

What Farmers Think About the Farm Bill

As Congress begins the work of drafting the next farm bill, North Dakota Farmers Union felt it important to capture the thoughts of the people most affected by this critical piece of legislation – family farmers and ranchers and rural citizens. Six separate listening sessions were held July 17-19, 2017, in Bismarck, Devils Lake, Hillsboro, Jamestown, Minot and Watford City.

After opening remarks at each session by NDFU President Mark Watne, a moderated discussion ensued. **A recurring thought was the importance of the farm bill in providing a safety net for family farmers, and the necessity of crop insurance as an essential risk management tool.** Here are key takeaways, comments and personal stories:

-Strengthen Crop Insurance

“Crop insurance is at the 60 to 65 percent range [of being subsidized to farmers]. I’ve had farmers tell me if it drops below 60 percent, they’re not going to [be able to] afford to take it anymore. I talked to Farm Credit last year and they said at least up to a quarter of patrons will not be able to make their loan payments for the last year, and they are still waiting to get their money.”

– Bob Kuylen, South Heart

“Our crop insurance program is not adequate. It doesn't get us to where we need to be, but it gets us a whole lot better than zero and trying to figure out how to do it alone. We can't withstand any more cuts to crop insurance. We need an enhanced crop insurance. We do not want public delivery of crop insurance. It's been so well delivered and serviced by private insurance companies, it's been a success story. Crop insurance is critical to the success of farmers and ranchers.”

– Steve Perdue, Ray

“Keeping people in crop insurance, especially what we've done these last few years, has provided stability, especially in comparison to the '80s when people had a loss and got wiped out.”

– Rick Holman, Mayville

-Provide Adequate Farm Bill Funding

“The last two farm bills, we have actually saved money. But the dollars diminish; they aren't carried over to the next farm bill.”

– Wes Niederman, Sioux County

“The Farm Bill has taken a lot of hits over the past 10 years. I understand the reality of trying to hold our own, but by holding our own, if you take strict inflation, we’re going backwards significantly. A lot of young producers see their expenses are not being adjusted for what they're receiving. Holding our own may not be enough.”

– Kurt Andre, Williston

-Address Specific Farm Program Issues

"Why are the planting dates different at FSA and crop insurance? Crop insurance already does all the paperwork at that end, and they're good at it. If the paperwork can cross over to FSA it would be convenient, efficient and a cost savings."

– Justin Sherlock, Daisy

"When the farm bill was drawn up in 2014, commodity prices were very good and we built a farm bill on commodity prices. Now that commodity prices have been low for three years, we don't have that price protection we did in 2013-2014. You don't have the level of protection from ARC and PLC. We need to design a farm program that will address some of those issues."

– Dan Spiekermeier, Sheldon

-Assist Young Producers

"We need to target something to young producers, not only in terms of education but in transitioning farms and ranches to our young producers, target tax incentives, and we should target some of the tax credits whether it's on investments, etc. We need to stabilize the family farm and rural America and we'll only see that if we stop consolidation in production agriculture."

– Richard Schlosser, Edgeley

-Address Market Instability

"We're fighting an uphill battle. When it comes to seeds or new equipment, they say increase your productivity. It's all geared to get every bushel you can raise and increase as much as you can."

– Matt Gilbertson, Maddock

"We need stability. The president talks about cutting food aid, and prices for peas dropped considerably after that. There's no stability when programs are threatened."

– Justin Sherlock, Daisy

"Long-range planning with commodity markets is a problem. We like to buy half-million [dollar] combines at the high point, but now we can't continue that long-range projection because we don't know what's going on. We must make decisions that aren't necessarily good in the long run. We need to convince people of the need for stability in agriculture."

– Rick Holman, Mayville

“The result of every farm bill is rural America shrinks, towns shrink, people leave, not because they want to. There are no inefficient farmers, there hasn't been since maybe the Depression. Agriculture has been forced to farm at a loss, because farmers don't get paid for what they do.”

– Tom Asbridge, Bismarck

-Promote Trade

“We export most of our food. I understand Pennsylvania people are concerned about manufacturing and NAFTA. Trade is critical for us and being able to trade with Cuba [and other countries] ...can we continue to do that?”

– Wayne Backman, Bismarck

-Protect Food Security

“Many of you here haven't forgotten about trade with China and the baby food incident. Now they're talking about the beef deal and want us to take their ground chicken and pork. They're concerned about where their food is coming from but don't want to label stuff that comes here. Food security has been overlooked for so long.”

– Roger Zetocha, Stirum

-Strengthen Disaster Programs

“Back in the 1980s, we had seven years of straight drought. We didn't have all that bad crop insurance, but it didn't cover our expenses. It was disaster payments this organization (NDFU) lobbied for and got is why I'm sitting here today and still have the farm. If it hadn't been for disaster payments, I wouldn't be farming.”

– Dennis Stromme, Zahl

“Without disaster assistance, we would easily lose 20-30 percent of farmers in our area.”

– Bob Kuylen, South Heart

“I got an email from Carson County FSA saying I qualified for emergency ECP practices. I applied for a solar pumping well. They were very helpful in the office with filling out the application. They printed it, I signed it, he (FSA employee) signed it, and then he pulled out a sheet and said, 'This is my notification to you that there is no money available now.' It will probably be October or November before I'd see any dollars, if approved. November is too late. They send out emergency practices that are approved, but there's no money, so you sit and wait. Once they say there is an emergency, the money should be there.”

– Wes Niederman, Sioux County

-Enforce Antitrust Legislation

"We're in the process of watching our antitrust legislation being of very little service to the people it's meant to serve. Our federal regulators are worried about the merger of fantasy sports teams and we've got food production for the world, expenses for producers, and ag mergers being greenlighted. I don't hear about it in congressional hearings. I don't hear about it in the ag community...I don't hear about it from anyone."

– John Devney, Bismarck

-Address Health Care Costs

"Health insurance is a big deal. We have an aging population that is involved in agriculture, being all self-employed. With that comes a higher risk. Health insurance can get pretty wild, so the rest of our net income has to go to health insurance or else we run the risk of being uninsured."

– Don Sondrol, Turtle Lake

"We've made more calls on health care than we've ever made in our life. Health care is a cost issue for farmers."

– Paul Satrom, Portland

"Health insurance must be purchased based on speculation. Farmers want coverage, but they have to make decisions that will mark their future based on information that may not be the greatest to them."

– Marvin Nelson, Rolla

"Part of the problem is if someone is hurt they initially have a \$740 emergency room bill. If one has insurance, and they use it, the cost is \$150-\$200 to cover the visit and get the needed prescriptions you need. That's a no-brainer. The other side of the issue is, who pays the \$740? We do. Eighty-two percent of people don't pay their medical bills. Charitable institutions aren't absorbing the cost of those who fail to pay their bills."

– Gene Watne, Velva

A Call to Action

Based on the remarks and concerns from these listening sessions, as well as policy adopted by our members, North Dakota Farmers Union issues this call to action:

Strong Safety Net

We call on Congress to write a new Farm Bill that provides a strong safety net for farmers and ranchers. It should maintain financial support for countercyclical programs and expand safety net provisions in times of disaster or drought. The safety net needs to work for farmers and ranchers, not budget cuts. Because of agriculture's critical impact on rural America, the national economy, and our country's food supply, farm bill legislation should be the highest priority for Congress.

Strengthening Crop Insurance

We call on Congress to fully fund federal crop insurance, which is a cornerstone of the farm safety net and an essential risk management tool for farmers who suffer crop loss or loss of revenue. For North Dakota family farmers to weather the constant challenges of farming, they need a crop insurance program that is more affordable and responsive to their needs. It must be improved to better serve all of America's farmers through the equitable use of our tax resources.

Beginning Farmers: The Future of Agriculture

We call on Congress to provide increased access to credit at lower interest rates and program support for beginning farmers, who have taken on the challenge of continuing the family farm or ranch. Young farmers are the crucial link in maintaining American's successful family farm system of agriculture. Solutions are needed for affordable equipment and land rent/purchases and farm succession planning that eliminates the cycle of passing debt from one generation to the next.

Health Care

We call on Congress to find solutions to fix the health care insurance marketplace and lower the increasing cost of premiums. Self-employed farmers and ranchers need improved accessibility to affordable and quality health insurance. The rising cost of premiums and limited choice of coverage has put a financial strain on farm families, and negatively impacted rural hospitals and their ability to provide critical health services. The situation will only grow more unstable as health insurance premiums rise.