

West Virginia Department of Agriculture

Kent A. Leonhardt, Commissioner
Joseph L. Hatton, Deputy Commissioner



December 14, 2017

Honorable Jim Justice
Office of the Governor
State Capitol Complex
Charleston, West Virginia 25305

Dear Governor Justice:

On Monday, December 10, 2017, I met with Dr. Stephen Jones, interim president for Fairmont State University. Dr. Jones is a forester by trade with 14 years of experience in the forest products industry. He has also served as chancellor and president of many public and private universities. Dr. Jones asked me to forward his phone number to you [REDACTED]. He would love to discuss why the West Virginia Division of Forestry (WVDOF) needs to be a part of the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA).

When I dig deeper into arguments against the proposed move to the WVDA, I learn that even those openly opposed do so only out of fear. Several years ago, the Division of Forestry was moved from the Department of Agriculture because of a conflict between the State Forester and the Commissioner of Agriculture. A governor friendly to the forester, blessed the move through legislation. At the federal level, forestry is housed under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). When USDA Secretary Perdue visited West Virginia earlier this year, he told a gathering of state foresters in Charleston that the WVDOF belongs under the WVDA. In addition, forestry education is housed within the West Virginia University Davis College of Agriculture.

In 2016, I campaigned on moving the WVDOF back to the WVDA with the focus on the service forestry concept being implemented. The service forestry concept is a more efficient management style and will be a savings to tax payers, if implemented. In addition, my department currently has forest health responsibilities for our state. We, along with the USDA, do all the inspections of logs and lumber for export in West Virginia. In fact, the increase in forest product exports is a result of my administration's improvements to the inspection process.

When I met with the Director of Forestry, Barry Cook, he agreed that forests are a crop and should be managed like one. The WVDA works closely with the West Virginia Division of Commerce on several projects. I believe we could continue this relationship if the Division of Forestry was moved. In addition to our partnership with commerce, the department also works closely with the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources on forestry related programs. There is no reason to believe the cooperation for forest products would continue, if not improved, with a move to agriculture.

I must point something out to you. By statute, West Virginia statute, the Department of Agriculture is mandated to help market agriculture products. In my administration, we have elevated to this an Agriculture Business Development Division focused on facilitating growth and new opportunities for our agriculture-based businesses.

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I understand there is a fear from current employees about the change from "civil service" to "at will." Let me assure you, my administration has implemented comprehensive policies to protect good, hardworking employees. We also follow federal workforce guidelines. In addition, many of our employees perform regulatory duties similar to our state foresters. So far in 2017, the WVDA has issued 742 shutdown orders, tickets, fines, etc. I bet those far exceeded any citations issued by the Division of Forestry.

I must give credit to Director Cook. There have been significant improvements to morale and operations under his leadership. But the move to the WVDA is about one thing, good government. I know by bringing together our two agencies, we can do a better job of helping West Virginia, protecting our forests and grow our timber industries. We will only enhance the improvements Director Cook has implemented.

We believe we have the votes in both houses to pass the Forestry Transfer Bill. I respectfully request you and I join forces to make this happen. Together we can show the citizens of West Virginia our state government is working towards an efficient use of their tax dollars. I would be happy to discuss this in more detail, as well as other ideas to bring good government to our state.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Kent A. Leonhardt
Commissioner

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C: Mike Hall, Chief of Staff, Governor's Office
Ron Miller, Agriculture Liaison, Governor's Office
Woody Thrasher, Secretary, West Virginia Department of Commerce
Honorable Mitch Carmichael, Senate President, West Virginia Senate
Honorable Tim Armstead, Speaker, West Virginia House of Delegates

