

## **THE FUTURE OF STATE FAIRS**

**Moderator--Annette Sweeney**, Iowa

**Marlene Pierson-Jolliffe**, State Fair of West Virginia

**Senator Jim Anderson**, Wyoming

**John Putney**, Blue Ribbon Foundation, Iowa State Fair

**Tina Hlabse**, General Counsel, North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

For over 200 years state and provincial agriculture fairs have been providing agriculture education, family entertainment, classes for competition among 4-H, FFA youth, master gardeners and an annual meeting place and celebration for the agriculture community. A 2006 study of the 38,756 seventh through twelfth grade schools in the U.S. published by the U.S. Department of Education's Coordinator of Agricultural and Rural Education revealed that 82 percent of those schools had no formal agriculture education program in their curriculum. Ninety-eight percent of those schools in urban areas had no formal agriculture education program in their curriculum. These alarming statistics underscore that by default state and county fairs have become the most important institution for providing agriculture education to our society.

Pierson-Jolliffe shared the mission of the State Fair of West Virginia which is "to produce a quality fair committed to the traditions of agriculture, family entertainment and education, and to develop non-fair events that utilize existing facilities, that create opportunities for growth and that benefit the community served by the facility." She pointed out that the mission of the State Fair of West Virginia is typical of state and county fairs in North America.

The State Fair of West Virginia, a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation granted state fair status in 1941 by the West Virginia state legislature, does not receive any state funds for its operations and yet it has an economic impact of \$9.7 million on the State of West Virginia annually. Pierson-Jolliffe said the fair stays relevant to the community, and contributes to the quality of life of West Virginians by helping solve social problems for the State of West Virginia. The fair supplements its income by renting its facility during the year but Pierson-Jolliffe stated that the 200-acre facility which has 51 structures would benefit greatly from support from the State of West Virginia to maintain its physical plant.

Senator Jim Anderson has within his district the Wyoming State Fair, which celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2012. Senator Anderson emphasized the importance of the state fair's role in educating about agriculture, industry, mineral deposits, conservation and most importantly the heritage of the State of Wyoming. Senator Anderson said the annual attendance is approximately 50,000 and that the bi-annual budget of the Department of Agriculture includes \$2.8 million to support the Wyoming State Fair. For the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2012, a special matching funds bill was approved for \$250,000 and the fair actually raised \$725,000 before the match. Senator Anderson emphasized that the Wyoming State Fair is in large part for teaching the code of the west adopted by Wyoming legislatures to Wyoming's citizens and visitors. The code of the west is:

- Live each day with courage;
- Take pride in your work;
- Always finish what you start;
- Do what has to be done;
- Be tough, but fair;
- When you make a promise, keep it;
- Ride for the brand;
- Talk less, say more;
- Remember that some things aren't for sale;
- Know where to draw the line.

Former Iowa Senator John Putney told about the history of the Iowa State Fair's Blue Ribbon Foundation which has raised over \$40 million from private sources which have been matched by state appropriations to help fund infrastructure improvements to the Iowa State fairgrounds. Putney explained the cycle of raising private funding, then seeking matching funding from the state legislature. Putney pointed out that the Iowa State Fair is annually attended by more than a million people who are drawn in large part by the opportunity to see the animals on display and the agriculture education exhibits. Putney emphasized the importance of fairs being staffed by professionals who are not subject to termination as the result of election cycles.

General Counsel Tina Hlabse, who has successfully defended tort claims for illnesses contracted from contact with animals brought against the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and the North Carolina State Fair, pointed out that the North Carolina State Fair was created by state statutes and is a government entity. She said that lawsuits filed by fair visitors contracting zoonotic diseases, including *E-coli 0157:H7*, was a growing problem. Hlabse said that to ensure the continued viability of their fairs, states should pass immunity legislation, such as was passed in Florida in 2011, to protect against such suits. Hlabse said that the immunity legislation that is being proposed in North Carolina is very similar to the agritourism immunity law that is already on the books in North Carolina. She said provisions could be added to recreational use laws creating an immunity for farmers who allow farm visitors. Wisconsin currently has such a law.