



VETERANS
to
AGRICULTURE

History and Why?

- ▶ The West Virginia Department of Agriculture, under the leadership of Commissioner Walt Helmick, chose to take Agriculture to the next level. In the course of a six-month period, and after close work with the WV Department of Veterans Assistance under Secretary Rick Thompson, the plan to recruit, train and equip veterans and members of the Guard and Reserve to become Agribusiness owners grew.

Letter from the Commissioner

As Commissioner of Agriculture, I am proud to announce the start of a new initiative in West Virginia. The Veterans and Warriors to Agriculture Program is designed to increase the number of entrepreneurs entering the business of agriculture, while serving our many veterans and warriors who have dedicated themselves to our country. The Program is intended to assist veterans in the transition from battlefield to home through education and business opportunities. When someone asked me why we decided to take this project on, my answer was a simple one: It's just the right thing to do. We intend to aggressively pursue as many avenues of support as we can to make this project thrive for many years to come. I invite all West Virginians, young and old, to reach out and help us as we grow and foster these new agribusiness opportunities for our veterans and warriors.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Matt Helms". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent underline.

Commissioner of Agriculture

What We Do

- ▶ Identify veterans who want to become involved in farming or agriculture related business.
- ▶ Market farm products of veterans already involved in agriculture.
- ▶ Build a brand for farmer-veterans products.
- ▶ Seek property and utilize state property that can be used for veteran farmers.
- ▶ Cooperate with Veterans Assistance and the Veterans Administration on certified agriculture education programs.
- ▶ Work to develop rehabilitation sites to assist our wounded and disabled veterans to readjust and heal . This includes addressing PTSD and TBI issues through Agriculture therapy programs.

Partners

- ▶ West Virginia Department of Veterans Assistance
- ▶ Work Vessels For Veterans *Helping Vets Succeed*
- ▶ THE MISSION CONTINUES
- ▶ West Virginia Beekeeping Associations
- ▶ West Virginia Veterans Coalition
- ▶ Farmers Veterans Coalition
- ▶ Homes for Vets now

Veterans in Action



West Virginia Department of Agriculture
Walt Helmick, Commissioner



Property in the State

- ▶ The WV Department of Agriculture has conducted an assessment of our property and has made some of this property available for an affordable lease program for veterans.
- ▶ Veterans have also been given access to property in various locations donated for the sole purpose of agriculture development.
- ▶ Assessments and a current agreement on mine property has allowed us to locate bee hives on one mine site in Kanawha County.
- ▶ We continue to work with veterans and property owners to ensure veterans who want to farm have a place to do so.
- ▶ We have found tremendous support for this program; many farmers have contacted us expressing interest for veterans to come and farm on their land that has been sitting idle.

Why Agriculture and How It Is Working

- ▶ Many veterans return home from war with various issues and concerns; studies have found that those who engage in regular physical work like agriculture has proven very effective with PTSD and veterans have proven to be excellent farmers.
- ▶ Veterans have proven they can manage and self motivate the very things needed to be a successful farmer.
- ▶ Since the program began, we have seen 103 veterans sign on with Veterans to Agriculture with over half striving to become Bee Keepers.
- ▶ Currently we are working with other organizations including veterans and non-veteran agencies that seek to assist our veterans and their families with a successful transition from military to civilian life.
- ▶ The program growth and success stories already prove this is worthwhile program that has increased not only interest in Agriculture by veterans, but also clearly shown a growth in small business ownership and cottage industry in West Virginia.
- ▶ Over the last three months, we have received calls from Maine, New Jersey, Illinois, Alaska, Ohio, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Oregon, Texas, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia and Florida asking for copies of our state legislation on how these states can implement a similar program.
- ▶ I fully expect to see other states following our lead across the nation and West Virginia should be very proud to know we have the only program of this kind in the Nation and while some states did offer minimal support for veteran farmers, it is clear that West Virginia stands as a positive example due to our training, mentoring, marketing, and supply acquisition section within WV Veterans and Warriors to Agriculture Program.

Agriculture is a Legitimate Business Opportunity for Veterans.

- ▶ The state of West Virginia spends more than \$7.1 billion a year on food of which only \$458 million is grown or produced in WV.
- ▶ That's more than a \$6 billion opportunity on the table for anyone who has the ability and drive to come and work for it.
- ▶ Veterans have the drive and work ethic needed to engage in agriculture and we aim to give them the best opportunity to be successful and secure a part of this opportunity.

What We Do

- ▶ We train, equip, and empower.
- ▶ We offer real opportunity.
- ▶ We build partnerships, teams, and co-ops of veterans, families, and friends.
- ▶ We include the entire family of veterans, even the “Gold Star” families by offering the same opportunity for those who lost a loved one defending the Nation.
- ▶ We care and are very serious about creating a \$billion agriculture industry in West Virginia and know the veterans and warriors of our state can and will take the lead to help make it happen.

Incarcerated Veterans

- ▶ We have state farms located at Lakin, Huttonsville, St Mary's and Pruntytown.
- ▶ Current numbers of veterans at each site:
 - ▶ Lakin-19
 - ▶ Huttonsville-113
 - ▶ St Mary's-62
 - ▶ Pruntytown-21

Incarcerated Veterans

- ▶ We fully believe when anyone breaks the law and is punished they are serving time for a reason, however, we also believe in the power of rehabilitation and will work with the DOC to gain access to those veterans that seek a career after incarceration in Agriculture. We will also seek those willing to work with Agriculture on the state farms located near the correctional facilities.
- ▶ We believe in giving an opportunity to ALL veterans and assisting in reducing the level of recidivism that plagues the system. We feel that offering a chance at business ownership in agriculture will help greatly, if given the chance.

Our Successes

- ▶ Currently we have 104 veterans in various stages of training.
- ▶ We have graduated 43 bee keepers this year, who are successfully operating apiaries in the state.
- ▶ We have 10 veterans that participated in our specialty crop grant project and all are growing gardens in WV and selling produce in farmers markets and from home.
- ▶ We have 8 more disabled veterans and families participating in our joint project with Berea College who are participating in the WV Vets to AG “Victory Garden” project and all are growing their own food in their back yards and also canning and preserving this food through the training that we are offering.
- ▶ We currently have 43 veterans signed up for the December 2014 class, with an average of 20 calls a week seeking application and information on the program.

The Potential for a Small Farmer

- ▶ If a community of 600 would pledge to spend just \$5 a week on local grown produce over the course of a year, that would mean over \$156,000 could remain in the local economy and support the local farmer.
- ▶ If a local veteran farmer could sell just \$100 a week to 5 schools for 40 weeks that is \$20,000.
- ▶ Local Honey also can mean up to an additional \$3,000 a year on just two hives, selling the honey, wax and bees.

What's Farming

- ▶ Veggies
- ▶ Livestock
- ▶ Honey Bees
- ▶ Flowers
- ▶ Fruit Trees
- ▶ Grapes
- ▶ Brambles
- ▶ Fish
- ▶ Hydroponics
- ▶ Aquaponics
- ▶ Worm/Compost farming
- ▶ Maple Syrup
- ▶ Sorghum
- ▶ Herbs/Spices
- ▶ And Much More

Needs

- ▶ The most critical need is funding.
- ▶ Additional staff; currently only one full-time Director position and one contract employee. WVDA staff assist when available.
- ▶ MOU's between all state agencies that will allow Program to utilize property tools and assistance already in place and not duplicate services.
- ▶ Additional farming equipment and tools placed in a central location for easy access.
- ▶ A Public Service announcement and web site.

Needs

- ▶ The development of a veterans farming cooperative run and operated by veterans in WV.
- ▶ A GI Bill approved Agriculture education program in every state vocational school with availability for veterans to attend these courses.
- ▶ An MOU between Vets to AG and the WV Department of Education and WV Department of Veterans Assistance.
- ▶ Cooperation for use of private, public, city, county, state and federal properties for agriculture development and education.

Interviews and News

- ▶ http://wvpublic.org/post/program-turning-warriors-farmers-across-wva#disqus_thread
- ▶ <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Veterans-and-Warriors-to-Agriculture/175925942616220?fref=photo>
- ▶ http://www.mydailyregister.com/news/home_top/2881328/Program-brings-historic-farms-to-forefront#.U_tWe7mA1dg

Interviews and News

- ▶ <http://www.farmanddairy.com/news/legislation-west-virginia-veterans-ag-program-looks-promising/176371.html>
- ▶ <http://www.newsandsentinel.com/page/content.detail/id/593103/Vets-to-Agriculture-program-seeing-early-success.html?nav=5061>
- ▶ <http://www.weirtondailytimes.com/page/content.detail/id/619694/Veterans-agriculture-program-a-hit.html?nav=5006>







QUESTIONS

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