



Alabama Cattlemen's Association

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House Agriculture Committee Farm Bill Field Hearing

Saturday, May 15th, Troy, AL

Comments delivered by Doug Gibbs, Gibbs Farms of Ranburne, AL
On behalf of the Alabama Cattlemen's Association

Chairman Peterson and members of the House Agriculture Committee, I'm delivering this statement to you today not only as a cattleman and member of the Alabama Cattlemen's Association; but also as the third of four generations currently living and working on our family farm located in the eastern edge of Cleburne County near the Alabama-Georgia state line. My family's role in the beef cattle industry involves hosting an annual production sale where we market 250 bulls and heifers from our herd of 500 Simmental, SimAngus, and Angus cows, as breeding stock. The remaining offspring are sold private treaty off the farm, or sent to Kansas where we contract them to be fed and harvested.

Like you, I am passionate about my country and our agricultural way of life. I am however deeply concerned about both. Survival of the family farm is essential to the well being of our great country. Our lives are dedicated not only to producing a product that consumers around the globe can enjoy, but also to helping fellow cattlemen use the animals they purchase from my family to be more profitable with their own farms and ranches, as well as help them market their own product as wisely as possible.

Like you, I understand that the decisions made concerning Ag policy in Washington, D.C. have the potential to impact agriculture producers just like me all across our country. Today my 67 year old father and 15 year old son are in the hayfield, with my 91 year old grandpa sitting in his truck wishing with all his heart that he could be more help, and I've left my family farm to be with you here for the purpose of speaking out on behalf of the hard working cattlemen in Alabama, as well as the rest of this great nation.

To be able to say something in 5 minutes to demonstrate to you how important it is to prepare this Farm Bill as wisely as possible is an almost impossible task. With all the challenges facing the family farm already, from the impact of what other countries are doing to our fuel and fertilizer prices, to the impact of foreign trade on beef demand, to the very questionable benefit of ethanol production, to the death tax, the last thing we need is for our government to produce a bill that does not keep the absolute best interest of the people that feed this country as the top priority. Just think about it, what would happen if the younger generation, or just 25% of farmers and ranchers decide that there is no future in agriculture, and give it up. This scares me to death. Please consider the following points and these opinions as you begin the process of deliberations for crafting the 2012 Farm Bill:

Risk Management Tools – Crop insurance programs are vital for protecting the stability of America's farming and ranching families. In a business where our bottom line can literally turn red overnight due to environmental factors beyond our control, these programs are extremely important and deserve your attention. Think back to our late president Teddy Roosevelt, who after surveying the death and devastation of a most cruel North Dakota winter, hung it up and moved back East to pursue politics. For the overwhelming majority of family farmers, this is a decision just too horrible to contemplate. Neither the farmer/rancher, or our country can take too much quitting.

Conservation Programs – Incentive-based programming meant to preserve and protect wildlife and delicate ecosystems have been embraced by landowners like my family. CRP, WHIP, EQIP, and other programs like them can absolutely define a mutually beneficial relationship between land managers and agency officials. At the same time, some of these programs can approach the point of systemic abuse when monies are paid to those who choose to simply neglect a piece of property in the name of

conservation rather than actively manage it. In these instances, those enrolled acres should be taken out of enrollment under the premise that active management of land to produce a viable commodity in addition to protecting wildlife is actually a better use of that resource.

Nonfarm Programs – I am positive that I’m not alone in expressing concern over the number of times our Administration has mentioned nonfarm programs in relation to our next Farm Bill. While I’m aware that more than 70% of Farm Bill funds are used on programs other than production agriculture, I still am wary over the talk of dedicating Farm Bill funds to address issues like high-speed internet and graduation rates in rural America. Please, let’s keep our focus during the Farm Bill dialogue on protecting our farming and ranching families first.

Conventional Growers vs. Small Scale & Sustainable – While I think it’s terrific that a vegetable garden is now growing on the grounds of the White House lawn, I think the fact that it’s being maintained as an “organic” venture and promoted solely as such does a disservice to those of us in mainstream agriculture. Farms like mine shouldn’t be discriminated against in the court of public opinion and certainly not within the confines of the 2012 Farm Bill. The scale of my operation is what allows me to be both profitable and efficient. We have already established that there are fewer and fewer family farms, and the business climate is getting more and more challenging, do you think we will be able to feed this country and world by going backwards with our production methods? Please, don’t let buzz words like “natural”, “organic”, and the like be used to vilify traditional commodity producers like me. And by the way, you could probably ask 10 different consumers how natural or organic foods are produced and get 10 different answers. For example, news reports this past Sunday morning, documented the surprise of families who were paying ridiculous prices for foods produced with little or no USDA oversight. The products I produce are every bit as safe and wholesome as those generated from an operation relying on opinion-driven marketing.

Wildlife vs. Ag Products – Like our past president Teddy Roosevelt who I mentioned earlier, I don’t know how you could be much more of a sportsman than I am. And in fact, the farmers and ranchers are the original stewards of the land. But just as my earlier comment on the abuse of some conservation programs highlighted the worth and benefit of land being used to generate actual Ag products, so too is it a legitimate argument to scrutinize wildlife programs with the same attention. While I don’t begin to argue that wildlife protection programs aren’t important, I do maintain that programs focused on protecting the actual production of farm crops can have multi-tiered benefits for ecosystems as well as local rural economies. It is uncanny the timing of the question my son asked me while we were rotating heifers to new pasture this past Saturday afternoon. He asked, “Daddy what would the land look like if it were not for the farmers and ranchers to see after and maintain it?” I thought to myself, how many in this country do you think are ready to go back to being hunter-gatherers in a grown up jungle, concrete city, or subdivision? Please, consider all the positives derived from year-round Ag production when considering wildlife related land use programs.

In closing, I’d like to thank the House Agriculture Committee for this opportunity to speak on the 2012 Farm Bill. As a constituent of Congressman Mike Rogers and a fellow Alabamian with Congressman Bobby Bright, I’m proud of their service as members of the House Ag Committee. I’m also proud to be able to deliver my comments in this outstanding venue which is owned and operated by the Pike County Cattlemen’s Association. This group of dedicated volunteers is an example of what good can come of a conjoined effort of like minded people who want to benefit the agriculture industry in their community.

Thank you again for allowing me to speak today. I, as well as the rest of the 11,000 members of the Alabama Cattlemen’s Association, look forward to working with you in the future.
