From Your Commissioner

Registrations for COVID-19 Relief

I have taken a lot of heat over my decision to put a threshold of $50,000 of gross income from farming, to be able to register for the non-dairy program. Now that the registration period has closed, we know that we have only had around 40 farms signed up. That is less than 10% of those we felt would be eligible. I am taking that as a particularly good sign for NH agriculture. I wrote some time ago that I felt that more people would be planting gardens and turning to local greenhouses for plants and vegetables.

What I didn’t see coming, was just how many people would be buying baby chicks this year. I hope that turns out well for the birds and the new poultry farmers. Raising a few backyard chickens might seem like any easy thing to do, but I suspect most of the readers of the WMB know that it is a little more complicated than just putting birds in a pen and waiting for them to start laying eggs.

But, back to the issue of the threshold. What we didn’t want to do was to overwhelm ourselves and not be able to provide any meaningful assistance. Other than much appreciated help from UNH Cooperative Extension, this whole project falls on existing staff. It is not as if anyone in the department is sitting around wondering what to do with themselves. I won’t pretend that I had any idea of how many registrations we would have, but I am pleasantly surprised by the low numbers. Frankly, I was expecting much higher numbers.

We have heard from a few farms whose incomes were under $50,000 and who have been badly hurt by the closing of restaurants, since those were their only markets. Now that we have a handle on the demands on the funds, at least in terms of the number of farms, we can start to think about opening the program back up with a lower threshold. Unless more funding becomes available, that decision won’t be made until after July 15th. At that time, we will have a better idea of the financial impact that the pandemic has had on our registrants.

Our maple producers have taken a real hit. In one case, their sales are down about $100,000 so far this year. With those kinds of numbers, it won’t take long for our 1.5-million-dollar fund to be depleted. To be clear, I don’t expect that any producer will be made whole, I am just saying that we could be looking at some large losses, without a lot of money to spread around.

Many of the farms in NH are small operations with under $50,000 in sales, but few, if any people can survive on the profit a farm of that size, can produce. We are hopeful that we will be able to help those who are truly in need. However, I don’t see us lowering the limit much below $25,000 in gross sales, as sales below that number really cannot not provide a livable margin. It is not that I don’t care, but there is only so much we can do. I am more than happy to talk with anyone who feels that my
assumptions are wrong and that we need to take different factors into consideration. That is why I am writing this column.

Shawn N. Jasper – Commissioner