

Making the Farm Bill Work for Farmers

This week I participated in a hearing of the Senate Agriculture Committee and had the opportunity to speak with U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. While we are already beginning to look at the 2012 farm bill, I think it's important we first discuss the challenges in implementation of the 2008 law.

A strong, secure rural America leads to a stronger nation. Whether it's a safety net for producers, sound renewable energy policy, or an aggressive trade agenda, we must maintain support for agricultural producers and the communities where they live. That's why it's important that problems with the 2008 farm bill be ironed out.

In my meetings with Iowa farmers, as well as my many town hall meetings, I continue to hear support for the protection that crop insurance provides agricultural producers. In 2008, Congress added two additional layers of protection, the Average Crop Revenue Election, or ACRE, and the Supplemental Revenue Assistance Program, or SURE. The hearing this week confirmed the importance of both of these programs but also highlighted the areas that still need work, such as simplification of the programs and increased participation.

The Department of Agriculture has other issues to address as well. It continues to struggle in the area of civil rights. For years I've been a strong advocate of resolving the Pigford settlement, which was agreed to in response to claims that the agency had discriminated against black farmers and failed to investigate or properly respond to complaints from 1983 to 1997. I am determined to ensure that the USDA provides fair and equitable services to all customers and upholds the civil rights of its employees. I supported Pigford's inclusion in the tax extenders bill, but we have been unable to bring debate on that bill to a close, so I will continue to work with Secretary Vilsack to resolve this case.

Curbing anticompetitive behavior in agricultural markets remains a top priority for independent producers, and I'll be closely monitoring the department's implementation of the new Packers and Stockyards Act regulations, as well as the outcome of the Department of Justice's agricultural competition workshops.

In addition, rural development programs in energy and broadband are quickly becoming more and more significant to the quality of life in rural America and the opportunities available for its citizens. I'll be working to make sure these programs are being targeted fairly and applied effectively.

Congress has started its 2012 farm bill discussions, but there's still work to do on implementation of the 2008 bill. I'll continue my oversight of the Department of Agriculture to make sure the farm bill works for producers and rural communities.