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Political pressure massing on poultry regulations

BY LAURA D'ALESSANDRO • STAFF WRITER • DECEMBER 24, 2009

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SALISBURY -- Not one new chickenhouse has been built in Wicomico County in a year.

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The Salisbury business community could suffer if the industry decides to relocate.

"There are ways to find win-win solutions for everybody, and we don't have to over-regulate the business to death to help the environment," said Brad Bellacicco, executive director of the Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce. "We at the Chamber are working a lot with poultry companies and Delmarva Poultry Industry to try and send that message."

Eastern Shore representatives in the state delegation are concerned, to say the least. Sen. Richard Colburn, R-37-Dorchester, among others, wants the governor's help. Colburn wrote a letter to Gov. Martin O'Malley last month requesting support for the \$2 billion industry that holds up the Eastern Shore's economy.

"We have to urge the governor and Congressman (Frank) Kratovil, Sens. (Benjamin) Cardin and (Barbara) Mikulski to keep the Delmarva poultry industry here," he said this week. "We would have a depression if this industry were to leave tomorrow."

The problem stemmed from U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regulations levied for the first time this year. In February, the EPA began enforcing a "zero discharge" policy through its Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation rules. Responsibility for drawing permits was left to each state. Up until recently, the Maryland Department of Environment hadn't clarified its standards. Compounding the problem is agricultural lenders,

such as Mid-Atlantic Farm Credit, who were hesitant to loan money to qualified borrowers who wanted to build new chickenhouses.

"Lenders in the area were afraid to lend money for the poultry houses because they didn't see what the regulation process would be," said Wicomico County Councilman Joe Holloway. "Lenders stepped back. That put a halt to any new poultry house production."

If a borrower -- a new poultry farmer -- couldn't put chickens in the house because of the new regulations, they couldn't make money and they couldn't pay back loans.

Bellacicco said a year without new chickenhouses is a year the construction workers didn't get those jobs. Individuals laid off from other jobs could have invested in poultry farming, but were denied the loans they needed to put up a brand new chickenhouse, he said.

The gridlock held expansion of the Delmarva poultry industry at a standstill. But after a work group was recently assembled and temporary guidelines put in place, the issue has been temporarily resolved.

According to Bill Satterfield, executive director of Delmarva Poultry Industry Inc., public meetings were recently held throughout the Eastern Shore to familiarize growers with the solution.

"The reason for the meetings was to help chicken growers who sought (chickenhouse) permit coverage early this year to better understand the permit," he said.

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While Satterfield said it appears lenders are no longer hesitant, Colburn said the poultry industry isn't out of the woods yet.

The EPA still has to rework its guidelines for a "zero discharge" policy, which is expected early next year.

"We don't know how stringent or how workable those new guidelines are going to be," Colburn said. "That's why we need to weigh in with the governor."

Colburn is concerned growers might be driven away from the Shore, where they've made their home for decades. Worse, he's worried they'll flee to the north or south ends of Delmarva if regulations aren't the same in Delaware and Virginia.

"However they craft these regulations, they should definitely be the same in Virginia and Delaware as they are in Maryland to be a level playing field," he said.

The Wicomico County Council submitted a letter to O'Malley on Dec. 1 to urge for the same support Colburn is requesting, to keep the industry "held up."

"We need this business to be viable," Holloway said. "The poultry industry is a vital part of our agricultural industry in Wicomico County. It's the largest part of our agricultural industry. Even if you don't grow poultry, it affects other farmers because that's where their grain sales go."

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