

## Speaker pleads with local farmers to tell their story to all who will listen

by Michael Connolly - 03.12.09



Speaker Bruce Vincent urges Sampson County farmers and agriculture supporters Tuesday night to better communicate their message to the masses so rural America will survive.



Bruce Vincent and state Rep. James Langdon, R-Johnston, talk for a moment after Vincent's speech.

The over \$70 billion industry in North Carolina known as agriculture is facing the most serious threat it has ever known — misinformation, according to a logger from Montana who was the guest speaker for Tuesday night's annual Friends of Agriculture rally.

Bruce Vincent's message was clear: Start communicating the whole truth of Sampson County agriculture to

the public, or else lose it.

“You all need to get a fire in your belly ... be actively involved in sharing the real truths; tell your story because you know the earth better than anyone,” Vincent told a crowd of hundreds of farmers and agriculture supporters. “It doesn’t take a great deal of time, just give an hour a week. It will be the best hour you ever give.”

Vincent described his home in Libby, Mont., and the changes he had seen over the years as the government became increasingly involved in his small town life.

In his impassioned plea, Vincent asked farmers again and again to get a fire in their bellies and to stand up and tell their own story of rural America. “No one knows the land better than you,” he said.

Humanizing nature through the lens of Disney has not helped the image of farmers, Vincent said, but for people in urban areas that is all they know — Bambi, butterflies and Flipper the dolphin to name a few.

“In the past 50 years, people in America have had more time on their hands than ever before,” said Vincent. “And when people go on vacations to visit rural America they fall in love. When they get home, and are asked to help save the rain forest” they help.” But there is a “fatal flaw,” said Vincent. People don’t know the truth, or the whole truth about life in rural America.

The false pretenses of rural America continue to exist even after vacationers go home. Compounding the problem, movements started in the 1960s and 1970s have turned into money-making businesses.

“They use fear, ‘send us \$20 or your skin will fall off,’” said Vincent, using a blend of comedy and complete seriousness to drive home each point.

In return, legislative bodies are pushed into voting on bills that make no sense and are detrimental to the areas they are supposed to help, he said.

The efforts by the original activist in the 1960s and 1970s to help conserve the natural resources have been “hijacked,” Vincent emphasized as he continued to draw comparisons between his logging town of Libby, rural America and Sampson County.

“Our problem is ignorance.” People, he said, simply don’t understand and “we don’t do a good job of telling them” the truth.

Government efforts to change the landscape of Libby by populating it with grizzlies, and the townspeople’s fight to stop them, made a difference.

“We picketed, we spoke out at public meetings and we shared the truths.”

The same was true of efforts to save the forest. And because of all those efforts, organizations intent on making money and pointing out weaknesses have turned their guns on water and animal rights. They are looking a new “piñata” to publicly swing at, Vincent said — and that puts you guys in Sampson County in their cross hairs.”

Vincent then offered his three truths to prevent this unnatural disaster. First, he said, democracy works, but it is not a spectator sport. Oftentimes rural America is the swing vote so it is important that voters go the polls; second, communication is key. Legislative bodies need to have the truth told to them by farmers — not just the lobbyist whispering in their ears. The third and final truth was to look beyond the current situation and envision how Sampson should look in 100 years.

“(By) dedicating one hour a week, writing a letter to the editor, phoning a commissioner or a legislator to thank them for the help they’ve given ... just an hour a week. If we all do that, there is hope that we will win.”

The general public, said Vincent, is tired of hearing the doom and gloom and want to know what they can do. There is a desire, he said, from those living in the cities to learn and to build bridges of communication, however action is needed to get the correct information out to the masses.

Vincent praised Sampson County’s beauty and touted its agricultural efforts, saying it was impressive.

That is something Friends of Agriculture board chairman Ronnie Jackson agrees with 100 percent.

Jackson, in welcoming everyone to the rally for the 10th year, said there was a lot to be proud of in Sampson County, tops among them farmers and agriculture.

“Sampson is one of the most diversified farming counties in the state,” Jackson said during an interview. “Almost everything is grown here.” It’s the diversity and not putting all the eggs in one basket that has provided the stable backdrop for years, he explained.

Jackson continued that there has been a lot of misinformation provided to legislators and, in turn, bills intended to help are possibly harming. That problem led to the creation of Friends of Agriculture in 1996. Its goals include supporting and encouraging “policies that enhance the viability of farmers ... to encourage efficient and safe use of natural resources ... to develop and share information that helps to support and sustain agriculture.”

***Michael Connolly can be reached at 910-592-8137 ext. 120 or can be emailed at [sicity@myclintonnc.com](mailto:sicity@myclintonnc.com)***