

He champions agriculture in N.J.

Charles Kuperus says innovation key to success

Posted by the [Asbury Park Press](#) on 06/9/06

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

VINELAND — Ask Charles Kuperus how farmers survive in the nation's most densely populated state — where highways, subdivisions and shopping malls crowd the cornfields, nurseries and barns — and his answer almost invariably is "innovation."

Kuperus, New Jersey's agriculture secretary, is constantly urging such change, in how farmers run their operations, what they raise and how they market their products. He encourages them to seek more local markets and label their wares as produced in New Jersey.

"It's a culture of innovation that we're really trying to promote," he said. "When we see emerging trends, we want to be sure we're on the front lines providing that information to our farmers."

Kuperus, who was raised on his family's dairy farm in Sussex, also is trying to prevent the wrong kinds of change, by promoting ways to keep families on their farms, preserve their fields and protect New Jersey's plants and wildlife.

"Permanently preserved farmland is something that's going to be there for generations to come," he says, adding, "Our strategy has to protect the farmland but make sure we keep these farm family entrepreneurs viable."

The Garden State already leads the country with 17 percent of its farmland preserved — a total of more than 1,300 farms covering more than 145,000 acres — with another 20,000 acres in the final steps of the process.

Kuperus, 47, and his staff have pushed an array of strategies designed to help state farmers diversify their income, produce "value-added" items such as branded fruit juice and keep more of the consumer food dollar.

For farmers in high-traffic locations, that can mean getting into agritourism with farm tours and holiday-themed entertainment such as corn mazes and haunted hay rides at Halloween, or setting up farm stands to sell their produce directly to the public, along with homemade pies, sauces and other goodies made from their wares.

Other farmers have begun trying to sell more of their produce directly to institutions such as state prisons and restaurants that promote Jersey-grown items on their menus, rather than to brokers.

Meanwhile, the Agriculture Department has doubled the number of community farmers' markets to 80 since January 2002, when Kuperus took over from longtime secretary Art Brown. Kuperus is only the sixth agriculture secretary since the department's start in 1916.

During his annual spring farm tour this May, Kuperus chatted with farmers about putting the "Jersey Fresh" brand or their farms' names on wrappers for each bundle of spinach, for example, to let consumers know its origin and quality.

"We have the nation's best state branding program," says Kuperus, who founded a nursery and garden center in his early 20s and later worked in local and state government planning jobs.

The Jersey Fresh campaign started in 1984 under Art Brown, who often appeared in its ads. An updated campaign with catchy slogans promoting specific items started in mid-April.



Campaign extended

Kuperus, a father of six who still lives in Sussex with his wife of 26 years, has extended the campaign beyond veggies, first to marketing landscaping products, labeled "Jersey Grown." Come July, clams, oysters and tilapia will be marketed under the banner "Jersey Seafood . . . It's a Shore Thing." After that comes "Jersey Bred," to promote the state's horse breeders.

Kuperus also has stepped beyond the secretary's traditional turf, pushing an agenda to curb childhood obesity through new school nutrition standards that must be instituted by September 2007. The rules ban beverages and foods high in fat and sugar from school cafeterias and vending machines, and require schools to teach good nutrition and encourage exercise.

The department also is working on strategies to feed more of the state's poor residents with surplus food distributed at soup kitchens and food banks. And Kuperus is pushing hard for an ethanol plant in the state, which would bring corn farmers a new market and extra income.

Farmers generally give Kuperus high marks for his strategies and follow-through, saying he is widely respected but can become impatient with people who don't get his ideas.

"Charlie is very much of a visionary. He sees the big picture and long range," said Rich Nieuwenhus, a Belvidere greenhouse farmer and president of the New Jersey Farm Bureau.

Farmers have clout

Kurt Alstede, who grows dozens of fruits and vegetables on 500 acres in Chester, Morris County, said the Agriculture Department is well run, partly because farmers have unusual oversight power: While the governor has final say, the secretary is chosen by the State Board of Agriculture. The board in turn is elected by delegates to the State Agriculture Convention each winter.

"One of the most impressive things that I think Charlie possesses is the ability to network, to get things done in Trenton," Alstede said.