

PBN: The Rhode Island Nursery and Landscape Association advocates for the development of green jobs. Why is this a priority and is there any evidence that more jobs are in the pipeline?

Agriculture and plant-based industries, the “original” green jobs and businesses, are tied to the land and waters of Rhode Island. These are the large and small businesses and associated jobs that make sure Rhode Islanders have access to good food, that provide the plants that enhance the beauty and health of our habitat and that care for our water, air and soil – our very foundation.

One challenge facing our industry is a large proportion of aging business owners and fewer younger people to fill this gap. Another challenge is meeting an increasing need for highly trained individuals and businesses to respond to issues relating to climate change, food security, water management and the demands of sustainable communities. RINLA sees an increased need for people who are trained in these areas to enter into the workforce and/or who have an entrepreneurial spirit to start their own businesses to meet an increasing demand for products and services.

An area that holds promise and growth is the state’s investment in green infrastructure. RINLA sees this as an economic opportunity throughout our members’ industry supply chain. We also see the need for developing new areas of concentration, such as green infrastructure inspections, operations and maintenance (O&M) on residential and public properties. Green infrastructure investment will create new job opportunities in both the public and private sectors. In particular, jobs in green infrastructure O&M offer entry-level positions that are well paying and include benefits, as well as offer professional career pathways.

PBN: You say the association represents a \$2.5 billion industry in Rhode Island alone. Where does that figure come from and to what extent is nursery and landscaping a growing economic sector here?

Rhode Island’s agriculture and plant-based businesses were not always recognized as leading economic sectors worthy of investment. In 2012, RINLA partnered with the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, the University of Rhode Island College of Business and College of the Environment and Life Science, Commerce Rhode Island, Rhode Island Turfgrass Foundation and Rhode Island Agricultural Partnership to develop the first consolidated Economic Impact Study of Plant-based Industries and Agriculture in Rhode Island. This 2012 study conservatively identified the total annual economic impact to be \$1.78 billion.

Recently, Dr. Tom Sproul of the University of Rhode Island Department of Environmental & Natural Resource Economics updated this study. The 2014 results show that agriculture and plant-based industries represent \$2.5 billion dollars of economic impact to the state. This includes Rhode Island landscaping contractors and services, which account for sales of \$706 million and 6,084 jobs and landscape-related suppliers’ sales of \$683.5 million and 3,434 jobs. Within the agriculture sector, greenhouse, nursery and floriculture production is the largest

subsector with sales of \$110.1 million and 1,251 jobs (for the detailed economic update for agriculture and plant-based industry go to: www.rinla.org).

The Economic Impact Study and data have helped RINLA to lay the groundwork for our economic sector to influence policy, development of training and educational programs, and the state comprehensive plans. Green-related industries will continue to grow as the state invests in issues such as food security, climate change and aging infrastructure.

PBN: How many members do you have and what are your chief activities as an organization?

The Rhode Island Nursery and Landscape Association is the umbrella organization for the \$2.5 billion dollar agriculture and plant-based industries in the state. We represent nearly 500 green industry members who include nurseries, landscape contractors, arborists, masons, garden centers, turf farms, landscape architects and designers, suppliers and allied businesses. RINLA advances the welfare of its members through education, research, legislative representation, certification, support in the marketing of green industry goods and services, and collaboration with allied interests/associations.

RINLA members are professionals who take pride in their work and uphold the highest standards in horticulture, environmental practices, agriculture and the landscape business. RINLA is also dedicated to the development and implementation of programs that will increase capacity and contribute to the well-being of Rhode Island's community and environment.

In 2014, the Rhode Island Nursery and Landscape Institute, the 501(c)(3) arm of the Rhode Island Nursery and Landscape Association, was established. The purpose of RINLI is to educate the public about the role of horticulture, agriculture and good land stewardship in contributing to landscapes that create ecologically sustainable communities.

PBN: Resilience and climate change are areas in which the association also focuses. Name a specific recent effort that yielded tangible results.

Rhode Islanders can be proud of and learn from local farmers and plant-based industries the true meaning of resilience. These are the local businesses who respond to shocks and stresses presented to them and learn to adjust to these new challenges. RINLA member businesses are those that react to the seasons and the unpredictability, economic shifts and societal trends with such flexibility and ingenuity. For farmers, any year could bring a bumper crop – but it could also bring record snowfall, a late spring, summer drought and devastating fall hurricanes leading to destruction of crops. Many of our local farmers and green industry businesses have diversified products and services as practical and sustainable adaptive strategy.

The RINLA board of directors and I have worked hard to push the state to address both the challenges and economic opportunities related to climate change, resiliency and green infrastructure. RINLA and I influenced the inclusion and acknowledgement of resiliency and climate change economic risk and opportunity recognized in the Commerce RI: Actions for Economic Development Plan. This plan has advanced a key part of our mission, which is to

support the development of strong economic policies that will help to sustain agriculture and plant-based industries into the future. The plan begins to acknowledge the vital role of green industry not only in how the state will support food security issues, but how we will continue to explore new territory in the creation of livable and sustainable communities (i.e. climate change, renewable energy, phyto-remediation, environmental restoration, water conservation and green building, etc.). I believe that Rhode Island can be a leader as we help our communities navigate with the tangible steps necessary to respond to the biggest challenges of our lifetime – climate change and building a sustainable economy.

PBN: You have led the organization for five years. What are your goals for leading the nonprofit over the next five years and beyond?

Looking back, the Board and I have steered the organization through a period of great economic turmoil and a changing environment, as well as evaluating the hundred-year-old trade association model. We have chosen to look at these obstacles as opportunities and have agreed that it was time to embrace and make a long-term commitment to change. Our goal is to keep RINLA relevant to our members. The RINLA board and I have worked hard to build a solid organizational structure, including the ability to diversify funding streams, while also trying to re-imagine and re-define the value we bring not only to our members but the broader community as well.

In the next five years, RINLA will be a part of a stronger and action-oriented coalition of economic sectors supporting one another as well as advocating for our member businesses; RINLA and partners will have established an outcome-based workforce training and placement program that keep will keep member businesses and municipalities strong and at the forefront of demand; we will continue to collaborate in response to state-wide issues relating to climate change and economic strategies for resilience and adaptation; and RINLA will have built a stronger and sustainable organization that will continue to support and advocate for agriculture and plant-based industries.

Please check back with us – RINLA and I are grateful for this opportunity – thank you
Providence Business News.