

Commissioner's column

Twenty years ago, the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services underwent a significant change, not in its function and mission, but in its name. The department added "and Consumer Services" to its title to better represent the work of the department.

At the time the name changed, then-Commissioner Jim Graham said in this newspaper, that "Most people think the Department of Agriculture only serves the farming community. We want to change that image. The 'Consumer Services' portion of the name lets people know we are more than just a farming advocate. I bet each person benefits from at least one service provided by our department every day."

That same statement holds true today, and we continue to educate people on the fact that our services and programs are not just for farmers and agribusinesses. We have made progress, but I still come across people who don't realize all that we do.

The department has increased significantly in size over the past 20 years, and has added more consumer and agricultural services in that time frame.

I am proud of the ways this department touches the lives of all residents of the state, even its smallest residents through food safety inspections and the delivery of U.S. Department of Agriculture commodities for the school lunch program.

In addition to delivering over \$43.6 million worth of USDA commodities, Food Distribution drivers have moved \$1.3 million worth of North Carolina produce to schools through the Farm to School Program during the 2016-2017 school year.

The schools have been a great market addition for the participating farmers, and I am especially proud that school kids have access to the freshest produce available.

Our Standards Division represents another consumer-focused program. The division inspects gas pumps, price scanners and commercial scales for accuracy, and tests the viscosity of oil. Standards inspectors even check packaged oysters to ensure consumers are paying for oysters and not excess liquid.

Our Food and Drug Protection and Meat and Poultry Inspection divisions help ensure food safety through inspection of products at processing facilities and in grocery stores, farmers markets and other retail settings. Processing facilities are inspected for cleanliness and compliance with North Carolina meat inspection laws and ready-to-eat products are also tested.

The Structural Pest Control and Pesticides Division is another division with consumer impacts. Inspectors will check termite and other pest control treatments to prevent deception, fraud and unfair trade practices and to assure high-quality workmanship. The Pesticide Section investigates pesticide-related complaints where pesticides are manufactured, offered for sale, stored or used to ensure compliance with pesticide laws.

I am proud of all the work of the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. As a farmer, I appreciate the services that help make agriculture and agribusiness our

No. 1 industry. As a consumer, a father and a grandfather, I appreciate the ways our staff works to ensure food safety, fair commerce practices and compliance with pesticide and other consumer-protection laws.

We regularly highlight the work of the department on our In the Field blog and on the NCDA&CS Facebook page. If you are interested in learning more about the work we do, check the blog out at <http://info.ncagr.gov/blog/> or follow us on Facebook at @NCAgriculture.