Ks Costello director Photo, info box

Costello’s goal: Grow understanding of ag’s impact in state

BY KAY SHIPMAN

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Only two days into his new job as acting agriculture director, Jerry Costello II established a formidable task - for Illinoisans to understand what the agriculture industry means to the state.

His idea “is to make sure people understand the impact of the agriculture industry in the state of Illinois. I don’t think they do … not enough people,” Costello told **FarmWeek** Tuesday at Ag Legislative Day.

Gov. J.B. Pritzker appointed Costello to lead the Illinois Department of Agriculture, pending Senate approval.

On Ag Legislative Day, Costello was ubiquitous. He addressed ag representatives at a breakfast and introduced former House colleagues and Agriculture Committee leaders, then advised nearly 1,000 FFA members who filled the rotunda before joining the mass of students on the Capitol steps for a group photo.

Agriculture has “always been a passion of mine. I love the industry,” Costello told **FarmWeek**. He reminisced about spending weekends on his grandfather’s diverse livestock and crop farm near Sesser in Franklin County.

Costello highlighted the state’s unique characteristics as the nation’s leading food processor with more than 2,600 companies and its miles of rail, highway, interstate and rivers to transport products.

“We’re a very unique state in the Midwest,” he said. “It’s a unique position that I hope to do everything I can to build on.”

The state’s diversity contributes to ag’s challenges. “Some of the challenges can be misconceptions of urban versus rural,” he said. “Getting people to understand and educated, which is something we as a department need to do and work on.”

House Ag Committee Chair Sonya Harper, D-Chicago, helped Costello understand another challenge, “a real need for fresh food, especially produce, in urban areas.” The new director said he’s interested in urban agriculture.

Illinois Farm Bureau President Richard Guebert Jr. praised Costello’s appointment and his “proven record in supporting agriculture” during his tenure in the Illinois House.

Guebert also congratulated Pritzker for selecting Costello from among the qualified candidates who applied. “Since his election, the governor has worked hard to choose people to run the Department of Agriculture who take pride in ensuring that the agricultural community is well represented,” Guebert said. “We believe Jerry Costello will continue in that tradition.”

During his Ag Day remarks, Costello pointed out Guebert had been a constituent in his House district, and thanked him and IFB staff and leaders for their efforts to support agriculture in the General Assembly.

As Costello looked ahead to his new responsibilities, he marveled that the industry he now leads provides so many jobs but receives little recognition for that.

“The fact we lead the nation in food processing with more than 2,600 processors, if you think of just the employment that comes from processors,” he said. “It goes back to the misconception … what agriculture means to the state and how this all fits together. That’s an important process. It needs to be more well broadcast to the state.”

Costello lives in Smithton with his wife, Lori, and their three children.

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