

West Virginia Farm PAC 2024 Candidate Questionnaire

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Party Affiliation: Republican **Senate District:** 15

1. What are the greatest challenges facing West Virginia and what steps would you support to meet those challenges?

West Virginia faces numerous challenges, including an aging and unhealthy population, low educational attainment, and a rampant opioid crisis. However, our most significant challenge is our low workforce participation, ranking among the nation's lowest. My top priority is further improving our workforce participation and promoting economic development. West Virginia needs not only jobs, but good-paying jobs. Economic development provides our citizens with better opportunities that allow for upward mobility. This growth leads to stable employment and more money being invested back into the community.

Since the Republicans took control in 2015, there has been a dedicated effort to enhance the state's judicial and regulatory environment to attract new businesses. Years of work has paid off as we've seen companies like NuCor, Mountaintop Beverage, and CMC Steel locate to West Virginia. These companies contribute billions to West Virginia's economy. The jobs they offer will increase our average household income, which in turn leads to a healthier population, improved test scores, and a broader tax base.

2. Currently, West Virginia produces approximately \$850 million in agricultural products annually. What actions should the State take to expand production and marketing of West Virginia agricultural products?

Products that generate true wealth are either extracted or grown. As we've partnered with the West Virginia Economic Development Office to attract new manufacturing companies, we should also urge the office to bring in agricultural processing industries. We need value-added manufacturing to process our agricultural commodities. For instance, converting apples into apple juice, apple rings, and apple sauce not only benefits West Virginia, but our entire nation.

We also need to continue supporting our higher education institutions. These schools are responsible for providing training programs for young farmers. They also promote innovation in the industry through research and development.

For instance, the research division of WVU assisted the West Virginia Agricultural Advisory Board in developing a five-year strategic plan for the state's Agricultural Economy. The plan set four primary goals: connecting producers to market opportunities, creating the necessary infrastructure to boost the agricultural economy, fostering the next generation of agricultural industry leaders, and improving access to land. The state should defer to those with industry experience and knowledge for suggestions on achieving these goals.

- 3. Some areas of the state have seen an influx of development which has taken up large amounts of farm land. How do you see Farm Land Protection playing a role in the future of economic development in the state?**

Berkeley County, my home county, has been heavily impacted by the surge of development in the state. A significant portion of West Virginia's preserved farmland is in the Eastern Panhandle. In fact, Berkeley County was the first to establish a local farmland protection board. For us, it's not commercial development, but instead the influx of population and the need for more housing. Striking a balance between development and preservation is essential for sustained economic and population growth.

Our 73,134 acres of scenic farmland in Berkeley County distinguish us from our neighboring states. However, only 8,475 acres of this land are protected. To continue attracting tourists, we must safeguard this beauty. We should maintain the funding for our farmland protection program and promote agritourism as a means for farms to remain operational. It might also be beneficial to complete a study on the benefit of providing a tax credit for landowners who contribute to state tourism.

Furthermore, the Secretary of Tourism and the Secretary of Economic Development should either serve as ex-officio members of the WV Agricultural Land Protection Authority or regularly attend its meetings. Collaboration and communication are key to achieving our shared goals.

- 4. Last year, personal income tax was reduced by 21.25 percent in West Virginia. Our state currently ranks 21st in overall tax collections. How do you envision West Virginia tax policy in the coming decade?**

Over the next decade, West Virginia's tax policy should aim to broaden the tax base while maintaining fiscal responsibility. This could be achieved by attracting new businesses and industries, which would increase employment opportunities and contribute to the state's economy. As the tax base expands, we should consider further reductions in personal income tax. However, these reductions should be implemented gradually and carefully to avoid budget deficits or cuts to essential services. To maintain financial stability, we've limited our budgetary reliance on the severance tax to \$250 million. Any funds exceeding this amount are considered excess revenue. Furthermore, the state should aim to eliminate business taxes that impede economic growth, such as the equipment and machinery tax and inventory tax.

- 5. At one time, West Virginia had some of the lowest electric power costs in America. What steps would you suggest to address issues with increased power costs for all West Virginia citizens and businesses?**

West Virginia is now an all-of-the-above energy state. Our mission should be to support and utilize fossil fuels while simultaneously researching alternatives. Instead of concentrating on the "best" way to supply electricity, we should aim for diversification to ensure a robust and reliable power network.

We should also utilize and incentivize existing companies. A notable example is the Pleasants Power Station, which once slated for demolition, is now set to undergo a transformative repurposing. The plant will now use a method of processing coal at high temperatures to separate the hydrogen gas from the graphite and other rare earth minerals. The hydrogen will be used to produce clean electricity, while the graphite will be used to make lithium-ion batteries, brake linings, nuclear reactors, and more. Thanks to embracing innovation, this is the first power plant ever to be saved from demolition.

By encouraging creativity and diversification, we can generate more power, thereby reducing costs for citizens and businesses in West Virginia.

6. **Test scores for students in West Virginia have ranked very low over the last five years. What steps would you suggest to improve classroom performance for West Virginia students?**

To improve student test scores in West Virginia, a multi-faceted approach is required:

- a. **Investment in Quality Teachers:** The quality of education a student receives is heavily dependent on the quality of their teacher. Therefore, it's crucial to recruit and retain high-quality teachers. To do this, competitive salaries and benefits should be offered. Our commitment to this is demonstrated by five consecutive years of teacher pay raises. Additionally, we need to raise awareness about our alternative certification program. Many highly qualified individuals are unaware that they can teach after completing this program.
- b. **Educational Choice:** School choice fosters a competitive environment that promotes excellence in education. It provides families with the opportunity to select schooling options—such as homeschooling, micro schools, charter schools, or private schools—that best suit their children's unique learning needs. With a variety of options, schools are encouraged to improve their services to attract and retain students. This competition often results in higher quality education and innovation in teaching methods. Furthermore, school choice empowers parents, giving them a say in their children's education, and ensures that students aren't confined to underperforming schools due to geographical limitations.
- c. **Removing Disruptive Students:** By removing disruptive students from the classroom, teachers can create a more conducive learning environment for all students. This allows teachers to focus more on instruction and less on managing behavior, leading to improved academic outcomes. Additionally, it encourages a more respectful classroom culture and reduces distractions, allowing students to better focus on their work.
- d. **Nutrition Programs:** Proper nutrition can have a significant impact on a student's ability to focus and perform well in school. Schools should provide nutritious meals and teach students about the importance of a healthy diet. I highly support efforts by state schools to purchase and use locally grown and produced agriculture products.
- e. **Career and Technical Education (CTE) School Partnerships:** West Virginia boasts many academically outstanding students. However, not all are considered “book smart.” I should know, I was one of them! By forming partnerships with our CTE Schools, we can provide new avenues to engage these students. Whether it's the science required for a

culinary career, or the math needed for carpentry, it becomes easier to engage students when their natural curiosity and passion are harnessed.

- f. **Parental Health:** Supporting children before they're born is one of the most crucial steps we can take. Researchers at West Virginia University Health Sciences found that nearly one in eight infants born in West Virginia from 2020 to 2022 were exposed to opioids, stimulants, or cannabis in utero. These children often experience neurodevelopmental and cognitive delays that become evident later in life and impact classrooms. By imposing stricter penalties on drug traffickers, we aim to reduce the consumption of dangerous substances, thus decreasing the number of babies born addicted to drugs.
7. **Currently, over 83 percent of land in West Virginia is privately owned. Agricultural producers are facing extensive challenges from the federal government from the standpoint of environmental policy. What steps would you take to protect private property rights?**

Private property owners should have the freedom to manage, use, and enjoy their land without unnecessary interference or constraints. This freedom is essential for economic growth, agriculture, and individual autonomy. However, we are currently dealing with unwarranted interference and overreach from the federal level. This issue places our state legislature in a challenging position, given our limited ability to address federal concerns.

One possible approach could be drafting a resolution urging the federal government to reevaluate EPA regulations. This reevaluation should ensure that regulations are not overly restrictive and that they consider the realities of farming. As Chair of the Council of State Governments (CSG) South, I have already adopted this approach to counter federal overreach. Both the WV House and Senate passed a resolution urging the federal government to reform the process of issuing permits for federal energy projects. I invited the 14 other states in CSG South to join us in this endeavor. Through collaboration with other states, we can remind the federal government that its role is to uphold state's rights, not vice versa.

8. **Environment advocacy groups are now targeting the expansion of West Virginia agriculture. Currently, Washington, DC policy has turned over most environmental policies to EPA and other federal agencies due to the Chevron doctrine. Do you believe the U.S. Supreme Court should overturn the Chevron doctrine policy, and if so, why?**

The Chevron Doctrine, in its current form, gives an unhealthy amount of power to bureaucratic agencies, allowing them to interpret and implement policies based on ambiguous statutes. In theory, this doctrine is meant to allow agencies with specialized knowledge to interpret laws within their jurisdiction. However, in practice, it has often led to an overreach of power, with agencies like the EPA effectively making laws, an authority that should reside with the legislative branch.

This undermines the separation of powers, a cornerstone of our democratic system. The Supreme Court should overturn the Chevron Doctrine to restore this balance and ensure that the creation and interpretation of laws remain under the jurisdiction of the elected legislature, not unelected

bureaucrats. This would not only uphold the integrity of our democratic process, but also ensure a more transparent and accountable system. Furthermore, it would provide an opportunity to establish clearer and more specific legislation, reducing ambiguity and the potential for misuse of power.

9. American farmers receive less than 10 percent of each dollar spent by consumers on food. What policies would you propose to help farmers and agricultural businesses be competitive in both domestic and foreign markets?

West Virginia should continue supporting and developing agricultural cooperatives. These cooperatives enable producers to market products directly to consumers, which lowers costs and increases profit margins. Besides the financial benefits to our producers, these cooperatives also offer direct benefits to West Virginia citizens. Purchasing local products directly from farmers or through local retailers ensures that our citizens receive the freshest, highest quality, and best-tasting products. Additionally, it helps to circulate more money within our local economy, supporting our farmers and strengthening our community's food system. Furthermore, buying locally ensures fair wages for our producers, while offering consumers prices comparable to those at grocery stores.

Potomac Highlands Producers, a group of farmers and producers supported by state and local agricultural specialists, the Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College, and community members, exemplifies the benefits of such cooperatives. They work together to sell more local food products and raise awareness of the abundance of products available. Hampshire, one of my district's counties, participates in this program. They sell products not only at the wholesale level but also directly to consumers. They even offer a monthly box for \$100, which qualifies under SNAP. I'd like to see more programs like this existing throughout the state.

10. Please list any additional information about your goals for West Virginia and the success of our state in the coming years.

More information about my goals for West Virginia can be found at www.ElectCraigBlair.com.