

AgriBusiness Council continues to support industry

Prices, regulations take top priority in year ahead

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

The Greater Spokane Incorporated AgriBusiness Council continued its efforts to raise awareness of agriculture in 2015.

Council chairman Jay Allert credited former GSI chamber CEO Steve Stevens with elevating the role of agriculture in developing the chamber's public policy agenda.

"That was a major development for us," Allert said.

Stevens, who joined in July 2014, resigned in October 2015. Todd Mielke, a Spokane County commissioner, joins GSI as CEO in February.



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Jack Silzel talks about representing farmers during an interview. Silzel is on the steering committee for the AgriBusiness Council of Greater Spokane Incorporated and advises the chamber on agricultural priorities. Silzel says regulatory controls and free trade agreements are top priorities for the council.

Allert expects those efforts to continue, citing the work of such council members as Jack Silzel, longtime farmer and an adviser to former Washington Rep. George

Nethercutt, and Jim Fitzgerald, executive director of the Far West Agribusiness Association.

"That's going to be an integral role for us, both on the

state level and national level," Allert said. "It's a fulfilling mission for us."

Allert is pleased that the council continues to increase in credibility with members of Spokane's business community.

"That's our proudest moment, as far as I'm concerned," he said. "The business community knows about agriculture, appreciates agriculture and the food industry. We're right there with them. That's how it should be."

The council's work on behalf of farmers is multi-faceted, Allert said. The organization helps people recognize agriculture as a business, and that it must be considered as

policy is developed or changes are being made, he said.

"Agriculture is being mentioned, it's being thought of, and we can't ask for much more than that," he said.

The biggest challenges for the industry in 2016 include a downturn in commodity prices.

"You can't help but be concerned when you're running at break-even or below for the industry," Allert said. "We want to do whatever we can to play a role in expanding markets and making sure policy is in place to ensure the industry continues to be healthy."

Silzel is a member of the council steering committee and represents the council on

GSI's public policy committee.

Regulatory controls are a top priority, he said, citing the Waters of the United States rules and food labeling controversies.

The council also supports free trade agreements to eliminate unfair tariffs for U.S. farmers.

Allert said the council will continue its work in 2016 under Mielke. The organization is looking for more agriculture-related businesses from the Spokane, Eastern Washington and the Inland Northwest to get involved.

"We can continue to grow awareness and look out for the industry," Allert said.

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