



What Do Rural People Think?

A Report by
Minnesota Farmers Union

Rural Voices Discussions: The Next Farm Bill

July 26 – July 27, 2017
Mankato, MN & Willmar, MN

Presented by
Minnesota Farmers Union
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What do rural people think?

There is an ever-present question on the minds of policymakers and the media: *What do rural people think?* In no area is this as true as when it's time to build a new federal Farm Bill. As the United States Congress begins to look at the Farm Bill, Minnesota Farmers Union organized two of many Rural Voices Discussions it will conduct in 2017 and 2018 to capture what farmers and rural people affected by Farm Bill programs have to say about what is essential in the bill. The Rural Voices Discussions aimed to provide an opportunity for farmers to have their voices heard and become involved in the development of policies and laws that will affect the future of farming.

The first was held on July 26 at Morson-Ario VFW Post in Mankato, Minn., and the second on July 27 at the American Legion in Willmar, Minn.

To make sure that MFU could hear as many voices as possible, the listening sessions were open to the public, and we contacted a variety of people and organizations to make sure we heard diverse voices on farming and rural issues.

The format of the sessions was simple. After remarks from MFU President Gary Wertish and special guests, there was a moderated discussion, with people raising issues of concern and questions they would like answered.

Special guests included were:

- Minnesota Department of Agriculture Assistant Commissioner, Andrea Vaubel
- Minnesota Department of Agriculture Director of Government Affairs, Whitney Place
- National Farmers Union Senior Vice President for Public Policy and Communications, Rob Larew

What did people talk about?

The discussions in both Mankato and Willmar included many items that we have heard about before, and several new items were added to the discussion.

Earlier this spring, MFU conducted 14 Rural Issues Discussions around the state; several points were raised then about the next Farm Bill.

The key point raised in the first meetings was that the Farm Bill renewal is a major priority. There are several ideas for what the bill should do:

- Ensure an adequate safety net for farmers, including crop insurance that allows farmers to stay in farming operations.
- Include local foods and beginning farmer programs
- Set up affordable, accessible health care as a family farmer safety net
- Provide easier land access for young farmers and veterans and help with succession planning for retiring farmers
- Increase credit and access to capital and operating loans
- Include a safety net for produce and organic farmers similar to crop insurance for corn, beans and wheat
- Increase visibility and research of renewable fuels, including ethanol, biodiesel, cellulosic and

solar

- Farmer-owned grain reserves may help with prices
- Cancel funding cuts in the USDA and closing of local offices
- Fix problems with the dairy supply management program
- Fund more Farm Advocates to address and support farmers facing crises
- Fund more organic specialty farmers
- Support women and minority beginning farmers, including subsidies and crop insurance
- Address cheap food policy impacting prices
- Address country-of-origin labeling (COOL)

In last Wednesday and Thursday's discussions, specific and similar points came up:

- The Farm Bill is critical for rural America, and it important that it be written to meet current and future needs, rather than out of a need to cut spending.
- Health care costs must be addressed. This is a major source of the financial crisis for family farmers in rural Minnesota.
- The Farm Bill is a national safety net for family farmers and rural America. It needs to include grassroots voices to address real needs.
- Crop insurance for commodity crops must continue with no budget cuts; and crop insurance for specialist crops must be created with additional funding.
- SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, must continue to serve increasing needs in rural and urban communities without budget cuts that would be passed on down to the states as expenses.
- Animal disease insurance is needed to help protect farmers against possible outbreaks of animal diseases.
- Rural development and infrastructure funding must be included.
- Broadband high-speed internet development and implementation for all rural areas is essential.
- Organic standards be standardized and protected.
- Land and credit access for beginning farmers are needed.
- Expand opportunities for family farmers to harvest and develop renewable energy.
- The nutrition title and the agricultural titles should stay coupled.
- Recognize that low crop prices, high input costs and the high costs of health care have created a crisis in rural America.
- The general public needs to be better educated on how the federal Farm Bill helps all communities.
- Supporting programs that encourage young people to go into farming, to fight hunger in rural America and to create affordable health care programs is a moral thing to do for anyone who cares about people and life on family farms and rural communities.



A Call To Action:

Based on listening to nearly 100 people in our first two Rural Voices Discussions on the Farm, Minnesota Farmers Union is following up these Rural Voices Discussion with the following call to action that we present at Farmfest 2017.

Strong safety net

We call on Congress to write a new Farm Bill to the needs of farmers, not budget cuts. A new Farm Bill and agricultural issues must be high priorities for Congress. Legislators need to hear and heed the input from family farmers and rural communities in building a new Farm Bill, instead of only addressing budget cuts. Congress should maintain financial support for current safety net provisions and look to expand safety net programs to address the broad diversity in family farms in the United States.

Health care

We call on Congress to use the Farm Bill to solve the issue of health care availability and affordability. This could include options such as farmer co-op pools. Action must be taken to cut down on health insurance premium and deductible costs. Case in point: in our discussions, we heard the example of \$43,429 per year premiums and deductible costs. This is not sustainable. If we are serious about keeping families on farms, we need to be serious about this health insurance cost crisis.

Listening sessions

We call on Congress members to hold more listening sessions and public hearings on the Farm Bill as it impacts family farmers and rural communities. Legislators should work with agriculture and nutrition groups to conduct hearings on topics such as health insurance costs, safety nets, broadband, renewable energy, dairy supply management, land access, beginning farmer programs and succession planning, health and human services issues, including pay for rural health care workers, and hunger issues including closed grocery stores, assisting farmers markets and others. This can create a broader understanding of how the Farm Bill connects to both urban and rural needs.

Hunger issues

We call on Congress to continue to keep nutrition and agriculture together in the Farm Bill. We call on Congress to support programs in the Farm Bill to address hunger, especially the SNAP program, Food Shelf initiatives including mobile food shelves for rural areas, and work with rural organizations, local governments and others to ensure that no one in rural America is hungry. Passing a Farm Bill is a moral thing to do. People should be able to afford to eat.

Infrastructure

We call on Congress to address the rural infrastructure issues in the Farm Bill, including ensuring that rural development and broadband internet access programs are properly funded and implemented.