

In my state of Oregon, like many across the country, agriculture is a critical part of our economy. From beef to nurseries to berries, family farmers and ranchers are providing the basic needs on which Americans and millions of people around the world depend. At the same time, American farmers are facing new and increasing pressures from budget deficits, trade rules, urban sprawl, climate change, rising energy costs and shrinking water resources. If we take our responsibility seriously, Congress must not miss the opportunity presented by the 2007 Farm Bill reauthorization to craft policies that are good for farmers, the land, the environment, our economy, and, indeed, the world.

Currently, our farm programs provide little help for the majority of American farmers and ranchers. Only 40 percent of farmers receive any commodity payments, while the vast majority of payments go to a few large-scale farm operations. Even communities that do receive high levels of support continue to lose jobs and see their populations decline. Clearly, current farm programs are not meeting the needs of family farmers or of rural communities.

As I've traveled around Oregon and across the country meeting with family farmers, I'm regularly struck by their innovative efforts to compete in global and local markets as well as their commitment to protecting the land. Like the grain growers in Pendleton, Ore., who are processing canola seeds into biodiesel, or the livestock producers in Culpepper, Va., who sell their pork and beef every weekend at the Dupont Circle farmers market, many farmers are exploring new sources of revenue to increase their profitability and competitiveness. Similarly, farmers are providing critical environmental services — such as flood control, clean air, open space and habitat for endangered species — yet the current Farm Bill provides only minimal payment, at best, for this broad range of services. In fact, 75 percent of farmers who apply for conservation funds are turned down for lack of money.

In 2003, the American Farm Bureau Federation tasked a diverse group of producers from across the country to examine how American agriculture would look in 2019 and to develop policy recommendations to help make that transition as easy as possible for our farming communities. They found that “farmers and ranchers [will have to] learn to produce what they can sell and not to simply sell what they produce” and that “[f]ederal government involvement in the agriculture sector will not exist as it does today, due to growing domestic budget pressures and international trade agreements.”

The 2007 Farm Bill reauthorization is an opportunity to craft forward-looking policies that help farmers manage this inevitable transition to a new farm economy. Our goal must be to provide effective support for rural communities and empower American farmers to take advantage of the free market, while partnering with farmers to carefully manage the special risks associated with agriculture.

As Congress moves forward and has to make choices and prioritize, we must focus on programs that provide an equitable distribution of benefits for all farmers and states. We should strengthen programs that provide new market opportunities on a local level and encourage the development of new revenue streams and farm-related businesses in rural areas. We should reform commodity payments in order to gain greater access to the 96 percent of the market that lives outside of U.S. borders through trade negotiations. We can make the environment a winning issue for farmers by paying them for the range of environmental services they provide and ensure that those payments are available nationwide. Finally, perhaps most importantly, we can use Farm Bill programs as a golden opportunity to strengthen the vital connections between our rural and urban communities — providing better nutrition and improving food security — while bridging critical political and social divides.

Every American community, whether urban or rural, has a stake in the Farm Bill. With the broadest group of stakeholders ever involved in crafting this legislation, I am hopeful about prospects for reform.

For too long, farmers and ranchers have had to contend with national farm programs that restrict what they can produce, distort the market, raise land prices and do little to help family farms stay competitive from generation to generation. We must use the occasion of the 2007 Farm Bill to update our Truman-era agriculture policy to reflect the challenges and opportunities facing rural America today and in the future. Congress owes our farmers, and all Americans who depend on them, no less.

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