

Season 6, Episode 4: A Passion for Agriculture

Host: ESF President Joanie Mahoney

Guest: Richard Ball, Commissioner of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets

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Only 1% of the population gets to actually be in production agriculture. 1% of us feed the other 99%.

I am more excited today about the future of your students and my kids and my grandchildren for their opportunities in New York State in agriculture, in the environment than I've ever been.

Joanie Mahoney: Welcome back, listeners, to Campus Conversations: The Podcast. I'm Joanie Mahoney, President of SUNY ESF. I invite you to join me as we hear stories from the people working with and at ESF who are committed to improving our world. Each of them play a role in propelling ESF forward as we strive to fulfill our mission. And today I am really honored that Richard Ball, Commissioner of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, has agreed to be our guest. On January 9th, 2014, Richard A. Ball was nominated as Commissioner of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. I can't believe it's been 10 years. He's on with us now, and I want to thank you for joining us today, Commissioner.

Commissioner Ball: Well, thank you so much, Madam President for being here. It is an honor for me, and I'm really grateful for the opportunity. I've always appreciated your passion for agriculture, for your community, for your role at SUNY ESF, and certainly for your curiosity. So thanks for that.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah, no, I appreciate that. That is a very polite way of saying that whenever I see you I pepper you with a lot of questions about what it is that you're doing. I think you are the person that has a day job that's most different from any that I've had because you actually have grown up in the world of farming and have been working on farms since you were a teenager. Is that right?

Commissioner Ball: Actually, I got my early indoctrination and probably became one of those lucky kids who knew what he wanted to be when he grew up when I was still just a toddler. Six, seven years old, I was milking cows with my grandparents. It's pretty easy to fall in love with agriculture at that point because you get to work with your grandparents and you get to go in the barn, you get to be in the field,

and you get to have more food than you've ever seen in your life at the breakfast table. I always say that that's where I decided I wanted to be a farmer, but I think it's probably where I decided I wanted to be like them.

Joanie Mahoney: Oh, that is such a nice message. So let's start then at the beginning. Where was childhood? Where were you working on this farm with your grandparents?

Commissioner Ball: Well, their farm was in a small community at the corner of Delaware and Greene County. It was a small community called Halcott Center. Not very big, but the primary occupation down there was agriculture. My grandparents had a farm. My mom was actually the fifth generation on that farm. My great great-great-grandfather established the settlement there, built the first church, and so there was a long tradition there. It was during an interesting time for me because they were just coming out of World War II. People would come up to that part of the state from the city during the summertime. They took in borders, so I was exposed to not just agriculture, but all kinds of people from all different walks of life. So it was pretty neat to be a young person and have all these aunts and uncles from the city that would come and spend the summer there and see my mom waitress in the dining room. They did three meals a day, and in between I was helping my grandfather farming. So it was just a wonderful way to grow up for me. Like I say, I fell in love with that rural lifestyle and the opportunity to want to be like them.

Joanie Mahoney: It sounds ideal. I can relate a little having grown up in a family where my grandfather's grandparents bought the house, I think, that he grew up in and then was in the family for generations. We used to all gather there and hear stories about which of them started the church in the village. I had these really cool four great-aunts that were all single, never married, and never had kids, and they all had careers as a nurse and a teacher and the village clerk. I just appreciated so much that there was this place with this family history. I have pictures hanging on the wall at my house of relatives that are great great-great-grandparents, and I know the house they grew up in, so I can relate to that. But what we didn't have was the agriculture component. And I think it's interesting knowing how hard a job it is to run a farm that you fell in love with it at such a young age rather than think, "Oh my goodness, that is a never-ending job."

Commissioner Ball: Yeah, it was kind of a Camelot experience for a young kid, riding on back of a horse, sitting on my grandfather's lap on a tractor. My great-aunt May was the teacher at the one-room schoolhouse that my mom went to. And it's like everybody was related or part of the family in that whole community, it just felt like, so it was a pretty ideal life for me.

Joanie Mahoney: I don't think young people today realize how close we are in time to that kind of life. We've gotten with the internet and the explosion in communications and electronics and the idea that you as somebody that's working now as a New

York State Commissioner had that kind of life growing up. It just is amazing how close in time that is, but yet it feels so far away.

Commissioner Ball: It is far away in a lot of ways. One thing that jumped out at me when I learned it, I remember 1956. I wasn't very old then, but 1956 is an important year in agriculture because it's the first year in New York State that there were more tractors than horses on farms. That's not that long ago. So we think about the changes in agriculture, I remember when there were more horses on farms than there were tractors on farms. So that's a head scratcher, and think about where we are today.

Joanie Mahoney: Well, that's one of the questions I had for you is what you've seen in terms of change in the world of agriculture. We went from a lot of small family farms to what looks to be massive industrial operations, and I'm curious what it is that you've seen.

Commissioner Ball: Oh, incredible change, and we're not done yet. We're going to see lots more change. I am thinking back at that time, someone said to me, "Well, how many cows did your grandparents have?" Well, the way to measure that was by did they have a hired man and did she milk also? So if there was a husband and wife, then he milked 10 cows, she milked 10 cows. If they had a hired man, they could have another 10 cows and they would have 10 cows dried off. So that was how big a dairy farm could be back in those days. And they were a fairly typical farm. So 30 to 40 cows was what the average farm had. 50 bushel of corn was pretty good yield back in those times. Today in the Schoharie Valley where I farm, 200 bushel is the average.

My grandfather, they had a baler when I was there, but before then, hay was piled up in the pasture and put on a wagon loose, and then with a hook brought up into the barn. So we've seen incredible changes. Today we have cows that produce 100 pounds of milk a day, and now one farm worker around a farm will take care of 70 cows. So many things have changed, and that's a good thing and that's a testimony to what's happening at Cornell, what's happening at ESF, what's happening in the best line grand system for ag education in the country right here in New York.

Joanie Mahoney: So you grew up on this farm, multi-generations ahead of you, and you worked with your grandparents. Did you grow up and do the operations on their farm, or did you head out on your own initially?

Commissioner Ball: Well actually, when I was about 11 years old, they sold the farm out from underneath me, and they chose to retire. I was pretty disappointed to say the least. But they were at an interesting time also in the dairy industry because they were going to have to look at a significant investment in their farm if they were going to keep doing it. It would've involved putting in a bulk tank. It

would've involved a pipeline and expansion and borrowing some more money because when I was little and I was helping my grandfather, milk went into cans, we put the milk in cans, we milked one cow at a time. My job was to pour the milk into the can through a filter, and then the cans would be put into cold water, there was a spring there in the barn, and then take it down to the creamery, which was in the village. There were creameries in every little village. Watch my grandfather visit with all the other farmers. Every farm had had a number, and their milk can bore that number.

So they were going to have to make a significant investment. And at their age, they decided that it was time for them to retire and they sold the farm. I never lost the interest. I guess that seed was planted in my head, if you'll excuse that pun. So I got out of high school and walked down a long pathway to a family farm and knocked on the door and asked for a job. I didn't fill out an application or anything, I was just told to come in the next day at seven o'clock in the morning and start working. So I didn't get to work and grow up working throughout my youth with my grandfather, but had that seed planted and then had a good fortune to be hired at a great farm.

Joanie Mahoney: And you spent the next couple decades with them?

Commissioner Ball: Two different farms actually. That first farm, it was kind of funny, I showed up the next morning at seven o'clock and I went out in the field with 72 young men who spoke Spanish. So thank goodness I paid attention to my high school Spanish, but I was number 73. It was a pretty large farm, pretty successful farm. But we learned how to talk to each other, I think because I could speak both languages and I spoke more Spanish than English for probably 10 years, I became a crew leader on that farm. But we learned how to work together. We became friends together. We learned how to get along together, built relationships together. It was such a great experience for me.

And then I was asked to be the general manager or farm manager of a neighboring farm still working with a crew that was Hispanic and also young people like myself from the United States. I think the biggest lesson I got there was change, that change was not a bad thing. Change was actually something not to just tolerate, but change was something to actually embrace. The farm I worked on had been a dairy farm, so that was comfortable for me. Then they began to grow potatoes for Frito-Lay making potato chips. It was this constantly seeking a way to stay alive in agriculture that I learned. That became kind of a tough road to hoe for the farm, so they started growing sweet corn and selling it to the local grocery store. And then they decided to build a roadside market and try selling to consumers.

And then they planted tomatoes and then they planted peppers and other vegetables and then built a greenhouse. So I got to embrace change and watch this family farm evolve and changing over the years. And so I think that's one of

the biggest lessons that I learned early on, was that change was something to be looked for, seeked out.

Joanie Mahoney: You are so lucky to have had that experience because I think that's one of the biggest things that stymies people, is this fear of change. They know what they know now, they are comfortable with the status quo, but they don't know how great it can. And having experienced that change and look forward to that change and look for opportunities, that's a gift that you got.

Commissioner Ball: Well, it is definitely a lesson that needs to be learned, I think. One of the fun things about being Commissioner of Agriculture is that every year at the New York Agricultural Society I get to meet century farms, families that have been in the same business at the same farm for over 100 years. We've got farms in New York State that some are 300 years in the same family. I get to meet them and talk to them and hand them an award. But what always impressed me was that every one of those farms is different than it was 100 years ago. They've all evolved. Every generation had put a different stamp on that farm, which is pretty cool.

I remember one more thing on that topic as a young farmer working on a farm, went to a meeting, and I listened to someone from Farm Credit who was very visionary. Farm Credit is the largest lender to agriculture in the Northeast. He said, "How many of you would like to build your farm and then see that farm succeed with the next generation on that farm?" Well, everybody's like, "Yeah, that's what we want, that's what we think about all the time." And he said, "Well, if that's what you want to do, then you tell me what six things you're going to do differently next year. Because doing the same thing over and over again and hoping you get a different result is the true definition of insanity. You need to introduce six new things on your farm. Maybe it's a new piece of equipment, maybe it's a new crop, maybe it's a different way of your business structure being put together. Do something different."

That hit me like a ton of bricks, and I never forgot. And today on our farm, I'll sit down with our banker and he'll come in and sit down in the wintertime, we talk about last year, and he'll say, "Okay, what are the six things for this year?" It's a little bit of a problem today for me because now my kids all think they get to do six new things too, but we try to keep it to six new things for the farm as all. But that embracing change fits in with that. And I brought that here to the Department of Agriculture as well.

Joanie Mahoney: You have to be one of the all-time, most authentic Department of Agriculture Commissioners anywhere. I mean, the idea that you have lived the life you've lived and then to be able to take on the role with the state government as Commissioner of Agriculture is amazing. It's good for the state, but it's probably great for your fellow farmers to know that there's somebody in your role that

actually understands the business and the obstacles they face and the ways that government can help and maybe not help.

Commissioner Ball: Well, you're very kind to say that. I like to think I bring some credibility with me when I come here. But I got to tell you, I spent 20 years learning how to farm, working for somebody else, and then dreamt of having my own farm and then spent 20 years building up Schoharie Valley Farm, it's our farm. I think that when we were finally able to buy our own farm I realized that I was a steward on this farm. I wanted my kids to have that same excitement about being able to manage their own farm. So I spent 20 years learning how to farm, I spent 20 years building our farm. I was pretty sure the next 20 should probably be spent getting out of the way and letting the next generation have that total experience and joy that I had. And that's when the phone call came and I was asked if I would consider taking on this role.

And even in spite of all that lofty philosophic viewpoint, I said no. As a farmer with our own farm, our goal was always to try to connect dots between what we were doing and the quality of our product with our consumers. I stepped back for a minute and I thought, "You know what?" New York State, one of the greatest agricultural states in the country actually, we rank in the top 10 over 30 different commodities, and we got some of the best education opportunities for agriculture in the country. We got some of the best farmers. We have access to water, we have good land, and we have the biggest marketplace in the world. And I thought, "You know what? What we're doing on our farm trying to connect with more consumers, wow, if we could connect New York State agriculture with the largest, most diverse, most amazing marketplace anywhere in the world, what a great thing that would be for agriculture and for consumers." So connecting the dots really is what kind of propelled me to say, "Well, let me check the temperature in the room and see if this is something that we could make some progress on."

Joanie Mahoney: And now you've got to be one of the longest-serving commissioners at this moment.

Commissioner Ball: I think that's possible. I'm not really sure. They typically serve at the pleasure of a governor, so they may change when there's an election. I have a number of inspirations who were commissioners of agriculture. Pat Hooker I give a lot of credit for pushing me over the edge, but so many other commissioners in New York State have just done outstanding jobs. One that I still stay in touch with is Dick McGuire. I don't know if you ever had a chance to meet him, but he served under Nelson Rockefeller and a little bit for Hugh Carey. He is today 101 years old. He is just as sharp as he's ever been. I talk to him, I call him up, and we have lunch occasionally. He is just a pioneer there and an inspiration, dairy farmer and Head of New York Farm Bureau back in the day, and then commissioner of agriculture under a couple of different governors.

Joanie Mahoney: I came in with Pat Hooker, who you mentioned, and I thought the same as you described, he was excellent. But for you to make the leap from one governor to the next I think is really a testament to that authenticity that I was talking about. Your fellow farmers just must be so pleased having somebody like you in that role. So you mentioned it, but eventually you and your family, you bought your own farm, and that's the family farm that you have now?

Commissioner Ball: Yeah. I had worked for 20 years and I was very happy at the farm I was working at. I was managing the farm, the kids were working there, and were involved with us. But after 20 years, there was a grutch there that needed ditching, and we found a farm that was just wonderful. It was 13 miles from where I was born, good land, and a farmer there who wanted to retire. I felt I had learned enough about growing things after 20 years that I could do it on my own or we could do it on our own. We had the optimism and we stuck our neck out, sold everything we had. I had learned how to confuse a banker, and so we were able to convince them that we could pull this off and make it all work.

The banker now tells me he likes to think he confused me because we took on a lot of debt and we struggled and ate Cheerios for a long time, but today we have three generations on the farm. We farm 200 acres in Schoharie. We've got 60 people that work on the farm and a pretty diverse, constantly embracing change kind of operation, which is very satisfying.

Joanie Mahoney: In our last opportunity, you and I saw each other in Albany not too long ago, I was thinking how wonderful it would be for someone like you to tackle the migrant crisis that we have because of your perspective. You described speaking a lot of Spanish for several years. I don't know what the answer is, but I do see the need for workers. I'm sure you see in the role that you have now, and then we have all these people who are looking for their opportunity in the United States and how you pair them all up. I just think it would be wonderful if somebody tapped you on the shoulder again and asked you to lend your expertise, your wisdom to that topic.

Commissioner Ball: Well, thank you for saying that. It is been a very challenging issue. As a farmer, I got involved with New York Farm Bureau and they asked me to chair the Labor Committee, which I did. And then American Farm Bureau tapped me and asked me to chair the American Farm Bureau Labor Committee. And so, we would talk about how do we solve the problem of not enough workers in the United States. We have a large number of people who want to come to the United States and work. And because I had that background and experience, it was a natural topic for me to get passionate about.

We need a working guest worker program for the United States. We have people in Puerto Rico, people in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Dominican Republic. They would all love opportunity to make a living. The average wage in Mexico today is \$5 a day. The young men that I worked with all came here for

an opportunity. Unemployment back then in their country was about 30%. There weren't opportunities for them. They could come up here and work for a few months. Some would work three months, some six, and then go home and buy a piece of property and build a house in a few years, educate their kids. It was just a great experience for me, and they were great friends, stayed friends with them, went to their funerals, they went to my funerals, went to weddings together. We still stay in touch. It was such a positive experience and there was a need. We didn't have enough people in our rural communities to do the work that they wanted to do.

They didn't necessarily want to live in the United States. They wanted to be able to get a job and live at home. But it's been over 30 years since we had a working guest worker program in the United States, and it's unfortunately an issue that's easy to demagogue, and so both parties drive a stake in the ground and just won't move away from it. But we've got to figure this out because we don't have the young people in our rural communities that want to pick tomatoes all day. But I'm fortunate, in my community, I have a lot of them, a lot of kids like me. Somebody took a chance on me when I was that age, offered me a chance. But yes, it's something that we need to come to grips with and actually deal with and iron that out.

Joanie Mahoney: It's been my experience in many different arenas that it's the fear of the unknown that stymies folks, and just getting to know people and learning about their lives and their families, and as you said, becoming lifelong friends, the unknown goes away, and there's a clarity about our ability to work together and to satisfy what everybody's trying to do. There's a lot of win-win opportunities in this conversation, but it's my opinion that there's just a lot of fear of the unknown. And when you make something a political football, it rarely wins. One of the areas that I wanted to take advantage of your willingness to talk to us is, in the world of sustainability, what are you seeing in terms of the changing climate, and what are you hoping that folks are learning that are going to come out and try to make things better?

Commissioner Ball: Yeah, that's a great question. I would say, first of all, sustainability is a word that will make the average farmer dig his fingernails in his leg while you're asking that question, because not a day goes by that a farmer doesn't think about sustainability. He doesn't think about how he can leave his land better than he found it, that he doesn't leave his farm better for the next generation. He thinks about his kids. He thinks about next year. He looks at a piece of land when he considers what to plow, what to plant, what to harvest, and then what's going to come after that. It's just you're in your DNA. I don't mean that to be rude, but farmers think about sustainability all the time.

Joanie Mahoney: They don't need to be told to think about sustainability.

Commissioner Ball: Well, there was probably not enough sensitivity around talking to farmers about their need to be more sustainable from non-farm community. And that's why people's like, "I do think about that." My friends farmers, all of them think about that, so it's not a new concept to a farmer. However, we're learning so much more today. We know we're doing a better job in agriculture today than we've ever done in the history of mankind. So things that my grandfather did for his cows and for his land, I think we've learned that some of the old ways were still pretty good ways and why was that. We could put a crop of buckwheat in and reach our hands in the soil after that crop and just say, "This is better. Somehow this feels better." Well, today, thanks to the work that you do in your institution and at Cornell, we know why it's better.

So we're in a better position to be more sustainable than ever, and that's exciting for me to see, the use of cover crops and rotations, getting more into that soil health and climate. My grandfather worried about the weather, but he didn't worry about the climate. But today's farmer has to think about the climate. We still worry about the weather. We still get up every day and worry about the weather, but we have to think longer term about that. We think about the soil health and how we can manage pests in a better way. I've never seen the level of expertise and interest as we have today on our farms about doing a better job and being more sustainable. Just called a group, I call it the dairy think tank, good friends of mine that are dairy farmers. I brought them in and said, "Where do you want to be in 10 years, 15 years? What are you thinking about?" They said to me, "We want to be the most sustainable dairy state in the country. That's what we want. We don't want to be the biggest. There's a 100,000 cow dairies out there. That's not what we want. We want to be environmentally the most sustainable in the country."

And I thought, "Wow, that is a powerful statement." And we can do it. I got to be a part of the Climate Action Council. I got to chair the Ag and Forestry Workgroup. We had academics. We had 19 people on the work group. I chaired it, had a lot of help from DEC. And together we looked at having researchers, academics, farmers, foresters, environmentalists. We all sat around the same table and said, "What do we want ag and forestry to look at and be like in New York State?" We fussed and debated, but at the end of it, we had complete consensus about the way forward, which is amazing. The transportation group, the energy group, the waste group, the housing group, all they could do was come up with a plan to be less bad on greenhouse gas emissions and carbon sequestration, but we could actually be not just less bad, but we could actually be the answer.

Joanie Mahoney: How encouraging.

Commissioner Ball: Our scoping plan is amazing. And your role in it at SUNY ESF, Cornell's role in it, and agriculture's role in it, it's so exciting to have a way forward. We can actually make things not just less bad, but make things better. We can sequester

carbon. We can reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We can actually do something about the climate. And that is just... It's New York in a great place.

Joanie Mahoney: You talked about here at ESF, and I know that some of our faculty participated in that working group, that's probably what you were alluding to, but we also have faculty that are doing research that came initially from you and an announcement that you made at a forest products event that Dr. Colin Beier here is working on, the research that's going to make it possible for people to know what land is going to be necessary for what functions in order to meet those goals and how to sustainably manage forests and where the carbon sequestration potential is best. That's an example of a really great partnership between the faculty here at ESF and your office. That document that was produced here at ESF, I have seen it referred to. It's going to be a tool I think that people are going to use for a long time now in forging a path toward what I loved to hear you say, that our dairy farmers want to be among the most sustainable. That's really encouraging, and I think that they'll like to see the information that's been provided by people like Dr. Colin Beier and his team. So thank you for that opportunity for us to do that research.

Commissioner Ball: Well, it's good timing. I get to spend a fair amount of time with our partners in Washington, other state departments of ag, but also Secretary of Agriculture in Washington. I've never seen the alignment between the federal government, USDA, and New York State that we have today. Climate-smart commodities was a grand opportunity that you and Cornell and Hagen markets and DEC went in on together. We were successful in \$60 million investment to further climate-smart commodity work. It's amazing. We've got the expertise, and the alignment is so important.

Joanie Mahoney: Oh, I love to hear about that alignment. You've said a couple of things that are the first time I've ever heard such a thing, one, that you had this total agreement from your working group. That's almost unheard of. And that there's this alignment now and now the resources are flowing. I mean, you seem to be the common denominator, and I know you well enough to say you're not going to take all the credit for this, but your voice and your experience really gives you a lot of gravitas in these conversations. I don't think it's a coincidence that consensus is building and there's alignment and funding is going to where it needs to go. I think there's something to be said for hiring real experts like you in the role that you have.

Commissioner Ball: Well, again, you're being very kind, but I have to tell you, there's so much good leadership in Washington today. Secretary Vilsack, I admired him when he was first Secretary of Ag and I was farming and just listening to him think about things. We've become pretty good friends. This is his second tour of duty now. I was able to be with him recently, and we talked about a transformation needed in the food system to make success in agriculture and success in rural America and success in rural New York possible for more people. But we talked about the

need. If we look at the farm bills over the years, farm bill is a nebulous thing for most of us, it's something that has to do with out west and program crops like cotton and wheat and sugar and rice and corn. But the farm bill discussion today is about New York. It's about this needs to be the most relevant farm bill in history.

In his estimation, there's a need for a transformation in the food system. If you look at farm bills and their history, they kind of trace the history of agriculture. And every 40, 50 years, there needs to be an adjustment. When I was younger, 50 years ago, there was a shift and there was a need to make sure there was enough wheat and enough corn and enough cereal grains that were raised in the country because there wasn't enough in the grocery store. So program crops and commodities and insurance programs adjusted. I think we're at a point where we need that again. We've got decades of doing some pretty good work in agriculture and with the environment and forestry around water quality and air quality. Well, now we find that those same programs can take us to a different place because they can help us sequester carbon if we maximize those programs and reduce greenhouse gas emissions at the same time. So a lot of the programs we put together with the federal government, with other states, and with our university system are leading us and give us a head start on the climate initiatives that we face together.

Joanie Mahoney: And at the same time, feeding New Yorkers. The food that is produced and consumed right here in the State of New York is huge. When I was county executive, I was so surprised initially going back now 15, 20 years ago, to hear that there are six or 700 farms in my one county. I don't think people when they hear New York State they realize the number of farms and the amount of food that's produced right here in New York. There must be thousands and thousands of farms across your whole jurisdiction.

Commissioner Ball: Around 30,000.

Joanie Mahoney: 30,000 farms in the State of New York. It's amazing.

Commissioner Ball: All different sizes.

Joanie Mahoney: I found it shocking. For all of those reasons that you ticked off, but it's also a lot of employment. A lot of families are supported through employment on farms. Before I let you go, I want to switch gears. I don't know whether people connect you as a farmer and as the commissioner and all of the things we've been talking about with the Great New York State Fair. But that is a big part of the job that you have, is that the fair is under the umbrella of Ag and Markets and that's your role. And so in addition to all of these other things, you are constantly working on making the fair a better place. I think from our conversation recently you said there is a steering back toward its roots in agriculture. Is that right?

Commissioner Ball: Well, the little farmer in the job up here, so yes, agriculture needs to be the center of that fair, and I'm happy to say that we're well on our way there. I got together the dairy industry and the vegetable industry and the fruit industry, and I said, "So if you had a chance to talk to a million people, what would you want to tell them?" They looked at me kind of funny, and I said, "We have a million people that are going to walk through the state fair this year. They're going to be young people, they're going to be old people, they're going to be all kinds of people, but a lot of them will be young people. What would you like to tell them about your industry, about agriculture?"

And so we've set a goal here over the last 10 years to put agriculture back in the center of that fair. You can see a cow. You can see a horse. I know that's important to you. It's important to me as well. You can see a bunny. You can see a chicken. But at a time when we need more workers on farms, more workers in our food manufacturing facilities, our dairy processing plants, here's a chance to say something to them. Only 1% of the population gets to actually be in production agriculture. 1% of us feed the other 99%. But if you think bigger about agriculture and look at the food system and you think about research and you think about genetics, you think about logistics, transportation, culinary arts, food safety, all those, you start thinking about all those related jobs, you're talking about almost 40% or 50% of the jobs that we have in the world.

So let's think a little bigger, and let's look at our fairs, the state fair, our county fairs as touch points to agriculture. And maybe mom and dad and maybe that young person that goes to the fair sees an opportunity that might... Who knows what's going to light their fire? Let's look at adding that to our farm-to-school initiatives to connect young people with food in a real way. And so our opportunity to touch some hearts and minds while we have a great time, while we have fun food, and while we get lots of entertainment and go on a Ferris wheel, let's not miss the opportunity to connect our population in New York State with fairs. And the governor is so excited about this. Let's look at how collectively through the state fair and all our county fairs we touch more lives. Let's measure success by how many young people we touch with agriculture.

Joanie Mahoney: And I predict success because the people that we attract here at ESF, and I get to interact with young people every day, they are so much more in tune to the health of the planet. They know about soil quality, they know about organic farming, they know about nutrition. There is a real hunger for learning about how to do the things that they want to do. That is that opportunity at the fair because you're going to have an audience of people that want to know what should I be looking for when I go to the grocery store that's going to make things better in the direction that we all need to go. And that's something I talk about here at ESF a lot. You watch the evening news and you hear these conversations from 50,000 feet and they're not relatable. And then you have this whole population of people who want to be helpful, but they don't really know how.

The fair is going to give you the opportunity to talk to people at the ground level to say, "If you're trying to make your food system better, if you're trying to encourage healthier food and environmental impacts, the soil impacts, the carbon sequestration as you talked about, if you do these things, you'll be furthering that goal," I think you're going to have a million people that are going to be sent out, and an awful lot of them are going to be following those directions. And year after year, we're going to get to that goal of farming in New York being among the most sustainable. So I love how you're thinking and I love the fair for all the reasons you listed beyond that, but I think that's the most life-changing opportunity, is to recognize that you're talking to a million people in that two-week period, and what do you want them to know?

I would just make a pitch too for forestry to be in that conversation because there's a lot of power in our forests and a lot of job opportunities in the whole life cycle of the forest. I hope that we will encourage young people to get involved in that arena as well. So thank you for what you're doing over there, and thank you for all the extra work you've done because I know the state has invested a lot of money in the fair, in the infrastructure of the New York State fairgrounds. And while that's exciting for all of us, for you, it's just more work. I mean, the fairgrounds is so much nicer now than it was when I was a kid growing up. It's just a much more pleasant place to be. And that's work that you've done and the folks that work for you have done.

Commissioner Ball: And your involvement as well. You had a lot of input in that in your prior roles. I do feel better about the fair than I ever have. What a great opportunity to connect dots.

Joanie Mahoney: I think so too. So well said. And thank you so much for taking time to talk to us. I know our students will be really happy to hear from somebody who's actually in a position where you're making decisions for the state and the direction that we're all going to take. It's so reassuring to hear you and to hear your expertise, and to hear your passion and your sincerity surrounding the role that you have as our commissioner for agriculture. So thank you very much. I will look forward to seeing you out and about and if not sooner at the Great New York State Fair in the fall.

Commissioner Ball: Absolutely. And let me just say one more thing if I might. I was pretty excited when I was seven and I was milking cows with my grandfather, and I was pretty excited when I was 18 and I got to make my own way in the world earning a job and making a living there. I was pretty excited when I bought my own farm. But I got to tell you, I am more excited today about the future of your students and my kids and my grandchildren for their opportunities in New York State, in agriculture, in the environment than I've ever been. So that's what keeps me up during the day.

Joanie Mahoney: That's fantastic.

Commissioner Ball: There's plenty of things keep me up at night, but that keeps me up during the day.

Joanie Mahoney: That's fantastic.

Commissioner Ball: So thank you for this opportunity. It's been a joy.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah, it really has been a joy. Thank you, Commissioner. I'll see you again soon.

Commissioner Ball: Look forward to it. Thank you.