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Oconee joins effort to boost horse industry

State Agriculture Commissioner Hugh Weathers addresses equine industry supporter in Anderson

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ANDERSON — Interested groups from Oconee, Pickens and Anderson counties pushing to maximize the economic impact of their equine industry got little more than moral support from visiting Agriculture Commissioner Hugh Weathers on Thursday.

Weathers spoke during a luncheon at the Anderson Civic Center to groups from the three counties, including elected officials.

After a presentation outlining his 2020 goal to increase agriculture's economic impact in the state from its current $34 billion a year to $50 billion in the next 10 years, Weathers fielded questions from the audience. Several times he was asked what the state and specifically his department are doing to help the tri-county equine industry.

Each time, Weathers offered a non-committal response.

"I don't have a specific plan," Weathers said. "We are trying to support the local effort."

While addressing the equine industry in general, Weathers supported the local effort going on in the Upstate.

"The three-county effort is the way to get it going," he said. "Whether it's getting funding from the state level or whatever, I support what you're doing here."

Oconee County Council Chairman Reg Dexter, who attended the event along with Councilman Paul Corbeil, said recently that part of the tri-county plan is to upgrade equine facilities and put in place a horse trail linking Anderson, Oconee and Pickens.

Such a trail would be a big boost to horse tourism in the local economy by bringing in visitors, Ken Sloan, Oconee's Convention and Visitors Bureau director, said this week. Sloan also attended Thursday's luncheon.

Howard Hiller, the lead agent at the Oconee County Extension Office, said horses are big industry in the tri-county area that generates big bucks in the economy from stable owners who board horses, to farms with pastures and hay growers.

"Horse owners also have to buy trucks and trailers and that helps the economy too," Hiller said.

According to Hiller, in the most recent inventory of horses in the state that goes back a few years, Anderson came in second only to Aiken with 6,000 heads. He said Pickens county ranked 10th with 2,700 heads, and Oconee was close behind with 2,400 heads.

Local equine groups are developing plans for a state grant for expanding horse trails. Hiller said Clemson University already has an extensive trail system in place.

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