PRESS RELEASE FROM THE TENNESSEE FARM BUREAU

Lack of Broadband Access In Rural Communities Discussed by Kisber at 85th Annual Convention Of Tennessee Farm Bureau

One of the biggest shortcomings in Tennessee’s economic development is limited broadband access for many rural communities.

Matt Kisber, commissioner of the Department of Economic and Community Development, said his department is currently exploring ways to ensure broadband access including high definition Internet access in every town and all 95 counties in the state. “The government gave us $2.5 million to use to [help] develop broadband access initiatives around the state that will open up rural communities,” Kisber said before the voting delegate body at this year’s annual Tennessee Farm Bureau Federation meeting Dec. 5, in Franklin, Tennessee.

Adequate broadband access is essential for any industry, any activity and any education effort, he said.

Kisber gave an overview of his department, which under his leadership underwent significant restructuring in 2003 and early 2004. In its new approach the state government’s economic development team recognizes the importance of rural communities.

“For so many years, economic development in Tennessee, in my opinion, was thought to be pursuing industrial opportunities,” Kisber said. “And while pursuing industrial opportunities is very important, we’re blessed in our state to be a very diverse and enriched location where there are lots of opportunities.”

Early on in the restructuring process, Kisber with the help of the University of Tennessee, identified 11 distinct economic regions based on consumer behavior. Each of these regions shows unique characteristics with its own opportunities and challenges.

“We developed individual economic strategies around those 11 regions,” Kisber said. “What’s going to work right for rural West Tennessee isn’t going to be the same for north East Tennessee and our strategies reflect that.”

The department also updated its infrastructure definition.

“When I came on board … you basically had to be in manufacturing, logistics or distribution,” Kisber said, adding that now the definition has been broadened to support agriculture-related and technological activities as well.

The new department structure, he said, allows state government to function effectively, especially when dealing with the business community.
Also addressing the nation’s largest state Farm Bureau’s annual meeting was Dr. Joe DiPietro, vice president of agriculture at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. In his remarks he asked state farmers at the annual meeting to support UT’s Tennessee Biofuel Initiative.

DiPietro said the Tennessee Biofuel Initiative “when successful will increase our energy independence, increase our environmental sustainability, as well as foster economic development both in rural and urban parts of our state. “It will help us produce a new commodity structure for farmers throughout the state, and we think it’s something that has to be done,” he said, asking Tennessee farmers for their support.

The implementation of a new concept to create ethanol from cellulosic biomass could place Tennessee at the forefront of alternative fuel development and create new opportunities for Tennessee farmers. The initiative is still in its conceptual phase, but Dr. Kelly Tiller, assistant professor of the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, said the time is now to get a demonstration biorefinery on the ground and make the state a leader of ethanol production from cellulosic biomass.

“We think that within 20 years, by around 2025, it’s very reasonable to think that in Tennessee we could be producing and consuming at least one billion gallons of ethanol run from local sources and be selling that wholesale at $1.20 a gallon or less,” Tiller said.

The production of one billion gallons of ethanol could replace about 30 percent of current transportation fuel needs in Tennessee.

UT researchers estimate that 10 biorefineries spread throughout the state would directly create 4,000 new jobs and support an additional 12,000 new rural jobs, creating $400 million in new state and local taxes.

The goal is that at least local growers’ cooperatives or local group of residents, which could add another $40 million to local revenues in these communities, would own four of the 10 refineries.

The delegates gave a warm reception to Tennessee U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander as he addressed the convention’s annual banquet on Monday evening. The Senator used the opportunity to thank the Farm Bureau leaders for their continuous efforts and information that they provide to their elected officials concerning issues facing agriculture. "I consider us all family and the information you have provided me over the years on energy, farm programs and agriculture in general is always appreciated," the Senator told the group. He went on to explain future developments to be made in efforts for energy independence and assured the Farm Bureau delegates that agriculture will always be consider in those efforts.
Voting delegates of the organization passed resolutions during a two-day business session that dealt with numerous issues facing agriculture today. Items that received much discussion were forestry programs, TVA, dairy prices, cattle ID, the state budget, regulations, education, Farm Bill changes, estate taxes, and farm programs. The resolutions passed will become the official program of work for the farm organization as they face challenges in 2007 at the state legislature and on Capitol Hill in Washington.

Delegates also re-elected all of its current officers and directors.

Also during the annual meeting, Carla Steadman of Hamblen County was selected as the new state Young Farmer and Rancher chairman for 2007. The YF&R program is designed for individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 to increase, train and surface new leadership in the Farm Bureau organization. Steadman replaces Eric Maupin from Dyer County who has served in the chairman's position this past year.

The delegates also attended numerous conferences during the annual meeting. Special sessions were conducted on broadband Internet, taxes and how they impact agriculture, alternative fuel study by UT, the bio-fuel industry and its impact on grain, Tennessee Ag Enhancement programs, and animal ID.

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