



Advocating in Our Democracy: It's Not as Hard as it Sounds

If given the opportunity to make a difference in our democracy, would you take it?

Rachel did. A farmer from Alabama, Rachel found herself at a conference near Washington, DC and decided to participate in the Lobby Day the conference sponsored. She hadn't called her legislators until the afternoon before, but managed to get meetings with staff from 8 of the 9 Alabama legislators. As Lobby Day wrapped up, Rachel returned with a shining face. "It was easy! I talked about my farm and my experiences, and the staff really listened. A few said they wanted to visit my farm!"

Luckily, you don't have to travel all the way to Washington, DC to talk to members of Congress. During August, legislators take a month-long break, and they often use this time to tour their districts and talk to citizens like you. They could be planning a meeting in your town right now!

As Rachel found, talking to legislators about issues that matter to

you is easy and can be a lot of fun because your opinion matters. They need to hear your views in order to do their job, so legislators are often a captive audience. And no one is more of an expert in your experiences and your community than you.

Do you love our democracy? In addition to being fun, talking to legislators helps to keep our democracy active and strong. Without input from you, legislators may only hear from paid lobbyists who don't have the best interests of your community in mind. Democracy works if we participate, and voting, while important, isn't enough. The people we elect also need to hear why we voted for them.

So how do you get started? The

first step is to identify your legislators and find their contact information. Maybe your elected officials are already on your phone's speed dial, but if not, visit www.congress.org and enter your zip code. It will tell you who your federal and state legislators are, and if you click on their name you can read a short biography and get their contact information.

Next, call one of their local offices and ask whether your legislator plans to do any meetings or community forums. At the meeting, arrive early, introduce yourself to the legislator's staff, as these are the people who advise the legisla

Advocacy by everyday people is important because legislators may otherwise only hear from paid lobbyists who don't have the interests of your community in mind.

—See **Advocating** on page 3.

Development Matters

Grassroots Advocacy

Since the early days of the Center for Rural Affairs, we have been known for grassroots advocacy. From fighting the corporate takeover of agriculture production to changing the way we do economic development, we have called people to action time and time again.

Advocates getting things done is why we do research and develop policy recommendations. We need people like you making sure our nation is on the correct

path. We're honored to be associated with people who get involved, following and supporting the Center for Rural Affairs.

This newsletter features a special section on grassroots advocacy to help you get involved. And I'd be happy to help you find the best way to support our work. If you believe in us and our work, we need you to do both.

Give me a shout – Matt Connealy, 402.687.2103 ext. 1009 or mattc@cfra.org. I'm here to help.

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House Passes 2012 Agriculture Appropriations Bill that Slashes Conservation, Rural Development, and Value Added Grants

The House of Representatives passed their version of the 2012 agriculture appropriations bill on Thursday, June 16 by a narrow vote of 217-203. Nineteen Republicans and all the Democrats opposed the spending bill.

Despite attempts by Representatives Lucas (R-OK), Peterson (D-MN), Blumenauer (D-OR), Farr (D-CA) and Holden (D-PA) to beat back cuts in conservation, the final bill slashes and burns conservation by \$1 billion. This is on top of the \$500 million already cut from these programs in the continuing resolution passed earlier this year.

The two programs taking the hardest hit are the Conservation Stewardship Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

The Conservation Stewardship Program, which provides payments to farmers and ranchers for conservation stewardship of land in agricultural production, is cut by \$171 million. Such a cut will require the

government to renege on contracts they already signed with farmers and ranchers across the country.

The rejected amendments would have curbed federal subsidies that mega farms use to drive smaller operations out of business.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program was cut \$350 million. Both these programs have seen significant demand over the years, with long waiting lists of farmers and ranchers who want to implement conservation practices on their land.

The bill took the ax to rural development funding as well. It zeroed out funding for the Rural Mi-

croenterprise Assistance Program (RMAP), a competitive grants program for organizations that provide training, technical assistance and/or make small loans to new and existing rural small businesses.

The Value Added Producer Grants program was cut to \$12.5 million, which represents nearly half of what went out the door in 2010. The competitive grants pro-

gram is designed to help producers expand markets and increase their profitability through value-added agricultural enterprises.

The final bill rejected two commodity program amendments. One would have limited eligibility for farm commodity program payments to individuals with annual adjusted gross income of less than \$250,000, and the other would have disallowed commodity program payments to individuals and entities in excess of \$125,000/farm.

Passage of these amendments would have been a good first step to curbing federal subsidies that mega farms use to drive smaller operations out of business. It also would have demonstrated that cuts in spending will be shared by all.

Instead, the House of Representatives voted to maintain the status quo for those entrenched interests that use their power and money to shape the debate. The Senate can and must do better.

For more information or to comment, contact Traci Bruckner, 402.687.2103 ext. 1016 or tracib@cfra.org.

Reader Comment

Farm Subsidies and Native Prairie

Michael Melius wrote from Hermosa, South Dakota – where he operates a small produce farm – to say, “It’s time to declare federal farm subsidies a success and begin phasing them out. Times have changed.

“Ethanol has helped the perennial surplus disappear. Increased corn production to meet the demand has meant less acreage for other grains. Smaller harvests for these crops boost their prices. Prices for grains have been at historically high prices. World population and economic growth have caught up with production; surpluses and low prices may finally be a thing of

the past.”

Melius wrote that high prices have farmers seeking more land for crops. “Efforts to conserve land as forest, prairie or wetland are under pressure. There’s just too much money to be made with cropland. Much of the new farmland, especially in the Great Plains, is coming from ranch land, including native prairie. Is it right for federal subsidies to distort the free market in favor of farmers over ranchers?”

His letter was published in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*: www.startribune.com/opinion/122981423.html.

CENTER for RURAL AFFAIRS

This newsletter is available both electronically and in print. To receive it online, sign up at the Center’s website, www.cfra.org, or email us at info@cfra.org.

You may also correct your mailing address and fax the back page to 402.687.2200, or call Kim Kaup at the Center for Rural Affairs, 402.687.2100.

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Rural Development

Increased Investment in Rural Communities Could Be Funded by Reducing Direct Farm Payments by Only 2 Percent

If Main St. is thriving in your small town, chances are good your community has benefited from federal programs aimed at rural development. From your community's utilities and sewer system to small business assistance to rural energy, the Department of Agriculture does a lot of work and only uses about 1.7 percent of USDA's budget. That equals about \$40.68 for every rural resident.

We think rural communities deserve more investment than that.

Federal contributions in rural development have been plummeting for years – almost one-third of its budget has been cut since 2003. The proposed federal budget Congress is considering makes even further cuts to an already bare-bones rural development program. One-third of the funds for the popular Value Added Producer Grant have been taken away, as well as all the money for the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program.

Instead of continuing this trend, the Center for Rural Affairs is proposing the Rural Renewal Initiative for the next farm bill. We're asking Congress to commit \$500 million over five years to a Community

Prosperity Fund that the secretary could spend in existing rural development programs. New opportunities are arising all the time in broadband, renewable energy, food systems and ecotourism, and this investment could breathe new life and capital into communities suffering population loss.

This investment could be fully paid for by tightening the limits on farm payments received by the largest farmers – a policy the Center for Rural Affairs has advocated for many years. It could also be paid for by reducing direct farm payments by just 2 percent. Though

\$100 million dollars per year is small in the context of farm bill spending, it would represent a significant and much-needed increase for rural development.



Advocating, continued from page 1.

tor and are most informed on the details of issues you care about. Sit close to a microphone if they have them. Prepare a short question or comment ahead of time, so when they open the floor you can be the first one to volunteer.

If there aren't meetings or forums scheduled, invite the legislators to a public event in your community like a festival or ribbon-cutting. You could also create an event around a legislator's visit – for example, tour a community development program, a successful small business, or an innovative school project around an issue the legislator cares about. And if that doesn't work, ask to meet with your legislator in the office closest to you.

Remember, legislators are people just like you. There's no

reason to be intimidated, and you can discuss what you're an expert in – your own experiences. Shake their hand, introduce yourself, and ask them questions or make comments about what matters most to you. If you've met with elected officials before, take someone along with you who hasn't had the pleasure.

If you read this newsletter, then you care about small towns. This is your chance to spur positive changes in your community on something you care about. Keep reading for more information on some of the issues we're working on, and be sure to let us know what you talked to your legislators about!

Contact Steph Larson, StephL@cfra.org or 402.687.2103 ext. 1014 for more information, to comment and to report back.

Are you an online junkie?

Get your fix of rural related news and commentary by following the Center at:

facebook

Policy Plays Catch-up to the Growing Importance of Broadband Internet

Access to reliable, affordable broadband Internet service across all of rural America is key to the future success of our small towns and businesses. But policymakers have been slow to respond to this clear need.

The 2009 American Recovery Act was a first serious step in investing in broadband in underserved areas. Much more is needed, and policymakers need to hear from you about the importance of broadband Internet service and the shortcomings of the current system.

One approach is to expand the focus of the Universal Service Fund. The fund is administered by the Federal Communications Commission and funded by a small fee on telephone service providers. The current focus of the fund is ensuring reasonably priced telephone service is avail-

able to all households, schools, libraries and medical facilities.

As broadband Internet has gained importance for business, participating in government, and simply being an engaged and informed citizen, it makes sense to broaden the scope of the Universal Service Fund to include Internet access.

Another matter before the Federal Communications Commission is the proposed merger of AT&T and T-Mobile. AT&T claims the merger would lead to increased rural broadband access, but we find little evidence to support their claim. Because the merger would lead to a very high level of market concentration in the mobile phone market, congressional and regulatory scrutiny of the merger is expected.

T-Mobile



at&t

Small Businesses Already Benefitting from Provisions in the Affordable Care Act

Health care policy remains at the forefront of congressional debate. The Affordable Care Act, passed by Congress in March of 2010, remains one focal point of the debate.

The Affordable Care Act is already helping small businesses afford coverage for their employees though a new tax credit. And nearly every state in the nation is working to implement a state health insurance marketplace to inject more competition into health insurance. The marketplaces will also deliver tax credits to offset the cost of insurance for many middle class families. Finally, the new law funds several programs to bring medical practitioners to small communities and help keep rural hospitals open.

All these provisions are under attack in Congress. This August, tell your elected representatives the Affordable Care Act, and the issues that it addresses, remain a top concern for you and your community.

There are several specific efforts aimed at rolling back gains made in the Affordable Care Act and in two key health programs, Medicaid and Medicare. The House of Representatives considered and voted in favor of full repeal of the Affordable Care Act. They have not yet considered other bills to address health care challenges.

Budget legislation under consideration would roll back or make cuts in both Medicaid, the health care program for the poor and working poor, and in Medicare, the health program for retirees. Other legislation seeks to block or repeal portions of the Affordable Care Act.

Congressional Attention for Clean Energy Issues Wanes; Constituent Voices Need to Sound Call

Attention to clean energy issues declined in Congress over the last year. Nevertheless, there are still actions policymakers can take to move the country toward a cleaner and more secure energy future.

The Federal Regulatory Energy Commission, or FERC, is working to make it easier to manage renewable energy as part of the grid. USDA also just announced a new effort to invest in smart grid technology. Smart grid technology

will further help manage and use more renewable energy sources.

This August, tell policymakers you support regulatory changes like these that put more renewable energy on the grid and treat it in a more even-handed way.

Last year we worked on a federal renewable electricity standard. While a federal standard is off the agenda for now, keep your eye on similar state standards. Many are in place already, but efforts to weaken them are underway. In

absence of a federal requirement, strong state efforts are even more important.

Finally, climate change remains the most pressing environmental concern of our time. Interest in action on the issue in Washington has waned, but policymakers need to hear from you that the issue remains important.

Corporate Farming Notes Grassroots Voices Important in the Long and Continuing Battle for the GIPSA Rule

On June 22, 2010, when Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack published a draft livestock market reform rule, commonly known as the GIPSA rule, he followed language in the 2008 Farm Bill compelling the secretary to write several reform rules, including one that defined



Tom Vilsack

the term “unreasonable preference(s)” that are prohibited by the Packers and Stockyards Act (P&S Act), legislation that was also a product of a lot of good, old-fashioned rural organizing back in 1920-1921.

Secretary Vilsack wrote a strong set of livestock market reforms, perhaps the boldest since the P&S Act first passed in 1921. He did so because you urged him to do so. Congress put that language in the last farm bill because of the countless times family farmers, ranchers, and other concerned citizens, both rural and urban, called upon them to level the playing field and make livestock markets accessible and fair to all livestock producers, regardless of size.

I first heard about this issue on my birth-

day back in 1997 in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, when I listened to Center for Rural Affairs board member Keith Mahaney call for this rulemaking in his testimony to the National Commission on Small Farms. Since then I've heard thousands of family farmers and ranchers make the same call.

Eleven years later, together, all of us were able to finally get that provision in the farm bill. Two years after that, USDA's livestock market reforms were issued. Another year later and we're still waiting, still urging Secretary Vilsack and President Obama to move the rule forward, still urging Congress not to hamstring them.

Ninety years after the P&S Act was written, one year after the GIPSA rule was written, and grassroots action and advocacy continue to be the most important aspect of getting this job done.

Contact John Crabtree if you want to advocate for livestock market reforms, 402.687.2103 ext. 1010 or johnc@cfra.org.

Greater Conservation Efforts Needed Despite Looming Budget Issues

As budget issues loom large and policymakers are making critical funding decisions on which programs they will cut and which ones they will protect, your voice needs to be part of the debate.

The House of Representatives passed their version of the Fiscal Year 2012 spending bill, including significant funding cuts to federal conservation programs, while for the most part, leaving in place unlimited commodity program payments and unlimited subsidized crop insurance.

With high grain prices pushing marginal land into row crop production, we need more investment in conservation, not less. Policymakers also need

to address the perverse incentive created by the federal crop insurance program that encourages transition of fragile land by ensuring a guaranteed revenue stream.

We've heard from farmers concerned over visible soil erosion on highly erodible land that has been transitioned from grass to row crop production. We encouraged them to share those concerns with their members of Congress.

If you're concerned too, call, email or attend an August public meeting and let your voice be heard. Tell your elected representative you think we need to invest in conservation, not roll back the clock with policy that encourages farmers to break up highly erodible land.

American Democracy, continued from page 8.

tions. So we must act not only to advance our narrow selfish interests, but also to advance the common good. America will be truly strong only when all of our people have genuine opportunity and a stake in our nation's future.

We can do one more thing to cure what ails American democracy in this time of extreme partisanship. Let's take a break from partisan talk radio and blogs and spend some time instead visiting with our fellow citizens of all stripes and working to understand their concerns. We might find more common ground than we expect.

And then attend the town hall meetings and other events held by your representatives and speak out. You'd be surprised how much they fear the wrath of voters and are constrained by what they believe you will accept.

It is critical that citizens of conscience step up to guide them.

Agree or disagree? Send your comments to Chuck Hassebrook, chuckh@cfra.org or 402.687.2103 ext. 1018.

Across the Nation

Nationwide

Obama administration establishes Rural Council

President Obama signed an executive order establishing the White House Rural Council on June 9, 2011. According to the Executive Order, the White House Rural Council will work to “coordinate development of policy recommendations to promote economic prosperity and quality of life in rural America, and shall coordinate my Administration’s engagement with rural communities.”

The focus of the council will be to increase the impact of federal investments on rural stakeholders including agricultural organizations, small business, education, health care providers, and state, local, and tribal governments and to facilitate rural economic opportunities associated with energy development, outdoor recreation, and other conservation-related activities.

Michigan

Legislation aims to limit state land ownership

Upper Peninsula lawmaker Tom Casperson introduced legislation to cap state land ownership at 4.6 million acres, hoping to address concerns of townships and municipalities with large sections of public land that receive payments instead of taxes from the state. Department of Natural Resources officials and conservation groups contend the bill would interfere with Michigan’s ability to preserve natural areas and ignores the quality and location of properties.

Casperson claims a 4.6 million-acre cap on state-owned land would force the state to better manage and pay for the properties it currently owns while providing a 15,000-acre buffer above current state land holdings to buy and sell land.

Vermont

Draft horses bring fiber optics to rural Vermont

Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin promised to have Internet available to every home in Vermont by 2013. When stretching fiber optic cable to remote areas in Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom became a challenge, FairPoint Communications hired lineman Claude Desmarais and his 1,700 pound Belgian draft horse Fred to haul the cable through tough terrain.

Fred pulls the cable and the linemen bind the newly-laid fiber-optic cable to an existing line strung between utility poles. Fred is 14, and he’s been laying line for five years. Desmarais has laid line with draft horses for 31 years.

For more information or to comment, contact Virginia Wolking, virginiaaw@cfra.org or 402.687.2103 ext. 1017.

The Networking Opportunity of South Dakota MarketPlace Approaches Quickly

July has finally arrived, and South Dakota MarketPlace is fast approaching. It’s not too late to register to attend this day and a half event held in Huron on July 26 & 27. With tons of networking, 30 sessions, and the opportunity to make connections from around the state and beyond, this is one conference you won’t want to miss!

Jolene Konechne is a past attendee of Nebraska MarketPlace and was also a major player in helping bring MarketPlace to South Dakota. Jolene is a school teacher and resident of South Dakota, but attended MarketPlace because she hopes to one day start her own business. “I am from rural South Dakota, and I thought it would be great, number one, for

networking and number two, because it brings people from around the state with varying backgrounds together to connect them in one place.”

Jolene’s favorite part of the conference was all the hands-on sessions available. “Every session I attended included interaction not with just the presenter but everyone in the room. The in-depth learning and education was by far my favorite.”

MarketPlace offers something for everyone! Don’t forget about the MarketPlace Store, which gives those who offer a service or who sell South Dakota-made products a chance to display and sell them at the conference. Contact Joy Marshall if you are interested in learning more about selling your products, joym@cfra.org or 402.676.0517.

We encourage you to sign up before July 19 and receive the Early Bird Registration rate of \$59. You don’t know who you will meet or what connections you will make, so sign up today. You can also become a fan of South Dakota MarketPlace on Facebook. Check back frequently before the conference. You never know what surprises might be offered!



More Localized Food Systems Offer Greater Economic Opportunity

In our November 2010 newsletter, I wrote about regional food systems and their economic benefit to local economies. Since then Ken Meter, with the Crossroads Resource Center in Minneapolis, looked closely at the economic potential in Nebraska around food and food systems. His numbers are significant.

The current annual market for food eaten at home in Nebraska includes:

- Meats, poultry, fish and eggs - \$557 million
- Fruits and vegetables - \$439 million
- Cereals and bakery products - \$359 million
- Dairy products - \$313 million

This suggests opportunity for local producers. But, according to Meter's data, Nebraskans spend \$4.4 billion a year on food, with \$4 billion sourced outside the state. That's an astounding amount of money leaving our local economies.

When discussing economic impacts for small town communities, it's important to look at the differences between metro and non-metro personal income. Personal income in metro Nebraska rose steadily from 1969 to 2007, from approximately \$15.5 billion to about \$44 billion.

Extreme Weather

Increased Temperatures Cause Greater Amount of Water Vapor over the Oceans

Some climatologists see a direct link between climate change and the extreme flooding and tornadoes in the United States this spring.

Kevin Trenberth, senior scientist at the *National Center for Atmospheric Research* (NCAR), states that the time is past when all these storms could be attributed just to natural cycles.

Trenberth says, "You can't simply blame this all on natural variability. Natural variability is certainly playing a role, but, equally, climate change that us humans have something to do with is also playing a role."

An increase in the earth's temperature has led to an even bigger increase in the amount of water vapor over the oceans, contributing to massive storms, according to the scientist. He hopes the devastation along the Mississippi and in the South will prompt lawmakers to take action.

People living in non-metro areas also saw an increase in personal income, but it was significantly flatter – about 60% of metro residents' rise. Non-metro personal income went from about \$15 billion to about \$26 billion from 1969-2007, with many more peaks and valleys compared to metro areas.

Given our vast agricultural resources, it makes sense to look at food as having the potential to build small town economies in Nebraska and other agricultural states. Is it the solution to prosperity? It's definitely worth a good hard look.

Right now only 1,300 Nebraska farms sell directly to consumers, with sales of \$5.9 million, contributing 0.04% of the total farm product sales in the state (Ken Meter). Opportunities for small-scale farming are drawing interest from new farmers. Most of them want to create real food for people who care, supported by suppliers who share those sentiments.

It sounds like a good fit all around.

Find out more about the Crossroads Research Center at www.crcworks.org. Contact Kathie Starkweather, kathies@cfra.org or 402.617.7946, with questions or comments.

Only 1,300 Nebraska farms sell directly to consumers, with sales of \$5.9 million, contributing 0.04% of the total farm product sales in the state.

—Data from Ken Meter

Around the Center

New Faces Arrive; Interns Bid Adieu

It's summer! As usual, that means we have welcomes and thanks to extend.

Joining our permanent staff is Jamie Horter, a South Dakota transplant who will be collaborating with and engaging dedicated supporters (like you!) across the nation. Don't be surprised if you hear from Jamie soon! Also returning for the summer is Lyons native Alysha Peterson as our communications intern to assist with media work.

We also say goodbye to interns Alyssa Charney and

Rafael Martinez. We appreciate the organizing work on health care and renewable energy that Alyssa has contributed, as well as the outreach to Latino farmers done by Rafael.

Alyssa heads next to rural Montana to work on local food access with Grow Montana, and Rafael is interning in Northfield, Minnesota, with the Rural Enterprise Center. We expect great things from both of them. Thanks so much, Alyssa and Rafael!



American Democracy Withered and Weakened by Partisanship

In 1976 my best friend and I attended a speech by then Senator and former Vice President of the United States Hubert Humphrey. When we walked up to shake his hand, he said he was pleased to see two very young men interested in government. And then he looked us in the eyes and said: “Young people today say that politics is dirty business. Then I say to you, get in there with your bar of political soap and clean it up.”

It was good advice. And I have never forgotten.

The blood, sweat and tears of citizens of conscience working to make government better are the rain and fertilizer of democracy. With them it flourishes. Without them it withers and weakens.

American democracy is withered and weakened today by partisanship, the corrupting influence of big money, and vested interests out only for themselves.

But there is nothing wrong with American democracy that cannot be cured by a strong dose of citizens

of conscience working to make government serve the common good.

That is why we dedicated part of this newsletter to providing how-to information for you to connect with your representatives in Congress this August. The August Congressional Recess is the time they travel their districts to hear from constituents. It is your chance to get to know your representatives and make a plea for policies to get our democracy and America on track – the track of genuine opportunity for all, strong communities, and stewardship of land, water and air.

You have an essential role to play. Democracy only works when citizens embrace their re-

sponsibility for their communities and their nation. Each of us is part of a larger community and society, in which we have a stake and to which we have obliga-

Let's take a break from partisan talk radio and blogs and spend some time instead visiting with our fellow citizens of all stripes and working to understand their concerns. We might find more common ground than we expect.

—See **American Democracy** on page 5.