

**State of Agriculture Address
Commissioner Richard A. Ball
January 9, 2025**

Good afternoon and thank you for that kind introduction, Anna. It's an honor to have our young people here with us at the forum, providing that special welcome. I'm excited to share that we'll be hearing more from Anna and members of 4-H, MANRRS, and our Ag Society Ambassadors later on.

I want to first extend my sincerest thanks to our hosts, the New York State Agricultural Society Board, for their tremendous work putting together this event. This forum is a time-honored tradition and a family reunion; one that I always look forward to, both as a farmer and as Commissioner. It is always great to be here among friends and colleagues and it is truly inspiring to see the commitment to our industry that I know we all share.

Thank you to all our panelist and speakers who have been here throughout the day. Your work and voices are critical.

To all our awardees: a huge congratulations. Thank you for your service to this special agricultural community. I also want to congratulate our Distinguished Service awardee, Elwyn Voss of the Voss Group. We met over 30 years ago. I appreciated your thoughts and advice as we were building our farm back then, but even more today, the passion and dedication to agriculture and to the next generation.

Of course, I would be remiss not to recognize the people that I'm honored to work with at the Department. Our staff understand and care about what you do, they devote themselves to work on our shared mission, and they make my job better (and easier) every day.

Those that are here this afternoon, please stand up when I call your name so I can introduce you:

- First Deputy Commissioner Steve McGrattan
- Our Deputy Commissioners, Elizabeth Wolters and Katie Howard
- Our Assistant Commissioner Damali Wynter
- In our Executive office, Lauren Williams;
- Jola Szubielski
- Hanna Birkhead
- Julia Mason
- Timothy Sheldon
- Lydia Johnson, our Excelsior Fellow
- Hannah Gonzalez, our AmeriCorps Vista Member
- Sarita Heffernan, my Executive Assistant and right hand

From the Division of Agricultural Development:

- Tim Pezolesi, Assistant Director
- Mark McMullen

- Teia Barnes
- Timothy McBride
- Jessica Woodward
- Jessica Brooks
- Andrea Jamieson
- Erich Keena
- Emily Cook
- Nickolas Kossmann
- Stephanie Wojtowicz
- Henry Talmage
- Mary Clark-Smith
- Andra Spencer
- Joseph Proctor

From Food Safety and Inspection:

- Steve Schirmer
- Wendy Ingersoll

From the New York State Fair:

- Julie LaFave, Director
- Christina Tuff

We also have our partners from Governor Hochul's office, Deputy Secretary Kevin King and Lindsay McMahon. Thank you for being here.

Thank you to former Commissioner Pat Hooker for being here, Nathan Rudgers, and Pat Brennan. I appreciate your mentorship and friendships.

I also want to take a moment to recognize the recent loss of a close friend of the Ag Society and former New York State Agriculture Commissioner Dick McGuire. Dick was a fierce advocate for farmers and a natural leader. He held leadership positions with so many groups, including the American Farm Bureau Federation and New York Farm Bureau, as well as at the Department. Dick will be remembered for his friendship and service to farmers, his leadership and mentorship, and his lifelong commitment to agriculture.

Ag Society was so important to Dick McGuire. He was always energized by this annual gathering of New York State leaders and what they – you – contribute to New York agriculture. We lost more than a few friends of ag this year. They, like Dick, met the challenges and opportunities of their day, took them on, and left us all the better for it. I am reminded of an old adage that I find myself coming back to when I reflect on Dick's legacy, and on our shared work: "We drink from wells that we did not dig, and we are warmed by fires that we did not build."

We all walk in the footsteps of those that came before us and try to "leave it better" for those who will follow in ours. Just look at our Century Farm families. Each one of these awardees has contributed to our community for decades and has a unique story to pass down to their

next generation. And, they share another common denominator as well: **change**. Every one of these farms is different today than they were 100 years ago, proving that change is something not just to accept, but to embrace.

In our industry, change is inevitable. From a changing climate to unpredictable markets and other global forces that appear beyond our control, there is no shortage of uncertainty these days. But following in the footsteps of our forefathers, I know that we can embrace that change and not just survive, but thrive, by evolving.

Having said that, New York has a big role to play in the “new world order,” as policies and priorities shift across the globe.

I have the opportunity to represent New York State at the 31st Tri National Accord, most recently in October. The Tri National Accord is a meeting between all the leaders of agriculture across the United States, Canada, and Mexico. We talk about trade agreements, tariff concerns, trade irritants, phytosanitary concerns, etc.

You’ve often heard me say, agriculture is very much a relationship business. Almost 40 percent of what we grow in New York State gets exported, and Canada and Mexico are our two biggest trading partners. We rely on positive trade relations with these folks to support our agricultural economy and open up opportunities to collaborate with our partners and engage in new and *fair trade agreements. In 2025, the USMCA comes up for a review and we need together to decide to renew for the next 15 years or renegotiate a new agreement. These are critical conversations and partnerships. New York has vital interests here and figure very largely into these negotiations.

On the national front, as you know, we are continuing to wait on a new Farm Bill. Every five years we have an opportunity to work on the most complicated piece of legislation to go through Congress. We need to remember that at its core, this process is about supporting our farmers and ensuring access to our food production.

Following our listening sessions several years ago, we heard one thing loud and clear from all of you and from our nutrition community: we do not need a smaller Farm Bill, we need the *right* Farm Bill. One that works for us here in New York, supports the specialty crop programs that are our strength, and ensures nutrition and agriculture are strongly linked – as they should be. This is a great opportunity for positive change, and we will continue to fight for what we need.

It’s been noted that nearly 86 percent of farmers in the United States also depend on off-farm income. We need to do better, and I believe we can do better to make sure agriculture is a viable way to make a living. Whether it’s rewarding our farms who combat climate change or ensuring our farmers are New York’s first and best suppliers, we have opportunities in agriculture, and we need to take advantage of them.

From the farmers and producers who feed our communities with fresh produce, dairy, maple, honey, and more, to craft beverages, natural animal fibers, and the equine industry that help drive New York’s economy and tourism, we have an amazing agricultural community within New York’s borders. We have some of the best soil in the country, access

to water, the largest marketplace in the world, and a smart, driven generation of young people who are eager to become the next leaders of our industry. We have a strong ally in our Governor, who knows the value of the work we do, and a tremendous network of partners – all of you – who work every day to support the agricultural community.

As I reflect, not just on this past year but on the long legacy of New York ag, I am inspired by what we have done together. Through decades, we have in New York, a history of doing the right things, investing in the right places, and pushing for the right policies. Our agricultural community has shown fortitude and innovation, shoring up our foundation while continuing to tackle challenges, both local and global.

So even in this time of uncertainty, I know: New York is going to be okay.

Right now, we have the privilege of a new year ahead of us. A story waiting to be written. With our Governor leading the way, we will continue fighting for programs and policies that directly support our farmers and boost access to agriculture across the state, strengthening our industry for years to come.

One of those initiatives is the Governor's Executive Order, directing New York State agencies to increase the percentage of food they source from New York producers. Our goal is to have agencies buy 30 percent of their food from New York State sources within five years, and we've already far exceeded our first-year goal. This initiative is a game changer. And it's only just begun.

New York has also championed programs to help offset rising costs for our farmers, including creating the Farm Employer Overtime Credit. At a time when many are experiencing the devastating effects of rising prices, this is just one innovative way that we're helping our families. The Governor is, this year, working hard to address the cost of living and put money back in the pockets of New Yorkers in other ways too – stay tuned for her State of the State next week to find out more about her goals.

We're also working to make sure everyone can succeed in our industry. The Beginning Farmer Grant Program and the Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Farmer Grant Program support New York farmers who are new to the field or who face disproportionate barriers to success. Access to capital is one of the biggest challenges to the success of new and beginning farms, and I'm proud that these programs are helping to build a path forward for these farmers.

One of the reasons I feel so optimistic about the future is **because of** these beginning and young farmers, and the next generation who will be leaders in agribusiness, animal and veterinary science, food science, conservation, biotechnology, and so much more.

Introducing young people to the importance of local agriculture and the food system early on is critical to developing a pipeline of leaders that are passionate about agriculture and eager to contribute to our story. I want to give you the opportunity to hear from one of these future leaders, Hannah Brady, who is an Ag Society Ambassador.

I'd like to note that Hannah is also here with us in person today – please stand. Thank you

so much Hannah for your words and your passion.

As you can see, we have tremendous assets in our colleges and universities, and we're working hard to strengthen those ties. We have been talking to higher education and career prep programs to understand the trends that they are observing. And, we're talking to employers in the ag and food system to understand their workforce needs for today and tomorrow.

We're also fortunate to have such strong partnerships with organizations like FFA, 4-H, MANRRS, Agriculture in the Classroom, and our Ag Society Ambassadors who are working with our young people and helping guide our future generation.

Today, we have more than 400 agricultural teachers across New York. We're adding MANRRS chapters across the State, including our very first junior chapter at John Bowne High School. We have nearly 200,000 4-H students in every corner of the State. Our New York FFA is growing faster than any other state, which is quite remarkable considering what I experienced at last years' National FFA Convention.

For those of you who know me, you know I am not usually speechless. However, that's 72,000 young ag leaders at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, a crowd that rivaled any I've seen (and even beat out the attendance for Taylor Swift in that same stadium, I'll note.) That does leave me speechless. Our New York group was there, with 97 students, representing 21 chapters, awarded national individual and team rankings. They certainly made us all proud, and it is inspiring to know that this is the future of agriculture.

Here at home, at the state's first-ever Youth Agriculture Conference, I was honored to spend time with some of the greatest minds in 4-H, MANRRS, and FFA. At this historical first-ever collaboration, we all had our sleeves rolled up, meeting each other, working together, learning what we had in common, and sharing in our goal of moving agriculture forward. Following the convention, Governor Hochul announced a Blue-Ribbon Panel to Advance Agriculture Education, which will build on these successes and our new collaboration, especially as we mark the upcoming 20th anniversary of New York Agriculture in the Classroom and the 100th anniversary of New York FFA.

For many in our next generation, a relationship to agriculture starts at their local county fair. Our fairs are hubs for agricultural education and can often spark new interests for those who haven't been exposed to the industry. That's why this past summer, the Governor launched a marketing initiative to support our 50+ county and local fairs across the State, including through the County Fair Passport Program, to make sure that these fairs continue to be centers of their community.

And speaking of fairs, we had another terrific year at the Great New York State Fair. We are proud to say that agriculture remains at the core of the Fair, and one of the biggest draws for visitors. From the Butter Sculpture to the Maple Booth, the expanded Voice of the Farmer Garden and the new Mobile Dairy Experience, agriculture continues to be front and center, giving nearly one million visitors an opportunity to connect with farmers and learn more about our industry.

Many of our students come from farm families that span across our industry. That includes dairy, our largest agricultural sector. Our next student presenter is 4-H student Everett Cox and he's excited to share with you his vision for the future of dairy. Let's take a listen to Everett's story...

It's inspiring to from Everett, one of the thousands of 4-H'ers from across the State, and hear his interest in the success of New York dairy. Through the Milk Marketing Advisory Council and the Dairy Promotion Advisory Board, we're working hard at the State to advance the industry, research innovative uses for New York dairy products, and increase consumption of New York milk.

In 2024, New York dairy had a lot to be proud of, with major investments made in our processing facilities across the State—from the launch of the fairlife production plant in Webster to the expansion of AgriMark in the North Country and so much more. These facilities represent millions of dollars in investment and will add hundreds of jobs to their communities.

Additionally, Governor Hochul has invested \$34 million for on-farm fluid milk storage technologies and processing infrastructure through the Dairy Modernization Grant Program. She also recently announced \$21 million for the Alternative Waste Management and Enhanced Precision Feed Program, which will help to address manure storage but will also mitigate greenhouse gases and provide opportunities to sequester carbon as we continue to pull together to fight climate change.

As we work to heal and preserve our planet, I often think about my grandfather who worried about the weather and I think about my grandkids who need to think about climate. From discussions I've had with students at the Bronx High School of Law and Community Service to our Youth in Agriculture Conference, I know that young people are thinking about this issue as much as we are. I'm proud to now invite Anna Maxwell to give her perspective on where we are and where we need to be going.

Certainly, climate change is one of the biggest challenges we face. I'm proud to say that agriculture is 100 percent at the table when it comes to tackling climate change, with initiatives that are making real impacts on our environment and on our farms. Our Climate Resilient Farming program, Agricultural Non-point Source Abatement and Control, and many more are providing real solutions in the fight against climate change, and protections to our farmers against extreme weather events.

For instance, through seven rounds of funding, the Climate Resilient Farming Program. Through has provided \$36 million to assist farms across New York State with projects that focus on soil health, water management, and the reduction of methane from manure/nutrient storage. So far, the program is estimated to have reduced greenhouse gases by 454,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent—that's like getting 105,000 cars off the road for a year! And the program is still growing. In the latest round, New York State has made \$33 million available – almost the same amount that was awarded the previous seven rounds combined – making this the highest amount of funding available ever.

I want to take a moment to thank our Soil and Water Conservation Districts, who are our boots on the ground, helping our farmers better handle the effects of these severe weather events while also helping them mitigate agriculture's impact on climate change. Through last year's budget, New York State increased funding by \$1.2 million to the Districts in support of their incredible work. Working with our partners like Cornell Soil Health and our Conservation Districts, agriculture is playing an important role in achieving New York's nation-leading climate goals and preserving our natural resources, all while supporting our farmers and securing local food systems.

Protecting the long-term future of New York's environment and our agricultural industry is a key priority of ours here at the Department. We are working to combat our invasive species, such as Spotted Lanternfly, and monitor our livestock for illness, like Avian Influenza. We are fortunate that here in New York, so far, we are managing this new animal health concern and are proud of our proactive measures, working alongside our partners at USDA, to prevent Avian Influenza from entering our state. We are working diligently in these and so many areas across the Department; work that is that are directly impacting the future of our industry, building a strong, more resilient food supply chain that will bolster our farmers and ensure all New Yorkers access to local, nutritious food.

Food insecurity should not be an inevitable consequence of geography or poverty; we need to see it as a solvable problem. An accurate measure of success for us needs to more than the number of bushels per acre or number of acres planted. We need to focus on how our success in agriculture translates into success in our rural communities and to connecting the dots between those of us who supply the food system and those of us who need access to it.

As we focused on our food system this past year, we doubled down on our efforts to connect more New York growers with more New York consumers. With some of the best food in the world available right in our own backyard, we are working to increase food security in our communities; develop a strong, local food supply chain right here at home; and ensure all New Yorkers know where their food comes from and can access the nutritious food they need.

I'd like to now introduce another student of agriculture, Rio Marini, Vice President for MANRRS junior chapter at John Bowne High School, to talk a little bit more about getting local foods to those that need them most.

We have a New York State Food Supply Working Group, which continues to address food shortages, food waste, and barriers to getting New York farm goods to markets. It also aims to improve the resiliency and self-reliance of the state's farm and food supply.

We have a variety of innovative programs that are helping us further these goals, like the Nourish New York program, which continues to connect families in need across the state with agricultural products grown by New York farmers. Just last month, we were proud to share that 100 million meals have been distributed to families across the state through the program. That's certainly something that deserves a round of applause.

From initiatives like the Farmers' Market Resiliency and Urban Farms and Community Gardens programs – which are designed to help people in all corners of New York State be a part of agriculture – to the SNAP-Ed Food Box Grant and Community Growers Grant, the FreshConnect Checks program, and the Food Access Expansion Program, which are helping increase access fresh foods and introduce new markets to our farmers, we are continuing to prioritize food system resiliency across the state. A crucial part of that work is getting New York food into New York schools.

Part of being Commissioner means travel, sometimes lots of it, to all corners of the State. The best part about the travel is meeting our *amazing partners, who are working daily to advance our shared goals. I've had several WOW moments on my travels this year. There's too many to name, but I have to share a few from my travels during Farm-to-School Month.

First, we visited CR Weeks Elementary school in the Southern Tier to announce the latest awards from the Farm-to-School program—more than \$1.5 million that is going to 16 programs to increase the use of locally grown food on school menus, improve student health, and boost New York's farmers. I had some of the best kale salad there, which the kids gave a huge thumbs up to, and the mac' n cheese was also pretty awesome.

Since the Farm-to-School Program launched, \$8.7 million has been awarded, benefiting school districts in every region across the State. That's an incredible success, and we're so excited to keep the momentum going.

Later that week, we took a trip up to the North Country to visit Champlain Valley Educational Services BOCES, one of two recipients of the first round of the \$50 million Regional School Food Infrastructure Grant Program. This program was brand new in 2024, and helps schools supply fresh, nutritious, scratch-made meals for school children. CVES BOCES will be using \$5 million to build a new commissary, which will feature a central food hub and two state-of-the-art educational facilities, all of which will help get more local foods to kids. I have to tell you, I was absolutely blown away by what I saw: an amazing group of people feeding truly good food in the school cafeterias that students actually liked. What's more, they turned the school cafeteria from a break even prospect to a profit center. This is good for kids, good for farmers, good for New York's economy.

Right now, we are accepting applications for the next round of the Regional School Food Infrastructure initiative.

There are so many great stories to tell, like the school in Sullivan County that blew the top off our New York State 30 Percent Initiative goals by sourcing 70 percent of their school food from local farmers last year. We're really excited about these opportunities, and I look forward to seeing all these projects unfold.

One of New York agriculture's greatest assets is without a doubt its people, the hard working farm families who care for our land and animals, producing the products that feed us. It's these businesses that make the delicious products that put New York on the map. Through programs like Taste NY and NYS Grown & Certified, the Department works hard to tell their stories.

For Taste NY, those stories showcase the quality and diversity of our New York food and beverages, which are made by entrepreneurs who take a chance on a good idea. Last year, we were excited to partner again with minor league baseball teams across the state, bringing more than \$5.7 million in sales to Taste NY businesses. Additionally, Taste NY launched a revamped ShopTasteNY.com online shopping portal, as well as celebrated the grand opening of a new market in Grand Central Station, making it even easier for consumers to purchase New York-produced products.

I'm proud to share that we recently launched a new \$1 million marketing campaign that is helping us tell the story of our farmers who have adopted a higher standard in both food safety and environmental management through the NYS Grown & Certified program. The campaign is called "Harvested with Heart," and it shows consumers and buyers the care that these farmers put into producing their food, and why they're driven to deliver only the best.

It's stories like these that keep us working for our people, and our industry, and I'm proud to say that we shared these videos at the NY Produce Show in December to thousands of food buyers from around the country.

As we hit the ground running in the new year, I am optimistic about the future of agriculture in New York. With the help of our strong network of partners, and our history of innovation and change, New York's agricultural industry will continue forward.

All year, I have seen real progress for our farmers despite the challenges they continue to face. And, after hearing today from young people who are venturing into agriculture with high hopes and passion for the industry, I feel more confident than ever that we are all in good hands. Let's celebrate our wins today, even as we roll up our sleeves to do more.

I've shared with you all the things that keep me up at night. But its incredible stories like Anna's, Everett's, Rio's, and Hannah's that keep me going during the day, focused and driven to make sure that we, as a State, are doing our part and that we are leaving it better for them.

It's their stories and the passion of our young people that allow me to stand before you today and say confidently that the State of Agriculture in New York is strong.

Our profession is noble, our cause is correct.

Thank you.