

NMDA takes the reins in agriculture from Las Cruces home base

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Founded in 1911, the New Mexico Department of Agriculture is unique in that it is the only New Mexico state agency not located in Santa Fe or Albuquerque.

Instead, the state's founders established it under the control of the Board of Regents of the New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, now known as New Mexico State University. As a result, the NMDA is headquartered on the NMSU campus, with a regional office in Albuquerque and staff and inspectors located throughout the state.

"The founding fathers of New Mexico were profound in their wisdom in placing an agency like NMDA with the teaching, research and extension functions taking place during that time," said NMDA's Director/Secretary of Agriculture Jeff Witte. "This has resulted in a uniform structure that has allowed us to respond more efficiently to producer and consumer needs.

"There is very little overlap or competition among scarce resources to address the needs, and it placed our department in the heart of agriculture, where producers in this area have instant access to the entire department," he said. "That is a benefit for NMDA and keeps us in touch with those we serve."

Not your grandfather's department of ag

The NMDA is a consumer-pro-



The New Mexico Department of Agriculture is located on the New Mexico State University campus. (Photo courtesy of NMDA)

ducer agency committed to ensuring food protection and helping the state to increase agricultural production and revenue. While the NMDA estimates that 75 percent of its efforts are focused on food safety and regulatory compliance, it also plays a multi-dimensional role in working with its many constituents.

On any given day, NMDA staff can be found handling a myriad of tasks, ranging from performing field and retail product inspections to organizing inbound trade missions for U.S. and international buyers, to presenting top agricultural issues to government and collaborating to protect the state's natural resources.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. NMDA represents all consumers and the state's more than 24,700 farms and ranches, according to the NMDA's latest statistics.

New Mexico has a long and successful agricultural history. It's home to wine and cattle ranching industries that date back hundreds of years. According to NMDA spokeswoman Kristie Garcia, New Mexico even has its own cattle-crossing border for livestock moving between the U.S. and Mexico. It is the fifth leading state for growing and harvesting dry onions, and ranked ninth in national milk production in 2017. New Mexico ranks first in chile production and peaches are the leading crop for the state.

The NMDA must be an expert on all these products and more. When the state takes on new crops, such as industrial hemp, it relies on the NMDA to ensure that cultivation complies with regulatory requirements. When emerging issues arise, such as the recent detection of chemicals, known as PFAS (Per-

and Poly-Fluoroalkyl Substances), contaminating the water on a farm in Clovis, New Mexico, the NMDA works closely with the FDA and other agencies to address its impact.

The NMDA is also the state's agricultural "brand ambassador," representing New Mexico at trade fairs, conferences and other events throughout the U.S. and abroad. It also invests in new marketing ideas. In recent years, the NMDA kicked off a nationwide green chile promotion, the largest single promotion in its history. It has also invested in extensive online marketing and social media programs to build awareness about New Mexico agriculture, food and beverage businesses.

Keeping an eye toward the future

In addition to managing present-

day requirements, the NMDA also keeps a close eye on how emerging trends will affect the state's agricultural future.

"Everyone will point to water as a top issue, but along with that, we are dealing with challenges with adequate labor and attracting the next generation of agriculture producers," Witte said.

The NMDA, well aware that the average New Mexico farmer/rancher is over 60 years old, is working with other groups to attract youth through programs such as the New Mexico Youth Ranch Management Camp and New Mexico Agriculture in the Classroom, a nonprofit educational outreach program for K-12 students and educators.

Witte also cites technology as a key factor to producers' success.

"Good connectivity will be a game changer for agriculture in the future," he said. "The consumer is driving home source verification. Food safety is driving source verification. Technology, connected through broadband will enable producers, transporters and value-added processors to utilize new features such as block chain to verify traceability. Our department will be working with producers and others to evaluate traceability technologies as they work with purchasers of their products."

For information about the NMDA, visit www.nmda.nmsu.edu.

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