

Commissioner's column:

We received some very welcomed news coming out of the recent meeting of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture concerning the rollout of the Produce Safety Rule under the Food Safety Modernization Act.

U.S. Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Scott Gottlieb highlighted the compliance challenges facing the food industry in 2018, and noted that education will be emphasized during the first year of implementation to give FDA more time to develop guidance and to complete development of regulator training programs.

That has been NASDA members' position for some time. We know these will be significant changes and FDA has heard plenty from producers and ag groups about this. Everyone is going to need time to fine-tune operations and get this right.

Gottlieb's comments signal that states will have some more time to educate producers about the changes and what it will mean, and we will be able to have an On-Farm Readiness Review Process that will help producers identify areas that will require attention to meet the new rules.

We want to bring producers into compliance, not simply penalize them. Focusing on education in the first year will go a long way in achieving that.

Another bit of welcome news involves water standards and testing methods. Gottlieb also noted an extension of time on compliance dates and the opportunity for more stakeholder engagement in response to concerns raised by NASDA members.

This will extend compliance dates by two to four years and allow for review of testing methods, which should provide producers with more practical water quality expectations. Again, this should also prove more achievable in terms of outcomes. I am pleased the FDA listened and has been responsive to the concerns raised. We all want the same results in the end, but it is important how we get there.

With future projections of food demands expected to rise 70-100 percent in the next three decades, we don't need to be regulating farmers out of business. There are practical and reasonable ways we can address food safety concerns, without causing the collapse of farms.

When I was first elected as Agriculture Commissioner, I did not know a whole lot about NASDA. I was aware of the group, but I quickly learned just how important a role it plays as a collective voice for agriculture.

I value my friendships with other state agriculture commissioners and secretaries, and while we each have specific concerns and interests regarding what's best for farmers and agriculture in our states, there are plenty of issues of common concern. I am grateful we have this organization that to speak on behalf of farmers and agribusiness owners across the country and it is rewarding when we see evidence that these efforts have been heard.

I will certainly keep you up-to-date as FSMA and water standards rules move forward. Education and the on-farm reviews will be critical to successfully navigating these extraordinary changes.

I want to mention another item of interest. I recently hosted an informal roundtable discussion with Ray Starling, special assistant to the president for agriculture, trade and food assistance. I was pleased we were joined by more than 50 agricultural leaders from across the state. Topics included international trade, access to labor, regulatory reform, and infrastructure improvements that could benefit

U.S. agriculture. Starling is a North Carolina native and former general counsel at the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. It was good to see him back in his home state and I appreciate the time he took to hear from ag leaders about what's happening in agriculture in North Carolina.