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PA SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE SOWS HOPE IN FAYETTE COUNTY

Uniontown, PA – Fayette County farmers of all ages had the rare opportunity to spend one-on-one time with Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Russell Redding Friday.

Redding, who last visited during the 2023 Fayette County Fair, served as guest speaker for the seventh Fayette County Agricultural Roundtable at the fairgrounds' Fiddlers' Building, alongside Penn State Extension Educator Justin Brackenrich.

"It's great to be back on the fairgrounds. We were here last August and, even in the heat, this place was buzzing, so it's always great to come back and talk about agriculture with the county commissioners, local leaders and folks who, every day, are invested in this business," Redding said. "These forums are a chance to listen to the local community and what they want to do around agriculture. It's about how we can help them do what they do and vice versa, so it's good to be here."

The roundtable, which included a question-and-answer session, was hosted by the Fayette County Commissioners and Fayette County Farm Bureau. State Sen. Pat Stefano, state Rep. Ryan Warner, other state and federal representatives, Fayette County Farm Bureau President Darrell Becker and board members, Fayette County Career and Technology Institute (CTI) Future Farmers of America (FFA) students and more were among the crowd gathered for a chance to discuss local farmers' needs and concerns with Redding.

Redding's presentation covered state initiatives, the Pennsylvania Farm Bill and other agricultural legislation in progress, combatting crop damage, Sunday hunting, grant opportunities and more.

"For me, this is a chance to talk about where we're making investments, and I want to hear about the economic development opportunities here. I want to sensitize this community a little bit to what's going on around the world, in terms of issues dealing with export activities and international relations, and I also just want to engage in conversations about what Pennsylvania agriculture is like and what we can do to help it grow here," he said. "I want both our farmers and FFA kids to be reassured that, every day, we're thinking about how we can both protect and grow what we have; recognize the diversity of agriculture in Fayette County and Pennsylvania; and, at the same time, what we need to do to keep it here. It's not going to stay just because you and I like it. It will take investments, opportunities and a lot of decisions by a lot of people to make sure food access is a consideration in daily policies and economic development strategy. I want them to really feel like they've got a partner in the Department of Agriculture."

Fayette County Commissioner Chairman Scott Dunn, who spearheads the roundtables, said Redding's visit was "an honor."

“The concept of our roundtables hasn’t changed since the first – take a good county industry, like agriculture, and try to enhance it by listening to the people involved in it. It’s also really important to build relationships with government officials who can help make that happen,” Dunn said. “To that end, Secretary Redding has been to Fayette County twice in the last year. We look forward to working with him to help build agriculture and make Fayette grow.”

Becker said Redding is “extremely active and a great advocate for agriculture,” whose personal recognition is “a great thing.”

“There are 67 counties in the state and 57 farm bureau satellite branches. To have him come here is important. In life, it’s important to get the ear of the people who can make change. We’re blessed that we’re very politically active here in Fayette County, and the Farm Bureau tries to piggyback on that by doing a lot of advocating for agriculture,” Becker said. “We have almost 350 farm bureau members, and we’re a grassroots organization. It’s my job to speak for agriculture, and it’s a tremendous responsibility. I want to thank the secretary for his presence and give him the accolades he deserves. To have this guy come back and forth into Fayette County, it’s a coup. It’s wonderful.”

Following the roundtable, Redding accompanied the FFA students back to CTI for lunch, a tour and discussion panel led entirely by the students. CTI Agricultural Science Instructor and FFA Advisor Adalyn Reed said her program boasts 35 students in 10th through 12th grade from four local school districts.

“I gave the students a briefing of Secretary Redding and his accomplishments, and they got to read his biography and testimony to his position. They used those to form questions related to general agriculture, his career, how he became successful in the industry and what he does on a daily basis,” Reed said. “It’s definitely an exciting opportunity that we didn’t want to pass up, especially while he was in the area. We’re a small but growing program, and I think any insight from our secretary of agriculture could help us expand our pursuits.”

Redding thanked Reed, the districts who utilize CTI and the FFA students for recognizing agriculture as “part of the very fabric of Fayette County.” He also congratulated the program on their engagement with the state Farm Bill and procurement of grant funding, which has already allowed for construction of a greenhouse.

“They recognize that there’s something special in the relationship between those that are on the farms and who are feeding us. They make that connection, and they also see a lot of opportunity in what the industry needs are – from technology and innovation, to working with the environment and, at the end of the day, still feeding us,” Redding said. “By building the greenhouse, they’re also recognizing the work we’re doing for the Farm Bill and translating that into this local community, inside the school, for folks who are committed to agriculture in whatever pathway they take after graduation. They’re going to be better citizens for Fayette County.”

Becker congratulated Reed for “doing a great job” for her students and said Redding’s support for CTI makes him “the perfect guy for the job.”

“Agriculture is the top industry in the county and the state, but people don’t really genuflect to agriculture these days. We, as a farm bureau, support Adalyn, and we’ve been talking to our legislators about getting some funding to build her a new barn so the students can get the maximum experience while they’re still in school,” Becker said. “Do you know how exciting it is for a 16-year-old kid to meet

the state secretary of agriculture and talk to him about opportunities in the industry? For Russell to be able to see past the next curve and understand what's needed is huge. He will inspire these kids. I guarantee it."

In addition to the greenhouse, Reed said, her program also operates a poultry barn and focuses on agricultural production and operations.

"This is my second year teaching, so I'm still learning the potential of the program and kind of getting a grip on what the students are interested in, so I can base our hands-on activities off of that," she said. "I hope, through this experience, they learn more about the Farm Bill and how it affects farmers, as well as future career opportunities and life lessons that they can take away from their time in agriculture."

Becker said he hopes Redding will come back for the 2024 county fair and establish an annual visit to deliver a "State of the Agriculture Address."

"Today is just the culmination of hard work over the years and getting some recognition for Fayette County being agriculturally strong and in tune with what's going on in our state," Becker said. "Russell Redding is a friend of Fayette County."

To learn more about the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, visit www.agriculture.pa.gov; the Fayette County Farm Bureau, visit www.facebook.com/Fayettefarmbureau; or Fayette County's Future Farmers of America, visit www.fayettecti.org.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.org.

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