

GLI 2019 Statewide Candidate Survey

Robert Conway Commissioner of Agriculture

1. As Commissioner of Agriculture, what would be your office's top legislative priorities in Frankfort?

Legalization of medical marijuana and installation through KDA of a refined quota system for agricultural production, based on the historic tobacco quota system, which was the foundation of Kentucky agriculture and the small scale, diversified farm for generations. My mother died of cancer and I saw first-hand how much medical marijuana could have helped her; I believe it is a moral issue for us to help people in need. A medical marijuana quota system would greatly benefit the agricultural sector, farmer's lives and profits; it would significantly increase state revenue, helping even with the pension crisis; a refined quota system for medical marijuana and for hemp production would attract many more people into farming, including young people. Improved farm income from these crops would help farmers diversify their operations, impacting the total agricultural economy.

2. How could the Commissioner's office better facilitate partnerships and engagement between businesses in urban regions and farmers and agricultural ventures in rural Kentucky?

The 20th century saw the unsettlement of rural Kentucky as the younger generation moved to the cities; but urban farms were not designed as essential features of urban planning. There is untold potential for fruit, vegetables, mushroom, tree crops, and honey production in urban centers, upcycling urban waste streams. In the 21st century, robust networks of institutionally coordinated urban farms can add resilience to Kentucky towns and major cities, and open economic opportunities to new farmers, even as the rural farmland economy is revitalized. As the small rural farm economy is revitalized through a refined quota system for hemp and medical marijuana quota system, based on the historic tobacco quota system; and as livestock and cattle operations are made more profitable through improved grazing techniques and better access to livestock processing facilities; and as funding is increased for conservation agriculture in rural and urban settings, a robust rural-urban exchange will flower.

3. What steps would you take to help Kentucky-based agricultural businesses more effectively compete in domestic and international markets?

Despite its small size, the Netherlands is the 2nd largest exporter of agricultural products in the world. This is due to the structure of their agricultural systems: the average farm size is under 50 acres; their systems of high tunnel and greenhouse production is the best in the world; and their farms generate good revenue, keeping people in farming. Kentucky is blessed with rich natural resources; but we have allowed our agricultural economy to be consolidated by over-production

of annual commodity crops, especially corn and soybeans. Over-production diminishes farm profits; and as export markets become increasingly insecure, we can take this as an opportunity to shift our focus. Kentucky can become a major exporter of hemp value added products, textiles, and genetics. Precision agroforestry alongside restoration of savanna ecologies will be a boon for the timber industry and its by-products. There is untold room for perennial/tree crop wholesale nurseries as incentivized agroforestry. In production of whole foods, mimicking the Amish process of consolidation points along major interstates/highways will bring foods to major Kentucky cities and surrounding states' major cities.

4. What would be your top environmental priorities as Commissioner?

The consolidation of the agricultural economy by multinational corporations has damaged western Kentucky ecosystems and pushed people out of farming, as whole counties have seen their small, diversified farms replaced by multi-thousand acre corn and soybean rotations. In the rural farmland, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture has a responsibility to promote agricultural production that accords with ecosystem function: for instance, the Pennyroyal Plateau (aka Pennyrile) of western Kentucky is a native grassland; therefore ecologically smart design will incentivize agricultural production on biodiverse grassland ecosystems (multispecies livestock grazing, agroforestry, and silvopasture); instead of perpetual growth of industrial scale commodity crops with poor profitability. In Appalachia, agroforestry systems are appropriate to the terrain, flora, and fauna; the KDA will incentivize innovations in agroforestry, collaborating with regional experts, organizations, and through the use of precision agroforestry technology. A hemp/medical marijuana refined quota system of cannabis production is essential to eastern Kentucky agribusiness and will provide sustainable opportunities as the coal economy continues to downsize.