

Republican Candidate for Illinois State Representative, House District 106
Tom Bennett's Perspective on Agriculture – 2/16/2012

Agriculture is a key industry in Illinois. According to the Illinois Department of Agriculture, approximately 76,000 farms, mostly family farms, cover more than 28 million acres, nearly 80% of the state. Our ag products provide over \$9 billion to the economy and food processing, the number one manufacturing activity, adds another \$13 billion each year. Almost \$4 billion of ag products are exported to foreign countries. We compete in a global economy and need to look for ways to develop new products, expand markets, encourage business growth, and reduce taxes.

The top five counties in agricultural sales in 2007 came from east central Illinois and two came from within the 106 Illinois House Legislative District. Top five include Iroquois County, McLean County, Livingston County, LaSalle County, and Champaign County.

My focus on agriculture goes back to my roots growing up on a farm in Gibson City, IL. Many of my core beliefs were developed there. I believe in the rights of the individual, personal responsibility and accountability, and private property. Farming practices should be profitable and safe for the environment. Farmers need to be able to provide a safe food supply for both current and future needs. There is nothing as "risk free". Government is not the answer to every situation. Here are the key areas I feel facing Illinois agriculture today:

1. State Budget – We need a balanced budget and the State must live within its means. The Illinois Department of Agriculture has reduced costs in several ways over the years including recent layoffs as it continues to work to protect the food sources of consumers and ensure that necessary inspection services are operational.
2. Preserve the agriculture sales tax exemption on seed, fertilizer, farm equipment and machinery - This would be devastating to the agricultural economy and farmers. Every state around us does not have a sales tax and they would welcome both our business and our manufacturing jobs.
3. Keep the Environmental Regulation and Livestock Management Facilities Act in place - Environmental and animal rights groups have pressured legislators to change the way farmers can operate livestock facilities. Many smaller producers are forced to decide whether to comply with new regulations or stop farming. There is also a growing push to change the Livestock Management Facilities Act (LMFA) in a way so that farmers can't operate or expand operations. We need realistic regulations based on data and scientific research.
4. Estate Tax - Farmers pay a high estate tax when a family member dies. Illinois has an individual income exemption level of \$3.5 million in 2012 and going to \$4 million in 2013 while the federal law has an individual income exemption level of just a little over \$5 million. We need to eliminate the estate tax altogether but in the meantime, the estate tax should have an individual exemption level equal to the current federal level, but not less than \$5 million.
5. Farmland Assessments – Farm ground is assessed based on its economic value. Several factors are included in the final equation and are part of a five year moving average that helps limit potential extreme highs and lows. This needs to be maintained.
6. Support agricultural curriculum and research at higher universities - Support efforts to maintain competitive agriculture research centers. We want new information and technologies received worldwide to be reviewed for use in Illinois. Take a look at all possible energy resources (including renewable). Need to look at the role of U of I Extension.
7. Fund Soil and Water Conservation districts. Some have been closed and nothing is taking their place.