Ks Stratton farm campaign mugshot, file photos, video

Stratton launches ag diversity campaign; first farm highlighted sees orders triple

BY KAY SHIPMAN

FarmWeek

Lt. Gov. Juliana Stratton launched a campaign promoting Illinois’ agriculture diversity March 28. Delayed by COVID-19 and Gov. J.B. Pritzker’s order to shelter-in-place, the campaign connects Illinois consumers statewide with farmers and businesses that grow, raise, process and sell diverse foods in their state.

The timing proved opportune for people needing food and farmers seeking buyers.

Stratton highlighted The Mill at Janie’s Farm and shared information online in her Cultivating Our Communities campaign. Owned and operated by Iroquois County farmer Harold Wilken, the business mills and sells whole grain, stone-ground flours and other grain products. By midnight Sunday, Wilken had received 450 orders. Prior to coronavirus, the mill handled 10 to 15 orders daily, but saw those grow to 50 to 70 after COVID-19.

“We’re very grateful for what is happening,” Wilken said. “I’m very excited and really blessed.”

Stratton told **FarmWeek:** “I think it’s important to highlight our state’s farmers, producers, specialty growers and local business owners by lifting up the products they manufacture. We know that many people depend on the income they make from their small business to support their families, which in turn, helps to keep their local economies running.

“It’s especially important during the coronavirus crisis that is leaving many small-business owners and entrepreneurs struggling to stay afloat, for my office to do what we can to shine a light on their products and businesses,” the lieutenant governor added.

Nearly all of Wilken’s wholesale markets dropped “way down” because his wholesale bakers sold to restaurants and “that all dried up,” he said.

Now his mill in Ashkum, population 800, is operating at full capacity with workers who include his employees, farm crew, relatives, college students and his teacher wife. “We’re all dug in,” Wilken said. “We’re going to ramp up to handle it. We’ve had a lot of positive feedback. I’m very grateful to the lieutenant governor.” Wilken was unaware his mill would be highlighted until he read Stratton’s tweet.

Stratton posted on Facebook, “Now, more than ever, it‘s so important to support our farmers, growers and small business owners … #StayHome and order online! CultivatingOurCommunities.” The lieutenant governor said she plans to highlight more farms and businesses in posts on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram using the hashtag “CultivatingOurCommunities.”

“I think Illinois has the best, most diverse specialty product industry of any other state in the nation,” she said. “I believe that by highlighting this, it will help support Illinois families and business owners, to drive sales and feed into local economies, particularly small-town business districts that anchor our communities.”

Asked how the local food system can support Illinois residents during COVID-19, Stratton responded, “When the COVID-19 crisis struck Illinois and many people panic-shopped at grocers, the one thing I wanted to make sure to do was assure our residents that our food production pipeline is strong and resilient.

“There are no dangers of running out of food because our farmers will continue waking up before sunrise and work till the evening hours to ensure that Illinoisans can feed their families,” she continued. “That said, I also want to highlight that there is an abundance of local food options out there: places to shop, products to try.”

Consumers can also support local farmers, some who have lost markets to closed restaurants and other businesses and are using social media to find customers. Stratton championed Illinois farmers and businesses.

“Buy local, buy local and buy local, whenever you have the chance! Our farmers and small-business owners are the backbone of our Illinois economy,” she said. “If we hope to emerge from this crisis with a strong economy, we’ll need those local growers and producers to thrive in the marketplace.”

Agricultural marketplaces increasingly rely on technology and broadband, especially now, the lieutenant governor pointed out.

“It’s imperative that our local producers are able to stay competitive and market their goods, locally, nationally and on a global marketplace,” she said. “A robust broadband network allows for farmers to keep up with growing trends in farming, it allows for small businesses to market their goods to consumers in markets we typically wouldn’t hear about if not for the internet.”

Stratton thanked everyone working through these unprecedented times. “We need you. Local and state economies need you,” she said. “I will do my best to showcase some of the amazing businesses that are pressing on during this pandemic. It’s humbling to serve as your lieutenant governor.”

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