

**U.S. House of Representatives Agriculture Committee  
Farm Bill Field Hearing  
North Country Community College, Saranac Lake, N.Y.  
March 9, 2012**

**Testimony of Larry Eckhardt  
Kinderhook Creek Farm, Stephentown, N.Y.**

Chairman Lucas, Congressman Peterson, Congressman Owens, Congressman Gibson, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me today to offer comments and ideas regarding the 2012 Farm Bill. My name is Larry Eckhardt and I'm a farmer from Stephentown, Rensselaer County, in Eastern New York State. I also provide crop consulting and planning services to farms in my area as a certified crop advisor.

There are several pieces of the Farm Bill that are important to our farm and to the vegetable growers in the state that I would like to highlight for you today.

**General Farm Bill Concerns**

The farms in our area, including our own farm, were really hit hard by the tropical storms of last summer and fall. In trying to recover from this damage, I think that it is important the 2012 Farm Bill continue to include **permanent disaster assistance and emergency conservation programs**.

These are very important to helping farmers recover after an unimaginable disaster, whether through replanting trees with the help of the Tree Assistance Program (TAP) or replacing soil or fixing fields that were washed away through help from the Emergency Conservation Program monies (ECP). **We can't go back to ad hoc disaster assistance**; farmers need disaster assistance they can count on and which arrives in a timely manner. Programs that are sometimes years in getting financial assistance to farmers (like SURE) are not very helpful and the efforts in these types of programs would be better spent elsewhere.

**Conservation** is an important piece of the Farm Bill and New York farmers have worked hard to meet extremely lofty federal and state standards. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) has provided critical funding and has helped leverage state and local monies to make sure farmers in the state continue to meet ever-increasing standards.

During these difficult economic times, I know there will be cuts in the Farm Bill, so I think it is important for Congress to focus its conservation efforts on **working lands programs**, like EQIP and the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, over the easement and land retirement type programs. Keeping vital and productive lands in production and protecting the environment at the same time should be our goals when funds are limited.

I would further suggest for the 2012 Farm Bill that the **role of NRCS** be returned to its real and original purpose—providing technical assistance to farmers for installing needed practices—and leave the handling of the funds for cost-sharing these practices to FSA. NRCS personnel have time and again told me that they are not trained in administering the funding of conservation – they are trained to help

farmers make conservation practices work. I agree and believe that FSA is better trained in handling the funds for conservation programs.

While mentioning FSA, I'd like to voice **strong opposition to closing local FSA offices** in our region. These critical offices administer all the programs now in effect, insurance, reporting and any new requirements for farms to comply with programs—how can we do this with fewer offices? And what little, if any, money is saved? I'm all for saving, but let's begin where it might make a difference, not by eliminating the people and offices on the front lines, who, for most of the real farmers, are **the face of the USDA**.

### **Specialty Crop-Specific Concerns**

New York is largely a state of dairy and **specialty crops**, that's why it's important that the **Farm Bill reflect the type of agriculture we have here in New York and the Northeast**. Specialty crops have been notoriously underserved in previous Farm Bill legislation and that's why it was so important that a specialty crops title was included in the 2008 Farm Bill and I hope will remain in the 2012 Farm Bill.

The **Specialty Crops Block Grants** have been important to many farmers, large and small, by supporting research, marketing and market development, and critical pest management programs that help increase our profitability and sustainability. The funds from other public sources for research and development in the area of specialty crops have been cut dramatically over the last two decades.

These **Specialty Crops Block Grants** have made substantial contributions to new business development, new products and new and improved growing methods for producers in New York. I hope for continued, and perhaps, increased funding for this important part of the new Farm Bill.

I don't think it's a secret that **crop insurance** doesn't serve specialty crop farmers well, especially not multi-crop farms like mine. The devastating weather events of 2011 have only served to highlight the need for some major changes in several areas. I would suggest a few ways for the Farm Bill to be more responsive to specialty crop risk management needs:

- First, I'm not an economist or an actuary. I can only suggest some ideas for a crop insurance program that will meet our specialty crop needs, but we need the help of USDA to figure out how to make them actuarially sound. I think Congress should instruct the USDA in the next Farm Bill to research and develop, with input from **actual growers of specialty crops**, risk management tools that will work more effectively for diverse crop farms. Being diversified helps manage our risk to a large degree, but as we saw last year, there are no options that work well in near complete or complete losses to help farmers get back on their feet.
- The **Non-Insured Disaster Assistance Program (NAP)** is the only coverage offered for most nontraditional specialty crops, but in the event of a complete loss, it really only provides remuneration for a quarter or less of my lost crop. When there is a partial loss, most often there is no coverage at all. There should be a **buy-up option** so farmers can better protect themselves and manage their individual risk. Although NAP is pretty cost-effective, the record-keeping can become overwhelming for farmers who have many crops—maybe 30 or more—and **recordkeeping should be streamlined** so more farmers would participate and be eligible for the disaster assistance programs. Other revisions, such as sign-up deadlines, acreage reporting, yield histories, type of production (organic or conventional), multiple planting dates and training of loss adjusters would have to be addressed to make the program more appropriate for growers.

- While we're talking about crop insurance, it just seems we would have to pay less indemnification on insurance policies or NAP, much less frequently, if some of our rivers and streams were better maintained. We have seen extreme sediment deposits and obstructions in many of our streams and tributaries caused by the lack of planned, routine care. Allowing the trained NRCS staff to help farmers responsibly clear and shape these waterways to prevent widespread flooding, it would substantially benefit our farms and help mitigate the effects of excessive rainfall on all our communities in the future. This benefit can only be accomplished if the **U.S. Army Corp of Engineers and The EPA are required to cooperate**, perhaps thru the 2012 Farm Bill.

**Nutrition programs** in the Farm Bill are also important to specialty crop farmers. The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program for schools and the Seniors Farmers Market Nutrition Program are two of the many programs that help link our farmers with the people who most need access to fresh, healthy foods. Any program that supports local food purchases and helps develop new distribution networks will be a great benefit to both farmers like myself and the people who need access to the food I grow.

There are a number of provisions in the present Farm Bill for **organic certification and research** and this is certainly an important piece of specialty crop agriculture. However, in this economy, I see many farmers using organic methods, but not able to spend the money or commit the time to complete their certification. Instead, their focus and that of many farmers has shifted to serving a market seeking out **local foods**.

Whether it's certified organic, grown organically, or grown conventionally, consumers want to know where their food is coming from and who grew the crops. Because of this, I think it is important for the 2012 Farm Bill to include funding for programs that **help all farmers who direct market**, no matter what production techniques they use. This means developing food distribution networks, supporting the Farmers Market Promotion Program, supporting food-based entrepreneurship programs, and other grant opportunities. These programs all help improve the viability of all family farms in all areas of the country.

And finally, the proposed new regulations for **food safety** are due out soon and diversified farms like mine are concerned with how this will change our business. **Food safety begins on the farm** and is certainly a primary concern on my farm. We work hard at ensuring it every day, in whatever way we can, but not knowing what is in these regulations and how hard it will be to comply with them scares me. If the Farm Bill can provide farmers assistance in meeting these new standards, whether with needed training, on-the-ground assistance from USDA, or tools to implement new procedures, this Farm Bill could certainly help that effort.

These have been several of the issues of the upcoming Farm Bill that I think are most important to diversified vegetable farms like mine. Thank you again for the invitation to speak today and if you have any questions, I am always happy to answer them.

## LARRY ECKHARDT

Larry Eckhardt and his family own and operate a diversified vegetable/cash crop/beef cattle operation in the Rensselaer County town of Stephentown. Kinderhook Creek Farm, Inc. consists of approximately 1100 acres of owned and rented land. The Eckhardt family, Larry and his wife Heather, sons Matthew (25) and Andrew (21), Larry's dad - George Eckhardt, and many full and part-time employees raise 200 acres of fresh market sweet corn, 200 acres of grain corn, 100 acres of soybeans, 325 acres of hay, 175 acres of small grains (oats, wheat, rye and barley), and 20 acres of misc. vegetables. The farm staff also custom plants and harvests 350 acres of corn and small grains for other area farms in Rensselaer County, Columbia County and Berkshire County in neighboring Massachusetts.

Larry and Heather also own Capital Area Ag Consulting, Inc., a crop management consulting firm with over 50 active clients in the Capital region and Western New England. Founded in 1983, the consulting business works with farmer/clients in many areas of crop management including fertility and pest management recommendations, nutrient utilization, manure/animal waste plans and crop rotations. Larry is actively involved in CAFO planning and CNMP/AWMP nutrient management planning systems. He is a certified crop advisor (CCA) and a voting member of the National Alliance of Independent Crop Consultants (NAICC).

Larry is a 1976 Graduate of SUNY Cobleskill in Agronomy and a 1980 Graduate of Cornell with degree in Agronomy and Ag Economics/Farm Business Management. In 2009, Larry was the recipient the Outstanding Alumni Award for the College of Ag & Life Sciences at Cornell. Larry has also received many commendations for his service to the New York Ag industry and service to his community.

Larry's present leadership roles include: Board of Directors of New York State Vegetable Growers Assn., Director of NYFVI (New York Farm Viability Institute), Member New York Farm Bureau State Fruit, Vegetable and Honey State Committee and State Labor Committee, Rensselaer County Ag Program Committee for Cooperative Extension, Supervisor for Town of Stephentown and Ordained Elder of Presbyterian Congregation of the Stephentown Federated Church.

Larry's past leadership commitments were: President – New York State Vegetable Growers, 19 years; Cornell College of Ag and Life Sciences Advisory Committee; Member of the Empire State Food and Ag Leadership Institute (LeadNY), class II; NY Farm Bureau Young Farmers State Committee; Local FSA county committee. President and Treasurer of Rensselaer County Farm Bureau, 8 years; Town Councilman – Stephentown, 10 years.

Committee on Agriculture  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Required Witness Disclosure Form

House Rules\* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2009.

Name: Larry Eckhardt

Organization you represent (if any): Kinderhook Creek Farm

1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2009, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do **NOT** require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source: \_\_\_\_\_ Amount: \_\_\_\_\_

Source: \_\_\_\_\_ Amount: \_\_\_\_\_

2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2009, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source: \_\_\_\_\_ Amount: \_\_\_\_\_

Source: \_\_\_\_\_ Amount: \_\_\_\_\_

Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you: N/A to me

Signature: Larry Eckhardt

\* Rule XI, clause 2(g)(5) of the U.S. House of Representatives provides: *Each committee shall, to the greatest extent practicable, require witnesses who appear before it to submit in advance written statements of proposed testimony and to limit their initial presentations to the committee to brief summaries thereof. In the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by any entity represented by the witness.*

PLEASE ATTACH DISCLOSURE FORM TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.