

AFBF President Bob Stallman
Annual Address to Members
96th AFBF Annual Convention, San Diego, California
Tradition, Perseverance, Vision: Farm Bureau Proud
Sunday, Jan. 11, 2015, 9:20 a.m.

Good morning!

Farm Bureau members, distinguished supporters, honored guests...welcome to the American Farm Bureau Federation's 96th Annual Convention.

And welcome to San Diego!

They say people do things a little differently in California.

You may have heard comments about some pretty "unconventional" crops!

And if you point out that California is the country's leading producer of nuts... the kind that grow on trees ... people might take it the wrong way.

But don't let those stereotypes fool you. California is serious about agriculture. The farmers in this state produce on a massive scale.

You don't have to wonder what they grow in Gilroy. Just follow your nose! The whole town smells like garlic ... which I think is a good thing. Other towns smell like strawberries, onions or citrus.

California's abundance coming from so many diverse farmers, commodities and farming methods is a representation of the diversity that exists in modern American agriculture.

Farmers across America coming together to work for policy and programs that benefit all of agriculture. That is Farm Bureau's most enduring tradition.

So what better place to gather and celebrate that tradition than in the Golden State!

We are proud to be here, and I thank California Farm Bureau for being our host state this year.

Something else that I am proud of is actually more of a someone.

The husbands and wives of Farm Bureau leaders are true partners in Farm Bureau's success. So I would like to recognize and thank my Farm Bureau leadership partner, my wife Stacey Bryan.

Many of you have attended Farm Bureau conventions for years, if not decades. So I have a question for you... Why do you come to our annual convention?

We know we come together to set our policy for the coming year. But the essence of this gathering is to embody the spirit of who and what we are in Farm Bureau.

We want you to leave here with a renewed sense of engagement and enthusiasm for all we do together.

We want you to be proud of what we do... as I am.

As one example, the American Farm Bureau Federation is proud to partner with the Farmer Veteran Coalition to create opportunities on America's farms and ranches for the brave men and women of our military.

Let me pause and ask all military veterans to please stand....

Thank you all for your service to our country.

Farmers are some of the most patriotic people you will find. A disproportionate number of those serving in our military are from rural America.

And regardless of where they come from, many are looking for a career... now that they are returning home.

We are working to put our returning veterans on the front lines of farming and food production by helping to develop a Mentorship Network to pair returning veterans with Farm Bureau members.

Our veterans still have much to offer their country, and we are honored to have them join us in producing our nation's food, fiber and energy.

Farm Bureau also is leading initiatives to strengthen and revitalize our rural communities ... so that more young people will want to return to those communities to farm and to raise their families.

Rural America needs our best minds and brightest ideas. It needs economic growth through entrepreneurship.

So we are excited about the Rural Entrepreneurship Initiative that the American Farm Bureau Federation launched a year ago.

Since then, we have hosted educational webinars for rural entrepreneurs. We held a Rural Entrepreneurship Summit for thought-leaders in rural development and business growth.

Now, our year of Rural Entrepreneurship activities is culminating in the most exciting event yet! The Rural Entrepreneurship Challenge!

More than 200 rural entrepreneurs from 35 states have pitched their business ideas to a team of business experts. This morning at 10:45 in the Trade Show, four finalists will compete for the top prize of Rural Entrepreneur of the Year. I hope many of you will attend and cheer on the finalists.

Rural America needs growth fueled by more small business start-ups.

Farm Bureau is working to connect inventive, industrious rural Americans with the resources they need for the success of their businesses and their communities.

One thing that no one can deny about rural Americans and, especially, America's farmers and ranchers... is perseverance.

California's farmers and ranchers can tell us a lot about perseverance. But whether it's a shortage of labor or water --- or floods...or hail...or windstorms --- too much heat...or too much cold, farmers and ranchers across America keep working to farm another day.

If you've been involved in agriculture for decades, you know that whether prices are up or down, America's farmers and ranchers are tenacious in their drive to plant next year's crops ... to rebuild the herd ... to keep their agricultural heritage alive.

The historic farm crisis of the 1980s was devastating for many, including perhaps some of you here today, or your parents or grandparents.

Thousands lost their farms to foreclosure because of high debt and interest rates, sinking demand around the globe and depressed commodity prices.

Today, commodity prices have dipped compared to recent years. But in general, America's farmers and ranchers are better off than they were 35 years ago.

That's why anyone who's been farming or ranching—or whose family has been farming or ranching—for more than 30 years is a living, breathing testament to the power of perseverance.

As damaging as the weather or economic winds can be, farmers' and ranchers' biggest challenges these days seem to come from their government.

Over the past year, Farm Bureau members have come together like never before to fight the attempt to regulate nearly every drop of rainwater that falls.

Under their Waters of the U.S. proposed rule, agencies want to sweep into federal jurisdiction... vast numbers of small, isolated wetlands, ponds and, yes, ditches... features that are not "waters" under any common understanding of that word.

What they really want to do is take away your control over how you use your land.

Farm Bureau members all across this country have told the EPA and the Corps what they think of that. They spoke loudly and clearly:

DITCH THE RULE!

I have two more words for EPA and the Corps ... NO, not those two words...

THAT'S ENOUGH!

Missouri Farm Bureau members Kacey and Andy Clay and their family made a YouTube video to tell the agencies "That's Enough!"

Kacey and Andy, please stand up and take a bow!

They have been joined by thousands of farmers and ranchers, other small business owners and even state and local governments in saying:

That's enough ... of trying to regulate land by calling it water.

That's enough of trying to bypass the legislative process and override the will of Congress.

That's enough of insisting the best way to protect the environment is through more and more... and more... federal regulation.

Farmers and ranchers care deeply about our environment and are focused on continuous improvement... eagerly adopting the best practices and technologies to protect it.

But we cannot sustain the nation's food supply if excessive restrictions and regulatory costs make the business of farming and ranching economically unsustainable!

Thousands of Farm Bureau members have stepped up and engaged in this debate over Waters of the US.

On these issues and others, Farm Bureau members have been active, vocal and resolute in their efforts.

That goes double for a key group of grassroots leaders we call the Grassroots Outreach Team, or GO Team. The GO Team is made up of members ...volunteers...who have had high-level training in issue advocacy and communications. Now they are putting those skills to work for their fellow farmers and ranchers.

Would all members of the GO Team please stand up and be recognized for your advocacy and leadership?

Thank you, GO Team!

We are already engaging the new Congress.

Now, I know what you may be thinking. Congress isn't going to do anything.

We have had gridlock.

We have had a do-nothing Congress....

But there's a lot that we need done, and I believe this Congress CAN act! I say that for two reasons.

First, Farm Bureau members have shown time and again that they will not take "no" for an answer. This past year, Farm Bureau has been as successful—if not more successful—than any group in Washington in implementing our policy priorities, from the farm bill to waterways transportation legislation.

Second, there are signs that compromise is possible.

There are things Congress must do, such as funding the government and finding a way to keep the Highway Trust Fund from running out of money.

There are things that the congressional majority will want to do, starting with proving to the American people that they can actually govern.

The leadership in both the House and Senate may be looking for bills that can garner bipartisan support and looking to move those early this year.

The realities of politics mean that these things must be done sooner rather than later.

Now that the new Congress is seated, several members are off and running ... for office!

By this fall, the focus will be squarely on the 2016 elections, and unfortunately, not on passing legislation.

All of this means that Farm Bureau members will need to be aggressive, and we will need to begin our advocacy efforts as soon as possible.

I look forward to seeing our voting delegates gather this week to set Farm Bureau's policy direction for the year. And I look forward to mobilizing our advocacy work immediately to implement those policies in 2015.

Farm Bureau members also will need to cut through the political noise.

As we have seen over the past few years, the ever-increasing polarization in our Congress means that Democrats are becoming more liberal and Republicans are getting more conservative—and each party is beholden to its most partisan—and most outspoken—members.

We cannot ignore the extremes of the left and right. But we must speak to the center: the legislators in both parties who go to Washington because they want to make policy and get things done.

Our message to those lawmakers must be focused and clear.

As I've already said...we need to block the EPA water rule.

We need to push for a real solution on immigration reform—one that provides a reliable and legal workforce for America's farms and ranches.

We need to maintain the farm safety net of the farm bill that we worked so hard to put in place.

We need endangered species protection rules...common sense rules...that balance species' needs with human needs.

We need tax policies that encourage economic growth and multi-generational farming.

We need solutions to congestion on our railways and at the ports—so the animals, crops, timber and other goods you produce can get to market.

We need to continue growing our nation's energy independence through the production of all forms of energy, including those that come from America's farms and ranches.

We need to open more markets around the world by breaking down barriers standing in the way of America's agricultural exports.

We need to maintain farmers' access to better seeds and technology, whether it's through today's biotechnology ... or innovations yet to come...

We need a national, fact-based approach to food labeling, not patchwork regulation that will do nothing for food safety but will raise the cost of food.

Farmers and ranchers need these things, and more importantly everyone who eats needs these things to get done ... so that all Americans can continue to enjoy an abundant food supply and live in a nation that is secure.

When it's wintertime, you don't stop working. Your animals still have to be fed. Your supplies have to be contracted. Your plans have to be made for the next crop year.

We've had a long winter of division and inaction in Congress, but we will never stop working for the solutions that farmers and ranchers need.

Now, it's time for Congress to get back to work! To do their job so you can do yours.

Sometimes Farm Bureau engages in areas that go beyond the realms of legislation and regulation. One example is our work last year to develop industry standards on how agricultural technology companies use and protect farmers' proprietary information as they use "big data" for precision farming.

That effort was initiated because of the policy established by our delegates at last year's annual meeting.

Our work to bring more transparency to data sharing agreements is continuing, but we have already reached a historic agreement among agricultural technology companies and farm groups on data privacy and security principles—an agreement that would not have happened without a strong Farm Bureau.

I will make you a promise this morning!

On all of these issues and more, whether we are working with Congress, federal agencies or even the private sector -- Farm Bureau has your back!

With the involvement and engagement of Farm Bureau members across the country, this organization will always provide a voice for you in our nation's capital and beyond.

A voice that speaks with credibility...and that is heard.

Working collectively through Farm Bureau, we will achieve things that individual farmers and ranchers cannot achieve on their own.

Just as America's farmers and ranchers persevere, so too will your national farm organization. We will continue to do the things that you need us to do—so you can continue to go about the business of keeping food on America's tables.

To fulfill that promise, Farm Bureau has a vision for the future. Central to that vision is a strong farm economy.

It is a vision in which Americans enjoy abundant, nutritious food....

...A vision where consumers appreciate that modern farming is a business that involves huge risks and tough choices, and they trust you to do it right.

...It is a vision in which rural America prospers.

...A vision in which farming and ranching is an attractive and rewarding career for our young people, and more of them are able and willing to be part of our farming future.

...A vision in which American agriculture is positioned to feed the billions more people who will join us on this globe over the next couple of decades.

No organization is as crucial to achieving this vision as the American Farm Bureau.

I know you share this vision.

I hope that many more will join us in our efforts.

And I hope you will join with me and with your fellow Farm Bureau leaders in committing to make this vision a reality.

As we reflect on and carry out our tradition of grassroots policy development and action...

And turn our focus to creating an even-stronger future for agriculture and Farm Bureau...

I could not be prouder to be a Farm Bureau member, or more honored to serve as your president and work for the farm and ranch families of America.

If your actions over the past year have shown the nation anything, it is that this mighty ship we call Farm Bureau carries a lot of weight. And it delivers!

That is what makes me Farm Bureau Proud!

God bless you all.

God bless Farm Bureau.

And God bless America.

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