



Expo Panel to Address Transportation Needs

North Dakota soybeans are a very mobile crop. Shuttling soybeans from the field to market, especially to overseas customers, involves nearly every mode of available transportation. Soybeans are moved from the field by truck by using local and state roads. Then, the soybeans are delivered to the elevator where they are moved by rail to ports that haul the soybeans by cargo ship to end users around the world.

A highly functioning transportation system is vital to North Dakota agriculture's profitability. A panel of experts, addressing transportation issues and solutions, will be part of the Northern Corn and Soybean Expo on February 23. The panel will be moderated by farm broadcaster Michelle Rook.

State of the State

North Dakota Department of Transportation (NDDOT) Director Bill Panos is one of the panelists. Panos says that transportation is the lynchpin in the value chain for all import-export businesses and that agriculture is no exception.

"Being the center of the North American continent has some advantages," Panos says, "however, shipping distance, and therefore shipping cost, is not one of those advantages. Our export products have further to travel to reach seaports than most of our competitors. Therefore, a highly efficient internal transportation system is doubly important for North Dakota's amazing agricultural producers. That is why NDDOT continues to work so hard to create a transportation system that supports large truck traffic, allows for efficient transloading and supported the recently initiated intermodal site in Minot. By producing the best quality products with the most reliable delivery in the world, North Dakota's farmers and ranchers can successfully compete with anyone, and transportation they can count on is critical to that equation."

Panos states that the NDDOT often hears

from the agriculture industry about seasonal load restrictions, which he says are a balancing act between protecting the taxpayers' investments and providing the most efficient transportation system for North Dakota's shippers. Other frequently voiced concerns include transportation safety, the shortage of commercial truck drivers and overall transportation funding.

"As vehicles become more fuel efficient and move toward electric power, the current fuel-tax method of funding transportation becomes less reliable," Panos explains.

Among the other issues facing North Dakota's transportation system are an aging system of rural roads. Panos says that the NDDOT is deploying innovative solutions and technologies to make the state's transportation system more efficient.

"As always, preserving the legacy of past generations and the huge investments they made in our transportation system is another focus of NDDOT," Panos states. "Keeping good roads and bridges 'good' is much more cost effective than rebuilding them when they fall apart."

To stay ahead of emerging issues, the NDDOT is in the process of developing its next long-range transportation plan.

"Transportation is the common thread that links everyone in the state: whether you're traveling to school or church, shipping crops out of state or traveling to Grandma's house," Panos explains. "Our transportation system was built on the shoulders of our parents and grandparents, and entrusted to us to keep it going. If we want to stay competitive in the world market, we need to ensure it is adequately funded and can adapt to a rapidly changing world."

Ports and Waterways

About 70 percent of North Dakota's annual soybean crop is exported through the Pacific Northwest, so waterways thousands of miles away



Bill Panos



Kristin Meira

February 23 and 24, 2021 | 8 - 11 a.m. CST

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are of concern to North Dakota farmers.

The Pacific Northwest Waterways Association (PNWA) is a trade group that advocates for federal policies and funding for regional economic development. The PNWA works with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Congress and the administration to advocate for the highest possible funding for the Northwest's federal navigation projects.

"PNWA advocates for the water-related transportation infrastructure needed to maintain navigation so that the Pacific Northwest remains a globally competitive area for imports and exports," says PNWA Executive Director Kristin Meira.

Meira states that infrastructure in and adjacent to the water needs attention. PNWA advocates for needs, such as routine maintenance dredging on the Lower Columbia River, to ensure that ships can be fully loaded with U.S. grain products for export.

Meira understands the role waterways in the Pacific Northwest play in the soybean value chain, even though ports in Oregon and Washington are about 1,500 miles from North Dakota.

"For all of us, we can plow ahead in our lane paying attention to what we do, but it's important to look up and see how each region and each part of the supply chain is important," Meira says. "It's a reminder of how important coastal connections are for agriculture. If we don't get it right, what happens back on the farm can be impacted. Farmers can do everything right in raising their crops, and we have to make sure we're handling them properly here," Meira explains.

Meira will be joining the virtual panel discussion, addressing the transportation process and current issues. She says that the Northern Corn and Soybean Expo offers an opportunity to share information about the importance of waterways in the Pacific Northwest.

"I want to provide information on all that we are doing to do right by the hard-working farmers in the upper Midwest," Meira explains. "It's an important opportunity to connect with people who care about how ag products move from the farm to overseas markets."

Rail

North Dakota boasts more than 3,000 miles of train tracks. Two Class I railroads serve North Dakota's freight shippers: BNSF Railway (BNSF) and Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). BNSF operates over a network of 1,723 miles, serving the Bakken region, and the CPR operates 484 miles of railway in North Dakota's agricultural areas as well as all the major population centers in North Dakota.

Because of rail's importance to North Dakota farmers, a representative of the state's commercial railroad sector will be joining the transportation panel. To date, that representative has yet to be named.

The transportation panel will take place on Tuesday, February 23. To participate in the session, visit www.northerncornsoyexpo.com for details and to pre-register.

—Story by Daniel Lemke, photos courtesy of North Dakota Department of Transportation and Pacific Northwest Waterways Association



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