

Farm Bill Field Hearing

Senator Pat Roberts wanted Kansas farmers and ranchers to be in the center spotlight when the Senate Agriculture Committee held its first Farm Bill field hearing. Several hundred persons representing rural and food policy interests gathered at K-State's McCain Auditorium to listen to the proceedings.

Presentations from three panels comprised of government, education, commodity, and rural development representatives made up the program of the three-hour event. Sen. Roberts chaired the event in partnership with the ranking member, Sen. Debbie Stabenow from Michigan.

In their opening remarks, Sen. Roberts pointed out that the next Farm Bill would be drafted in a much different atmosphere than existed in 2013. Not only is there a new administration, but record prices for all commodities have plummeted. In order to successfully reauthorize a new farm bill, Roberts said that we "must write a bill that works across all regions – all crops."

Sen. Stabenow added that a Farm Bill must also serve the millions of Americans that live in small towns and rural communities, as well as conservation of our farm and ranchland. She looked forward to "new opportunities for voluntary conservation initiatives" as well to new partnerships for funding research.

In the first panel, KSU President, Ret. General Richard Myers; Kansas 1st District Representative, Dr. Roger Marshall; and Kansas Secretary of Agriculture, Jackie McClaskey greeted the Senators and the attendees. All emphasized the important role Kansas agriculture plays in the nation's economy, agricultural and food research, and in international relations.

Bringing attention to the current state of agriculture, Rep. Marshall pointed to recent reporting from Kansas Farm Management Association showing that net income for participating farms went from record levels to less than \$5,000 in 2015.

"We know those levels will fall when they are reported for 2016, and unless something changes, they will be even lower for 2017," said Marshall.

Sounding a theme that would be echoed in all panels, the opening group emphasized the important role of agricultural and rural enterprises while highlighting some of the current economic challenges in the farm and rural economies.

Farmer-Producer Panel

The second panel was made up of farmers and ranchers all of whom also represented commodity organizations ranging from livestock, dairy, grains, and cotton. Kansas Farm Bureau was the only general producer organization represented.

In his opening statement, rancher and president of the Kansas Livestock Association, David Clawson, stated that the "KLA members, and the vast majority of cattle producers, oppose the involvement of the federal government in determining how cattle are marketed." He clarified that this meant continued opposition to GIPSA regulations, which restricted ownership of cattle by major meat packers.

Clawson also spent significant time defending funding for the conservation programs like EQIP and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). Clawson said, "I encourage members of this committee to remind your colleagues that federal funds spent on conservation are a good

investment in our country's natural resources and the ultimate beneficiary is the general public.”

Reno County farmer, Cameron Peirce, said that the Kansas Sunflower Commission supported full funding for conservation. He singled out soil health as an example of success. Peirce stated, “USDA-NRCS’s soil health initiative has been a big success in the last few years. Producers, agribusiness and commodity investors now understand how important soil health practices are to increasing productivity on the land and protecting our natural resources at the same time. Every effort should be made to encourage producers to adopt practices that improve our nation’s soils.”

Conservation was not the only common thread in the producer panel. To a person, all wanted to make sure that the Title One safety nets, Agricultural Risk Coverage (ARC) and Price Loss Coverage (PLC) along with crop insurance stayed fully funded.

Enhancing trade and supporting the Marketing Access Program (MAP) came up again and again. Pratt County corn producer, Kent Moore, emphasized that “The growth potential for ag exports is greater than any other demand sector today. We believe it is time to increase our efforts to provide access to these growing markets around the world.”

Finally, several panelists expressed the need to aggressively enhance biosecurity especially in addressing the potential threat of Foot and Mouth Disease. Michael Springer, representing the National Pork Producers Council, said that “an outbreak today of the disease, which last was detected in the United States in 1929, likely would cripple the entire livestock sector,” and “the economic consequences undoubtedly would ripple throughout the entire rural economy, from input suppliers to packers and from processors to consumers.”

Rural Development and Services Panel

The final panel of the day centered on rural communities and businesses. Panelists spoke strongly in favor of continued funding for programs that guaranteed loans, provided funding for utilities and telecommunications, and increased access to quality housing for a growing agricultural labor market.

Sounding a note of concern, Shan Hanes on behalf of the American Bankers Association, warned that the “Farm Credit System has become too large and unfocused, using taxpayer dollars to subsidize large borrowers and Congress should consider legislation that would level the playing field with the Farm Credit System.”

Pioneer Communications CEO, Catherine Moyer, stated that small rural internet development does not have access to “Wall Street” investment but provides essential education, business, and communication services to rural America. “Cost-effective Rural Utilities Service (RUS) loans offered through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) are therefore an essential resource for small businesses looking to deploy broadband in rural America,” she said.

Other panelists asserted the same principle that rural America is different and dependent upon these important USDA programs whether in protecting water resources or extending Farm and Home Loan programs to rural towns like Dodge City.

Follow-up perspectives and analysis

Notably absent from the panels were speakers representing more recent innovations in agriculture, rural development, and sustainable agriculture: farmers markets, regenerative agriculture interests, direct marketing enterprises, and micro-business development. Groups like Audubon, Nature Conservancy, and the National Wildlife Foundation had no panel voices. Neither the Kansas Rural Center nor the Kansas Farmers Union was asked to provide a farmer spokesperson. No one representing nutrition programs spoke either, although food and nutrition programs are the bulk of

the farm bill dollars and are critical to gaining urban and consumer support.

It was very encouraging to hear strong support for conservation programs – especially those that enhance the management and health of soils and rangeland. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether continued and increased taxpayer money flowing into price supports and insurance offers anything more than a band-aid to recurrent agricultural woes.

Today agriculture receives little or no attention from the newly elected president. It is a time when many in rural America are now experiencing a crisis in credit and income; a time when extreme weather fuels wildfires, floods and tornadoes killing cattlemen, livestock, and destroying homes. In this context, it would be refreshing to look deep into the future and suggest pro-active policies that could lessen the recurrent boom-bust cycles endemic to the agriculture, stabilize rural population, address climate change, and decrease the high rates of rural poverty.

Most of the testimony in Kansas looked to either strengthen and tweak existing programs and support the status quo. It will be interesting to see if broader perspectives emerge in the months ahead leading to what many hope to be the Farm and Food Bill of 2018.