

# Legislator, full-time farmer

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**W**HEN J. Lowell Stoltzfus is not doing battle at the State House, the state senator is most likely out in his cabbage patch protecting his young plants.

The Senate minority leader grows cabbage plants — lots of cabbage plants.

"We just finished up shipping about 30 million plants," said the 56-year-old Republican who represents the lower Eastern Shore. The small plants are shipped throughout the country, where they are transplanted and grown to produce heads of cabbage.

He estimates that as much as 40 percent of the sauerkraut consumed in the nation originated on his farm on the shore of the Pocomoke River, just a few miles outside Pocomoke City.

"It's a unique business," said Agriculture Secretary Lewis R. Riley. "I think he's the only big-scale cabbage farmer in the state."

Stoltzfus is unique in another way. As he puts it: "I'm the last full-time farmer in the General Assembly who actually makes a living off the farm."

Stoltzfus was elected to the House of Delegates in 1991. He moved to the Senate the next year to replace Riley, when then-Gov. William Donald Schaefer appointed the Eastern Shore chicken farmer as his agriculture secretary.

Today, Stoltzfus is something of a dinosaur and blames the demise of the farmer-lawmaker for the de-

cline in Maryland's farm population.

"Only 2 percent of the state population is in agriculture," he said. "So you have a very minute part of the population to choose from."

As a result, he says, the agriculture community's voice has been diminished in the legislature. "The industry is way under-represented and misunderstood.

"As Maryland becomes more urbanized — and there is development going on all over the state — there's a disconnect between the understanding of agriculture and the people of the urban communities."

Stoltzfus said this was very evident during the 1997 outbreaks of toxic *Pfiesteria piscicida* in waters flowing into the bay, including the Pocomoke, which flows through his back yard.

"When the *Pfiesteria* thing came up, I was overwhelmed with it," he said. "I felt like, why can't people listen? Why can't they understand?"

He said environmental forces in the legislature made a connection between the fish kills from the *Pfiesteria* and chickens. "They were playing politics. There was no proof that chicken farms caused the problem," which closed portions of three rivers to recreational use, triggered panic over the safety of Maryland seafood and knocked the state's tourism industry for a loop. "To this day, there is not adequate proof."

He said there were forces within the legislature who have run the poultry industry out of business. "They had

very little understanding of how vital it was to Maryland's economy. They didn't understand that the livelihoods of so many people were dependent upon the poultry industry."

In his part of the state, he said, poultry farming is as big a part of the economy as Disney World is to Orlando, Fla.

The senator thinks he has a better understanding of the state's environmental issues than environmentalists have of agriculture.

"I was chairman of the Chesapeake Bay Commission last year," he said. "I understand the water-quality problems of the bay, and I know they must be addressed.

"But my philosophy is that the heavy-handed, Big Brother approach by the government won't accomplish as much with farmers as co-operation, education and getting out and being partners with them," he said.

He said the Water Quality Improvement Act, passed during Gov. Parris N. Glendening's administration, was not the best approach. "In fact, it was counterproductive, in my opinion."

Before the legislation was passed, 90 percent of the state's farmers participated in a voluntary nutrient-management program designed to control nitrogen and phosphorus on their fields, he said.

Seven years after passage of the water-quality act, about 65 percent of the farmers have signed up for the mandatory program.

"This is an example of the disconnect between urban area and rural area," Stoltzfus

said. "The heavy-handed tactics or police state don't work in the agriculture community. These people are already struggling. They are doing the best they can with the knowledge they have. We should be patting them on the backs, rather than kicking them in the butt."

Earl "Buddy" Hance, president of the Maryland Farm Bureau, said the state legislature seems to move further away from agriculture with each election.

"When you have more urban legislators with no connections to agriculture, they don't understand the problems we face," said Hance. "That's why Lowell is so important. We have to educate these urban lawmakers and make sure they understand. Lowell can do this better than we can."

Said Riley: "Lowell has a great knowledge of the bay and farming. It's very helpful to have his voice on the Senate floor. Agriculture gets a lot of urban support, and I think much of that is due to Lowell."

Stoltzfus said he brings an understanding of the vulnerability of agriculture and the importance of farming to the state's economy to the General Assembly.

He said agriculture accounts for about 14 percent of the state gross product, and the poultry industry is a big part of the industry. "That's a huge segment," he said. "I don't know of any other single sector that can claim that large a percentage of the state's economy. I think I bring an understanding of that to Annapolis."