

TITLE: Developing a SmartAgenda ® for Illinois to Grow the State's Ag Economy

Members of the Vision for Illinois Agriculture (VIA) project are taking steps to create a "Smart Agenda" to advance the state's agriculture industry and to create favorable business climates to grow Illinois' agricultural economy. The SmartAgenda®, unveiled at a March 26 press conference in Springfield, outlines eight primary "agenda" items that should be accomplished in order for Illinois agriculture to ensure success in the future.

"Illinois is in a unique position to leverage its strengths in order to feed the world's need for food and fuel," said Illinois Farm Bureau President Philip Nelson, a founding member of the VIA. "In this competitive, global agricultural market, Illinois agriculture is at risk of being left behind by other Midwestern states and emerging global competitors. This effort will focus our decisions and investments to maximize the potential of Illinois food and agriculture."

The Illinois Smart Agenda's eight focal points include:

1. Managing the state's affairs with fiscal integrity.
2. Updating the state's infrastructure and broadband, as well as upgrading the state's physical transportation infrastructure.
3. Practicing regulator responsiveness, including conducting the permitting business regulatory processes in a timely and transparent manner.
4. Providing support for startups, so that Illinois can consistently translate research capabilities into commercially viable businesses.
5. Developing a world-class education program, educating Illinois' students to achieve reading, math and science scores on par with the top 10 percent of students in the world's industrialized nations.
6. Maintaining the state's vocational, four-year, and community college curricula in manufacturing, processing, building, and trade skills.
7. Engaging diversity in the workforce in proportion to the population sectors of African American and Latino populations in the state.
8. Funding higher education research in Illinois on a level with the top five states in the nation for basic and applied research in agriculture, life sciences, physical sciences and computer/communications technology.

"Prosperity in today's world economy depends on innovation; the capacity to discover, create and market depends on Illinois prowess in science and technology; and practices which facilitate commercializing technology. Illinois current practices and business climate fail to provide this support," said David Miller, President and CEO of iBIO a biotechnology professional organization. Miller also participated in the news conference.

VIA members recognized that developing Illinois' business climate is paramount to the state's agriculture industry. Dr. Geoffrey Hewings, Director of the Regional Economics Applications Laboratory at the University of Illinois, reported that the state of Illinois has

lagged the nation and the rest of the Midwest in job creation since the early 1990s, and is more than 123,000 jobs below its peak level of employment in 2000. Hewings noted that this is not solely due to the loss of the state's manufacturing base, but segments of the construction, education, financial, government, information and manufacturing sectors have also suffered losses in job numbers, leading to this decline.

As a first step to improving the state's business climate, Miller said that the members of the VIA planning team have agreed to focus on changing the state's permitting process--SmartAgenda item number three-- as their immediate priority.

"We have received reports that some permitting for ethanol plants in Illinois is taking more than 500 days, in comparison to some of our neighboring states only requiring 90 days," said Miller. "Companies are allowing an additional year of planning to site a business in Illinois because of these unnecessary delays. Rather than assigning blame for the past, we'd like to engage in a statewide discussion of the key elements we think are vital for the state to do to address these issues."

The Vision for Illinois Agriculture includes participation from more than 25 farm and commodity organizations, universities, agribusinesses (such as GROWMARK, Bunge, Kraft Foods, Farm Credit, and John Deere & Co.), and representatives of the Illinois Department of Agriculture and Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity.

The key goals of the Vision for Illinois Agriculture project are to be in the top three in agriculture production and exports, to grow the food manufacturing into the top three ranking in the United States, and to lead the United States as an alternative biobased outcomes leader through the adoptions of new technologies.

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