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CEA: Making Our Voice Heard

Tom Stenzel



Editor's Note: I asked Tom Stenzel, executive director of the CEA Alliance, to write a guest column on the importance of political activism in support of our industry. While the Farm Bill may be resolved by the time this publishes, his message is no less important.—JP

Having helped lead produce industry advocacy for some 30 years, I'm distressed when I hear any business discount the importance of an industry voice before national, state and local political leaders. I recognize why today's political landscape isn't inviting to business leaders who just want to run their operations. But a "head-in-the-sand" approach is likely to lead to just more negative impact on our businesses.

I signed on to help the CEA Alliance, a relatively new trade association representing and serving vertical farms and greenhouse producers growing fruits and vegetables in a highly controlled indoor production environment. The Alliance is working to gather our many individual voices and magnify our impact in shaping the business climate for our companies. And I'm glad to say it's working!

There are two steps that every CEA producer, as well as their supply chain partners, need to take.

First, come together with your competitors recognizing that you can accomplish more together than you can alone. I know that concept may seem foreign when there's a race to develop the newest technologies and guard intellectual property. In reality, we have more to gain by sharing perspectives and aligning around common industry goals than perpetuating blind individualism. The CEA Alliance continues to grow, adding more producers, industry suppliers and business partners who understand the importance of collective action.

The next step is then to take our messages to all those policymakers who're shaping our business environment. Politicians at every level can inadvertently, or sometimes intentionally, pass rules and regulations that limit our opportunities for success. We have to educate them on the perils of such policies when under development, not just moan about them when they become law.

Perhaps even more importantly, I believe we're at a crossroads in building government support for the CEA sector. Almost every federal and state government leader I've talked with has been strongly supportive of CEA production. They recognize our role in fortifying national food security, food system resilience, climate-

smart agriculture, sustainability and more. Increasingly, government officials recognize that CEA producers are an important part of the domestic fresh food supply chain and a critical backstop against supply chain disruptions triggered by extreme weather and macroeconomic challenges.

Now is the time when we can shape the positive outcomes we want to enable our businesses and the overall sector to grow.

The CEA Alliance is leading the charge to make CEA production an integral part of the 2023 Farm Bill now under consideration in Congress. Since the 2018 Farm Bill, commercial-scale CEA producers have grown tremendously, due to their value in the agricultural landscape. However, these producers don't qualify for many of the existing programs authorized by the Farm Bill, which have been primarily focused on outdoor field agriculture. While the 2018 Farm Bill took an important early step to create the USDA Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production, it's now time for Congress to accelerate government support and investment in this important and growing part of U.S. agriculture.

Beyond the Farm Bill, we're also advocating for more meaningful support to producers to invest in innovative technologies and farming systems. The establishment of a federal investment tax credit for innovative farming technologies would be a critical market-based policy for addressing the high capital costs associated with innovative technologies like robotics, automation and artificial intelligence, and would fill an important policy gap for the CEA sector and the overall domestic fruit and vegetable industry.

The majority of direct involvement of government with CEA producers has been at the state and local level. Those closest to our growers recognize the importance of what CEA producers bring to their states and local areas. We've been gratified that the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture actually passed a resolution unanimously that supported using federal tax credits as a potential investment strategy for CEA producers.

Now, as we bring our message to national leaders, those local connections matter. We have CEA producers now in almost every state and members in many Congressional districts. There's nothing more powerful in demonstrating our value than to have a political leader tour one of our farms. At the Alliance, we encourage and help all of our members in hosting these important visits.

When we look back a few years from now, I believe we'll see 2023 as turning point for our industry. Not only are consumers and retailers beginning to understand the value of CEA production, government leaders are beginning to step up to support this critically important part of agriculture. If you're part of the CEA supply chain, we ask you to join in with your peers and make 2023 the year we shape our future.