

Events like Potato Blossom Festival highlight

The County's best: Sen. Troy Jackson, D-Allagash • July 26, 2019

Each year, the Potato Blossom Festival exceeds expectations and attracts visitors from all around the state and country. But for me, the significance of the Potato Blossom Festival goes beyond the fun and games, which I certainly enjoy. It's a celebration of rural Maine. It's a welcoming home of our friends, family members and neighbors who have moved away. And perhaps most importantly, it's a tribute to our rich agricultural heritage. The Potato Blossom Festival feels like a long overdue family reunion. And this year, it was no different.

I had the honor of attending the Maine Potato Board annual dinner to recognize the Chandler family as the 2019 Farm Family of the Year and present them with a legislative sentiment, the highest form of recognition by the Legislature. Families like the Chandlers exemplify what makes The County a great place to live and work. Darren Chandler and his brother David represent the sixth generation of growers in a long line of farmers. The primary operations are in Mapleton and Castle Hill, where they farm 1,700 acres and raise 500 acres of potatoes for processing. Their ongoing success truly showcases how our heritage industries are more than just an important part of our history; they remain an integral part of our rural economy. But our economy is constantly evolving and changing to meet new demands and overcome new challenges. Some farmers have taken new approaches and seized new opportunities.

Earlier this year, I got a chance to stop in Mapleton to take a tour of the Maine Malt House, LLC, which is a part of Buck Farms, a potato farm established in 1958. After learning that Maine breweries and distilleries had no local source for malt, the company began producing barley to supply malt and fill that gap. This is a great example of Maine ingenuity. The Buck family saw an opportunity with Maine's emerging craft beer industry to produce local malt. But there are also things we can do as a state to grow and support this industry. For example, lawmakers have responded to calls from farmers to help grow demand by passing two pieces of legislation into law this year. I introduced legislation to extend the popular and widely successful Mainers Feeding Mainers program, which seeks to reduce hunger by supporting our local farms and food producers. This program provides local food banks with the resources to purchase fresh produce from 75 participating family farms. It increases demand so farmers can grow more products while making sure hungry Mainers can access fresh food.

The second law creates a fund for school nutrition directors to purchase locally grown food to serve fresh produce for school meals. Much like the Mainers Feed Mainers program, this new law will help grow demand for farmers and ensure Maine children can access nutritious meals in school. Lawmakers also passed my bill to create a potato processing plant in Washburn, something that I have talked a lot about. For companies to receive this tax credit, 95 percent of the agricultural products processed in the facility must be sourced in Maine. This should bolster Maine's potato industry. These are just key examples of how we can grow our agricultural industry and deliver results for farmers. The Potato Blossom simply serves as a reminder of how important farmers, especially potato farmers, are to our culture and our economy.

There is no doubt, the 72nd Maine Potato Blossom Festival was an overwhelming success. I want to extend my gratitude to the great people in Fort Fairfield — and the surrounding areas — who put on this event and to all the farmers and people who participated. It brought together people from all over the County to celebrate our thriving agricultural heritage that continues to fuel our local economy. Most importantly, it highlighted what makes the County so great: hardworking people with a deep sense of pride in their families and in their communities. I look forward to seeing what next year has in store.