

A Fresh Look at the Next Farm Bill

By Val Dolcini

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Recently, Agriculture Secretary Vilsack laid out his priorities for the upcoming Farm Bill legislation and noted that we need to think bigger than the words 'Farm Bill' suggest. This major legislative package, drafted only once every five years, is about a whole lot more than farming: it's about supporting jobs in the future, it's about keeping pace with the changing needs of agriculture and rural America, and it's about providing a secure food supply for the nation. As the debate unfolds in Washington, it's clear that this bill must do more with less by simplifying programs and creating innovative solutions while still making targeted investments to keep agriculture productive and rural communities vibrant.

American agriculture – which is responsible for one out of every 12 jobs in America - is a bright spot in the American economy. As they write the new bill, Congress should focus on three core principles that have shaped the success of the American farmer: maintaining a strong safety net, supporting sustainable productivity and promoting vibrant markets.

A safety net must provide producers assistance quickly after they lose their crops to a natural disaster. It must reflect the diversity of American agriculture by working for farmers of all types and sizes. It needs to be simple enough to understand and it must be accountable and justifiable to all Americans – using resources wisely to provide assistance only when really needed. The safety net is particularly important for beginning farmers. Today, American farmers are aging, and the next Farm Bill must help to identify, recruit, train and support a new generation of farmers and ranchers.

Farmers and ranchers must be able to produce an affordable, quality product year after year. That means continuing federal investments in research needed to maintain our farmers' leadership as the most innovative and productive in the world. Conservation is equally important to sustainable productivity – it supports healthy soil and a plentiful water supply, and this legislation should continue our commitment to conservation and to maintaining robust voluntary conservation assistance programs.

The legislation should continue to promote vibrant, fair and diverse markets – at home and abroad – for farming operations of all types and sizes. We should continue efforts to expand markets for 'Grown in America' goods abroad, which will help support record agricultural exports and more than 1 million American jobs this year. At the same time, we should look to expand domestic opportunities for producers interested in local and regional markets, and continue work to support specialty crops producers.

Farmers aren't alone in the need for a safety net – the Farm Bill legislation helps families struggling through tough times put food on the table with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). SNAP is a bridge to self-sufficiency for working families – more than half of SNAP beneficiaries are children and the elderly and this legislation can help us continue these efforts.

The Farm Bill legislative process should also address the community needs of rural America. Rural development programs help drive rural job creation with the effective use of taxpayer dollars. The legislation should continue the federal government's partnership with leaders and businesses in rural communities which will make it easier for emerging rural businesses to access the capital they need to grow, create jobs and sustain growth.

Rural America should also produce renewable energy to improve incomes for farmers, create rural jobs and increase our national security. USDA is helping to develop a biofuels economy in every region of the nation by promoting research and providing opportunities for farmers, ranchers, and businesses to pursue these new Ag ventures and this must continue.

While challenges will always confront farmers and ranchers, the future for American agriculture is bright. As a nation, we must build on these foundations and prepare for the opportunities ahead. This Farm Bill should help move our nation and our economy forward: creating jobs, providing a safety net for millions of Americans, supporting rural communities and building on the incredible productivity, strength and success of American agriculture.

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