect dairy farmers

To the editor,
Farm Women United (FWU), has issued an unequivocal condemnation of the dairy provisions of the 2018 Farm Bill. Hurriedly passed by both the House and the Senate during December's lame-duck session, giving dairy farmers no time to examine the dairy provisions, the 2018 Farm Bill was quickly signed into law by President Trump, who, like Congress, chooses to remain out of touch with the victims of these morally bankrupt federal dairy "policies."

The 2018 Farm Bill dairy provisions are an insult to the thousands of American dairy farmers already bowed down under the weight of staggering debt piled on them since

Congress and President Obama approved the 2014 Farm Bill. Unjust financial burdens have brought on despair, family break-up, financial collapse, and suicides since the equally defective 2014 Farm Bill did nothing to make sure federal milk prices include "cost of production" for dairy farmers.

In view of the fact that dairy farmers have been disregarded throughout the entire 2018 Farm Bill process, FWU demands that the 2018 Farm Bill be "OPENED" to fix the milk pricing problem. FWU is calling once again for a \$20 per cwt Emergency Floor Price under milk used for manufacturing and for multiple federal field hearings to get to the bottom of the systemic dairy corruption and failed federal policies that keep dairy farmers' milk prices so far below the cost of production. It is long past time that Farm Bills be moved forward to ensure that the farmers who produce the nation's food be treated with the dignity, respect, and the financial reward they have earned from their labor.

To see a longer version of this letter as a press release visit our website at www.farmwomenunited.org or visit FWU on Facebook.

Tina Carlin, Executive Director, Farm Women United, Laceyville, Pa.

The Leader



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The Leader (ISSN #10501983) The Leader is published daily at 34 West Pulteney Street, Corning, New York 14830 by GateHouse Media, LLC. Periodical postage paid at Corning, N.Y. 14830-0817. USPS code 1 0586-160. Postmaster: Send address changes to The Leader, 34 West Pulteney Street, Corning, New York 14830.

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