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Farm Bill '07: Farms Are Not Created Equal Federal Committee Meets To Examine Needs Of Northeast Agriculture

By Andy Andrews, Agricultural Correspondent

HARRISBURG -- A cookie-cutter, "one-size-fits-all" approach just will not do. Farms in this area are different – sometimes completely different – from those in the Midwest. So when U.S. legislators get together by the end of this year to write the Farm Bill – something they do about every five years – needs of Northeast producers, with Pennsylvania as a good representative, have to be topmost in mind. That was the consensus of panel members, including Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New York farmers, last Friday at the Harrisburg Farm Show Complex.



The U.S. Senate Agriculture Committee, chaired by Saxby Chambliss (R-GA), met to speak to an array of producers. This was the third in a series of regional field meetings. Others are scheduled for Iowa, Nebraska, Montana, and Texas. Joining Chambliss was committee member Sen. Rick Santorum (R-PA) and other state legislators. Santorum, up for re-election this November, is the first senator from the state to serve on the agriculture committee "in over 100 years," he said.

The key to a successful 2007 Farm Bill in Pennsylvania, he said, is "reflective of Northeast agriculture."

Farm Bill writers must take into account differences in topography and can not use a "cookie-cutter" approach to crop insurance for all U.S. farms, noted several panel members. While Midwest farm land is primarily flat, many Pennsylvania farms can have both bottomland and hillside land in the same location, Santorum noted.

Santorum is spearheading efforts to protect the state's specialty crops, which have as much market value, or more, as row crops. Federal government programs must address the special needs of vegetable growers.

Some of those growers, such as Keith Eckel of Clarks Summit, were devastated by flood damage with the heavy June rains. Crop insurance has to be modified to fit those needs. Eckel grows 325 acres of fresh market tomatoes, 90 acres of sweet corn, 50 acres of pumpkins, and 50 acres of field corn. He operates nine separate farms, of which one is seven miles away.

The flood disaster in June was "narrow in scope but devastating to producers involved," Eckel said.

Whole tomato and sweet corn fields were wiped out by flooding, according to Eckel.

Eckel said that half of U.S. total crops sales are specialty sales. The \$609 million mushroom industry is the largest single cash crop in Pennsylvania. The state is ranked number one in mushroom production.

Crop insurance legislation has to allow coverage of specific crops grown in specific locations.

According to Carl T. Shaffer, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau president, 43 percent of the farmers in the state use crop insurance. In other states, 80 percent of producers are enrolled. Shaffer noted that federal agencies view Pennsylvania as an "underserved state."

“We want to get off that list,” said Shaffer.

Twenty-five percent of Americans live in the Northeast. A lot of food they eat is grown nearby. This is a farm bill, not a conservation bill, noted Shaffer. The Farm Bill must not only address the needs of the environmentalists, but keep production agriculture vital. And that means producers need advice to remain competitive.

“We need technical advice,” Shaffer said. “We don’t need water police.”

What will America do if the agriculture infrastructure erodes? Will the American public buy their food, like they do their gas, from foreign nations?

“I don’t think we want to depend on foreign nations for food production,” said Eckel, who noted that production encouragement, rather than income support, should be the real goal.

The Mid-Atlantic and Northeast remain critical to all foods, including dairy and cattle. Richard Wilkins, B&W Ag Enterprises, on behalf of the American Soybean Association, noted that more than 10 percent of the nation’s soybean production is consumed by poultry and cattle farms in this area. Wilkins, a crop farmer and equipment dealer from Greenwood, Delaware, praised the efforts to promote alternative energy through several federal programs.

In the end, consumers must be provided with incentives to drive up to a fuel island and not have “to pay extra for renewable fuel,” said Wilkins, including soy diesel products on the market.

Federal programs under the Farm Bill also need to address the fast-growing organic agriculture industry. Organic production has increased by 20 percent per year in the past decade, said Klaas Martens for the Organic Farming Research Foundation.

Martens, an organic producer the past 14 years out of Penn Yan, N.Y., has asked the Senate agriculture committee to help provide more research dollars for organic agriculture production.

“Unfortunately, we are likely to have no additional funding for any new research programs in the next Farm Bill,” said Sen. Saxby Chambliss.

Organic production does a lot to protect the environment, noted Martens. Flooding in Penn Yan in 2000 brought eight inches of rain. He saw two kids in a rowboat in his bean fields, which were carefully terraced. The work of the conservation district and federal agencies ensured the protection of Penn Yan from potentially devastating flood waters, noted Martens.

Others who spoke included James Shirk, East Earl, representing Shirk Family Farm and Penn State; Christine Hetz Phillips, Fairview, representing Fairview Evergreen Nurseries and the Pennsylvania Landscape and Nursery Association; and Don Cotner, Danville, representing Cotner Farms.

Also providing comments were Logan Bower, Blain, representing the Professional Dairy Managers of Pennsylvania; Dr. Joe Jurgielewicz, representing PennAg Industries Association; Robert M. Ruth, representing the National Pork Producers Council; and David Hackenberg, Lewisburg, representing the American Beekeeping Federation.

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